Beyond Words on the Page: Using Multimodal Composing to Aid in the Transition to First-Year Writing

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This article reports on a multimodal podcasting unit conducted during a two-week modified summer bridge program for at-risk incoming first-year students. The examples from student work show how teaching a multimodal genre encourages writers to draw from their prior knowledge of standardized genres learned in high school to effectively transition to college composition.

For writers and instructors, sharing the transition from high school to college writing is complex and at times frustrating since this transition reflects differences in writing values between secondary and college writing. Writing values include genres, purposes, practices, and language. In essence, what students often experience as they enter college writing is a new writing context (Dennihy) and changing values in what it means to learn and write. To students, the process of transitioning to college writing seems even more complicated when they are asked to compose in genres that seem familiar to high school genres, but they are expected to apply a different set of values. In response, students may default to the writing practices and standardized forms that worked for them in high school in hopes of meeting their college instructors’ expectations. Some of these standardized forms include popular genres, such as the five-paragraph essay. Additionally, standardized forms also include formulas for writing such as the Jane Schaffer writing method (Jane Schaffer Writing Program; Wiley), which dictate specific formulas for the arrangement of sentences in paragraphs, and fill-in-the-blank writing, which encourages students to copy directly from lecture materials or texts. Instructors should not be surprised when they assign essays for the first assignment in first-year writing (FYW) and their transitioning writers submit the writing in standardized genres they learned in high school, such as five-paragraph essays.

Instructors who hope to help transitioning writers move beyond standardized genres and formulas should consider beginning the FYW class with alternative genres for composing that invite students to compose in entirely new ways. In this article, I delve into a multimodal podcasting unit conducted during a two-week modified summer bridge program for at-risk incoming first-year students. I
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show how teaching a multimodal genre encourages transitioning writers to extend beyond standardized genres and formulas learned in high school and to see composing as multimodal, complex, and audience-aware.

**Writing in High School**

Scholarship in composition has examined a myriad of reasons for the rocky transition from high school to college writing, including lack of vertical alignment or differing expectations (Patterson and Duer; Sehulster); gaps between students’ knowledge and required knowledge in composition (Saidy; Reiff and Bawarshi; Yancey and Morrison), and experiences with high school courses to replace composition such as AP and dual enrollment (Denecker; Taczak and Thelin). These reasons highlight the field’s perception of a misalignment between high school and college writing. Susan Fanetti et al. argue this misalignment is the product of differing values in secondary and postsecondary writing. They argue, “High school education is designed to be standardized and quantifiable. College education is designed to be theoretical. . . . High school students learn to follow a specific set of rules; college students learn there are no rules—or, better, that the rules change daily” (77–78). Because of the ever-increasing emphasis on standardization in K–12 schools in the US, which is largely fueled by legislation that values quantifiable measures of student success over more subjective and descriptive measures, even the least prepared student comes to college with formulas and rules for writing. These same rules typically provide students with the skills needed to be successful on the writing sections of tests used for FYW placement, such as the ACT and SAT. When students enter the FYW class, they bring their writing knowledge and values learned in high school and employ those skills in the hopes of success in FYW.

The five-paragraph essay is one example of a genre, or standardized form, that exemplifies the misalignment between secondary and postsecondary writing. For secondary teachers, the five-paragraph essay and similar genres are often employed to provide students with a rudimentary structure for organizing thoughts about writing (Wiley; Smith). In their “Snapshot of Writing Instruction” Arthur N. Applebee and Judith A. Langer note the quantity of writing in high schools has increased slightly in recent years, but increased standardized testing in school has impacted this increase. Therefore, the majority of writing in school uses standardized forms, such as the five-paragraph essay or formulas, such as fill-in-the-blank essays. Furthermore, research shows struggling writers, those who could most benefit from practice in nonformulaic genres, are typically exposed to the formulas most, since the formulas are seen as stepping-stones. As such, struggling writers spend their high school years trying to master these formulas and rarely learn skills to move
beyond formulaic writing in secondary school (Brannon et al.; Wiley). Therefore, students who may need the most writing support are often most entrenched in formulaic structures, which carry over into their postsecondary writing classes, whether these classes are developmental, stretch, traditional composition, or another iteration of FYW.

Therefore, much of secondary writing, due to the focus on standardization, continues to value the essay over other genres, including multimodal genres. This is due largely to constraints in secondary schools such as access to computer labs, concerns about authorial integrity, and the pressures to prepare students for college. Applebee and Langer highlight that much of the writing they observe in classrooms is monomodal, brief, and focused on test prep, and when computers or technologies that invite other modalities are integrated into secondary writing, “[s]tudents seem to mostly use word processors as a powerful typewriter, with little embedding of video, audio, or graphics” (23). Applebee and Langer do note exceptions to this monomodal view of writing, often in science classes, but the findings of their study generally suggest student composing prior to high school favors written compositions.

The emphasis on the essay extends to the types of composing required of students for placement in college writing. In her chapter “The Literacy Demands of Entering the University” Kathleen Blake Yancey points out students gain admission and are placed into college writing classes via written forms such as college admissions essays, standardized test writing (i.e., ACT/SAT writing tests), and college/university timed writing-placement exams. These writing genres work to solidify secondary students’ experiences with writing as formulaic and monomodal. It is no wonder students enter FYW expecting to write what they have always written—standardized and formulaic genres.

However, when arriving at college, incoming students are often not rewarded for their mastery of standardized forms needed to finish high school and access college. Instead, incoming students are often left feeling they lack skills and knowledge required for college writing. Melissa Dennihy says she spent years telling students “Forget what you learned in high school” (157) before she realized the problematic nature of her assumption, “instructing incoming students to forget what they learned in high school would help, rather than hinder, their adjustment to college” (157). Instead, Dennihy suggests students’ prior knowledge can be an advantage in the transition to college writing.

### Changing Values and Transitioning to College Writing

By the end of their secondary school careers, and especially since the adoption of the Common Core State Standards, high school writers have been exposed to a variety of genres and types of writing. Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi surveyed students enrolled in random sections of FYC at their university about high school genres from which they drew to complete writing in their FYC courses: five-paragraph essay, essay format, timed writing, argumentative essay, and so forth (323). Additionally, in
a study of first-year high school students in an urban secondary school, Hannah and Saidy found that students reported over seventy types of writing required in school, including timed tests, essays, five-paragraph essays, and summary/analysis paragraphs (133). These two studies highlight the many genres students report bringing with them from high school writing. Represented on both lists are standardized forms such as the five-paragraph essay, timed writing for standardized tests, and fill-in-the-blank essays. While the specific genres and standardized forms vary based on geography, state/local teaching benchmarks, state/local teaching values, and student abilities, students typically leave secondary school with beliefs about what constitutes effective writing in school and exposure to some formulaic genres and their rules.

For students who have been taught to think of writing as structured, formulaic, and measurable, the transition to FYW, in which writing is theoretical, critical, and constantly shifting, may prove challenging. The challenge for FYW instructors is helping students to use their prior knowledge to access the college writing. In their article about how students access and use prior genre knowledge in FYW, Reiff and Bawarshi describe students transitioning into college writing as either boundary guarders or boundary crossers. Boundary guarders are “students who seemed to guard more tightly and engage in low-road transfer of their prior genre knowledge” (325), whereas boundary crossers are “students who engaged in high-road transfer as they repurposed and reimagined their prior genre knowledge, even in the face of disparate tasks” (325). The authors identify three indicators of whether students will be boundary guarders or boundary crossers. One indicator students will be boundary crossers is presence of “not” talk or identifying what a genre is not (i.e., this in “not” a five-paragraph essay). Reiff and Bawarshi show that students who use “not” talk are better able to participate in boundary crossing because they can abstract and repurpose strategies in new writing contexts. Their research suggests if we want to help students make the transition to college writing, we may help draw on the genres, forms, and strategies they bring with them from high school and help them see how college writing is “not” that.

To help students use prior knowledge via “not” talk, it is helpful to begin FYW with genres and forms “not” like the ones students experience in high school. In the collection Naming What We Know, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, scholars in writing studies identify and engage with threshold concepts, which Yancey defines in her introduction as “an articulation of shared beliefs” that can function as boundary objects, heuristics for planning, and propositions that can be put into dialogue with other disciplines (xix). From a pedagogical perspective,
threshold concepts are concepts students grapple with as they enter the discourse of writing studies and see the changing values between high school and college writing.

One threshold concept is that writing is multimodal. Multimodal writing diverges from standardized genres often used in high school writing, which are typically monomodal. In their contribution to Naming What We Know, Cheryl E. Ball and Colin Charlton reference the New London Group and note that there are five modes in writing, “linguistic, aural, visual, gestural, and spatial” (42) and that all communication uses multiple modes; “Thus, all writing is multimodal.” In “A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing” Jodi Shipka notes that when multimodal contexts and opportunities are available, “composition courses present students with the opportunity to begin structuring the occasions for, as well as the reception and delivery of, the work they produce” (279). Often, the FYW course is the first time students have thought of writing, at least schooled writing, as more than just written words on a page.

Ball and Charlton note that while “[h]istorically, rhetoric and composition studies is often assumed to focus on writing (and sometimes speech) as solely alphanumeric-based communication,” which is the linguistic mode, a solely monomodal composition is highly unlikely, especially in writing studies where teachers and scholars have largely moved away from composing primarily privileging the linguistic mode.

Assigning and teaching multimodal writing as an introduction to FYW offers the opportunity to help students see writing as “not” monomodal and “not” in a standardized form. Rather than abandoning all prior knowledge, students can repurpose knowledge they learned in monomodal and standardized forms. Multimodal composing invites students to see writing in a new way—employing multiple modalities, valuing critical thinking, and responding to audience expectations rather than to standardized formulas.

The Transition Challenge

In the following pages, I describe a multimodal curriculum I designed, taught, and studied during an abbreviated summer bridge program, which I call Jump Start, for students identified as most at risk of not being retained in their first year of enrollment at a large university in the Southwest. The at-risk designation was based on a combination of standardized test scores, high school GPA, socioeconomic status, and first-generation college student status. The College of Letters and Sciences offered the brief bridge program to students enrolled in their majors. All of the students enrolled in the program I describe were majoring in humanities-focused majors (e.g., English, history, linguistics, languages). The Jump Start program was explicitly not a study skills or remediation program. Rather, the purpose of this program was to introduce students to content and methods of study in the humanities, familiarize them with the campus and campus life, and provide them with a supportive community of other students, peer mentors, and professors prior to the
start of the academic year to ease their transition to college and increase the likelihood of retention. Although this program was specifically for humanities students, the multimodal composing unit could be used with any transitioning writers, as the subject matter was not specific to the humanities.

Eight students were enrolled in the Jump Start program. Jump Start is an optional program, so all of the students elected to participate. Because of their participation they were able to move into campus housing two weeks early without charge and they received three elective credits (graded) upon completion of the course. Three of the students self-identified as white, one as North African, three as Latino/a, and one as white and Asian. Five of the eight students were first-generation college students and five of the students primarily spoke English at home (see Table 1 for additional student demographic data). Of these students, seven had tested into the university’s stretch writing program for the fall semester and one student had taken the English 101 equivalent via dual enrollment during high school and so would be enrolled in English 102, the second course in the sequence, in the fall semester of the first year. Placement in FYW courses at this university is based completely on SAT Verbal (460 or below) or ACT English (18 or below) test scores.

The Jump Start group was a small one, and we spent seven hours per day together for two weeks, so their backgrounds, personalities, learning histories, and learning practices were an important part of the Jump Start experience. There was Alyssa, who grew up in southern Arizona and was one of four children. Although Alyssa describes financial struggles in her family of origin, two of her sisters had attended college before her and had helped Alyssa choose high school courses, such as dual-enrollment English, that help shorten the duration of college and lessen the financial impact on her family. There was Amma, a student who had immigrated to the US from North Africa as an adolescent. The eldest of four children, Amma felt

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Ethnicity (self-reported)</th>
<th>First language</th>
<th>Language spoken at home</th>
<th>First-generation college student (Y/N)</th>
<th>State of permanent residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyssa</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>White/Asian</td>
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<td>English</td>
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<td>California</td>
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intense pressure to succeed in high school. She claimed she struggled with reading but worked exceptionally hard despite these struggles to achieve academic success. Carla had moved from Puerto Rico to live with her brother for her final two years of high school. She was an ROTC student who struggled with the complex financial aid system, which she spent much of Jump Start learning to navigate. Jenny was a student from Northern California and was the first in her family to attend college. Jenny also claimed to struggle with reading and often said that she felt like she had not learned much in high school. Nina had come to Arizona from Illinois because her aunt, who was helping to pay for college, was in Arizona. A Chinese major, Nina was taking an online summer school class at the same time as Jump Start. Adan was a student from California’s Central Valley. He was a first-generation college student, but his sister had preceded him to college. Adan was future focused and hoped to become a lawyer. He came prepared for class and often contributed to class discussions. Antonio was a shy student from southern Arizona. He always came to class on time and prepared, but he rarely participated. Antonio said he struggled with writing, but he would ask questions if he could do so away from other students. He often sat alone at meals or would go to his dorm at mealtime. Finally, there was Billy, a student from California. Billy was sweet but struggled to make it to class on time. By the middle of the first week, the other students had a morning routine that included waking Billy. This opportunity to get to know students so quickly enhanced my own teaching and research since it gave me the opportunity to specifically address students’ backgrounds and learning styles to help them develop as college writers.

**Instructional and Research Methods**

Since one of the explicit goals of the Jump Start program was introduction to content and methods of study in the humanities, the primary instructors, who were both faculty members in English, chose to focus heavily on writing within an interesting and relatable thematic frame—food. As a professor in the program, I intended the writing instructional unit I designed, taught, and studied to be a transitional writing unit. That is, I wanted the writing unit itself to act as a bridge between writing in high school and the FYW course, whether it was the stretch English course or the traditional first-year course. I was interested in introducing students to the differing value systems between high school and college writing by inviting students to think critically, compose for an audience, and begin to think of writing as multimodal rather than monomodal. As such, I designed a podcasting unit based on a topic related to the theme for our session. To do so, I drew from pedagogical sources about the teaching of podcasting (Bowie, Jones; Goodson and Skillen; Rozema). I hoped to build on my prior teaching experiences with struggling writers whom I found far better at orally telling me their ideas than writing those ideas on paper. Furthermore, in “Podcasting and Performativity” Leigh A. Jones describes her podcasting unit as one in which “students jumped into the assignment, took creative risks—the kinds they feared with writing assignments—and
seemed to enjoy doing so” (76). Via this podcasting unit, I hoped to encourage students, many of whom were struggling writers, to jump into composing and to take creative risks as they navigated the transition to college writing.

The Jump Start program was only two weeks in duration, and this instructional unit was limited to one week. The students met from 9 a.m.–4 p.m. each day. The morning hours were dedicated to academics and the afternoon hours to guest lectures, field trips on campus, meetings with peer mentors, and other community building. Therefore, this instructional unit was condensed to a week, but students still received approximately eighteen hours of instructional time over the week, and they drafted, revised, and recorded in the evenings for homework. Table 2 provides a detailed description of the instructional methods, student work completed, and data collected during the podcast unit. Since I was interested in examining the students’ transition to college writing and understanding of the values of college writing via a multimodal instructional unit, this language guided my analysis.

After the unit was completed, I organized data by student and coded using the broad themes: writing in high school, writing in college, multimodality/aurality, monomodality.

While this was a podcasting unit, I am not suggesting all composing in FYW should focus specifically on multimodal composing nor that multimodal composing units should always include podcasts. In fact, much of the writing I assign in my composition courses still privileges the linguistic mode. However, if we hope to transition students to differing values between secondary and postsecondary writing, it is helpful to begin with a multimodal genre that is “not” the genres they used in high school. This move encourages students to move away from formulas that may have been successful in high school and invites them to cross, rather than guard, boundaries.

Changing Values

At the beginning of the Jump Start session, I surveyed the participating students regarding their high school writing experiences and their beliefs about their preparedness for their college writing classes. This survey served as a mechanism for getting to know the students and for assessing whether students’ experiences with and values about prior writing aligned with scholarship about secondary and postsecondary writing. The survey responses confirmed the majority of students’ writing in high school was primarily monomodal essay writing. Students reported writing “essays about books we read,” “3 to 5 paragraph essays,” “expository essays,
TABLE 2. Podcast instructional methods and data collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional activity</th>
<th>Student work completed</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
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| Pre-survey (non-instructional)                             | Pre-survey             | 1. Demographic information  
2. Student pre-assessment of self-efficacy  
3. Open-ended responses about writing in high school and college |
| **“This I Believe”**                                       |                        |                                                                                |
| 1. Students listen to “This I Believe” podcasts by high school and college students  
2. The class discusses statements of belief  
3. Students compose “This I Believe” statements on the topic of food | 1. Notes  
2. “This I Believe” statements | 1. Notes  
2. “This I Believe” statements  
3. Research memo on observations of statements of belief composing |
| Podcast listening exercise                                 |                        |                                                                                |
| 1. Listen to student podcast  
2. Discuss and list on the board genre elements of effective podcasts  
3. Discuss and list ways students develop ethos in podcasts and discuss sources | 1. Notes  
2. Genre elements of effective podcasts | 1. Student notes  
2. Research memo on observations during listening exercise |
| Podcast planning                                           |                        |                                                                                |
| 1. Freewriting to explore topic  
2. Planning document  
3. Rough outline | 1. Freewriting to explore topic  
2. Planning document  
3. Rough outline | 1. Freewriting  
2. Planning documents  
3. Rough outlines  
4. Research memo on observations during podcast planning |
| Peer response                                              |                        |                                                                                |
| 1. Work in pairs  
2. Read aloud podcast script twice  
3. Listener writes a letter to the speaker  
4. Speaker and listener discuss letters  
5. Speaker makes a revision plan | 1. Letter to partner  
2. Revision plan | 1. Letters  
2. Revision plans  
3. Research memo on observations during peer response |
| Podcast listening day                                      |                        |                                                                                |
| 1. Students listen to each other’s podcasts  
2. Students reflect on things learned in others’ podcasts, their own podcasts, and about writing in college | 1. Reflection | 1. Podcast recordings  
2. Podcast reflections |
| Post-survey (non-instructional)                            | Post-survey            | 1. Post-survey |

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persuasive essays, performative essays, etc.” One student reported writing “research papers and essays,” which suggested the research paper was a paper primarily in the linguistic mode. The survey questions did specifically ask about writing, which may have skewed the results to focus on monomodal essay writing. However, one student did describe “making websites for a research paper,” which she described as “not a lot of writing.” Additionally, even the student who had taken a dual enrollment English 101 course reported only doing analytical essays.

When asked the types of writing they expected to do in college, the students responded, “research paper and analyzing books and movies,” “essays, research, informative,” “more argumentative papers and essays that involve a deeper understanding.” One student said, “too many to list,” and another pointed out, “A lot more than what was taught to me in high school.” These responses reaffirmed much of the research, which argues student writing at the secondary level is essay based and primarily appeals to the linguistic mode. However, these responses also show students know college will be different, but they are not sure how. They expect to learn more and with more depth in college, but they expect college writing will be an extension of what they learned in high school—more essays, analysis of books, and so on.

An additional question asked students which of their writing skills they think will be most helpful in their college writing class. Four of eight students’ responses centered on formatting and citations. They responded, “MLA and analyzing,” “formatting and structure,” and “MLA format.” Another student simply responded, “essays.” This further illustrates that students expect to bring their standardized and quantifiable skills of formatting and citations to college in the hopes of being successful in their postsecondary writing courses. I was not interested in telling the students to forget everything they had learned about writing in high school. Instead, I designed the Jump Start writing curriculum to honor students’ prior knowledge, invite awareness of the values system at work in college composing, and encourage students to think of writing in complex, critical, and multimodal ways.

Keeping these elements in mind, I designed the podcasting unit to help students see writing as “not” monomodal and to challenge the students’ assumptions I would be checking for standardized formatting of paragraphs and citations. To do so, I made it clear from the start of the composing process that the podcast would be assessed as an oral argument. I would not collect students’ written scripts and compare them to the oral argument. This encouraged students to move beyond the linguistic mode and its attendant document formatting to consider what they needed to make an argument work for an audience who was listening.

**Using Prior Genre Knowledge in New Ways**

While students have often seen and read essays prior to entering college, the majority of these students had never listened to a podcast, and none of the students had composed a podcast prior to this project. Therefore, to build awareness of this type of multimodal composing, the students began by listening to two different types of audio arguments. The first was “This I Believe,” NPR features written and
In the first step, the students listened to a “This I Believe” feature by a high school student who discusses food scarcity and her feelings when her mother would shop at the gas station minimart because her gas credit card was the only card not maxed out. Using this recording as a model, students informally composed their own, very brief “This I Believe” statements they read aloud to the class. This first step served as a scaffolding step for the students, since it helped them identify a food issue on which they could build for their podcasts and gave them experiences reading their writing aloud. In this section, Alyssa wrote and read,

This I believe. The world is always changing, always growing. Riddled with poverty, there are those who struggle every day just to survive. Food is a necessity. Not everyone has the luxury of going out to eat every night or just to go to the supermarket to buy food. We need to help those who can't help themselves.

In her brief reading, Alyssa started to think about issues of poverty and food insecurity, which became central to her podcast. But her “This I Believe” statement was broad, and she asserted an argument as she read. Amma, a student who had immigrated from West Africa in her early adolescence, wrote about something very personal: “This I believe. Food makes me embarrassed to be a part of African culture. My family is very big on rice and soup. They make different types of food and put it on rice . . . I started trying to get out of eating African food or rice with soup my senior year of high school.” In contrast to Alyssa’s statement, Amma’s was very personal. She used a personal example to show the connectedness between food and culture. This activity was used as a building block to give students the opportunity to combine the linguistic and aural mode before they started planning for their larger piece.

After listening to, composing, and reading aloud “This I Believe” statements, students shifted to listening to student podcasts about issues on college campuses, which would more clearly serve as models for their assignments. One podcast was about bike safety and the other about early class start times. The students began by simply talking about the arguments, including: What was interesting? Were you persuaded? What could have made the argument more effective?

The class then listened to the podcasts again, and students made lists of the genre elements of the podcasts, highlighting which were most effective. Students listed a number of important elements, such as “a unique opening the audience relates to,” “statistics,” “quotes from sources,” “establish credentials/ethos early on,” “state the argument up front,” “pair evidence and analysis throughout,” “summarize the argument,” and “use music and/or sound effects.” Students noted that some of these elements, such as pairing evidence and analysis throughout, were familiar strategies they used in argument essays in high school, while other elements, such as clearly stating the speaker’s credibility and using sound effects or music as part of the composition, were new.

Once students had experience with writing and reading their arguments,
they moved on to planning, which they completed in primarily the linguistic mode. In this planning, students responded to two questions: What will be the points of your argument? What types of sources do you need? Alyssa focused her argument on teen hunger broadly and said she needed statistics, examples, and sources from schools. Amma said her argument would be about “[h]ow kids from foreign countries change their ways of eating when they go to America,” and she needed “an article on culture shock.” In this planning stage, as students reverted back to the linguistic mode primarily, they began thinking about what they wanted to say in the podcast and how they would establish their credibility. In this step, the students employed familiar strategies of articulating an argument and planning for research they had done in high school and applied these strategies to a new genre of composing. These early activities introduced students to the aural mode, invited them to reflect on the composing skills and abilities they brought with them to college, and consider ways they would add to those skills and abilities in college composing.

Combining Modes for Critical Thinking

Students used their materials from the first round of drafting as outlines, of sorts, for the first drafts of their scripts. As often happens in composing arguments, the students used this first step in drafting to narrow arguments. For example, Alyssa began by wanting to write about teen hunger, and her argument started very broadly. She thought she would discuss how it affects mindsets, how it will affect the next generation, the rates and statistics, and what society is doing to help stop teen hunger. She began composing her script in essay form, much like an essay she would write in high school with a three-pronged thesis. Each day the students read their scripts aloud to a classmate. After reading one day, Alyssa approached me. She realized her script looked like an essay and had all of the required elements—an argument, sources, established ethos, a call for change, and so on—but the argument was not interesting to an audience.

Alyssa’s concern about the audience stemmed from her worry that her podcast was missing something and her classmates would not find it important or interesting. When we discussed her current draft script, I asked Alyssa why she was interested in teen hunger, and she told me that when her older sisters went to college it changed the number of dependents in her family, and she and her younger brother no longer qualified for free and reduced breakfast and lunch at school. This impacted her family greatly, since her family could not afford to buy lunch, and her mother needed to provide two additional meals per day. We discussed how Alyssa’s experience both established her ethos on the topic of teen hunger and made her argument more specific, grounded, and important to listeners. Alyssa’s script had originally started with a general introduction:

Somewhere along the way, society blocked out the severe issue of teenage hunger. Whether or not it had to do with school funding or just the lack of compassion for generations to come, it is an issue that needs to be fixed. The United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Services, follows an Income
Eligibility Guideline that shows whether or not you qualify to get free and reduced lunches in schools.

In this initial script, Alyssa had included all of the relevant data on the issue. She went on to discuss the guidelines and income thresholds. However, she wanted to draw in her audience and make her podcast interesting to listen to. In her revised script, Alyssa wrote:

Food. A basic resource need for survival. Providing free food to adolescents should be a given. We want our children to have better lives than we did. We want them to never have to worry whether or not they can eat breakfast and lunch at school because of money issues. During the first semester of my senior year in high school, and my younger brother’s freshman year, my mother was told we no longer qualified for free lunch. We had always qualified for free lunch . . .

We can end the issue of teenage hunger in schools with a simple solution—providing free breakfast and lunch to all students.

These changes made Alyssa’s draft far more engaging and relatable to her listening audience. Moreover, by thinking about ways speakers make oral arguments, Alyssa was able to more directly say what she thought should happen—students should receive free breakfast and lunch at school. As Alyssa negotiated the tension between the linguistic and aural modes, it pushed her to think about the way her argument was working. Composing an aural argument removed from Alyssa’s mind questions about paragraph length and format, sentence arrangement, and stylistic concerns specific to written composition and replaced those with concerns about the effectiveness of the argument and audience perceptions. Through the drafting process, Alyssa showed a deepening interest and ability in critical thinking. She used her sharpened critical thinking in a new genre to construct her argument and to consider the audience’s perception of the argument, which are both particularly important in college-level composing.

Learning to Listen in Peer Review

Even in the peer review process, this podcasting unit focused on multimodality. The students participated in a multimodal peer review process by asking questions targeted toward the multimodal nature of this composing and encouraging writers and responders to use both writing and speaking as the modes of receiving and negotiating feedback.

In the peer response process, responders listened to their peers read their podcast scripts twice. During this time, the responders took notes on the oral delivery of the scripts. This step was designed to have the respondent and the composer hear the podcast script as it would sound when recorded. Peer respondents were encouraged to consider a list of items ranging from an interesting introduction to establishing ethos to showing how facts support the argument. In responding to Antonio’s podcast script about a place for compassion in public assistance food programs, such as the food stamp program, Carla highlighted the fact that Antonio
needed to cut down on an explanation of how food stamps work. She told him “Summarize the part where you are explaining food stamps” to keep the audience interested. She was also interested in hearing Antonio “[g]ive your point of view on the abuse of food stamps.” Finally she asked Antonio to “give some more examples/argument or look for why the office of food stamps restricts them sometimes.” Antonio acknowledged to Carla that he was struggling with his argument. After their discussion, he made a list of planned changes including “better conclusion, testimony of FS, examples/facts, summarize general topics, explanation, more facts on it.” For many of the students, this was the first time they had read work aloud and received oral and written feedback on their work and process. This highlighted the multimodal nature of composing but also encouraged students to remember the importance of audience in the development of their multimodal compositions.

Findings

All students navigated with relative success many of the challenges of moving from more standardized monomodal writing to multimodal college writing. They worked through multiple drafts, composed arguments reflective of their critical thinking, and rarely, if ever, asked questions about paragraph length, the use of personal pronouns, or other vestiges of the genres important for success in high school they expected would bring success in college.

In the first assignment in a college composition class, a primary goal is simply receiving a completed assignment from each student. With the exception of one student, all arrived in class on the final day of Jump Start with a complete recorded podcast. The one student without a podcast had a full draft of his script, so I sent him to the empty classroom next door to record, and he returned with a completed podcast. For this specific student, time management was a major challenge, so pushing him to manage his time and complete the assignment, even if the recording was not the highest quality, was important. Furthermore, this communicated to students that composing in college is achievable even if challenging. Beyond completion of the assignment and the holistic assessment and scoring that students received, there were two primary research findings.

Multimodal Composing Encourages Critical and Reflective Thinking in Transitioning Writers

One of the major goals of this assignment was to help students use their existing practices and strategies, but to move beyond standardized forms. In large part students achieved this goal and developed awareness of the ways that genre elements operate in different types of texts. For example, Antonio had a successful peer
review and drafting process, through which he made major changes to the quality of his argument, and he was exceedingly proud of his podcast. However, in the recording he orally cited the sources that were in parentheticals in his script. As a transitioning student, he thought it was important to include the citations when he read his script, since individual authorship and MLA formatting had been heavily emphasized in high school. However, in his final reflection, and after hearing other students’ podcasts, he commented, “noting sources the way I did in MLA style for a podcast is silly.” Via this multimodal composing process, Antonio developed a sense of critical and reflective thinking about his own writing and began to see how composition in college may have different stylistic norms and genre conventions than composing in high school.

Jenny, one of the students who said she did very little writing in high school, focused on the organization and flow of the podcast. Most of Jenny’s experience with composing in high school had been personal writing and narrative. In reference to her podcast she noted, “The most challenging part was figuring out how to link all of the info together to make it flow. This was different in a way it wasn’t in personal writing and you had to put all of your info in there and not leave out important fact because you couldn’t go back and add stuff.” As a transitioning writer, Jenny was the one who struggled most since she believed she came to college lacking writing skills that had not been developed in high school. As such, she struggled in the ways many writers do early on in their college careers, with organization, using evidence, and establishing ethos. However, Jenny also reported struggling as a reader. Therefore, the podcast assignment, and the aural mode, helped her develop writing fluency because she could hear her argument and work to strengthen the organization for a more effective composition. This particular genre invited Jenny, who struggled with both reading and writing, to work in a different mode that better suited her learning strengths and invited her to think critically while using those strengths. So, while she claimed to struggle with organization, her final podcast was well organized and reflected her ability to think critically and organize an argument.

### Multimodal Composing Enhances Audience Awareness for Transitioning Writers

The podcasting unit encouraged students to consider audience in ways many had not before. Students knew that the entire class would hear their podcasts, and we discussed places podcasts could be shared. Further, many of the students reported listening to other podcasts as they composed for this class.

Adan, a student from California’s Central Valley who composed a podcast about consumers and sustainable agriculture, is one of the students who reported listening to podcasts as he composed his own. After this assignment, one of Adan’s goals was to create and publish more podcasts because he believed his “leaves a small grain in the mind of everyone who listens to it so they can go on and create a sustainable life.” Adan’s hopefulness in the power of his argument is grounded in a sense of audience awareness. He, like other students, reported feeling that this form of multimodal composing has a social impact. Nancy, a student whose pod-
cast was about healthy eating in college, said, “A podcast is different because it is a more effective way to get a point across to someone. To me, it is easier than reading an essay.” Amma, who composed her podcast about the challenges of immigrant teens who feel like they are leaving their native culture behind when they begin preferring the food in the United States, said in her reflection, “I didn’t only write a paper. I put the ideas out there for people.” Interestingly, Amma struggled with the evidence for her podcast, since she could find little research on the topic. Because there was so little existing data, she believed her podcast had the ability not only to bring awareness and recognition of the issue for other immigrant students but also to impact those who supply food to children in schools via food and nutrition programs. Amma’s podcast was strengthened by her clear sense of audience and belief that her podcast could have a social impact.

Audience awareness was also a consideration for students in the recording process. Many students reported they were unaccustomed to hearing their recorded voices and anxious about their classmates listening to their podcasts. Moreover, many of the students had never thought of their composing as writing for an audience other than the teacher. Antonio struggled because he stuttered when nervous. He said, “It was tiresome. I had to take at least 60 takes to get the whole podcast right, with some minor pauses and slight stutters. It really brought the anger out of me every time I slipped up but I kept on going, and, I mean, in the end, I was ecstatic that I finished.” Another student, Carla, wrote in her reflection, “It was challenging recording because I had to do it more than 12 times.” The students found the recording process challenging, especially in relation to hearing their voices and making their arguments sound the way they hoped. They were so committed to the final aural composition they did not even really consider the number of drafts they completed at both the script composing and recording stages. In traditional monomodal essay writing, it is often challenging to get students to revise once or twice. In this multimodal assignment, students revised repeatedly and throughout the process. Many students, like Antonio, were ecstatic and proud of their completed drafts, and many hoped their arguments impacted others.

**Multimodal Composition to Transition to College Writing**

As part of the Jump Start curriculum and experience, students are supposed to get a jump-start on the college experience. Like other freshman bridge programs, Jump Start targets a specific population identified as being at risk for retention. Many of these students are also our most struggling writers, who have had the most standardized writing curriculum in high school. Therefore, one of the goals of this curriculum and experience was to make transparent college values and expectations that could make students stumble in the transition to college learning.

Via this multimodal podcasting unit, students composed by building on their prior genre knowledge and many of the strategies for standardized writing they brought with them from high school. Because of this, students were not told to “forget everything they learned” in high school. Instead, this writing unit invited
the students to bring what they knew with them to the composing process but to use it in multiple modes. Instruction was carefully sequenced so students moved recursively in and out of the various modes for composing repeatedly throughout the process. Although the students struggled with their transition to multimodal composing, since it required them to think differently about what it means to compose for school, this did not prohibit them from creating podcasts reflective of their abilities to do research, think critically, and impact an audience—skills they will continue to need to be successful college writers.

The transition to college writing is challenging for students just out of high school, since secondary and college writing often operate under different values. Incoming students, especially those who have been struggling writers in high school, often take full responsibility for this transition and at times are unsuccessful. Instructors can play an important role in aiding students in the transition by choosing assignments that encourage students to draw from the genres they have used before, such as the five-paragraph essay, and embody the values of college writing: multimodality, critical thinking, and audience-focused composing.

Note

1. I should say that the particular technologies or genres were less important to me than the fact that students experience multiple modalities and compose in a new way. So, instructors who are not experienced in teaching podcasting may choose a different genre for composing. In the past, I have used photo essays for this same type of assignment.

Works Cited


Dennihy, Melissa. “‘Forget What You Learned in High School!’ Bridging the Space between High School and College.” *Teaching English in the Two Year College*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2015, pp. 156–69.


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