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Jennifer Kingma Wall

# Multimodal Digital Assessments in the English Language Arts Classroom: Designing Literacy Tasks Using Digital Technology

As new technologies continue to emerge and new ways of communicating develop, literacy practices are expanding. Inside and outside of school students are creating, interacting, sharing, evaluating, and remixing various digital content. A helpful way to think about and theorize around these emerging literacy practices is a new literacies framework. New Literacies, which is sometimes also referred to as 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies, online literacies, and digital literacies, is a theoretical orientation toward the new literacy practices that result from new technologies, considering the ways that they are participatory, changing at a rapid pace, and are multiple and multimodal (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu 2008). New literacies is a way to think about the new technologies themselves, as well as the developing new ways of using new technology for literacy tasks. New literacies also theorizes around the new practices that come with new technologies, what is referred to as the “new ethos stuff” (Lankshear & Knobel 2006, 2008). This includes new ways of thinking and creating that stem from new technologies, such as more participatory, collaborative, and distributed literacy practices, where literacies are less individuated, as well as the way that digital literacy practices allow for hybridity and remixing.

In this time of ever growing literacies, it is important for teachers of English to think beyond traditional literacies and incorporate these new literacy practices in their teaching and assessment. Teachers of English are frequently being called upon to integrate technology, develop students’ 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, and to create more innovative and engaging assessments that have connections to literacies that exist beyond the classroom (Alvermann 2008). One way English Language Arts teachers can integrate technology and work with these expanding literacies is to incorporate multimodal digital assessment into their teaching.

Multimodal digital assessments are projects or compositions, which ask students to use multiple modes of meaning-making and communicating, in a digital format, using digital programs or web 2.0 technology (Selfe 2007). The modes might take many forms including, but not limited to, linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial modes. The assessment might take a variety of digital formats and use various digital programs, and often incorporates web 2.0 technology, web-based digital programs which are often collaborative and interactive. The products that students might create with a multimodal digital assessment could be more writing centered, such as digital stories using programs like Storify, websites, wikis, blogs, and hybrid written texts, or more centered on other modes such as visual, auditory, and spatial modes, with creations such as Prezis, iMovies, podcasts, digital art compositions, and infographics. In this paper I will describe some of the issues teachers should consider when working with multimodal digital assessments, drawing from the literature, a qualitative study of high school English teachers’ practices with new literacies and multiliteracies, and my own classroom experiences, as well as explore some ways to design multimodal digital assessments.

## Considerations for Working With Multimodal Digital Assessments

When teachers first think about developing a multimodal digital assessment, they should examine their assumptions about working with technology, think about their own proficiency with technology, as well as that of their students, and consider the needs and learning goals and how the assessment will attend to that as well as fit within the curriculum.

### **Assumptions About Students and Technology**

We are continually told that today's students are being brought up in the digital age, and as a result, have significant technology skills. Many students have cell phones, tablets, home computers, and other technologies and have been using them for quite some time. However, this does not necessarily mean that they use the types of literacies that fall under the umbrella of new literacies, nor does it mean that the students who do engage in new literacies practices outside of the classroom can smoothly transition those skills to academic work. While some students are frequently writing blogs, creating and editing audio, visual, and video content, and engaging in communities of shared interests such as fan fiction websites, some students are not creators or consumers of any web 2.0 content, and would need to learn the technology skills needed to complete a multimodal digital assessment. Additionally, students who are frequently engaging in new literacies practices outside of school might not readily engage in these practices for academic work (Heron-Hruby, Hagood, & Alvermann 2008). Teachers who are designing multimodal digital assessments should be prepared to work with students' diverse skill levels, as well as be prepared to help students acclimate skills to academic tasks when working with multimodal digital assessments.

However, an advantage of using multimodal digital assessments is that students might be more open to working on more challenging skills because these types of assessments may allow for more engagement as students work with genres and modes they find to be personally meaningful. Research shows that visual aspects of multimodal digital work in particular is appealing and engaging for students, especially male students (Bruce 2009; Rowsell & Kendrick 2013; Vasudevan, DeJaynes, & Schmier 2010). Teachers could also design the assessment as a group project to allow students with more advanced technology skills to guide beginners or offer advanced students the opportunity to present tutorials to the class on how to use interesting and relevant forms of technology. Studies of students' out of school new literacies practices describe the diverse and advanced new literacies skillsets some students possess, as well as describe these students' work with online affinity spaces and other communities of practice

(Chandler-Olcott & Mahar 2003; Guzzetti 2009; O'Hear & Sefton Green 2004). Studies indicate that students who frequently engage in new literacies practices in out of school settings might not be students who are high performing on traditional school literacy tasks, and that using multimodal digital assessments with students that struggle with traditional literacy tasks gets students more interested in their work as well as allows them to work with more complex and critical thinking skills within the different genres available through digital spaces (Bruce 2009; Skinner & Lichtenstein 2009). Furthermore, some studies highlight the ways that extensive use of multimodal digital work in the classroom can impact identity, where designing tasks that employ digital literacies and personal storytelling can be an impetus for students to author new classroom identities (Vasudevan, DeJaynes, & Schmier 2010).

In my own classroom experience, both my past as a high school English teacher and present as a college professor, my students' attitudes and aptitudes toward working on multimodal digital assessments have been similar to that described in the literature. With high school students, my most successful assessment was the revamping of a formal persuasive research paper to a multimodal digital format, allowing the students to choose their own digital platform. Previous to this shift, some students loathed the research process, struggled to synthesize sources, and had limited facility with formal citation formats. After shifting to a multimodal digital format, students found the integration and synthesis of their research, which they primarily conducted online through databases and Internet search engines, to be more fluid. Citation through hyperlinks helped students to make real world writing connections. Students found the use of multiple modes to be beneficial in building an argument, as visual, video, and audio content could enhance an argument in ways that words alone could not. For example, one group of students created a composition advocating for the implementation of better safety regulations for the football players in the NFL, and integrated video clips of dangerous plays, images of brain scans reflecting brain injuries, and audio clips of players describing their injuries. These non-print sources, imbedded with text in a multimodal composition, created a stronger argument and provided the types of details that traditional research papers

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could not include, in a way that excited the students as they searched for and edited their clips to provide the most impact. Although some students struggled with the technical components of the assignment, digital work promoted a collegial environment in which more technically advanced students volunteered to assist other students and took pride in their ability to share these literacy skills. In a qualitative study of high school English teachers' use of new literacies and multiliteracies in their classrooms, the teachers expressed similar findings when implementing multimodal digital assessments (Wall 2014). They found the students to be more engaged and personally invested in these assignments than traditional assessments, and also found that the learning curve for less technically savvy students was more easily mediated by allowing students choices with their digital platform as well as allowing collaboration.

### Teachers' Skills and Familiarity with Technology

Another consideration is the teacher's skill level and familiarity with technology. Some teachers shy away from working with technology because they believe that they lack the technology skills to develop or implement a multimodal digital assessment (Leander 2007). Teachers may have limited experience working with digital technology or working with new literacies from their teacher preparation programs, professional development programs do not frequently attend to using digital technology for creative literacy tasks or take on theoretical orientations toward literacy such as new literacies, and digital technology is rapidly changing, so it may feel difficult to keep up with the newest programs and websites (Hundley & Holbrook 2013; Pennington, Brock, Palmer, & Wolters 2013). However, teachers don't need to have expansive knowledge of the various web 2.0 technologies to develop an assessment; it is more important to think about the new literacies the assessment will address, and have an open mind about the technological component. Teachers can work around their own developing technology skills in two ways: they can pick one technology tool of value to study and develop their own proficiency, and build an assessment around the one technology of familiarity, or they can design an open-ended assessment and invite students to bring their own

diverse knowledge of web 2.0 technology to the table, allowing students to choose a technology that suits the task and their own skill level.

In the new literacies and multiliteracies research study, all of the teachers described themselves as not being very interested in digital technology and not having an in depth understanding of various programs and websites (Wall 2014). However, they all believed that using digital technology for multimodal digital assessments was engaging and effective, so they designed their assessments with opportunities for students to work with a choice of platforms and to draw on their classmates as resources. One teacher invited students to offer mini lessons on using particular websites and programs as a way to work around her lack of familiarity and allow the students a more participatory role in the learning experience. Another teacher started integrating multimodal digital assessments with only programs he was familiar with, such as PowerPoint and Blogger, to make sure he could explain what was necessary to complete the task. None of the teachers found that the technological component was a barrier to their ability to guide students through the task nor the students' ability to complete the task. Although there were the typical drawbacks of using technology, such as times when the computer lab was not available or the WiFi was not functioning, the teachers' knowledge of digital technology did not hinder the assignment. In my own experience, I used to feel a need to be familiar with every possible technology the students could use, teaching myself how to use the technology before assigning a task. However, I quickly learned that technology changed faster than I could keep up with, and that my students were a vital resource, and often were able to show me aspects of the technology I could not figure out myself. Additionally, I found that reaching out to my students as resources created a sense of camaraderie and they were not only excited to show me how to use the technology but also that they were motivated to show their technological savvy with their final product.

### Integrating Technology Purposefully

Another issue teachers should attend to is how the technology is being used to engage new literacies practices. Technology must not be used just for technology's sake, as it will not enhance thinking or learning simply to upload a traditional

literacy assessment to a website. Multimodal digital assessments can be powerful learning experiences, but they might not always be perceived as such by students or even administrators. While teachers are being encouraged to use technology, they are also working in an age of extreme teacher and student accountability, where sometimes technology skills get translated to working with online test prep materials, rather than developing new literacies skills (Jacobs 2012; Siegel 2012). Although all of the new mandates, curricular goals, and tests claim to be in the name of preparing students to college and career ready as 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, new literacies and the purposeful integration of technology is almost completely absent from current school reform. Tests such as the PARCC assessments, which move from paper to computer-based testing, reflect the assumption that moving traditional literacies from paper to screen somehow makes the task “new” or “21<sup>st</sup> century,” but instead it reproduces the same literacy skills and does not reflect a new literacies orientation or expand literacies in any way. As teachers design multimodal digital assessments, they will have to consider how new literacies and digital technology is conceptualized at their own schools, and how their work will be perceived by administrators as being in line with the schools’ and departments’ goals.

Unfortunately, in the accountability climate of schools today, this can be a challenge for English teachers, as they are responsible for preparing students for these high stakes exams, and there may be little flexibility with the curriculum to work in new literacies, or teachers may be on standardized or even scripted curriculums where it is not easy or even possible to design your own assessment. In the study of English teachers’ use of new literacies and multiliteracies, all of the participants found it challenging to integrate multimodal digital assessments in light of school reform mandates, pressure to prepare students for standardized tests, and tension between administration and teachers around what new literacies and digital literacies mean and how that might look when students work on these types of tasks. One participant felt that multimodal digital assessments might be perceived as less important, less serious, or too easy for students in the high performing magnet high school in which she worked.

Another participant was on a standardized curriculum and the expectation of the department chair was that all the teachers would do the same work in the same way on the same day. He felt like it was risky to work with multimodal digital assessments, yet thought they were valuable, so he found ways to integrate them where possible, but to a lesser extent than he would have under different working conditions. A third participant described the difficulty of having her department chair perceive the multimodal digital assessment as equivalent to a traditional composition, rather than a “fluff” assignment. Ultimately, the participants thought the value of engaging in new literacies was worth the challenge of changing perceptions of administrators that were skeptical of this work. All of them did so by emphasizing the literacies engaged, and how the digital component allowed for expanding literacies.

One way to ensure the technology is being used purposefully, the assessment targets literacy goals, and it is perceived as academic and worthwhile work, is to center the technology integration around the specific ethos of new literacies: participation, collaboration, distribution, as well as the idea of the remix.

**Participation:** Teachers can think about the ways that digital technology enables students to actively participate as creators of multimodal, multimedia content, as well as engage in active online affinity communities with other creators.

**Collaboration:** Teachers can focus on collaboration, either amongst classmates, or beyond, building digital communities beyond the classroom, perhaps with students in other schools. Collaboration can also be a means for teachers and students to explore the ways in which new literacies practices challenge traditional, singular authorship.

**Distribution:** Distribution can be an instructional focus for researching and gathering materials for the project. Teachers can help guide students through evaluating and selecting digital content that is distributed and available. Teachers can also consider the way that a multimodal digital assessment can be distributed in vastly different ways than a traditional assessment, which is often only shared between the student and evaluator, and what function it might serve to have the

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assessment distributed, whether with classmates, or on a larger scale.

**Remix:** Teachers can focus on the creative opportunities that exist in multimodal digital projects, which cannot be done with traditional assessments such as written essays. If the assessment offers the opportunities for students to remix media, teachers could integrate lessons about following copyright laws and using citations, especially by working with Creative Commons resources and using hyperlinks within digital texts.

### Guiding Questions to Design a Multimodal Digital Assessment

When designing the assessment, teachers can think about their own beliefs about technology and new literacies, their students' needs and experience, and the purpose and learning goals of the assessment. The following questions can be used to think about the design and scope of the assessment:

#### Questions About Teacher Beliefs

- What are your theoretical and epistemological beliefs about new literacies, multimodality, and technology?
- What is your familiarity with digital technology?
- What is your willingness to teach into the assessment?

#### Questions About the Students' Needs

- What is the technology background and skill level of your students?
- What is their experience with new literacies for academic tasks in your class? Beyond your class?
- How will you accommodate for students' various skill levels? Will the assignment be a group project or individual?
- Do they have access to technology in school? Outside school?
- How much time will they have to devote to the assessment?

#### Questions About the Purpose and Learning Goals of the Assessment

- What is the overall learning or performance goal?

- What new literacies skills will this task attend to?
- How will multimodality and digital technology further or enable this goal?
- Will the assessment be formative or summative?
- Will you design the assessment as a formal task or an experimental task?
- What would possible products look like?
- Will students have choices of media and modalities?
- What types of learning tasks are valued in your department, and how will this assessment fit within that scope?
- Will you want students to cite, formally? Do you want to give attention to copyright issues? How does the idea of remix and hybridity fit within your goals?
- How will this assessment attend to aspects of technology and audience, regarding collaboration, sharing, and publishing?

Considering this set of questions while designing the assessment will help teachers to clarify the purpose of the assessment, tailor it to the students in the class, and design it in a way that attends to specific aspects of new literacies.

### Designing Rubrics for Multimodal Digital Assessments

Finally, once the assessment is developed, the teacher must also consider how to design the rubric for assessment. The rubric should match the design of the assessment, so, for example, if the task is to create a composition that uses remixing and the expectation is that students will work with Creative Commons materials and cite their work, then the rubric should prioritize these learning goals over other potential learning goals such as traditional composition features like a thesis statement. If the assessment is formative, and you are focusing on the new literacies practices, the teacher should decide what aspect of those practices should be focused upon, how those can be improved from this task to the next, and what type of rubric would best suit scaffolding that learning. With a formative assessment, it might even be beneficial to simply provide written feedback and not rank or evaluate the assessment in a more formal way. For a

summative assessment, the rubric should clearly represent the learning goals of the assessment and communicate the students' proficiency meeting those goals. Teachers can use rubrics with descriptors of various levels of proficiency, or they might choose to make a checklist of the grading criteria, and rather than evaluate the level of proficiency, can it can simply focus on completing the goals (Borton and Huot 2007). The latter can be best for students who are newer to working with technology and for teachers who are creating a multimodal digital assessment for the first time. Additionally, teachers might invite students into the conversation with the assessment rubric, having them develop criteria for assessment based on what they are learning through the process of doing the assessment or even having them self-evaluate their work (Kuhn, Johnson, and Lopez 2010). When assessing the work, teachers should think about how the assessment process can be related to the ethos of new literacies, and how participation and collaboration might be beneficial to the assessment process, whether that means students are providing feedback to classmates or are contributing to the assessment process with the teacher. Just as new literacies challenge singular authorship, they invite teachers to consider how a participatory lens toward grading might be more authentic in the context of multimodal digital assessment and might provide greater and more meaningful feedback to the student.

When working with multimodal digital assessments, especially the first time, having a more experimental attitude might allow teachers to have a better sense of what students are capable of and how it would be best to assess the work. Sometimes students will create work that is beyond a teacher's expectations, whereas other students might have stuck more closely to the

guidelines of the assignment, making it difficult to decide how to evaluate the work (Newfield, Andrew, Stein, & Maungedzo 2003). It might be beneficial for the first assignment to assess both the process and product, focusing on the ways that the process achieves particular learning goals and allowing the teacher to provide feedback to students to guide them toward the ultimate product. In the research study, one participant found that her students benefitted from being evaluated on the process in addition to the product. As her students worked on a multiliteracies research project, they were assessed for meeting goals in the process, and this also allowed them to ask questions and for her to clarify expectations, which helped the students have a better grasp of this non-traditional task. She also felt that they took the work more seriously, as some students perceived digital work to be more of a light, fun, and artistic project, and less of an academic one, but checking in and having learning goals throughout the process helped them to connect the multimodality to the research task and give more attention to the academic component of the work.

Ultimately, multimodal digital assessments offer many possibilities for teaching and learning. As new literacies practices continue to evolve and expand, the ways a teacher might conceptualize and design this form of assessment and match it to students' needs and curricular goals is boundless. Teachers will face challenges as they integrate multimodal digital assessments into their teaching, but if they work with a flexible and open-minded attitude, they might find that the rewards make this a type of assessment they use again and again.

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