

Not without New Media:

Composing & Evaluating Strategies in Composition & Communication Classrooms

Let me start with a definition, *my* definition: New Media is a label applied by critics and theorists (and potentially audiences) to genres, forms, objects, etc., whose conventions break from traditional notions of that genre. It gets us excited because we think it is **new**.

For this talk, I want to limit that definition of new media to include only the genres of digital, multimodal, multimedia compositions—what, specifically, has been called literary hypertext that uses elements of multimedia (i.e.—images, text-as-image, sound, etc.) in its composition.

As a teacher of composition and communication, let me also clarify that when I use the term mode, it does NOT mean the five modes of composition. I don't think I even know all five of them! Rather, I mean the material elements we choose to make meaning with when we compose a text/object. This notion of **mode** is taken from Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Multimodal Discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication* (2001). Again, as a teacher, it is crucial to me that students understand the complex ways in which we communicate – not just through research papers and speeches, but through multimodal compositions. (I am sure that this audience would agree!).

So, to return to Kress and van Leeuwen for a moment: They offer four strata (or layers) of practices where meaning can be made in multimodal texts:

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Discourse = “socially constructed knowledge...independent of genre, mode, design,...which can only be realized in semiotic modes”

Design = “(uses of) semiotic resources...and realizes discourse in the context of a given communication situation, [changing] socially constructed knowledge into social (inter-) action.

Production = “the organization of the expression to the actual material articulation” [“it may be difficult to know where ‘design’ ends and ‘production’ begins”]

Distribution = adds a layer of semiotic meaning and “in the age of digital media, ...the functions of production and distribution become technically integrated...”

For the purpose of this talk, I want to focus on the discourse and design portions of Kress and van Leeuwen's strata.

In their discussion of discourse, Kress and van Leeuwen say that “Multimedia production is unmaking...the aggregation of discrete practices, and favours multi-skilling, complex practices, which is now NOT seen as an aggregation but as ONE integrated practice.”

In other words, one person can compose a multimedia piece, when it used to take several, individual practices by individual people to create a multimodal piece (the artist, the musician, the programmer, the editor, the producer, etc.)

My intention in the classroom is to center the class discourse around teaching students (and myself) to encourage multi-skilled learning in the classroom, through the analysis and composition of artful and rhetorically savvy new media texts.

Part of the understanding of and creation of new media texts comes from knowing that a designer has “a multiplicity of decisions” to make when approaching a composition. What becomes important in teaching design is negotiating the complex choices a designer makes between implicit and explicit design practices. Explicit, articulated practices may turn into forms such as prescriptive “grammars of design” like the popular Robin Williams’ non-designers design series. The implicit choices, Kress and van Leeuwen say, are mostly held in the realm of aesthetics. While aesthetic qualities in a NM piece are crucial to its success, I will leave that discussion for another time, and return to the explicit design choices.

It is the teacher’s responsibility to articulate design choices for students to understand and create their own objects. Kress and van Leeuwen say that “we must infer from performance/production back to design,” and this is part of the direct instruction and practice in communication modes for the sophomore-level, general education course at Michigan Tech, where the following student examples come from.

The course is called Revisions: Oral, Written, and Visual Communication. It is a LOT to cover in 15 weeks. Part of the goals of the course is to teach students that these three modes of communication are NOT separated easily – that, in fact, they are quite likely to be used in conjunction with one another. This goal makes it easy for instructors to look to teaching multimedia or new media in the class. And while many of the instructors choose to follow the institutionalized syllabus that has been created for that class, several instructors who are multi-skilled in analyzing and creating multimodal compositions have chosen to push the intentions of this class.

I wanted to introduce students to multimodal texts (and, here, as throughout the talk, “text” refers to Rosenblatt and others’ broad notion of text as interpretable object), to give them an idea of what designs were available to them in their own projects. I also wanted to understand their notions of composition (especially since they thought of the class as an ENGLISH class, when it is designated as a UN class and is mostly taught by graduate assistants in the Humanities Department. There is no English or Speech or Communications department at Michigan Tech—even after I corrected them, they repeatedly referred to the class as their English class.).

I asked the students to complete several assignments that might help me determine what their thoughts about the class and their compositional strategies lay. In one assignment, I asked them to read Chapter One of Italo Calvino’s *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (which details how the speaker/narrator of the book proceeds to begin reading a book) and respond by writing what their own writing and reading strategies were. Every student equated writing with only the process of writing essays for English classes in high school and college (and some mentioned lab reports as well). None of them mentioned e-mails, speech outlines, online role-playing games, or instant messaging. I was hoping students would tell me about the other-than-English-class genres, but it was probably because the assignment was situated in *what they expected* to be an English composition class that they responded with what they thought I wanted to hear about English papers. And, even then, their critical reflection about their composing strategies was shallow at best—One student commented in his response that after “Four years of advanced English courses, my habits remain the same. Do it fast, write an excellent paper, and finish off with a crappy closing.” That response was one of the most in-depth ones I received.

If we are to think about the composing process (for any genre) as the actuality of design, then Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that “only recognized modes are available as elements for the design process. Similarly, only recognized structures and sequences [genres]...are available to the design process.”

This may be why students were not able to analyze their own design processes for written genres more astutely—those processes were not recognizable to them, and were, therefore, not available for comment or analysis.

Later in the semester, I introduced students to a piece of literary hypertext, knowing that most all of them had never seen or read a text like this before. The piece, *Hypertext Gardens* by Mark Bernstein (available at <<http://www.eastgate.com/garden>>, c. 1998) is an essay about the structures available to literary hypertext. It is not actually a piece of creative writing, so the genre was closer to those articles they had already read in class that critiqued or analyzed the design of an object. And, as a class, we had already approached different modes of communication and composition – from storyboards to images to video to music—but, in the end, students generally failed to see the point of composing a text that was structured like *Hypertext Gardens*.

Because I knew this genre was so new to them, I decided to introduce them to the text by showing them the original print version of the essay first. I thought that if they could see the argument laid out linearly, then they could translate the content of the argument to the design of the hypertextual piece (and, thus, eventually close the gap between form versus content). I brought in the article, cut up into pieces, including the images that appeared in the print version and gave three sections to each student in the class. I asked them to arrange the article on the table in class, to restructure it according to what way of reading it made sense to them. They spent some time doing this, coming up with several variations of possible readings until they settled on one definitive reading. They achieved consensus on a single reading based on the way I had cut up the original text – they simply pieced together the cut-ups, aligning the scissors marks of each section until they had found the original, linear, 8.5x11 inch structure of the piece. [I knew I should have used several different pair of scissors!]

We discussed the choices they made and how the pictures fit into the text to complement what the text was saying. They said they realized there were multiple ways of reading, but, in the end, they wanted something that was **right**, so they pieced it together based on the scissors marks.

We then went into the lab to view the piece online, in its HTML form. It was the exact same text and images, just arranged to take advantage of the designs available in HTML. [The map of the online text is available at <http://www.eastgate.com/garden/colophon.html>.]

They hated it (as I did when I first encountered literary hypertext). They only wanted to get “to the end” of the piece as fast as they could. When it didn’t follow the linear reading that the print version had, they got frustrated and kept going back to the beginning to see if they could find the **right** way through. For homework that evening, I asked them to write a response showing their reaction to reading a text like that for the first time, how they made meaning from the HTML text, and what path they took through the text.

[slides of student responses to *Hypertext Gardens*]

Jeff—a computer engineering major with a penchant for smart, witty remarks

- In it’s digital form, Hypertext Gardens was designed like a “**hastily developed Angelfire or Tripod directory**”
- It lacks “**formatting**” in its “**nonstandard** image placement and varying font sizes between pages. Some pages are centered while others are justified....it keeps the eyes moving and leads them to view the entire page instead of one small part” [*he viewed this as a bad design choice*]

Alan—an engineering major and jazz musician

- Sets himself up as a good oral communicator, but poor written communicator

- The structure of “hypertext can help you as a reader by letting you dig deeper into the whole article that you are reading and getting more involved with the subject matter”
- “The web page on hypertext **was designed in a way that made it confusing but you learned for the confusion**”
- “You could navigate through the whole set of pages but it was **trial and error** to get through the whole thing”

Bryan—a Mechanical Engineering/Engineering Mechanics major who said on the first day of class that he didn’t want to draw with crayons in this course

- **The print version** “shows the type of document that I like, which is **straightforward, linear, and easy to follow.**”
- “The website was a totally different story...with **no navigation buttons**, you are left with little choice but to go where the author wants to take you, and that is **NOT how a webpage should operate**, in my opinion.”
- “a good website needs to have some way to navigate you back and forth from where ever you are.”
- “After viewing the flowchart that was the basis for the web page design...all of the lines are curvy and **it looks unprofessional.**”
- “What I mean when I talk about **general structured navigation** is that on most websites there is a **homepage with an index** of what comprises the website and then if you click on those individual links, there is usually that same index or there is a link to the home page, or if the site is **constructed “linearly”** there are navigation buttons.”

Greg—the class undertalker, but on-task, computer science major

“With the text version, all the text that is spread out over the webpage is all within one place and nicely organized. With this web page, it is much more difficult to extract information from it. A **good web page design** is laid [sic] out in a manner where it is **easy to obtain the information** that is being looked for. The structure must be presented in a fashion which enables **easy access to information**. This site was the opposite. “

Mark—a materials engineering major and photographer [the constraisting voice]

- “My journey has made me realize the truth of lesson 3 [in Hypertext Gardens]: “The shortest path is not always the best.” **If I had just concentrated on getting “through” the gardens, I would have missed most of the information presented on the site.**”
- “I find that the information **does not need to be presented linearly**...no matter which path is chosen, the info presented does not seem out of place. The sections of the text are interdependent. “

- “The Hypertext Gardens were designed to provide a visual references on how hypertext can be used to present information in a way that keeps the reader interested in the material.”
- “The Gardens show that **rigid structure [of traditional hypertext structure] is not necessary.**”
- “Throughout my journey through the gardens, I am presented with pictures of gardens and pathways...The affect [sic] can be compared to wandering through a garden maze and finding a beautiful flower....It provides a **visual clue** to what the page is going to be about.”
- “Without the pictures, the hypertext is no longer the ‘artful combination of regularity and irregularity’.”

What I realized from their responses was exactly what Kress and van Leeuwen suggested...”that out of the semiotic modes which exist in any culture **only some are officially recognized**, and, therefore, available to design processes. These modes are likely to be highly developed – with an awareness by members of that culture of their grammar-like organization. Other modes are NOT recognized [as the case with HT Gardens], or are recognized only in relation to certain specific domains, or are semi-recognized. These modes may be well-developed, that is, quite fully articulated as semiotic resources, or they may be less so.” While literary HT is a fairly recognized mode within its member community (or audience), for this group of students, who are fairly immersed in the commercial and educational world of the Web, the purpose of literary HT eluded them.

In comparison, the design team of Oren et al (qtd. in Kress and van Leeuwen) discovered that users of educational multimedia failed to do their own, adequate assembling of the database and became disoriented, ending up clicking aimlessly from screen to screen. This habit, they suggested, was not the best way of assembling if the aim of the exercise is to **learn something**. Users did not take the opportunity to explore and branch out and instead they “relinearized” the text.

This re-linearization came into play when the students in my class were to compose a website with an analysis of a recruitment video they had critiqued. I offered them the suggestion that they could structure the website however they wanted, and that, perhaps, they could take into consideration the structure of the *Hypertext Gardens* piece to find a more creative way to present the analysis.

But, both groups of students designed sites that were quite traditional in their conventions. In their individual response to working on the project, the students explained (at least for me) why they had chosen to stick with the design practices they were most familiar with.

Greg (the computer science major) was the web design leader for Group 1. He modeled the group's analysis design off of his own personal web site, which resembles more of an academic or business site than a typical personal site in that it is very structured and uses the same logos and color scheme as the university's web site. In reflecting on why they had chosen to structure the group's page they way they did, he said, "We determined that we wanted to offer a linear way of viewing the page, but not forcing the surfer to adhere to that order..."

Jeff (the computer engineering major) was in charge of the second group's website design. He commented about his design process in the following way: "The page was easy to do...Using some <table> and tags made the whole thing look nice, and I added some images that went along with what I was commenting to stay with the graphical standards of the web....We wanted an "interface that would be able to link and be consistent." He added later in his reflection of the site design that "in an extra bit [from designing the required site], I put together an extra page that gave a little background on [the project] and the purpose of our website (the archetypical [sic] 'main page'."

Jeff, who throughout the class was used as a resource of knowledge on web design by the other class members because of his CS major, said in his Technology Autobiography assignment at the beginning of the term, "In today's fast paced society where the coffee is instant, the internet [sic] is wireless, and the wires are fiber optic, it is very important to know what you are doing; or at least give the impression that you do."

In the end, my decision to bring new media into the communication classroom, and my subsequent syllabus design of how to approach new media texts, failed. There are many reasons for this, but the real question is what to do about it for the next time I teach this course, and how to approach grading when, for this class, the students didn't match my expectations of complex design and discourse. For me, evaluating the texts has everything to do with how I teach these new discourses to students who are so unfamiliar with non-traditional, new media texts, as their responses point out. It would be comforting and simple to have a tidy rubric to evaluate the texts these students make. But, the problem lies before the point of grading. Unless we bring the idea of new media compositions into the discourses of the class, showing how new media is an idea that pervades many areas of students' study (and, thus, extends beyond the confines of the "English" classroom), then students will not have the available designs of new media to work from. I believe this will limit their potential as communicators in the future (not just with the example of literary hypertext, because certainly that is a genre that most of these students, at least, will never see again...but with the potential that all multimodal work can bring to communication practices).

In this class, we did not spend much time discussing (discoursing) about new media and the structures of multimodal communication – time was spent more in practice than

discourse. However, for the instructors I have interviewed who successfully teach multimodal texts in their composition classrooms, they rely on two things that are interrelated: in-class analysis of multi-modal texts AND, discussing/practicing the justification of the CHOICES students make in designing their own new media texts. It is the combination of learning rhetorical analysis of these texts, which gives them new available designs *and* the students' use of their new rhetorical discourse, based in the composition class, to say how their discourse and design choices inform the final production and distribution of their new media object. All of these communication practices will help to make the design of new media texts explicit, and, therefore, useful in the composition class.