Ubiquity: The Journal of Literature, Literacy, and the Arts, Praxis Strand, Vol. 2 No.1, Spring 2015, pp. 27-47
Ubiquity: http://ed-ubiquity.gsu.edu/wordpress/
ISSN: 2379-3007

For Whom Are Students Composing?

A Reflection on Multimodal Assessment

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Abstract

In this dual narrative piece, the authors dialogue about a critical moment regarding the assessment of a multimodal composition. The first author is a university professor and the second author was a pre-service teacher in the first author's class. The authors illustrate the difficulty of assessing multimodal compositions without clear criteria and conclude that audience reaction is important to consider in the assessment process.

Keywords: Multimodal assessment; teacher education; reflective practice; dual narrative; new literacies

For Whom Are Students Composing? A Reflection on Multimodal Assessment

Introduction

This story is a dialogue about a dialogue; a story about the challenges of assessing multimodal composition and about the power of reflection for problem-solving; a story about the development of pre-service teachers and the development of teacher educators. As any teacher knows who has juggled instruction, assessment, building community, paperwork, test preparation, continuing education (not to mention family, friends, health, and a rich, full life outside of school), education is complex and often overwhelming. We offer our dialogue about a critical moment that occurred in a university methods course to illustrate a key method we as educators use to make sense of the complexity and contradictions we swim through every day: reflection.

We are a new assistant professor and former middle school teacher (Nadia) and a pre-service teacher in the final semester of her program (Muno). In this reflective piece, we utilize dual narrative or what Schaafsma and Vinz (2011) call "tandem telling" as a way to present our perspectives on the same situation that occurred in the course Nadia taught and Muno took in the Spring of 2013. This piece centers on a multimodal composition—specifically, a digital story that Muno turned in for her final project and with which Nadia took issue.

Our story highlights the importance of reflective practice for educators at all levels, whether it is a novice middle school teacher or a first-year assistant professor. We believe that multimodal composition is a critical focus because of the prevalence of multimodal composition in society and the workplace, a trend noted by many researchers including Cope and Kalantzis (2000) as well as Davies and Merchant (2009). Additionally, new technology standards such as those developed by the International Society for Technology in Education emphasize the

importance of K-12 students and teachers learning how to use technology to develop innovative products and utilize digital tools to facilitate inquiry. In this article, we detail our differing perspectives regarding the development and assessment of a multimodal composition. Educators need to take the time to think carefully about how they will instruct and assess students in multimodal compositions, and we offer our thoughts on how reflection plays a crucial part in teachers learning how to instruct and assess these "new" literacies.

The Teacher as Student in Problem-Posing Education

We frame our work with the problem-posing educational theory of Paulo Freire. Freire (2007) criticized "banking education" where teachers see children as empty vessels that need to be filled with information. He contrasted this one-way theory of education with his notion of problem-posing education. In problem-posing education, the teacher and the student examine an artifact or object that exists in the real world and jointly try to make meaning. Of critical importance, it is neither the teacher nor the student who possesses the right answer; rather, they both bring what they know of the world to the reading of this artifact and together co-construct meaning. A quote from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* addresses why we feel this framework is suited for our collaborative work:

> Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (Freire, 2007, p. 80)

This quote represents how we chose to approach the problem of our differing perspectives regarding Muno's composition. Nadia was willing to reach out to Muno to try to learn more about what had happened, and Muno was willing to explain her perspective.

Tandem Telling: Our Separate/Joint Story

Using Schaafsma and Vinz's (2011) work as a guide, we chose narrative inquiry for our methodology. Narrative inquiry is a method of research that relies on stories to explore and challenge ideas. This method allowed us to have a dialogue about a particular event as we co-constructed the event into a narrative form. Writing this article in tandem, by sending the piece back and forth via email with tracked changes, was part of the reflective process for understanding the event we explore here. Through tandem telling, we were able to adhere to the purpose of narrative inquiry for teachers as stated by Schaafsma and Vinz (2011): "to let the narratives provoke them into looking and (re)searching again as they continue to struggle with learning how to teach" (p. 12). In the following sections, we take turns telling the saga of the digital story that was misread and then partially redeemed—or at least reread in a new light. Nadia will start with some context and then turn the story over to Muno.

Nadia's Life in April 2013

It was late April, conference season for me, and I was in San Francisco enjoying reconnecting with friends and colleagues, attending stimulating sessions, and somewhat frantically completing my own presentations. I was ending my first year as an assistant professor, and my life had been busier than I thought possible: figuring out grant writing; negotiating service to my department, college, and university; writing, writing, and more writing; meetings, meetings, and more meetings; teaching initial teacher preparation classes, developing

relationships with new and wonderful people; and confronting a full inbox each morning of emails ranging in urgency from reply immediately to reply by yesterday.

Dealing with the demands of a new tenure-track job is not the point of this narrative, but the context for the particular situation that arose. In the midst of this particularly busy time, I received an email from Muno. She wanted me to review the multimodal video she had created for her end of course project, a project that was due the day after I returned.

The course was "Critical Issues in Middle Level Education," a hybrid course (one week face-to-face, the next week online) designed to be a space for pre-service teachers to gather and discuss key issues in their student teaching. My colleagues and I had designed the course around what we considered critical issues: creating classroom community, managing a classroom, facilitating meaningful instruction, assessing students' funds of knowledge and learning, and reflecting on practice. Throughout the course, students engaged in discussions and activities based on readings in these areas, participated in virtual reflective practice groups, and created a product to demonstrate how they would address these issues in their classroom.

For the final project, students were required to integrate everything they had learned in the course into a narrative description of one day of teaching, a comic strip, a teaching manifesto video, or a digital story. My colleagues and I wanted to encourage creative compositions and allow for multimodal expressions, and thus offered these options for our pre-service teachers so they could showcase their strengths and also share their knowledge with one another in a way that was interesting. Figure 1 displays the rubric we created to assess the summative projects.

In this course, our goal is to help you consider how you will create a classroom community while facilitating meaningful instruction, assessing your students' funds of knowledge and learning, dealing with potential disruptions, and reflecting on your practice. So what might this look like? For this assignment, you will create an INNOVATIVE artifact that demonstrates to your instructor how you are seeing all of these pieces fit together. You will choose from one of the following options: realistic fiction, a comic strip, a video manifesto, a digital story or another pre-approved idea.

RUBRIC for Summative Artifact

Objective	**Score**
Addresses classroom management	Out of 15:
Addresses building community	Out of 15:
Addresses instruction	Out of 15:
Addresses assessment	Out of 15:
Addresses reflection	Out of 15:
Is creative and interesting	Out of 25:
TOTAL	Out of 100:

*Points will be deducted for lateness, messiness, or unprofessional presentation of work

Figure 1. Directions and rubric for summative artifact

Because we wanted to provide choice and flexibility, we left the rubric intentionally open, stressing to students that grading would be based on both detailed and thoughtful presentation of key course concepts and activities as well as on creativity. The summative composition is the assignment that Muno was concerned about, a concern to which I did not have time to attend.

Muno's Life in April 2013

Similar to Nadia, I was having a very busy April and feeling overwhelmed by a number of things. With the thought of approaching deadlines and with student teaching coming to a close, I was more than anxious about my upcoming graduation. After all, it was all that my cohort and I had been talking about for the past year. And to think about the relief of it finally being here was thrilling and exciting, but somewhat scary. I was often flustered by thoughts of

life after graduation. Finding a job and continuing my education were just two of the many thoughts that filled my mind.

In April, I had been simultaneously working on completing my student teaching assignments as well as my final summative artifact for the Critical Issues course. Although the assignment seemed relatively simple, it was a matter of presentation that mattered most to me. After organizing my thoughts and ideas, I decided to present my artifact in the form of a song/video combination. I carefully selected quotes that I felt epitomized each of the critical issues we had focused on during the semester. As many students learn to do through their college career, I sent my artifact to Nadia for review with this comment: "I'm doing the video manifesto/digital storytelling combined. It will be approximately 5-6 minutes long, give or take a few minutes.... I'd like to receive your feedback before I finalize the video." After many attempts to view my video, Nadia regretfully informed me that because she was away at a conference and could not open the file on her laptop, she was unable to watch my video and that she would try to view it on a colleague's computer or upon returning to her office. Although I had really wanted to receive her thoughts about what I had created, I was understanding of the timing of the semester. It wasn't until the day of the presentation, as I was walking from my car to the classroom and reading my email on my mobile device that I received an email from Nadia requesting me to redo the assignment. A bit confused, I slowly read each line of her email:

> Dear Muno, I FINALLY could watch your video on my office computer, and I need for you to make some changes. While the quotes and pictures are being displayed, you need to present your beliefs on each of these topics and how you will achieve these goals in the classroom. I could not get a sense of your classroom practice at all from the montage of quotes and songs, even though it was creative and interesting. For today, go ahead and

> present this video and receive peer feedback, but then resubmit online by Monday. Thank you and so sorry I could not give you feedback earlier!

My instant thought was, "What had I done wrong? Did I miss the whole purpose of the assignment? How could I have not thought more thoroughly about such a critical assignment?" Nonetheless, I continued on my way to the classroom, where my classmates and I would all present and reflect on one another's projects. It was then when I entered the class that Nadia asked if I had received her email, and reiterated that I should present what I had, and later alter the project to resubmit for credit. Not arguing with her proposal, I agreed to present my work and redo it with her suggestions.

Nadia's Missed Opportunity for Feedback

As Muno described, we engaged in a series of emails, but the end result was that I was not able to view the video until I returned home. Then, when I finally viewed Muno's project, I saw a random collection of songs that did not cohere into a clear summary of what she had learned in this course. For example, to summarize what she had learned about instruction, Muno played a clip from a line dance song called "The Cha Cha Slide" by DJ Casper, included pictures of animated teachers in front of engaged students, and summarized a key point on instruction with this quote:

> Student-centered instruction [SCI] is an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. (Collins & O'Brien, as cited in Froyd & Simpson, 2008, p. 1)

Even though Muno's chosen modes fit together, there was no explicit explanation of how they fit. I had imagined students talking throughout the digital video and explicitly describing how they would apply course concepts to their current or future practice. At this point, I was faced with a dilemma; I did not think that her project met the requirements, but it was due the next day. So I wrote Muno an email (which Muno already included above) saying that she could go ahead and present her work, but she would need to make changes and resubmit after our final class session. I wondered what Muno had been thinking as she constructed her video story.

Muno's Intention and Process for the Digital Story: "How My Thoughts Came to Life"

Actually, unknown to Nadia, I had spent a lot of time thinking about this project. When developing my digital story, I thought of my middle school students and how my mentor teacher and I incorporated the use of technology in teaching as well as the immediate response we often received from the students in doing so. I wanted to show the future teachers and my peers that presenting ideas does not have to be boring; that it is possible to in some way entertain and yet inform your audience. I felt as though by using technology, student learning was more authentic and their reflections were much more individualized. Therefore, by using technology, I was certain that I would be able to receive the feedback I had desired without the use of traditional forms of speaking. I would present my beliefs on the five components with the support of quotations from different authors I had read about in my education classes and align them with humorous song lyrics that illustrated each specific component.

To offer an example along with my decision-making process, I selected the song "We Are the Champions" by Queen (Mercury, 1977) because my cohort and I could all relate to the lyrics, "We are the champions, my friend. And we'll keep on fighting 'til the end." I included this song in the section on reflection because I saw us as having achieved our goals through our

reflective problem-solving abilities, abilities we had developed in this class. I also included a silhouette picture of a group jumping for joy as the song was playing to represent the successful group work in which we had engaged. These song and picture illustrations were a depiction of what we as a class, and as a cohort, had been experiencing simultaneously from the initial start of our journey.

In another example, I played an excerpt from the song "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge (Edwards & Rodgers, 1979) and then showed a clip of a group of penguins on an iceberg that shift to one side to avoid a shark attack. Understanding my audience, I knew how they would read this metaphor. Based on our face-to-face interactions and conversations on social media, the idea of the "shark" of assignments and graduation approaching us with the *Jaws* theme (Williams, 1975) in the background would resonate with the feeling that we all had. Additionally, this picture and song represented what I had learned about community building with students. This image symbolized the idea that working in collaboration with one another and with the support of one another would allow us all the ability to essentially survive. The concept of community building in the classroom is much needed in that it creates the culture that each individual contributes to a positive environment, free of criticism. We had discussed in class how part of community building was making sure students knew that they were resources for one another in solving problems. Thus, the penguins were a metaphor for my future students and also for the position in which my cohort and I were.

Once my ideas on creating the artifact were complete, I envisioned presenting my project to my cohort and receiving elated and positive responses. I wanted to present a project that was unique, but also thought-provoking. However, not having Nadia's approval left me with uncertainty. I felt I had awaited her response long enough and that if she did not get back to me

in time, I would respectfully present what I had prepared. Yet, I was still understanding of her situation in that she had been out of town and busy at a conference and was nonetheless proactive in keeping in contact with me through her multiple attempts to view my video presentation. Though she was challenged with the incompatibility of my document with her computer software, I did not feel less confident in my work. I accepted the inconvenience and looked forward to presenting my thoughts to class, as I had truly desired their collaborative feedback in response to my creativity.

Nadia's View of Presentation Day

On the day of Muno's presentation, I did not foresee changing my decision. Yet something occurred during Muno's presentation that made me rethink my initial evaluation of her project. Presentation day arrived, and students arrived with an abundance of snacks, drinks, and supplies for our celebration. We started with some socializing and eating, and the atmosphere was positive, although I sensed that many of the students were tired. Next, due to time constraints, I put students into small groups to present their final projects and then asked them to nominate one person to share with the whole class. Somehow, Muno ended up being last on the list for the whole class presentations.

Before Muno presented, we heard excerpts from fictional narratives of classroom teaching, viewed comic strips that detailed one day in the classroom, and had one person read an excerpt from their teaching manifesto to the class. We also had a few dynamic digital stories that aligned more to my vision of what this product would look like because the student explicitly explained his/her thoughts of the critical topics in an audio overlay while presenting pictures, quotes, and video that supported what the student was saying. I remember hoping that Muno did

not feel bad about presenting at the end of the session. Honestly, I thought the class was going to react half-heartedly to her song and quotation montage, but my prediction proved wrong.

At the end of the class, Muno played her short video, and the response was incredible. Students danced in their seats to her song choices, laughed at her ironic images and funny video excerpts, and nodded in agreement with the thoughtful quotations she had chosen. And when she ended with the song "We Are the Champions" by Queen and showed two images of people jumping for joy and students embracing a rainbow colored sky, the whole class cheered and applauded. Suddenly, I saw the entire project in a new light. Muno's project appeared to have impacted her classmates even more than the presentations with much more written content prior to hers. Instead of seeing the project as deficient, I realized that it was elegant and spare, that she had allowed the songs and images to speak for themselves and had chosen these with a keen awareness of her future audience. Also, as I reread the quotations, I noticed that through her selections, she had accentuated critical points from the course, such as the importance of student-centered learning and the critical function of norm-building for classroom management. Furthermore, her presentation was fun, engaging, and it moved people.

I always try to practice what I preach, and part of being an educator who believes in Freire's teachings is learning from students and reflecting on things that go wrong or are not as I expect. When Muno came up to me after class to discuss her work, I immediately told her something like:

> I was wrong. Your piece had an incredible impact on the class, and I can now see how your music and image choices represented key areas. You definitely do not have to redo this project and have earned an A.

As a teacher educator, modeling for future teachers the importance of reflection and re-evaluation is especially important in order to foster lifelong teacher-learners. Muno appeared to be pleased, and in her soft-spoken way, she thanked me but did not say very much else. I emailed her later and asked her if she wanted to write about this experience with me, which she agreed to do. However, as I continued to reflect on this moment, I started to realize that I may have allowed my assessment of Muno's project to change too dramatically based on the response of her peers, a realization I will explore more in my conclusion. Based on my own research, I knew that other educators were struggling with assessing multimodal compositions, and I wanted to offer my experience of grappling with the difficulties of assessing a multimodal composition to aid others on how to structure and assess these types of assignments.

Muno's View of Presentation Day

As I walked into the classroom on presentation day, I was definitely feeling the fatigue Nadia referenced earlier, and also feeling the end of semester drag. Reflecting on the experience of presenting my ideas to my classmates, I felt that it yielded the results I had desired. The responses were positive, exciting, and expressive. The class was engaged in the video and related to it on different levels, both academically and personally. I was happy that my classmates admired and approved of my presentation. Although it was coincidental that I went last, it somehow added to the effect of ending with a positive uplifting presentation. After completing my presentation, I remember the cheers and smiles from my classmates. Specifically, I remember one of my classmates bringing out a lighter to the playing of "We Are the Champions." Seeing this reaction, I felt that I had successfully communicated all that I had intended; that with the head-nodding and smiles, my classmates understood and related to my thoughts and perceptions of what we had been learning throughout the years.

So considering the feedback I had received and the request for Nadia to have me redo the assignment, I did not think there was any other way I could change or add to what I had originally presented without taking away from the originality of it. I had incorporated the required components, supported the song lyrics with quotations by notable authors, and provided visual representations to supplement the work. How else would I change what I had thought so deeply about and organized prior to seeking her approval?

After Nadia had criticized my work, I felt that I had missed the whole purpose of the assignment; I was so concerned about what my classmates would think and worried that in my enthusiasm to reach out in a creative way, I had not addressed the purpose of the assignment. It was not until after the class was dismissed and I spoke with Nadia that she agreed with my work, and acknowledged that it met the requirements of the project. I was speechless and humbled that she accepted my work. I simply thanked her for her help and wished her the best; I was finally through with my undergraduate career.

Nadia's Conclusion

As Muno and I close our tandem telling, we offer our individual conclusions on why our story matters. First, as a writing researcher, I pose the question: what does this mean for multimodal composition? It means that traditional content-oriented rubrics may not work sufficiently for complex products involving music, color, video excerpts, and images (Behizadeh, 2014; McGrail & Behizadeh, under review). Additionally, I argue that evaluators of multimodal compositions, and all compositions, need to consider the impact these compositions have on an audience.

However, my quick decision to give Muno an "A" on her summative project was not a sound one. Yes, I saw (and still see) her presentation as more powerful because of how her peers

reacted, but could I truly say that Muno had fully grasped key concepts? I believe I allowed my judgment of Muno's project to shift too dramatically, from deficient to exceptional, based on an enthusiastic audience reaction. Upon further reflection, I found myself questioning what it means when an audience, in some cases the World Wide Web, celebrates an online composition, whether it be a viral video or a journal article with a million shares and hundreds of comments. What does this celebration (or sometimes debate) say about the composition? Was it effective? Should we praise the designer for successful impact on the real audience? Based on my continued reflection, I believe that evaluators of multimedia compositions need to have additional parameters for determining quality while also considering audience impact.

One solution to my shifting judgments would be to have a detailed rubric as a solid anchor for this project. The rubric I used was too vague to provide any real guidance to my students or me. If I value audience reaction and the audience is the classroom community, then I need to include audience reaction in the rubric or have the audience participate in evaluation. Similarly, if I value explicit explanation of how multimodal components represent or support key concepts from the course, I need to outline those requirements in the rubric as well. Alternately, I could ask students to reflect on their intended impact and then their actual impact, and I could assess their reflections.

Secondly, what does this narrative mean for developing a reflective practice? I think this narrative illustrates a way to engage teachers at all developmental levels in rich reflective practice that goes beyond individual journaling. As Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos (2002) concluded in their review of research on reflective practice, "It is the socially constructed-reflections—those built through interacting with informed others—that can lead future teachers to more in-depth considerations and penetrating ideas" (p. 140). The rationale for her project that

Muno offers in this article demonstrates her understanding of the critical components of the course, an understanding that could not be inferred from her composition alone.

When educators incorporate new media in classrooms, like digital stories or blogs, they may fail to instruct and assess in meaningful ways, but there is much to be learned from these failures. In this specific case, by recognizing my failure to acknowledge the positive aspects of Muno's project initially, and then realizing my failure to critique my own pendulum swing after seeing the positive audience impact of her project, I learned that I need to value both audience reaction and evidence of deep understanding.

Muno's Conclusion

In completing this assignment, I feel that it has taught me that there are many ways to present ideas, that essentially reaching your audience in a unique and creative way is not subjective to the thoughts of one person. After discussing and reflecting about what had just occurred with Nadia, I felt a sense of accomplishment and that, although she initially thought that my work did not fulfill the requirements, she had a change of heart after seeing the collective response of my peers. I did not feel she was wrong in her initial thoughts; however, I felt that she was more focused on a traditional method of presenting ideas rather than my multimodal approach. In reflecting on my classmates' projects, I was open to the various forms of presenting ideas. Ironically, reflection was one of the required components to discuss in the project, and I personally began to reflect on the projects of my classmates, as they presented satirical comic strips, video recordings of themselves, narrative storytelling, and so on. I concluded that each presentation was an expression of their individuality. In presenting and reflecting on multimodal productions, it is essential to evaluate the purpose of the work and if the presentation addresses the intended components, before being critical of the author's piece. In addition it is important to

be accepting of the different forms in which ideas are presented. If the assignment allows for creativity, it is important not to limit students' potential in being creative. Multimodal compositions encompass the many forms of presenting thoughts and/or ideas and require teachers to think carefully and deeply. Ultimately, in evaluating my own students' work, I seek to consider ways in which students communicate and make meaning of their work. Teaching and learning are not limited to traditional methods of pen and paper; thus communicating with one's audience must not be limited to the sole method of speaking or writing (Miller & McVee, 2012). Multimodal composition should be evaluated based on effective communication and fulfillment of the intended purpose.

Our Joint Conclusion

Returning to Freire, we end by reiterating the importance of challenging the traditional hierarchy of professor and pre-service teacher or classroom teacher and student. Referring to a problem-posing classroom, Freire (2007) stated, "Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are 'owned' by the teacher" (p.80). In this teachable moment, multimodal composition was the object, and it was an object that belonged to both Muno and Nadia. We have offered here an example of teacher reflection, no matter at what level the teacher is. Also, for teachers incorporating more multimodal compositions into their classrooms, we hope that through this reflection, we have brought up some key questions regarding the purpose of these compositions and the importance of considering how the intended audience actually responds.

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