I have always been fascinated with new communicative technologies and considered the exploration of new platforms to be an important aspect of my pedagogical practice. As noted by many literacies scholars (Alvermann; Gee; Kist; Lankshear and Knobel), exploring and studying the online literacy practices of our students is of critical importance in developing a better understanding of the motivating factors and influences popular technologies have on offline literacy practices. However, as Snapchat rapidly grew in popularity, I resisted it.

Snapchat, in brief, is an ephemeral, multimodal, mobile messaging service. There are a few things that make Snapchat particularly unique. First, Snapchat approaches both text and image as being of equal importance. Second, Snapchat can only be accessed via mobile device, and finally, within the application, messages are only viewable for up to ten seconds before they disappear. The implications of these characteristics will be explored in this column. Originally launched in 2012, Snapchat recently surpassed 150 million daily users, ten million more daily users than Twitter, which was launched in 2006 (Frier).

The temporary, ephemeral nature of the exchanges in Snapchat gave me the impression that it was more for individuals interested in lewd exchanges than it was for me. I was not alone in that feeling as the mobile app has drawn a great deal of public concern that it may be used to send suggestive or explicit images by the mostly adolescent and young adult user base. However, current studies suggest that while this type of usage is present, Snapchat is primarily used for relatively innocuous communications (Piwek and Joinson).

After several conversations with current and former students about the social and playful ways they use Snapchat, my resistance was overtaken by curiosity; I began looking into this popularized form of multimodal communication.

Multimodal literacy has been a topic of discussion in NCTE tracking through the historical advances in visual media technologies. These discussions can be traced back in English Journal where both the excitement and concerns of new technologies have been explored. In one example of this, following the advent of the moving picture, Robert W. Neal in 1913 observed that though there was public concern about the social and moral implications of the moving picture, it held potential in the English classroom for studying plot and writing fictional narrative. Though not explicitly stated, Neal was exploring early ideas of the benefits of multimodal literacies.

In addressing the multimodal nature of communication and growing influence of new media, Gunther R. Kress argued for the necessity of a theoretical shift in the field of literacy from a linguistic focus to a semiotic focus. This multimodal perspective helped to move literacy from textual composition and comprehension to a broader concept of meaning-making using multiple modes at the same time (Kalantzis et al.). These types of advances in our thinking of, and approaches to, multimodal literacies are reflected in the valuing of multiple modes of text and the importance of digital technologies as stated in
the NCTE position statement on multimodal literacies (NCTE, Multimodal Literacies Issue Management Team).

Reflecting on the historical influence of technologies on the teaching of writing, Troy Hicks et al. determined that “[d]espite all the cultural and technological changes in the types of texts we are able to produce and consume, . . . not much has really changed in the teaching of English over the past 100 years” (68). While Hicks et al. encourage us not to wait for the technology of tomorrow to do the work of today, we must also consider what the technologies of today can tell us about our possible work of tomorrow. Young adults’ access to smartphones and use of social media has become a near ubiquitous aspect of American society. A recent study by the Pew Research Center indicated that approximately 86 percent of young adults currently own smartphones (Anderson). In addition to making phone calls and sending text messages, these smartphones allow the users to engage with social media through different software applications. Over the past decade, social media use among young adult Internet users has grown from 12 percent in 2005 to 90 percent in 2015 (Perrin). As noted earlier, Snapchat has become one of the most used social media tools.

The more I explored Snapchat, the more taken I was by the potential it has to shape communication patterns because of the way its software was designed and coded. David M. Berry referred to code as a “super-medium” in that it “is not a medium that contains the other mediums, rather it is a medium that radically reshapes and transforms them into a new utility form” (10; italics original). As Tom Liam Lynch has previously asserted, software is neither passive nor is it neutral. He uses the term “software-powered” to focus on the significant role software plays in both mediating and shaping society. The ways Snapchat has been designed holds interesting implications for how multimodal literacies are engaged.

At first glance, Snapchat may not seem much different from other image sharing or instant messaging applications. However, on closer examination, it becomes clear that the ephemerality built into the software, the exclusivity assured by restricting access to mobile devices, and the relationship of visual and textual elements Snapchat has the potential to require sophisticated composition strategies. It takes careful consideration to convey meaning in a visual/textual way that can only be viewed for up to ten seconds. For example, the design of Snapchat has removed a hierarchical relationship between text and image. Instead of one mode being the primary focus, both the visual and textual elements work in concert to convey meaning: one mode is not privileged over the other.

Finally, the ephemerality of the communications Snapchat enables is what truly makes it unique. Unlike other types of digital communication, “snaps” are not archived and are only viewable for a few seconds. Consider, for a moment, attending an art gallery that only allowed the pieces of art to be viewed for between one and ten seconds. The creations in Snapchat are intended to convey clear communication in a brief period. To achieve this, an author must have a clear understanding of the intended audience and how this ensemble of modes, and the relation of text and image, are determined by the genre of the composition and the social relation to the audience.

In addition, the fact that Snapchat software is only accessible via mobile devices places a premium on context. The authors of a “snap” must consider what they want to represent about their respective physical or situational context. The author must then determine how to represent this in a visual way. This may be as simple as conveying happiness with a smiling selfie, or as complex as sharing the diversity of a summer concert audience with a framed image of the nearby crowds’ legs and shoes from the dancefloor.

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Snapchat and the Sophistication of Multimodal Composition

that audience will interpret the multimodal message.

While the issues of multimodality, context, and audience are not new concepts to composition practices, the Snapchat platform engages them in new and interesting ways. The combination of the software’s interface design and the popularity of Snapchat has incredible potential to influence the ways we approach rapid, social communication.

As social media, and now Snapchat, continue to permeate our society and our social communications, is it possible that Snapchat will be able to do what the previous century of technological advances have largely failed to do? That is, can it shift the ways we approach the teaching of composition? It surely will for me. To determine what this shift might look like, we need to take up Donna E. Alvermann’s charge and work with students to determine where/if the literacies developed and employed in Snapchat have a place in our classrooms.

Works Cited


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