

2015

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Writing in Motion: Using Kinetic Texts in the Writing Classroom
By Larissa Babak

In my senior year of high school, I had one of my first experiences with multimodality and technology in a writing classroom. For the first assignment of the school year, my AP Literature teacher required that we write an essay about *The Catcher in the Rye* based entirely around a song of our choosing that we thought Holden would relate to. Then, we had to dissect the lyrics and write an essay about why Holden would have related to the song.

Immediately, I was excited about the assignment. For years, I had created playlists that outlined my favorite books and the emotions of the characters. I was thrilled to be able to combine a hobby I enjoyed outside of the classroom with a school assignment. Even though I only needed one song for the assignment, I created a full *Catcher in the Rye* playlist, filled with songs I thought Holden would have loved: "Runaway" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, "Secrets" by OneRepublic, and "Revolution" by the Beatles, to name a few. Eventually I settled on Green Day's cover of John Lennon's "Working Class Hero" for my essay, and although I don't remember anything I wrote in the paper, I remember that I loved writing it.

One of the reasons this assignment appealed to me so much at the time was that I was able to connect something I was already passionate about (music) with analysis of a text. Associating Holden's words with Lennon's lyrics made sense to me, because even though "Working Class Hero" isn't about Holden Caulfield, Green Day's hard-rock sound and Lennon's disillusionment with his world made me feel more in touch with the character. At the time, I struggled to analyze books simply based on their content, and opening that interpretation up to a song I loved felt organic. Plus, all of my classmates chose different songs from a huge variety of genres, and every student was able to connect to Holden in their own unique ways. Even though I didn't know the term then, I realize today that this AP Literature assignment was my first academic experience with multimodality.

Multimodality has been a focal point for writing studies scholars since the early 1990's. In their influential work, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," the New London Group advocates that literacy educators and students can shape their own educational success by becoming active designers of social futures.¹ The New London Group is a group of international scholars who called for a new and more inclusive definition of literacy to account for the changes due to globalization and technology. One of their main arguments is that the classroom should become a

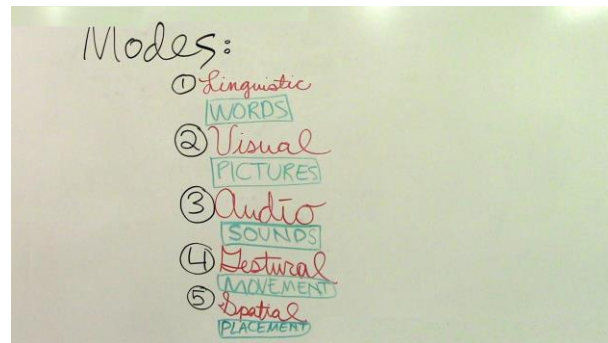
¹ Cazden, Courtney, Bill Cope, Norma Fairclough, Jim Gee, *et al.* "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures." *Harvard Educational Review* 66.1 (1996): 60-91. Print.

space that welcomes students' different experiences and literacy practices. For the New London Group, education should provide a platform so students can use their own experience in a way that will benefit them outside of the classroom. When my AP Lit teacher assigned my class to take an audio mode and integrate our analysis into the visual and linguistic one of the essay, he was too accommodating the class's range of musical tastes and experiences.

In high school, I had no idea what multimodality was, but now, four years later, I understand how letting students explore writing through alternative means allows them to connect with their work in entirely new ways. Integrating multimodality into a writing classroom can help students to express their creative instincts while critically analyzing texts; it is also a way to examine writing that cannot be done in an essay format.

Background

Put simply, multimodal writing pedagogy is the concept of incorporating various modes of meaning into a writing classroom. Developed in 1996 by the New London Group, multimodality can be seen as a pedagogical shift to accommodate the diverse backgrounds students bring to their educational experience.² The New London Group's modes of meaning provide a framework for what factors influence a multimodal project: visual, audio, spatial, gestural, and linguistic.³ A project is multimodal if it incorporates two or more of these modes of meaning, which leaves open many possible options for students to use their own skills to develop their work, whether through videos (like my project), photographs, posters, websites, playlists, podcasts, scrapbooks, and many more.



Still from my video A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies, illustrating the New London Group's 5 modes.

Since the New London Group's initial study, other scholars such as Cheryl Ball, Cynthia Selfe, Gail Hawisher, or Gunther Kress have discussed the benefits of multimodality and argued for the necessity to open the classroom to new technologies and different modes of meaning. For instance, Gunther Kress's work has examined multimodality in terms of communication and expression, drawing from the idea that modes play off each other in ways that complicate the dynamic of visuals and language.⁴ Kress's argument that images provide a sensory link accepts

² "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies," p. 61

³ Ibid., p. 83

⁴ "Multimodality," p. 183

that multimodality in the classroom allows a more fluid way of communicating and expressing messages to various audiences.⁵ However, Kress also argues that each individual mode cannot function on its own, and must be supported by the others in a variety of ways.⁶ Ball, Selfe, and Hawisher have too examined and argued for the incorporation of different modes in the writing classroom. These scholars call also for a critical examination of modes. For example, Selfe, in “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,” argues that strictly using the aural and visual modes has “limited our understanding of composing as a multimodal rhetorical activity,”⁷ and that multimodal projects must incorporate all modes for full effectiveness.

Despite possible concerns regarding usability or accessibility, multimodal projects should focus on creating a message rather than a perfect final product, and technology should serve as a lens and means of getting that message across. Many analysts agree that technology, particularly in relation to multimedia, should not limit the means of multimodal composing. As Daniel Anderson’s “The Low-Bridge to High Benefits: Entry-Level Multimedia, Literacies, and Motivation” states, computer literacy’s should serve as an “entity and non-entity, a mediator that continually links converging technologies, concerns, and people.”⁸ Similarly, Claire Lauer’s “Contending with Terms: ‘Multimodal’ and ‘Multimedia’ in the Academic and Public Spheres” argues that modes serve as “ways of representing information” to compose, while media are media are “tools and material resources” to produce texts.⁹

However, the overall success of multimodal writing pedagogy depends on student and teacher engagement, and how well multimodality as a whole can adapt to a classroom environment. In a comprehensive study of student perceptions of multimodal composing, researchers found that students became more aware of “layering, implicit persuasion, a clearer understanding of the audience, [and] affectative appeals” because of multimodal projects, while the main difficulty students struggled with was developing a clear thesis.¹⁰ Overall, students felt they were more able to express themselves creatively through multimodal composing, but struggled with creating a larger message rather than just a visually appealing final product. However, the authors found that though “students may need additional instruction in how to create theses, assertions, arguments, and claims in multimodal texts,”¹¹ they felt they had less constraints and, by going beyond the

⁵ Ibid., p. 195

⁶ Ibid., p. 187

⁷ “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,” p. 616

⁸ “The Low Bridge to High Benefits: Entry-Level Multimedia, Literacies, and Motivation,” p. 361

⁹ “Contending with Terms: “Multimodal” and “Multimedia,” p. 227

¹⁰ Page 6, Understanding Modal Affordances: Student Perceptions of Potentials and Limitations in Multimodal Composition

¹¹ “Understanding Modal Affordances,” p. 21

form of the print essay, had more opportunities to project their unique vision into their work.¹²

My Project

Drawing from multimodal theories, I formed my own research question: how can educators and students examine different facets of writing by using motion? In 21st century culture, we are constantly inundated by YouTube videos and gifs, but how can animating an audio text provide a better understanding of writing style and rhetorical choices? And, if used in the classroom, what can students learn about writing by incorporating motion?

In order to explore these questions and examine their overall implications, I decided to myself become a multimodal writer. Basically, I designed my project around the idea of recasting existing written and audio texts by adding motion to amplify their original rhetorical features. I designed each kinetic text as a video; the goal was to show how the addition of motion can work as a pedagogical means to help students explore and engage with texts at a deeper level. As I made each video, I carefully considered where they fell in relation to a classroom setting, and what students can learn from composing in this way.

For each video, I defined an overarching goal in relation to writing that could be learned from creating a kinetic version of a text. These goals are as follows:

- **“A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures” by the New London Group:** An alphabetic text that could be translated into a multimodal format to accommodate different kinds of learners.
- **“Paperback Writer” by the Beatles:** A text that allows for an inner examination of the text’s themes but also projects messages to a larger context.
- **Opening Monologue from *Annie Hall* (1977, Woody Allen):** A text that examines voice, tone, and diction through typography.
- **“Romeo and Juliet” by The Killers (Cover of Dire Straits):** A text that takes a canon and allows for modern connections

The Creation Process

Before I get into the specifics of each video, I shall explain my process for choosing texts for adaptation. Throughout my work, I discovered that the pedagogical benefits of multimodality are intimately connected to the selection process of appropriate source texts. In other words, some texts lend themselves more or less to

¹² “Understanding Modal Affordances,” p. 20

kinetic recasting. For each of my video, I considered multiple kinds of texts from different media, ranging from traditional written formats (poetry, fiction, nonfiction) to video (film and television) and music. As I listened to my favorite songs and watched my favorite movies, I was often able to choose parts that would translate visually by looking for certain distinguishable characteristics. Specific rhetorical moves seemed perfectly suited for a multimodal project. Eventually, my search for texts revolved around finding writers, songs, and film scenes where these characteristics were prominent:

- The visual nature of the writing in how well the text could translate to images, symbols, and motion as a whole.
- Character and tone through dialogue and diction, where texts with more exaggerated characteristics appealed more to the visual format
- Associative moments in the pieces that connected to history, culture, and the humanities.

In a classroom setting, without even making a video, students can learn how paying attention to modes in existing texts forces a close-up analysis of what a text does. By looking at language and understanding how different writers present their information, there are immediate links to what translates well...and sometimes doesn't. Certain genres have large potential in the classroom, like poetry, because figurative language and metaphor have a lot of potential in the multimodal realm because of the clarity and vibrancy of the author's words. If students were simply to research and storyboard a potential video even without going through with actual creation, they would still gain the skills of active reading and translating.

Although the task of choosing texts was daunting at times, upon experimentation with various technologies, I was able to distinguish which of my ideas would fit the best with the formats I wanted to work with. For texts where character and tone of voice was essential, I quickly realized Adobe After Effects was the best tool for creating typography; due to the lengthy process of entering text into the program, I dropped a lengthy poem in favor of a more idiosyncratic film monologue. Students can learn these kinds of lessons by exploring on their own and deciding what best fits into multimodal composing.

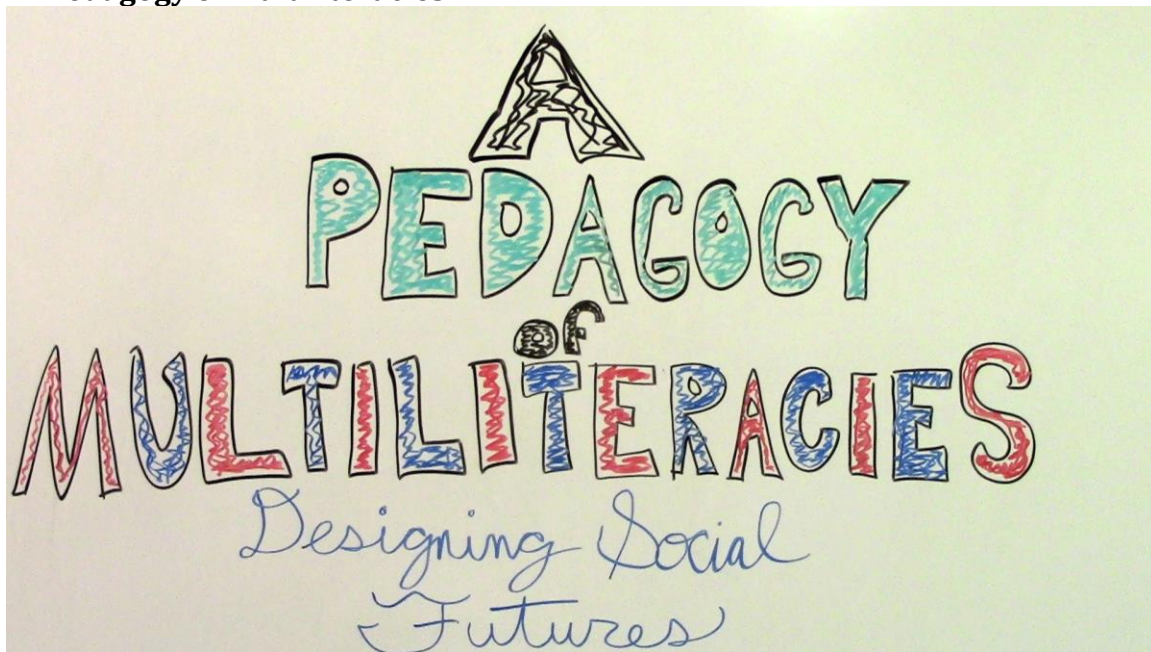
In my case, once I had narrowed down my choices to my main texts, each creative process shared a similar development and drafting process. This development began by experimenting with a variety of possible platforms. I immediately began trying out different software programs and their effectiveness, including Adobe Flash, Illustrator, and After Effects, and simply using the programs to create certain effects. Stop-motion animation was the simplest in terms of understanding the composing process. For example, when I drafted my "Paperback Writer" video, I immediately began conceiving movements of various pieces of paper and objects in my head. The methodical move from a text to a program was highly interconnected as I explored the affordances of each. I knew After Effects was best for capturing

Woody Allen’s voice in the “Annie Hall” monologue, while a whiteboard was best for showing the teaching methods explained in “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies.”

From there, drawn out illustrations of each video and the words were my next drafts. On a white sheet of paper, I drew out the images, words, and modes I wanted to employ in my videos. These storyboards both helped me realize the intended imagery of the assignment and helped me develop my larger messages. My draft of “Paperback Writer,” where I wrote out the entire song and drew the main images, helped me visualize where symbolism could add more to the song’s story. The only text I did not storyboard was the “Annie Hall” video, because with a text that relied heavily on typography, all of my drafting could take place directly in After Effects.

These storyboards were very important for developing my theses. According to “Understanding Modal Affordances,” thesis development is the largest limitation of multimodal projects. Alexander, Powell, and Green found that, even when students had projects that looked good, some of them lacked thought on the rhetorical moves. As I drew out the concepts for my video, I began to notice patterns in the texts, particularly repetitions in form and emphases I felt supported the main message of each text. From these, I thought about my own interpretations and considered what I had to say about the topics of each piece, and how to visually illustrate written text. In a classroom setting, storyboards serve as a bridge between abstract ideas and a real composition. Once I had finished storyboarding, I began making my videos.

“A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies”



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMOMf1uNdYk>

The Text and the Technology

The main message of the New London Group's theory of multimodality is that all students benefit from multimodal learning because all students are drawn to different learning styles and literacies. So, for this video, I decided to take a theoretical essay and translate the messages in the form of video. By redeveloping this essay into a short format video, I hoped that the video's new form could help students who struggle to get through theory, as well as to help students who tend to be more visual learners.

Because the New London Group's essay is about modes in the classroom, I knew a whiteboard and dry-erase markers was the best way to get the message across and stay relevant to the essay's topic. At the same time, I knew that simply writing and drawing concepts on a white board was not going to be enough to make the essay's meaning apparent, so I developed a script that both took specific passages from the source text and wrote my own passages to bridge the gaps between the theory and my images on the board.

Conceptually, this was one of the easiest videos for me to develop. Once I had thoroughly read the article and storyboarded the video, I thought the process of writing on the whiteboard and making the video wouldn't be difficult. However, I ran into several technical issues along the way, particularly in relation to the camera that I was using. Because of the lighting in the room I was working, the camera would not easily focus on the screen; this made some of the photos blurry or created bizarre shadows. Although I was able to edit most of the photos to make the flow as smooth as possible, the stop motion animation still looks uneven at points. In other words, although the project was not difficult from a conceptual perspective, the execution phase took longer than I had planned.

Despite these technological obstacles, recasting this text in video form allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the article's main messages in a way I hadn't from just reading. By looking at direct quotes and thinking about how I could visually represent and synthesize the concepts, the development of this video came together to show that adapting the messages in a new form can provide better appreciation of the meaning.

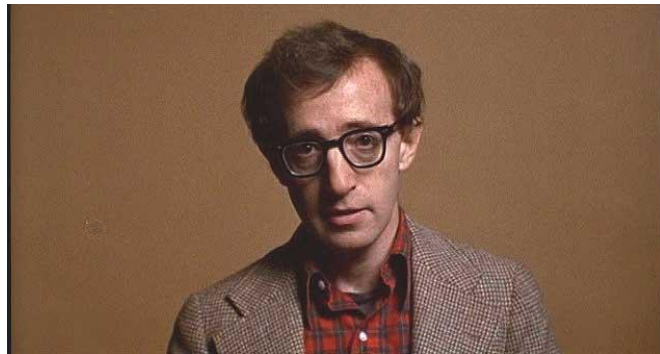
Opening Monologue from “Annie Hall”

Annie and I broke up

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5vi2qViMHA>

The Text and the Technology

I chose to adapt the opening monologue of Woody Allen’s 1977 film *Annie Hall* in order to examine character and voice through typography. In the film itself, Allen’s character Alvy sits in front of a plain background while talking to the audience in a similar way to the traditional kinetic typography genre. However, instead of a human representation, the typography form represents Alvy’s words that introduce the subject of the film.



Still of Woody Allen as Alvy Singer in the opening scene of “Annie Hall”

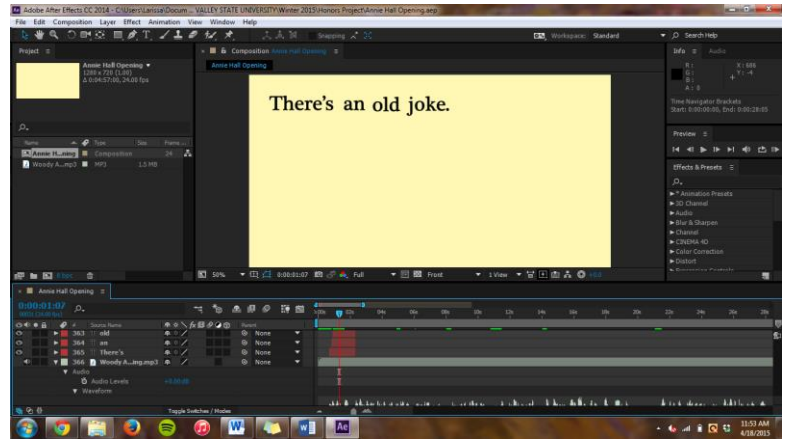
I kept my own design for this video simple—a plain background with the monologue’s words—because Allen’s aesthetics throughout his films are far more focused on story and plot than flashy cinematography. Also, in order to think more openly about the meandering thoughts of the character, I wanted the focus to be more on form. As I listened to the monologue, I designed the layout based on where I sensed patterns in the form of Allen’s speech; so, at times, there is a lot of space between words while, at other times, passages are clumped together. The main idea was to represent the rhythm of Allen’s delivery.

I used Adobe After Effects in order to enter in the words of the monologue with Allen’s voice; the process was pretty simple. At first, the number of options After

Effects offers seemed overwhelming, but after spending several hours figuring out how various functions work, putting the video together wasn't overly challenging.

Overall Conclusions

When we watch films, the experience involves a plethora of modes that work together in creating a dynamic message. The visuals provide a sense of place where we can understand location and timeline through sets and costumes, as well as an aesthetic of cinematography. The gestures of the actors give us a foundation to judge a character based on their physical movement of both the face and the body. The auditory mode is represented in dialogue and background sounds, but even if we are focusing on what is being said, the minute intricacies of the language may not be as easily apparent.



The timeline in After Effects

For this video, the only mode I had to work with was the audio; this forced me to concentrate on the micro-level of speech. Entering the words of the monologue into After Effects was a stop-and-go process of listening to each syllable of Allen's words and entering in data on a timeline. As I listened to this text over and over, and moved from word to word, I began to sense patterns in the language and messages: repetition of phrases, the cadence of stutters, the use of diction and emphasis. These are the main elements I tried to emphasize through typography, size, and font. By paying attention to where these elements fell, I got a much larger sense of how creating a character through language can provide an extremely thorough examination.

In a classroom environment, a text like this can become a way for students to do an in-depth examination of a character. Whether students take a scene from a movie or TV show, or even simply read a passage of fiction, animating the words through kinetic typography provides a tremendous insight into how writers and actors give characters a unique voice.

“Paperback Writer”



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kh45BNjftjs>

The Text and Technology

I chose the song “Paperback Writer” by The Beatles because the lyrics and the music offer many opportunities to explore what it means to be a writer in both the context of the song’s 1960s time period and in today’s world. As I listened to the song, I realized that the story of a first-time writer with big dreams is still the story of many writers today. Almost immediately, I knew I wanted to make a “stop-motion” video because I felt the low technology fit the song well since it was released in 1966. I also immediately knew that I wanted to use actual books and other pop culture references in the video to tell the song’s story and to make broader connections; so early on, I decided that I would set up a camera facing a desk where I would lay out all of the objects seen in the video.

After a few early drafts where I took some rough pictures and set them to the music, I began creating the final video in approximately 30-second chunks. I took photos that fit the verses and the chorus in short chunks, and then uploaded them into Windows Movie Maker to be edited together with the music. This helped me ensure that I had enough photos to fit the verse or chorus in question. It also allowed me to check that the photos were timed perfectly with the music. The biggest limitation with this method was that the editing of photos or timing was difficult because usually, I could not place the camera in its exact original position. However, this medium also gave me a lot of freedom and agency, since I didn’t have to deal with the limits of certain effects designated by a software package.

Overall Conclusions

The biggest lesson I learned about multimodal composing from this project is how motion can really add a deeper dimension to a text. The power of interpretation is an essential part of how writers develop their craft; writing is also about reading and looking at what others have done and how we can move forward. When I made this video, I was not only thinking about what Lennon and McCartney meant, but I also considered how I could write my own message into the piece. The song itself tells a very clear story. By animating it, the message of the song comes to life in terms of what the piece meant when it was written but it also acquires new meanings about how this connects to today's context.

Students in a writing classroom could easily take a text in any genre, whether a speech, song, or passage of fiction, and create their own message around the original work. The ability to interpret lets students have creative freedom while following a well-known layout, which also allows them to delve more intuitively into their passions and create a new dialogue with a text.

The Ill-Fated ROMEO AND JULIET Video

Text and Technology

My original plan for this video was to take one of my favorite cover songs ("Romeo and Juliet" by Dire Straits) by one of my favorite bands (The Killers), and create a video that took Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and adapt the two. However, like the star-crossed lovers themselves, this video was not meant to be. Although I developed a strong, comprehensive storyboard where I drew out in detail the entire song and video, the process of making the video in frame-by-frame fashion in Adobe Illustrator was far too time consuming and laborious.

The major lesson from this failed attempt is that choosing a strong source text is a crucial element in a project. Although I had good ideas, I had undermined the complexities of adaptation between the play and the song. A narrower scope would have matched the project better. In addition, I must acknowledge the fact that time constraints were also a huge part of this video not working out—making the video was too complex and would have required too much time, given the scope of my work.

Overall Conclusions

Putting a text in motion creates a large pool of benefits for students. The New London Group's multimodal literacy pedagogy can enable teachers to account for different literacies and learning styles, no matter what experiences students have from inside and outside the classroom. Kinetic texts have the ability to appeal to a wide audience of students, particularly those who are used to watching short-form YouTube videos for fun.

Recasting texts is an interpretative act that requires both understanding the source material and being able to adapt it into a new format. Therefore, the ways in which students approach their own meaning-making process can be completely different. When I worked on the *Paperback Writer* video, I was engaging in active reading to both interpret a message and create a new one. However, as the article "Understanding Modal Affordances" suggests, teachers should put an emphasis on how to make the greater messages clear, because although I found thesis development natural in my own project, some students might struggle with balancing between a complex message and a polished product.

Despite possible technology-related difficulties, the composing process students use to create a multimodal project is extremely helpful in analyzing a source text. Many of the writing courses I have taken emphasize the importance of process for forming arguments. While making these videos, the process became intertwined with getting messages across as I typed in words into After Effects or moved books around on my desk; having the experience of creating a video gave me better appreciation for how an effective process can be even more beneficial than a final product in terms of what I learned.

Lastly, technology serves as a lens that allows for a new understanding of a text. For example, when I created the *Annie Hall* video in After Effects, I had to pay close attention to the phonics of each syllable as I linked the words and the recording. In this regard, technology helps us understand a text's source material through production. Through this process, students can also choose a technology they want to learn along the way, and hence develop more technical skills. At the same time, I do not deny that technology can be struggle. Some software can be difficult to learn. Lack of experience, time, or access can also become obstacles. However, the point of multimodality in the classroom is not to have a perfect final product. The goal is rather to have a fully realized message, which is, according to most studies, the most important element in writing pedagogy.

By putting writing in motion, we learn lessons regarding the connections between process and product that can be applied far beyond the classroom walls. Personally, this project helped me complicate my approach to writing; I now have a greater understanding of the complexities of composing and shaping modes into a message. From the lessons I have learned, I believe that putting writing in motion can give students new ways and, ultimately, more agency for interpreting and creating texts.

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