Sit in the cramped bleachers, my palms beginning to sweat as I watch my oldest daughter salute the judges and mount the four-inch-wide beam, her long limbs creating imaginary paint strokes in the air as she moves quickly and cleanly through her routine. Thirty seconds in, she pauses, her arms raised, her right leg and foot poised to move into her most challenging acrobatic element. In a flash, her body arches through the round-off, both feet snapping squarely onto the beam, the crinkle at the edge of her eyes the only indication of the skill she’s just triumphantly executed.

As I watched my daughter stick the element that mercilessly hounded her all season long, a reactionary thought flickered into my head at light speed. No ordinary word or phrase, it was a thought, just the same: 🙅.

That’s right; I thought an emoji.

In that tiny moment during my daughter’s gymnastics meet, my brain matter underwent a dramatic change. No longer did I believe that language was confined to mere words, even though I—like nearly every human being on Earth—have “read” many, many symbols throughout my life, a large number of which transcend a variety of cultural and linguistic boundaries: the peace sign, the accessibility symbol (aka the International Symbol of Access), the Pepsi logo. At the same time, though, I failed to think of an instance when I’d actually composed something that lacked written language—until I recalled the dozens and dozens of times I’d responded to a Tweet or commented on a Facebook post with a GIF. The shock of this recollection made me sit up straighter, and for the rest of the meet, I found myself distracted by the thought of how this fleeting moment might inform my work with young adolescent writers—might redefine the very concept of what writing is—for a long time to come.

Of course, all of us—myself included—have drawn, painted, designed, or sculpted something that lacks alphabetic language at some point in our lives. Doing so in order to communicate or convey a message to an audience, though, is something else entirely. This is what we do when we are composing: we are, as Katie Wood Ray (2010) suggests, purposefully and thoughtfully “designing [texts] with readers in mind” (p. 3), regardless of the mode of communication we’ve chosen to use.

Because of this, many educators (Palmeri, 2012; Selfe, 2007) have long advocated for a broader definition of writing in order to meet the wide variety of needs and interests of our students, many of whom struggle with—or simply prefer not to engage with—“traditional” ways of teaching writing, which overwhelmingly privilege print text. Often, as is the case with author-educator Troy Hicks, this has taken the form of suggesting that educators blend our knowledge around the pedagogy of writing workshop with students’ use of digital compositional tools, such as blogs, wikis, or those offered by the KnightLab at Northwestern University (http://knightlab.com/). While, as Hicks points out in the May 2018 issue of this journal, such teaching and learning “still has a long way to go” (p. 9) in order to make the most valuable use of all that digital writing technologies have to offer, I would like to remind us that there are also myriad ways to incorporate alternative, analog modes of writing into our workshops that can help us redefine what it means to write—to compose—in today’s classrooms. Borrowing a concept that educator Kristin Ziemke wrote in a blog post about reading for the Nerdy Book Club in May of 2015, redefining what “counts” as writing in our schools and classrooms, whether we are talking about digital or nondigital forms of composition, is not a matter of either/or, but of yes/and.
Why Redefine Writing?

Offering students space, time, and opportunities for composing that include visual, aural, spatial, gestural, and even multimodal forms of text (New London Group, 1996) is not important simply because it’s naturally engaging or because it helps bridge the gap between students’ in-school and out-of-school literacies, although these reasons are valuable ones. Even more important is that doing so can provide greater access for all learners, particularly those who have dyslexia, those whose first language is one other than English, those for whom so-called “standard” English is not the norm (or even preferred), and those who prefer to compose using modalities other than what is normally privileged in schools and classrooms. When we think of students we typically identify—or who typically self-identify—as “writers,” who comes to mind? Alternatively, when we think of those students who we typically identify as “struggling” writers, who do we envision? While some might consider this to be a gross generalization, my “struggling” writers, who do we envision? While some might consider this to be a gross generalization, my realization that the students we typically envision on two decades as a literacy educator have led me to the realization that the students we typically envision on either side of the equation, particularly those who attend primarily English-speaking schools, most frequently possess the following characteristics:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>“Struggling” Writers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• girls</td>
<td>• boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• those whose first language is English and</td>
<td>• those whose first language is one other than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have a solid grasp of its spelling and</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>syntax</td>
<td>• those who produce small amounts of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>alphabetic text (or do so grudgingly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• those who produce volumes of alphabetic</td>
<td>• those with dyslexia or who receive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text in school</td>
<td>special education services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “neuropsychological learners”</td>
<td>• those who prefer to “draw or speak” rather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• those who write alphabetic text outside</td>
<td>than write words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why might this be problematic? The implications of this kind of binary thinking are many and span across racial, gender, ethnic, class, and ability lines, as I’ve learned from my experience teaching in a variety of public schools. Most significant, though, is the implication that only some students are typically invited to be members of the writing “club,” and that others—far too many of them, in fact—are not. When this happens, not only are we potentially disengaging a great number of students from the act of writing, we are also continuing to act as self-appointed “gatekeepers” who make dangerous, flawed decisions about whose voices are valued and whose stories are worthy of telling.

What This Means for Today’s Classrooms/Writing Workshops

In order to make room for a wider span of students who are identified—or more importantly, who self-identify—as writers and who regularly engage in the act of writing, educators across the grades must break free of the ties that have bound them for far too long to the idea of composition as one that privileges alphabetic text. Rather than see alternative or multimodal forms of composition as a potential “add-on” to the kinds of composition we already ask our students to do—another unit that we must squeeze into an already-crowded curriculum—it is essential to consider how we might seamlessly blend both traditionally alphabetic forms of composition, which privilege a limited number of students, and alternative forms of composition, which share access with a much wider range of students, into our practice. We can do this in a variety of engaging, low-risk ways that incorporate both digital and nondigital tools:

- **Experiment with a wide variety of compositional modes.** Devote a portion of class time each week for nongraded examinations of, discussion about, and tinkering with comics, infographics, logo designs, wordless picture books, spoken word poetry, and other popular and engaging forms of text. Use mentors like those featured on this Padlet I created here (https://padlet.com/scoppola/WritingRedefined2018) to inspire students to make healthy risks with their compositional decisions. What are some common craft moves that these mentors make when creating these compositions? What craft moves can we try out in our own work? Tune into those students who appear to thrive during this time and invite them to share their processes, their thinking, and their tinkering with classmates.

- **Ask students to “reimagine” or “remix” a piece of writing they’ve already composed.** For example, if students have already composed a personal narrative for your class using exclusively alphabetic text, ask them to sketch out what their piece might look like in comic form. Alternatively,
ask students to create a digital version of a poem they (or someone else) has written that incorporates both aural and visual elements. There are many examples of digital poems online—one of my favorite being one William Sexton created from Langston Hughes’a poem “I, Too, Sing America” as a ninth grader, which can be easily accessed via YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaDMSKZVKNY. In assessing this work, consider how some of the more common rhetorical devices we use when composing alphabetic text are also employed—albeit in different ways—when composing multimodal texts.

- Consider the ways that analyzing and tinkering with alternative or multimodal forms of text can inform the writing of exclusively alphabetic text. When looking at powerful examples of protest art, for instance, ask: What can we learn about writing persuasive essays by analyzing how the creators of such art make careful decisions about word choice, content, layout, image composition, and typography (typefaces, point sizes, line- and letter-spacing)? When listening to spoken word poetry, how might we use what we hear to help us envision how that poem—and other poems we compose—might look on the page?

- Invite students to reflect on a class discussion or compose a piece of writing using emojis, icons, or GIFs. Before dismissing such work as silly or anti-intellectual, consider the fact that we as a people have communicated with, attempted to persuade, and/or entertained others using images since the beginning of time. It’s not as easy to compose, say, a familiar fairy tale using emojis as one would think! (And for those who at this suggestion, consider the report about the status of millennials that the White House Council of Economic Advisors released in October 2014, which takes the form of an infographic accompanied by an impressive number of emoji) (Mosenetz, 2014).

- For those intrigued by the idea of “redefining writing” but who are not yet ready to bring this concept to students, conduct your own inquiry into “alternative” or multimodal ways of writing. Tune into where, when, and how often you see these kinds of compositions in the world outside of school. (Once you begin “seeing” them, it is nearly impossible to “unsee” them.) What characteristics do they share with more traditional forms of composition—especially those we privilege in school? What sets them apart? Reflect on what kinds of writing we typically consider academic or rigorous and why. What biases around composition might we want to take a closer look at?

Bronwyn Williams, professor of English at the University of Louisville, makes an excellent point in his foreword to the book Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers (2007) when he writes that “many, if not most, people who got into literacy and teaching writing did so because they were in love with print literacy” (p. x). As true as this may be, it is staggering to think that, nearly fifty years after Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969) pointed out that “print no longer ‘monopolizes man’s symbolic environment,’” (p. 165), we continue to teach composition across all grade levels, but particularly across the older grades, as if the opposite were true. Alphabetic composition is ubiquitous,
powerful, and necessary; no one (myself included) is arguing otherwise. However, if we are to shed our self-appointed roles as gatekeepers of the “writing club” in order to make a more inclusive club—where all voices and stories are equally valued, even those that thrive in traditional compositional spaces—then taking a hard look at what we consider as “writing” is a first step toward that goal.

**References**


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