Multimodal Composing: Engaging Diverse Learners in AP English Language and Composition

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Youth are awesome. They come to our classrooms full of aspirations and possibility, ready to take on the world. And yet, youth's exuberance is no guarantee of academic engagement or excellence, especially when they are blocked from consistent, robust opportunities to develop the skills and dispositions for academic excellence due to race, culture, or class (Milner, 2010). As AP classes are opened to more students who are willing to accept the challenge, the role of the teacher in providing the appropriate support and challenge for students along a novice-expert continuum has broadened in scope. Designing and promoting lessons with opportunities for students to engage in multimodal composing (c.f., Yancy, 2009) is an approach that not only develops the skills and dispositions for active and meaningful learning, but also provides relevance and authenticity. AP English Language and Composition, as a course, offers possibilities to accomplish this goal through its alignment with rhetoric and composition, analyzing and synthesizing non-fiction print and visual texts, as well as developing arguments on issues of importance (College Board, 2016).

The way students interact with writing in their everyday lives has changed dramatically in the 21st Century (Williams, 2008). To keep students actively engaged in schooled tasks, it is important to address the gap between what students are doing in school and out of school. Lenhart (2015) reported for the Pew Research Center that 92% of teens visit the Internet at least once daily. Smart phones are owned by 85% of African American teens compared to 71% of White and Latino/a teens and African Americans and Latinos/as go on line the most frequently, 34% and 32%, compared to 17% of white teens using the Internet at the same frequency (Lenhart, 2015). Lenhart found that he most popular site used was Facebook, indicating that frequent use is not necessarily connected to realizing youth's aspirations or developing schooled literacies considered important for informed participation in political, economic and social milieus. Because enrollment in AP courses has the potential to increase college enrollment and graduation rates for African American and Latino/a students (College Board, 2016), then it is concerning that their underrepresentation in AP courses continues (Kohli, 2014) and maintains the opportunity gap in educational outcomes.

The effects of the opportunity gap (Milner et al., 2013) are an institutional problem, not a problem with students' abilities or dispositions. A history of differing instruction and knowledge made available to students based on their class and race (Howard, 2010), as well as hegemonic curricula, which limit equitable distribution of knowledge for students from culturally marginalized groups (Connell, 2007) have highlighted the disparity of enrollment in AP. In a

pluralistic society such as ours, inclusion is tantamount to social justice. However, inclusion does not mean everything will be equal, or the same – rather, from a perspective of equity, the assistance each student needs should be provided, with appropriate challenges for those in the expert range, and appropriate assistance for those in the novice range on the continuum. In the AP class, this is possible in many ways, one of which is to engage students in issues of importance to them through inquiry, culminating in a multimodal composition (MMC).

Multimodal Composing in AP English Language and Composition

In AP English Language and Composition, rhetoric is an important focus of the class. Rhetoric promotes the sharing of multiple perspectives in order to allow people to choose the best course of action when there are disagreements about important political, religious, and social issues (Crowley & Hawhee, 2011). This is a strong focus for coursework in which students self-select an important, controversial cause and develop arguments with which to address what the best course of action may be for the greater good. Multimodal compositions are texts inclusive of varied media, with each medium communicating a coherent concept. For example, sound might be used to indicate distress, not just as a background to a MMC. At its most minimal level, an MMC might be a blog with visuals inserted; at a more complex level, a MMC might be a hybrid of media and print to create "a sensory rich space" (McPherson, 2009). In order to produce a MMC as a persuasive text, students must still understand and include the elements of argument: claim, evidence, warrants, refutation, and incorporate the means of persuasion – *logos, pathos, ethos* – to produce a convincing text.

Therefore, MMC prepares students on the novice end of the continuum to argue issues of importance, entering the important conversations of the day, through its potential to engage writers in the writing process, with the intention of then bridging to academic writing (Miller et al., 2013). Through work on a MMC, agency may be developed as varied choices are made in how to best design and produce a coherent and persuasive text using multiple media sources. Likewise, working on a MMC provides opportunities for students at the more expert end of the continuum to innovate and challenge their notions of print text and composing. Because students view their personal use of technology as disconnected from the what they view as the "boring" writing demanded in school (Witte, 2007), using MMC to develop academic topics such as argument may reframe students' understanding of school tasks. The primary tasks in AP English Language and Composition are reading critically and carefully, and persuasive writing for varied purposes, as appropriate for the intended audience and purpose. Creating multimodal texts is a powerful way to make strong connections between the interests that

students pursue outside of the classroom with the skills and dispositions being developed in the AP class.

The increase in engagement when using MMC (Williams, 2008) is another plus of using MMC in the AP English Language and Composition classroom. Engagement describes the overall level of how students are active in what they are learning, including their involvement in how they are learning and with whom they are learning (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). The higher the level of students' engagement, the greater their academic success (Rumberger, 2004). As more students enroll in AP classes with novice skill sets and cultural backgrounds differing from the more mainstream background knowledge aligning more closely to schooled competencies, engagement is a crucial part of supporting their success. For example, if a student is immediately judged to be unprepared for the rigor of the course due to writing issues, that student processes the label assigned as "failure," and subsequently drop the course or loose the desire to fully engage. Multimodal compositions open an avenue for success for this group of students, as including eager and willing students from all backgrounds should be a primary goal of the course.

Facilitating MMC

Although students engage with digital technology on a regular basis in their daily lives, it cannot be assumed that they will be able to complete the tasks assigned in classrooms without facilitation (Philip & Garcia, 2013). A MMC will likely be a new way of expressing complex ideas for students, and sharing models with them is a good way to orient them to multimodal composing. Cynthia Selfe (2007) has an excellent link to resources for teachers: http://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/students/envs3100/selfe2007.pdf. Also, typing "multimodal composition example" into your web browser and viewing some of the examples to identify a few that have a strong argument will provide an overview of the variety of the genre. Use a selected few examples with students, and after viewing them, go back to one and deconstruct the argument together. This is an important step in creating the expectations of a MMC for when they create theirs. Along with deconstructing the example, analyze as you would a print text for the rhetorical situation, purpose, audience, and the devices used to create the persuasive effect, and evaluate the effectiveness.

Although AP classes are high stakes, in terms of college acceptances, they are also a place of academic freedom for teachers not often experienced in general education classes. There is no mandated curriculum, only guidelines to meet the goals of the course. Therefore, while preparing students to improve their traditional print writing, MMC can provide a welcome

break from essay writing and revising, while supporting students' ability to argue limitless issues of importance with an informed perspective. The role of critical thinking in creating MMCs should not be overlooked. MMCs require problem solving, and expert thinking to solve "problems for which there are no rule-based solutions" (Levy & Murnane, 2004, p. 167). As the deconstructing of sample MMCs will reveal, there are few if any "rules." However, there are commonalities enough to provide a guide for assessment.

An additional way to keep students engaged and challenged in the process of what constitutes a convincing argument and of the process to develop one is to have the class work together to identify criteria for assessment. Newfield et al. (2010) describe a class of youth in South Africa who created a multimodal composition of cloth, paper, and other artifacts due to lack of digital technology, and then collectively discussed how to assess their product. This process proved to uncover what was important to the students as they accessed and honed important skills in analyzing and responding to texts, using perseverance, and innovating in their individual and collective expression of concepts.

This type of discussion has great potential in the AP classroom to mitigate the possibility of having the test drive curriculum. While teachers may actively work to develop curriculum that is not "test-prep," it is the nature of an AP class to always have the presence of the test informing the knowledge produced. In AP English Language and Composition, "covering" rhetorical devices, non-fiction text, argument, and so on are necessary to adequately prepare students for the test, and teachers do have a responsibility to make sure that students are prepared. However, within those topics, there is great latitude in how to take them up. MMC is a way to ensure students are actually actively engaged in these aspects of the course, which are not only necessary for the test. They are necessary for informed civic participation. MMC can provide the skills and dispositions required to actively participate to create change in some of the world's impending issues. They are, after all, awesome.

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