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# Thinking with Images and Words: Multimodal Possibilities for Reader Response Journals

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Reader response journals provide students with space to document their thinking about the texts they read. Students might record the text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections they make (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). They might also use this space to explore pertinent questions, construct their interpretations of characters and key events in fiction, or focus on quotations they deem significant. Reader response journals honor the reader's perspective, aligning with Rosenblatt's (2019) argument that each reader uniquely transacts with any given text. Each reader brings to their text their individual life experiences and background. Thus, one student's interpretation of a text will never mirror another student's interpretation. Meaning is not buried in a text, ready to be extracted in a precise form. Readers make meaning when they transact with a text.

As a middle-school English Language Arts teacher for 15 years, Stephanie valued reader response journals as a way for students to track their thinking as they read texts, either independently, in groups, or as a class. She presented her seventh and eighth-graders with a reading response notebook at the start of each school year, and she encouraged students to respond in a variety of ways. Some students experimented with creative writing in response to their readings, at times writing themselves into the stories they were reading and stepping into the narrative as existing or new characters. Other

students engaged in fanfiction, creating spin-off stories that traced different paths through the storyworld created by an author. Letters to authors were also not uncommon. The possibilities for reader response journals are vast.

While Stephanie's students' responses varied in how they chose to capture and present their ideas, one aspect linked most of her students' work: the modality. Students created their responses with written language. In privileging written responses, my classroom practices around reader response notebooks limited students' abilities to more completely represent their thinking. As Kesler (2018) stated, "The emphasis on primarily written responses prevents other modes of expression. We all know students who would benefit from expressing themselves and their learning in different ways, especially when our goal is to develop deep comprehension of texts" (p. 3). Kesler explained that the reader response notebook allows for a variety of "designing on the page" to occur (p. 5). The blank page affords readers a myriad of possibilities for representing and communicating their thoughts. Students can use various tools (e.g., pens, pencils, markers, and crayons) to express their ideas using combinations of images, visual representations of data, and written language.

## Multimodal Reading Responses

Kesler's (2018) arguments for expanding reader response to include images and visual

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representations of data are connected to social semiotic perspectives on multimodality. From a social semiotic perspective, all communicators use various resources to represent and communicate their ideas to other people. Spoken and written language are semiotic resources. However, image, musical notation, numbers, and facial expression are also modes people use to represent meaning and make it tangible to others (Kress, 2010). Although spoken language and written language are often the modes of representation and communication prioritized in school contexts, Jewitt (2017) contended that all modes have equal potential to contribute to meaning-making activity.

From this perspective, students should have the agency to choose the modes, materials, tools most apt for the task at hand (Kress, 2010). Reader responses, for example, do not have to be restricted to words and language. Valuable

thinking can be made visible through image and other modes, too. Single images, comics, photographs, collages, charts, maps, and diagrams can help readers understand the texts they read--both nonfiction and fiction texts. Just as writing can support reading comprehension (Duke et al., 2011), so, too, can creative responses that students construct through multiple modes and semiotic resources.

### Multimodal Reading Responses in the University Classroom

Stephanie no longer teaches middle-school students. Instead, she is very fortunate to teach talented pre-service teachers at the University of Montana. As part of her Language Arts Methods classes, Stephanie assigns weekly readings from numerous literacy-oriented journals and multimedia sources. In a previous semester, she

#### Goals for This Assignment

- To be present in your reading
- For you to choose the aspects to which you wish to respond
- For you to be as creative as you wish with the format and modalities of your response.

#### Purpose of the Weekly One-Pagers

- **Composing to Learn and Reflect:** Using composition to think through the course material you are reading. This One-Pager should not be viewed as a summarizing activity but as an opportunity for you to synthesize the readings, decide upon the big ideas, identify your questions, and forge connections between your reading and other texts, personal experiences, or broader national and / or global issues.
- **Composing to Remember:** Educational philosopher, John Dewey, described how true learning is the residue that's left after you have stepped away from specific acts or moments of learning - hours, days, or even years later. The weekly One-Pagers are your chance to write to remember and crystallize everything you read about into idea nuggets that you can carry forwards into your future work educating and working with young people. This task, then, is an act of synthesis.
- **Composing for an Audience:** It is important to share your thoughts and ideas with others. As new teachers, your voices will be instrumental in helping shape what literacy education looks like in the future. Your classmates will be able to read, view, or listen to your responses. There is no course textbook for this course, so your One-Pagers will be compiled into a community text. The compilation of One-Pagers will act as a guide to the course content.

**Figure 1:** The Goals and Purposes for the One-Pager Assignment

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required students to write a response to each week's readings. However, for the Spring 2021 semester, Stephanie decided to redesign the reading response task and expand the options available to students when responding to their required and recommended reading texts. Stephanie's research on multimodal texts and multimodal composition in grades 4-8 classrooms (Reid, 2020; Reid & Dyer, 2018; Reid & Moses, 2019) and Kesler's (2011) study on pre-service teachers constructing multimodal reading responses motivated her to make this change. Stephanie had also witnessed other professors encourage their students to represent their thinking using modes and formats beyond the written response (A. Wynhoff Olson, personal communication, February 2020).

First, Stephanie created an online community document and gave all the students editing access. Within this class document, each student was allocated a single blank page. This one-pager assignment was inspired by an AVID reading strategy and, as Potash (2019) explained, "Students take what they've learned—from a history textbook, a novel, a poem, a podcast, a TED Talk, a guest speaker, a film—and put the highlights onto a single piece of paper." Although Stephanie may have considered using notebooks were in-person instruction a possibility, the online document offered an important affordance: Students would be able to read and experience each other's work. Furthermore, each week's document would become a collective guide to the most salient aspects of each week's readings. See Figure 1 above for the assignment goals and purposes that Stephanie shared with her students.

An essential aspect of the one-pager reading response assignment was that students could choose to respond multimodally. Stephanie required some written language and insisted that students cite sources, but students could incorporate images and design if they desired. For multimodal inspiration, Stephanie recommended that her students explore Stringfield's (2019) creative note-taking approach and Schrock's (n.d.)

website on sketchnoting. Stephanie also directed her students to read Yamasawa Fletcher's (2018) NCTE blog post and view the sixth-grade one-pager examples featured in the blog post. Stephanie's students were still free to communicate their thoughts using written language, but they could also choose more visual and design-oriented response methods.

Although many students chose to respond in writing, three teacher candidates, in particular, decided to construct their weekly reading responses using both words and images. In the following section, Lela, Bobbi, and Megan explain why they chose to create multimodal responses and provide insight into the affordances and challenges of constructing this work. They also share one of their weekly multimodal reading responses.

### **Lela's Multimodal Process and Response**

I love looking at, thinking about, and making pictures. Family lore states that I drew portraits at age two. This interest has persisted into my adulthood. When Stephanie announced the weekly One-Pager assignment to our ELA methods class, I leaped at the opportunity to integrate more drawing by hand into my weekly routine for the semester. After months of video conferencing and online forums during quarantine, I couldn't wait to work with my hands.

Each week, I started by reading all of the assigned articles. As I read, I searched for common themes and highlighted important points. I also thought about how I could organize my favorite quotes into an image that emphasized common themes. As I sketched, I grouped related quotations and drew symbols that represented salient concepts. I then organized the overall composition of the page. During my undergraduate studies in Painting and Drawing, I learned to conceptualize design (in its purest form) as

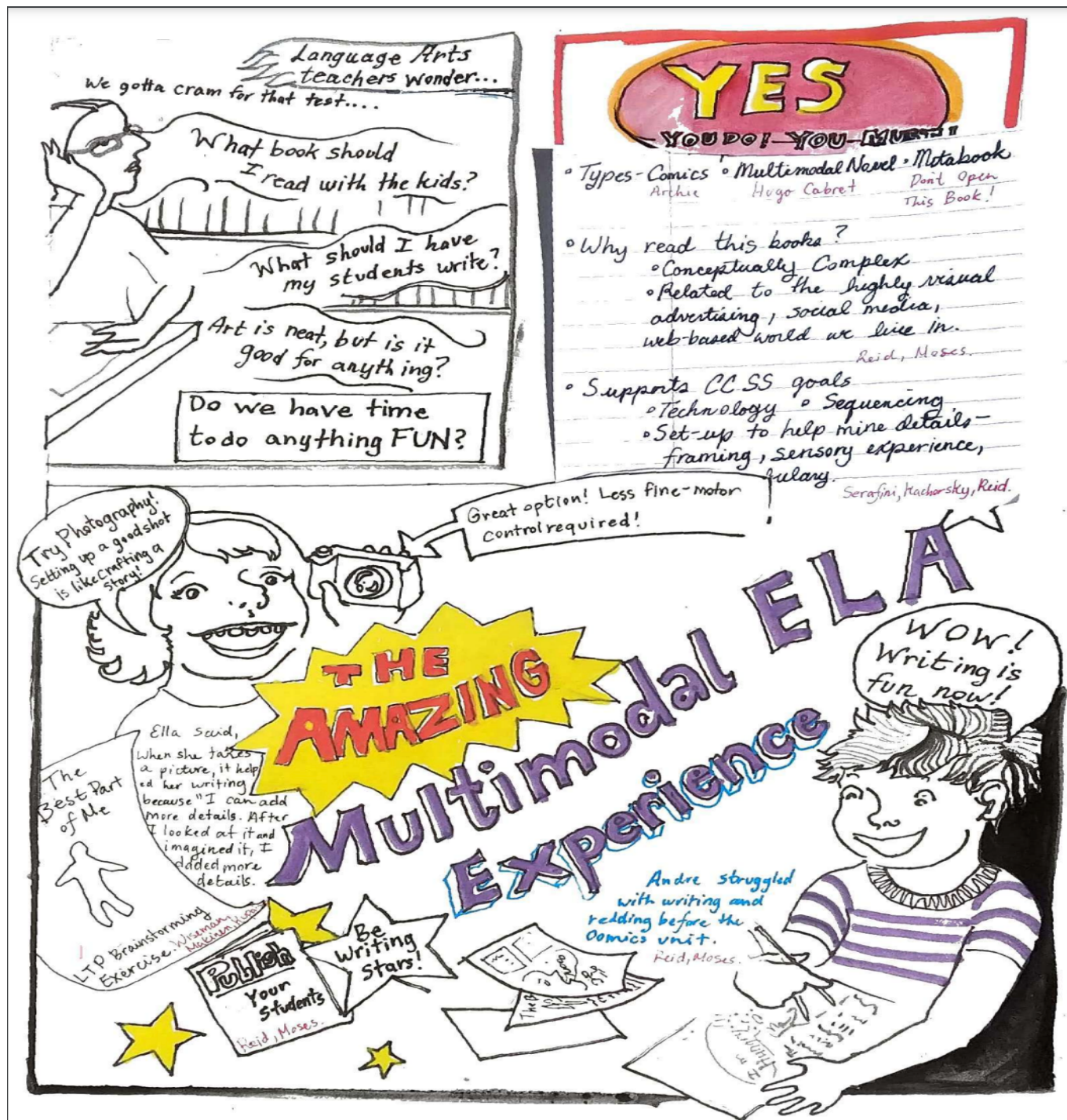


Figure 2. Lela's Multimodal Response

imposing a visual hierarchy on existing information. With this concept of design in mind, I chose which items I wanted to foreground and constructed size relationships. I used contrast of color, value, and line weight to emphasize significant ideas from the readings. Using a large 10 3/4 x 14" page

provided room to work, so I felt free to use watercolor, markers, pens, and occasionally collage.

In this article, I share my one-pager created in response to a selection of weekly readings that discussed multimodal assignments used in elementary (see Figure 2). Comics were shown to engage students with

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the combined modalities of writing and image-making. Therefore, I used markers, bold ink, and brush techniques to mimic comic-style illustrations. My page also included panels, motion marks, text call-outs, and thought bubbles—all comic book elements (Serafini et al., 2018; Reid & Moses, 2019). The flying pieces of paper the children are working on are examples of assignments described in the articles by Wiseman et al. (2016) and Reid and Moses (2019 ). Through my one-pager, I also wanted to communicate that students could achieve state standards while participating in creative production. I expressed this idea in my first panel, which depicts a teacher wondering what the purpose of artmaking could be in the Language Arts classroom.

One week, I chose to type a written response rather than my customary

illustration. This written response helped me realize that my pictures communicated my ideas more effectively than my short essay. Additionally, I engaged with the readings more fully as I synthesized a drawing and had vivid memories of my finished pieces and the readings. I also experienced kinetic memories of the artmaking process: I remember my hands moving on the page and the pen digging into the paper to form letters and pictures.

Finally, I enjoyed the limitations of the one-pager. Sometimes, I can get lost in the process of deciding “what” I’m going to make before I even get to the point of tackling the assignment. Even worse, my ambitions for a project can outweigh my abilities or allotted time, leading to unsatisfactory results and a huge drain on my energy. This assignment's one-page limitation gave me a concrete task to

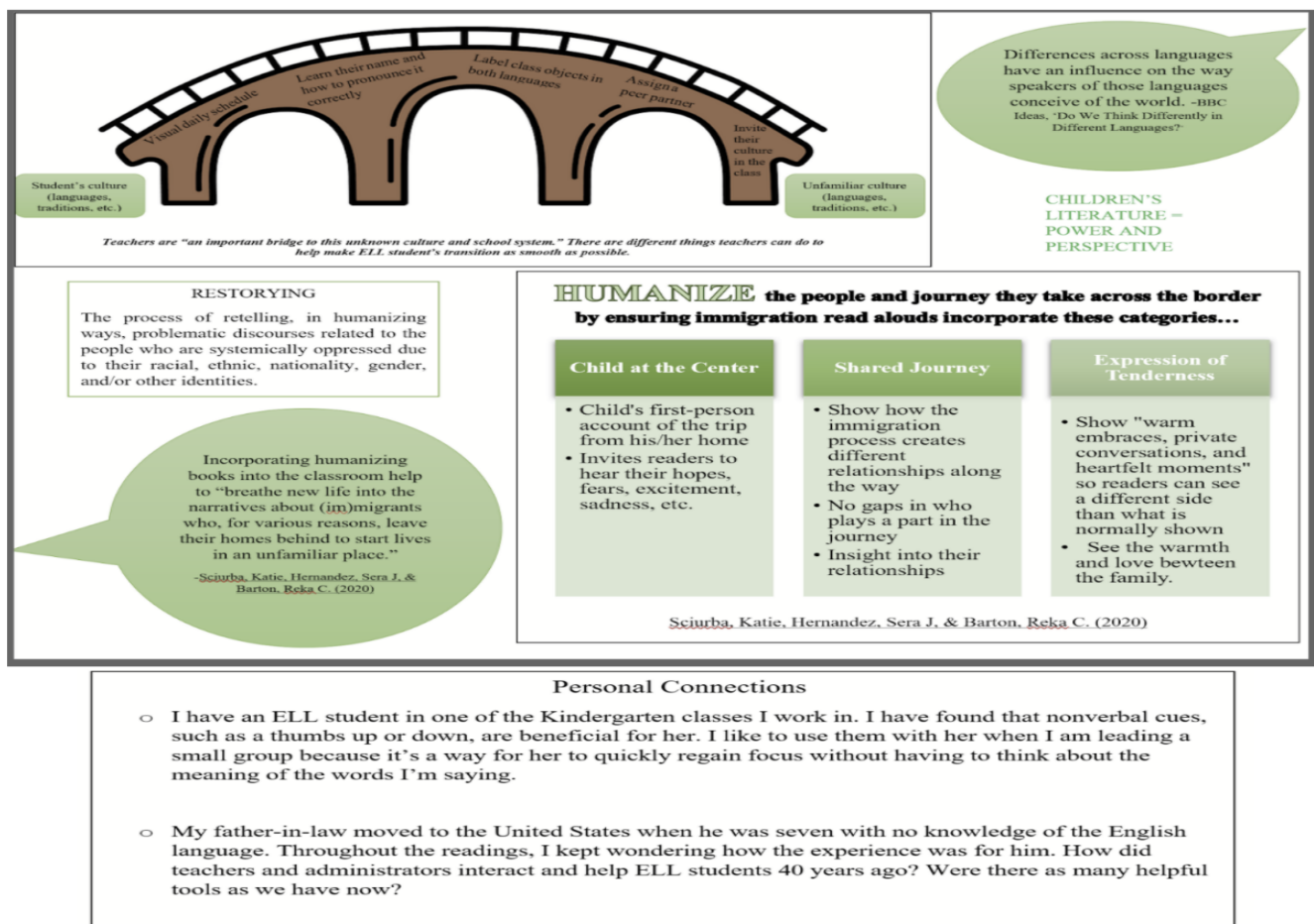


Figure 3. Bobbi's Multimodal Response

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accomplish, making it more manageable. This assignment enabled me to work in a new way that catered to my interests and abilities, strengthened my understanding of course content, and gave me great ideas for assignments to implement in my future classroom.

### **Bobbi's Multimodal Process and Response**

I did not sit down and say, "I am going to respond to these articles multimodally." I did not even realize I was doing so until I finished my first response submission. I was taking the information I was reading and displaying it in a way that made sense to me. I wanted to look back at my composition and remember exactly what I thought when I wrote it. For me, it was not only words and paragraphs that could help these ideas stick.

I created the majority of my designs using Microsoft Word. I took advantage of tools such as shapes, SmartArt graphics, text boxes, and drawing options. As time went on and I was completing more submissions, I subconsciously created a system for completion. First, I would write down different ideas, quotations, or concepts that I wanted to include in my response. Second, after reading the articles assigned, I started to design. I first selected a color theme (each submission had a different color scheme) and then presented my ideas using the tools mentioned above. I experimented with placement and considered how to make specific things stand out.

The example response I share here is my submission about supporting emergent bilingual students (see Figure 3). In the top left is a visual of a bridge. I included a quote from an article that says how teachers are "an important bridge to this unknown culture and school system" (Colorín Colorado, n.d.). I immediately knew I wanted to include this metaphor in my response. I created a picture of a bridge with different things that teachers can do to help ease emerging bilingual students into the classroom. I included where the student was coming from on the left side of the

bridge and indicated where they might be heading on the right side.

Overall, I am grateful for the opportunity to create assignments multimodally. The opportunity to freely explore and discover how to connect my thoughts with the reading material was life-changing, and I learned and retained so much more this way. I would not have been so reflective and detailed if I had been required to complete them using more traditional essay formats. I did not have to worry about fitting a specific format. Instead, I prioritized deciding how to show the ideas and information that resonated with me.

### **Megan's Multimodal Process and Response**

As a student during an online era, I am given many reading and response activities each week. While the material differs, the style of response can become rote, even formulaic. When Stephanie presented the class with the option of responding multimodally to weekly readings, I felt excited by the prospect of creating responses that were engaging to create and reflect upon. The opportunity to respond to weekly readings multimodally offered flexibility and an outlet for creativity in my response process.

I utilized the same materials and general style each week, choosing to focus on a range of brightly colored flair pens, colored pencils, and paper to create my responses. As the first step in my process, I read each assigned article and took brief notes on moments that stood out to me, memorable quotes, and information that sparked a visual response. I primarily noted page numbers and short lines that I could use for my multimodal response. Once I finished reading, I returned to my notes to select the most usable pieces of information. I aimed to include three quotes from the readings as a border to the main images in each of my multimodal responses (see Figure 4). After writing in my bordering quotes, I then decided how much space to allocate for each reading. Some weeks, I equally divided the drawing area into

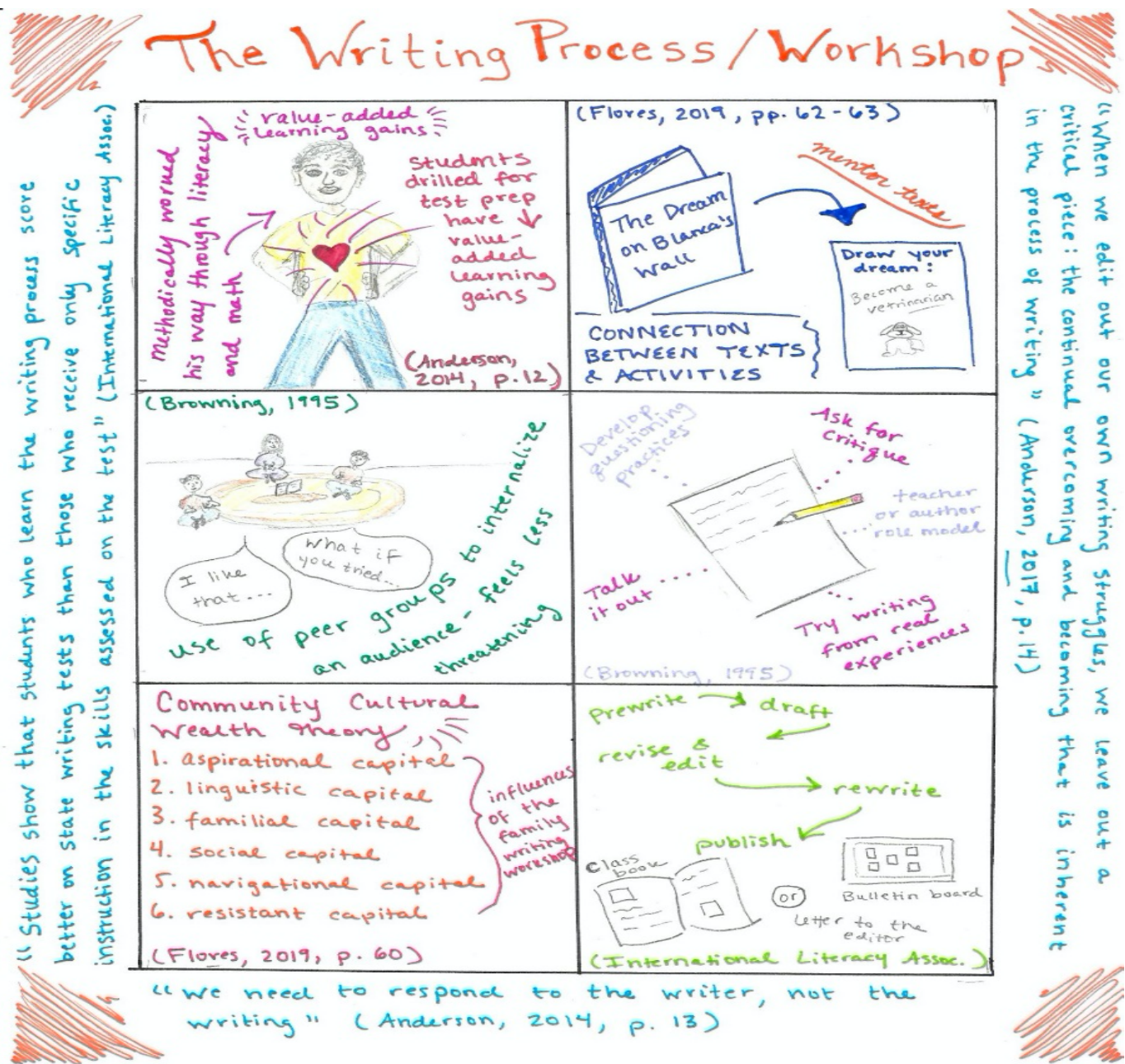


Figure 4. Megan's Multimodal Response

three chunks to represent three articles. Other weeks, I favored a particular article or resource and created a larger space for the accompanying drawings.

In the response shown in Figure 4, I shared my multimodal response to a set of readings listed under the theme of *The Writing Process and Workshop*. The center-left figure highlights students sitting on a classroom carpet, discussing one student's writing. The dialogue provided

shows two sentence stems demonstrating the constructive feedback offered in a safe and non-threatening writer's workshop scenario. Another drawing of note is the upper right-hand image showing the connection between the book *The Dream on Blanca's Wall* (Medina, 2004) and potential student activity. In the bottom right image, I listed writing process stages but chose to draw particular attention to the final stage of the process, publishing, by drawing a class book and bulletin board.

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The preparation involved in creating a multimodal response was the most significant challenge. Unlike typing traditional paragraphs, creating hand drawings on paper required access to more materials and a flat workspace. However, this challenge is outweighed by the benefits of this style of response. Instead of drawing my focus to the semantics of my writing and the correctness of my sentence structure, I was focused on the *ideas* and *messages* when creating these drawings. I have also found that the images I create have more longevity in my memory: the thought process involved in transforming an idea into a picture helped to solidify the concepts and improve my recall.

### Assessing Multimodal Reading Responses

When discussing the possibilities of multimodal composition, questions regarding assessing and evaluating this kind of work frequently arise. This discussion arose within Stephanie's methods class, too. Together, we decided on three strands of action. First, Stephanie agreed to prioritize feedback through written comments in response to students' work. In the future, Stephanie would like to experiment with multimodal formats for feedback – perhaps via video-recorded commentary, for example. Second, students began the semester with three responses that gained automatic full points. This decision provided students the opportunity to experience designing one-pagers and read the range of responses constructed by their classmates. Third, the class co-wrote two rubrics to support them in developing meaningful work. The first rubric focused on the more traditional written response. The second rubric focused on the possibilities for reflective multimodal responses.

When developing the rubrics, students drew inspiration from and adapted Kesler's (2018) reader-response rubric, which focused on thoughtfulness, volume, variety. For our reader response, however, we focused solely on the thoughtfulness category for two reasons. First, Stephanie expected students to produce one page

each week in terms of volume. Second, students wanted to create patterns of responding to the readings and felt that aiming for variety would distract from the goal at hand, which was to craft meaningful responses to their readings. Collaboratively, we developed the Thoughtfulness Rubric for Multimodal Reading Responses shown in Figure 5. Due to the pandemic, Stephanie hosted this class online, so students worked together on the rubrics via Zoom and Google Docs. It is also important to note that students could revise and resubmit any reading response after receiving Stephanie's feedback.

There are challenges involved with assessing multimodal responses. Written work tends to unfold in conventional and temporal ways (Kress, 2010). As evidenced by Lela, Bobbi, and Megan's responses, there is no conventional way to compose and read these kinds of responses. Therefore, as the reader of their multimodal responses, Stephanie navigated each response by designing her reading pathway (Serafini, 2012). Another reader would likely choose a different reading journey and construct a different interpretation. There was even one instance when Stephanie's interpretation of Lela's work did not align with Lela's authorial intentions. The subjective work of assessment allows assessments to be understood as transactional (Rosenblatt, 2019) and part of an ongoing chain of semiosis (Kress, 2010). In responding to these one-pagers, Stephanie's feedback was responsive, interpretive, and personal. Her feedback became part of an ongoing dialogue with students that unfolded over time and across feedback sequences.

In future iterations of this course, Stephanie plans to explore labor-based approaches to grading and assessment (Inoue, 2019) that center mindful, reflective work and de-emphasize the product expected as output. This approach may encourage risk-taking and result in more students trialing different ways to represent and communicate their thinking. A labor-based approach would acknowledge the time students spend on their work.



A Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Images are my own, OR I have remixed the images (reworking found images into a meaningful collage, infographic, or meme)</li> <li>• I have created a unique visual that represents my perspective on the readings. My visual engagement with the readings should include some words. One-pager may consist of multiple images with quotes and own thoughts or comprise a single visual.</li> <li>• I am learning about or thinking about new information, and/or I am drawing connections between information and my experiences to understand what I am reading. Engagement with the texts is evident. Responses may include important questions.</li> <li>• I focus on multiple texts or readings, and I synthesize ideas across the different articles and readings. This includes sources from other weeks or classes as well. Even though I am working predominantly with visuals, citations are included.</li> </ul>
B Grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My perspective is present, but I could provide additional details to support my thinking. Information shared is more summary, without focusing on deeper connections (text-to-text, text-to-self).</li> <li>• Multiple texts or readings are referenced. Connections between at least two sources/ experiences are shown.</li> </ul>

**Figure 5.**

*The Thoughtfulness Rubric for Multimodal Reading Responses. This rubric was co-created by Stephanie and the course members. Importantly, this rubric was inspired by and adapted from Kesler's Reading Response Rubric (2018).*

As you can see from the examples, Lela, Bobbi, and Megan spent considerable time producing their responses. A labor-based approach would also clarify that artistic skills and talents are not a prerequisite for this kind of thinking and learning work. It may be that some students are hesitant to engage in multimodal responses using semiotic resources with which they are unfamiliar or lack expertise.

**Implementing Multimodal Responses in the Classroom**

For educators interested in implementing multimodal reading responses in their classrooms, we would like to offer the following six recommendations:

1. Discuss with students the purpose of their reading responses. This discussion may help students understand the learning goals and the thinking they are expected to undertake.
2. Brainstorm with students the different ways they might represent their thinking about the texts they are reading. Kesler (2018) offered an array of ideas. Class idea-mapping might include digital tools and other analog materials beyond the notebook.
3. Encourage students to try out a variety of reading responses (Kesler, 2018). Teachers could expand the tools and materials available for representational work in their classroom spaces. Students could share their responses so that variety is visible to each classroom participant.
4. Make it clear to students that they are not being evaluated on their artistic skills or expertise with particular formats or tools. Instead, you could (a) grade students on the work they complete and (2) provide feedback on the thinking communicated through their submitted piece (see Inoue,

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2019). Invite students to share their ideas on how these responses might be graded and assessed.

5. Ask students to track their multimodal response process and reflect upon their decisions as they work towards their completed response.
6. Just as teachers demonstrate writing and written language texts, we recommend that teachers share how they might construct multimodal responses with students. However, the teacher's work should not be presented as a model for students to imitate—but one of many possibilities. Teacher commentary might highlight process and decision-making.

### Conclusion

As Lela, Bobbi, and Megan's accounts of the assignment suggest, the blank page offered students the chance to design their thinking and represent their ideas using images, words, and design features. This assignment also presented students with an opportunity to use tools and materials beyond those afforded by the computer. During this pandemic academic school year, this temporary break from the screen felt significant. In an era when digital technology is so readily available and pervasive, it is important that non-digital technologies not be dismissed. Thinkers can use pens, paints, paper, scissors, and glue to make their ideas material, and we argue here that opportunities to use these tools and materials should continue to exist. However, we also foresee classes wishing to expand the digital possibilities for multimodal reading responses: film, podcasting, animation, audio productions are all potential options for future interpretive work. We fully expect this assignment, the rubric, and the way students' work is shared to evolve. We hope, however, that students will continue to think, compose, and design in multimodal ways, choosing the semiotic resources, tools, and materials most

apt for communicating and expressing their thoughts (Kress, 2010).

### Author Biographies

**Stephanie F. Reid** taught middle school students ELA for 15 years in England and the United States and is currently an assistant professor of literacy education at the University of Montana. Her research focuses primarily on visual and multimodal literacy practices in school and university contexts.

**Lela Horst Baumann** is a graduate student at the University of Montana. She excited to become an elementary school teacher. She finds teaching a great way to study, go on adventures, and make new friends.

**Bobbi Rodriguez** is an undergraduate student at the University of Montana in the K-8 Elementary Education program. She is thrilled to meet her future students and watch them grow socially and academically.

**Megan Sorg-Pignataro** is a current graduate student at the University of Montana pursuing a degree in Curriculum and Instruction. As a former AmeriCorps service member and preschool administrator, she brings a love of hands-on, experiential learning to her classroom instruction.

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