

Chapter 5

The Writing Process and Multimodal Composition: Conversations with Four Artists

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ABSTRACT

This chapter expands upon an interior monologue the author created during the experience of composing a comic strip for publication. Building on this reflection regarding the processes of composing in multimodal form and on the work of John Steiner (1997), four professional artists were interviewed using semi-structured interviews to get at the steps they take when writing multimodally. Categories of the data are uncovered and refined using the constant-comparative method. Some of these trends include: gaining knowledge through practice of a medium's structure and affordances including the necessity of writing in nonlinear fashion and being able to write collaboratively. Implications for instruction are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, I had the chance to create a comic strip that was published in a local newspaper (Kist, 2012). I had been assigned to review a graphic novel (Pekar et al., 2012) and thought it might be a good idea to do the review in the form of a comic strip. Since Harvey Pekar had such a distinctive style (developed with his frequent collaborator, R. Crumb), I thought it might be interesting to do my review in the style of Pekar. My editor gave permission and I was off on a completely new experience of composition. As I was creating the comic strip with the artists with whom I was col-

laborating, I was monitoring my own composing process and wondering about the implications for teachers and students. As a literacy scholar, I wondered, what do we know about multimodal writing processes?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES THAT FRAME MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION

Of course, we could also ask what we really know about word-based writing processes to begin with. After all, the field of “English” is only a little over

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100 years old, having been brought into the universities by the middle class after WWI (Eagleton, 1983; Scholes, 1998). And, as Monaghan and Saul (1987) convincingly demonstrated, from the beginning of the English classroom, writing instruction has always held a subservient place to the reading of the canonical works of literature. Writing in schools, if it existed at all, has tended to be in service to literary criticism and, in particular, the American New Criticism (Monaghan and Saul, 1987).

The golden age of composition studies sought to remedy this lack of focus on writing. Educators were urged to focus on writing as a process for students (Moffett, 1968; Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1977). Teachers were supposed to work with the writer, not with the text that was produced. Several visionary writers attempted to describe what this would look like in a classroom (Elbow, 1973/1998; Graves, 1983/2003; Murray, 2004; Atwell, 1987, 1998). Whether these scholars have had much influence in the writing instruction over the last 40 years could be the subject of another chapter, article, or book.

The focus of this chapter, however, is a relatively new development in composition studies—looking at multimodal composition. Paralleling the work of composition scholars who have focused on the medium of words on a page, has been more recent work by those who have paid attention to the affordances new technologies have brought. Some have come at this from an arts background and have urged classroom teachers to go beyond words on a page--students should be allowed to use multiple forms of representation to know and to make meaning (Greene, 1997; Leland & Harste, 1994; Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). Tom Romano (1995, 2000) famously suggested that allowing students to describe what they had learned from research using multiple genres would broaden and deepen their knowledge of disciplinary content.

As the Internet became readily available to more people, the links between these “old school” arts-based researchers and literacy theorists became more needed and necessary; not only could the arts serve in a supporting role as aids to help kids know “content.” Being able to “read” and “write” in multiple media would become keys to becoming truly literate in the 21st century (Kist, 2005; Leu, 1997, 2001, 2001). The simple reason for this need for multimodality is that, when one reads online, one is subjected not only words but also images, moving pictures, sound, music, and advertising, making reading and writing truly multi-modal experiences. Shouldn’t our students, therefore, get practice in working with multimodal texts?

But what does this look like in the real lives of classroom teachers and their students? What does it mean to write in this multimodal communication world? The New London Group (1996) attempted to tackle these questions early on, describing the “affordances” of the multiliteracies available to readers and writers of these new forms. Newly invigorated semioticians described how students can use signs and symbols in repurposed, remixed ways (Hull and Nelson, 2005; Mayers, 2009; Ranker, 2008, 2009, 2012), although it’s worth noting that these multimodal compositions often seem to be effected only outside of schools by marginalized groups (Iddings, et al. 2011) or by very young children in spite of the efforts of early childhood educators (Kress, 2003; Dyson, 2003). Of course, over the last decade, there have been many articles written describing sanctioned in-school multimodal writing projects, including those featuring murals (McKenzie & Danielson, 2003); hip-hop culture (Morrell, 2002; Paul, 2000); music (Turner, 2011); wikis (Schillinger, 2011); photography (Zenkov et al., 2011); and graphic novels (Frey & Fisher, 2004; Morrison, Bryan, & Chilcoat, 2002) to name just a few. Hobbs (2010) has even written a guide for teachers explaining

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