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Exploring Adolescents' Multimodal Responses to *The Kite Runner*: Understanding How Students Use Digital Media for Academic Purposes

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how adolescent high school students in an AP English class used multiple forms of media (the Internet, digital video, slide show software, video editing tools, literary texts, and writing) to respond to and analyze a contemporary novel, *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini. Using a multimodal analysis framework, the author explores the following question: How are students' multimodal retellings with literary devices mediated by the text, the choice of compositional tool, and the use of different modes? The findings of this study can be used to shape our understanding of adolescents' multimodal composition practices in academic settings.

Keywords: literacy, technology, literature, composition, new media

As tools for multimodal composition evolve alongside emerging technologies, twenty-first century adolescents are finding new ways of using media to communicate, collaborate, and create, often in entirely digital spaces (Alvermann 2008; Moje et al. 2008), out-of-school settings (Black 2009; Guzzetti and Gamboa 2004; Knobel and Lankshear 2002), and informal learning environments (Hull 2003; Hull and Zacher 2004; Ohler 2006). While students are using verbal, print, multimedia, and visual modes simultaneously in their everyday lives (Hagood 2000; Kress 2003), in schools, the opposite is often true—students are primarily or exclusively interacting with print-based texts (Alvermann 2008; Moje 2002). If “the future of writing is closely interwoven with the future of digital technology” (Merchant 2007, 126), educators need to develop a better understanding of how reading, writing, and other forms of communication shape and interact with the introduction of new technologies into the world (and into classrooms).

Research has begun to conceptualize and explore how digital, multimodal composition practices can be used in schools (Jewitt 2008; Mahiri 2006; Ranker 2008). However, there is still much to learn in terms of using multimodal composition for academic purposes; using multiple modes—such as text, speech, images, sounds, music, and video—to respond to literature may necessitate new instructional approaches and new forms of teacher-student and student-student interactions. In this article, I examine adolescent

learners' multimodal compositions created in response to an AP English class's reading of a contemporary novel: *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini. Analysis of students' multimodal products—in conjunction with their reflections, questionnaire responses, and researcher and classroom teacher observations—suggests the complexity of this type of composition process, its appeal to high school students, and the potential for the simultaneous development of literary analysis skills and technical expertise.

Literature Review

This section describes concepts that informed the design of this study and the analysis of data: new literacies; multimodality; and specific aspects of multimodal composition, including design, transformation, and transduction. The final portion of this section offers connections between underlying principles of media literacy education and multimodality in an effort to outline the theoretical and analytic frameworks that these two fields share and the implications for educators looking to incorporate multimodal composition into classroom settings.

New Literacies

Reading and writing are not isolated skills that can be separated from other social processes; instead, they are interwoven with other representational systems to create meaning (Bakhtin 1986; Gee 1996). In the twenty-first century, this notion is particularly pertinent;

new means for the representation and dissemination of information are inextricably linked to the ways in which reading and writing function. Theorists (Leu et al. 2004; Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Street 2003) have used the term “new literacies” to refer to ways of thinking about literacy as a social practice, one that is always situated in a specific time and place, and one that asks questions about whose literacies are valued and whose are marginalized. Other researchers have referred to communicative and symbolic systems of meaning-making as “multiliteracies” (New London Group 1996; Kress 2003), “multimedia literacies” (Warschauer 2007), and “digital literacies” (Knobel and Lankshear 2009; Vasudevan, DeJaynes, and Schmier 2010). In light of the interest in thinking about multiple literacies, technologies, and new media, some scholars have begun to look at multimodal composition as one way of allowing students to use different semiotic systems to construct meaning.

Multimodality

Theories of multimodality recognize that in representational systems, meaning is constructed through the interactions of various modes (Kress 2003). As new technologies emerge, modes such as images, sounds, music, writing, speech, special effects, and movement become more readily available to readers and writers. These theories also recognize that the experience of viewing or creating a “text” is both connected to and different from traditional notions of reading and writing print-based texts. As Jewitt (2006) points out, “The potential structure and interactivity of digital media provide new possibilities for interaction... and offer different potentials for learning” (2). When several modes are used in a composition, the combination of these modes constitutes the overall meaning of the piece, and none of the individual modes can carry the weight of meaning-making alone (Kress 2004).

Researchers exploring multimodal composition in classrooms have focused on the potential for increasing student engagement and the importance of using multiple sign systems to create meaning. Students have created hip-hop texts (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2005), PowerPoint presentations that involved literary analysis of poetry and novels (Bailey 2009; O’Brien, Beach, and Scharber 2007), video games based on characters and events from *A Wrinkle in Time* (Oldaker 2010), podcasts (Wilson, Chavez, and Anders 2012), and MediaStage productions that recreated the scenes, characters, and themes of *Macbeth* (Tan and

Guo 2009).

This research reveals that multimodal composition can offer opportunities for students to make connections to the media that they use in their out-of-school lives, encourage students to become more critical producers and consumers of text, and create new opportunities for collaboration and communication. It also implies that multimodal composing may affect the academic performance of students in other ways, including improving their ability to write in more print-centric forms (Alvermann 2010; Smythe and Neufeld 2010). However, given the dominance of print in most secondary English classrooms, more work is needed to conceptualize and operationalize ways in which multimodal composition can be used to support academic learning.

Multimodality: Moving within and among Modes

One of the affordances of multimodal composition is that it gives students a chance to think about unique ways to convey their understandings through their purposive selection and combination of modes. Research on multimodal theory has identified several aspects that comprise meaning-making: materiality, framing, design, and production (Albers 2006; Black 2005). While materiality refers to the physical (or digital) materials that a composer has to access to create meaning, framing is the way in which all elements of a composition work together; in digital texts, these elements include “visual, musical, spatial, movement, and other modes” (Albers and Harste 2007, 13). Design refers to the choices composers make in which modes to include or emphasize, while production notes the creation and organization of the product, as well as the technical skills needed to complete a composition. For the purposes of this study, I analyze framing and design features of their students’ compositions, as well as the ways in which they are combining modes in order to compose multimodal responses to literature.

Multimodal composers also often move both within modes and among modes in order to construct meaning, using a process called synaesthesia—the move “from one semiotic mode in meaning to another semiotic mode, an activity constantly performed by the brain” (Kress 1998, 76). Kress (2003) points to two important components of synaesthesia: transformation and transduction. Transformation is a concept that explains how modes provide composers with the ability to reshape the specific mode, and it operates on the forms

and structures within a mode. While it is important to recognize evidence of transformation in a multimodal context, it is also necessary to look at the process by which these sign systems are being navigated. Modes also work with each other (and sometimes against each other) in a continuous process of transduction, or the move of semiotic material from one mode to another (Bezemer and Kress 2008). In this study, student composers used images, text, sound, embodied action, and other modes, and the multimodal products and students' reflections revealed serious consideration of these symbols working with (and sometimes against) each other to create meaning.

Connecting Media Literacy Education and Multimodality

Media literacy education and multimodality share many common theoretical principles: the need for an expanded definition of literacy that recognizes the importance of multimodal and multimedia texts, a focus on the importance of active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create, and a goal of developing informed, reflective, and engaged participants that use their skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings when reading and creating texts with multiple forms of media (National Association for Media Literacy Education 2007). Another major tenet of media literacy education is the focus on media texts and popular culture, and the importance of viewing forms of media as constructions of reality that contain value and ideologies with social consequences or effects (Considine, Horton, and Moorman 2009). Likewise, Clark (2010) describes multimodal composition as "an intentional pedagogy of digital rhetoric that emphasizes the civic importance of education, the cultural and social imperative of 'the now,' and the 'cultural software' that engages students in the interactivity, collaboration, ownership, authority, and malleability of texts" (24).

When students respond to literature as multimodal composers, they are using expanded definitions of literacy and their personal experiences and beliefs to construct meaning using multiple forms of media. While previous theoretical and empirical work has begun to conceptualize multimodal composition as a potentially fruitful avenue of research for media literacy education (Jacobs 2012), more work is needed to operationalize this practice for classroom use. In order to learn more about multimodal composition in response to literature and in classroom environments,

this study addresses the following questions:

- How are students' multimodal retellings with literary devices mediated by the text, the choice of compositional tool, and the use of different modes?
- What elements of the multimodal retellings show how students interpreted and communicated with multiple modes, using two different composing tools (digital video and PowerPoint)?

This study contributes to the growing body of literature addressing multimodal composition in classrooms through the exploration of the various modes that students used, transformed, and translated in their multimodal responses to a print text. For educators interested in media literacy, the use of digital technologies, and multimodality, this study offers a new approach to multimodal composition and literature response that combines the development of skills in literary analysis, media literacy, and multimodal composition.

Context of the Study

The data presented in this analysis is part of a larger study on multimodal composition, where thirty-six students from two twelfth-grade AP English classes read and discussed the novel, *The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, over the course of six weeks. *The Kite Runner* (Hosseini 2003) is a contemporary novel that traces the turbulent history of Afghanistan from the 1970s onward through the eyes of a young boy, Amir. It was also made into a popular movie in 2007.

Research Setting

This study was conducted at a high school with 2,600 students in a small Midwestern city. According to the state's Department of Education, 44% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and 72% of the student population is white, 15% Hispanic, 7% Black, 1% Asian, and 5% multiracial. Participants for the larger study were recruited from two twelfth-grade AP classes, which each met for fifty-three minutes daily. Thirty-six of forty-two students chose to participate in the research, and while data was not collected on the six students who chose not to participate, they still completed multimodal projects as part of the unit. Fourteen students chose to complete retellings with literary devices, resulting in eight projects.

The classroom teacher, Mrs. Johnson (all participant names are pseudonyms), has forty-three years of experience of teaching English and Reading

in K-12 classrooms. The state in which she teaches had recently added standards addressing student use of digital technology in high school English classrooms, and she originally came to me for assistance in designing and implementing a project that would ask students to respond to literature multimodally. Although Mrs. Johnson used different forms of media in her regular classroom instruction (primarily the Internet, video, and word processing software), she had no previous experience with multimodal composition or with designing digital media learning experiences for students.

Throughout the year, students had read and analyzed a number of novels and plays, including Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Class activities for the reading of these texts included the analysis of stylistic features of the text, analysis of plot devices and themes, and incorporation of interdisciplinary material. While The Kite Runner unit included all of the activities students had participated in throughout the year, it also incorporated the multimodal response to literature project.

I helped Mrs. Johnson to develop the project assignment sheets and rubrics, which were provided to students during the project introduction (see appendix A for rubric). The design of the assignment sheets and rubrics was based on my own experiences in using digital media with high school students, and Mrs. Johnson's goals for her students. Ultimately, she wanted them to: learn how to represent their understandings of the novel using new media; integrate music, images, text, and other modes to analyze a literary text; and develop skills in literary interpretation and technology. This project incorporated three elements of student choice—project genre, composing and presentation tool, and individual or group composition. Students were asked to select one of three project genres—a timeline connecting events from the book with real world occurrences, a literary analysis of themes, characters, and motifs from the novel, or a retelling of the story including literary devices. Students also chose one of two forms of media product and a corresponding composition and presentation tool: a digital video (iMovie or MovieMaker) or a slide show with embedded video, sound, and images (PowerPoint or Keynote). Students could choose to work individually, in pairs, or in small groups of three or four.

In the introductory sessions, students spent two class sessions (fifty-three-minute class periods) reviewing and asking questions about the assignment

and rubric, examining examples of multimedia projects, and exploring digital tools in preparation for the composition process. We wanted students to have some freedom in selecting their platform and composing tool (e.g., some students used Mac computers at home and wanted to use iMovie; others used computers in the school labs and generally used PowerPoint or Moviemaker software), so we did not provide explicit instruction in the use of the tools. Instead, we provided lists of resources and video tutorials and worked with students individually or in small groups to help them understand how different tools functioned. Additionally, two sessions were dedicated to working on projects, although all of the students needed additional out-of-class time to finish their projects. Six sessions were also dedicated to the presentation and class discussion of projects.

Research Methods

Researcher Role

My role throughout the project was a participant-observer. In addition to helping Mrs. Johnson design the project and the rubric for assessing students, I also selected examples of student-created multimodal compositions, assisted in the introduction of the project, aided students while they worked on their compositions in class, and helped to facilitate the presentations. I observed and collected field notes throughout all of these sessions.

Data Selection

In the larger study, there was a great deal of diversity in terms of student choice in project genres and composing tools. Sixteen of twenty-three projects (69.6%) utilized PowerPoint software as the composing tool, while seven of twenty-three projects (30.4%) used digital video software (Moviemaker or iMovie). Genres were fairly evenly split among the three choices: eight retellings including literary devices, seven timelines, and eight literary analyses (see table 1).

For this analysis, I chose to focus on one project genre: multimodal retellings with literary devices. Students who chose this project option were asked to create a retelling of the novel where they "highlighted" at least five to seven major events from the book; in addition, students were asked to "celebrate" at least three literary devices using different modes to represent the author's use of literary terms. I chose to focus on this subset of data because of the diversity between individual and group projects, as well as the existence

Table 1. Students' choice of project genre and multimodal composing tool

| Multimodal composing tool | Retellings with literary devices (8 projects; 14 students) | Timelines (7 projects; 10 students) | Literary analyses (8 projects; 12 students) | Project genre total (percentages) |
|------------------------------------|--|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| Slide show (PowerPoint) | 4 (50%) 3 individuals; 1 group of 3 | 4 (57.1%) 3 individuals; 1 group of 2 | 8 (100%) 5 individuals; 2 groups of 2; 1 group of 3 | 16 (69.6%) |
| Digital video (iMovie/Movie-maker) | 4 (50%) 2 individuals 2 groups of 3 | 3 (43.9%) 2 individuals 1 group of 3 | 0 (0%) | 7 (30.4%) |
| Totals | 8 | 7 | 8 | 23 |

Note: Even though some digital videos were completed individually, all projects done with this composing tool that included live video also included other actors, typically family members or students from other classes.

of digital video projects and PowerPoint projects, which was important because of my desire to examine the influence of composing tool on the modes that were used and emphasized in student projects.

Data Sources

Fourteen students created eight multimodal retellings with literary devices. Data sources for this analysis included: field notes, eight multimodal compositions, fourteen questionnaires about student experiences with multimedia projects, fourteen written student reflections, and an interview with Mrs. Johnson. Field notes were collected throughout during the introductory sessions in which students explored digital tools and multimodal projects, the sessions in which students worked on the projects, and the sessions in which students presented and discussed their projects. All student projects and supplemental artifacts from the composing process were also collected. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain information about students' experiences with digital media (in and out of academic settings), their project experience, and their choices in digital media. It was developed with the assistance of an expert reviewer and underwent multiple drafts. It eventually included twenty-three Likert scaling items and three open-ended items, covering multiple topics: students' prior experiences with digital media, their beliefs about peer and teacher collaboration, and their perceptions of themselves as writers and multimodal composers. Students were also asked to analyze their project experiences in a one to

two page written reflection that they submitted to Mrs. Johnson. The teacher interview occurred after the students presented their projects and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

My primary goal in the data analysis process was to triangulate data sources to provide a more complete picture of students' multimodal compositions. This triangulation included incorporating data sources from different viewpoints and perspectives: my observations and reflections (field notes), student reflections on the process (questionnaire responses and reflections), the teacher's perspective (teacher interview), and the compositions themselves (see below for second phase of data analysis). The first phase of data analysis began with my examination of my field notes from all sessions. I coded them using grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990) and open coding (Charmaz 2006), where codes emerge from the data during line-by-line readings designed to identify and label concepts and themes. Emergent themes included how students navigated differences in composing tool, the importance of music in digital video compositions, a deeper understanding of the novel emerging from students' research into novel events and selection of images and videos, and the role of student choices in the composition process. After I developed initial themes, I went through the field notes multiple times in a recursive coding process, organizing information thematically. I repeated this process with the student reflections and the transcript

from the teacher interview.

The second phase of data analysis involved the student questionnaire. Both sections were analyzed: Likert scaling items were analyzed using basic statistical procedures, like frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Open-ended responses were coded using the process described above in order to determine patterns and themes. Half of the questionnaire protocols were double-coded, with an inter-rater reliability rating of 87%.

The third phase of data analysis focused on students' multimodal compositions and included two

different steps. In order to systematically analyze the use of modes across both composing tools, I created a chart that tracked each instance of mode use; for example, if a student used two pictures on a slide, I counted that as two distinct images. This process was used for both PowerPoint presentations and digital videos. I also developed a chart that tracked the frequency of novel events and literary devices depicted and the modes that students used to represent these categories.

The second step of analyzing the compositions themselves was designed to understand the ways in which students were combining modes to create



| Scene # (time stamp) | Linguistic mode (written) | Linguistic mode (oral) | Auditory mode (sound and music) | Visual mode (still and moving images) | Special effects/ color | Gaze and gesture |
|---|---|---------------------------|---|---|---|------------------------|
| 1: In an art gallery composed entirely digitally (0:02-0:06) | <i>The Kite Runner</i> Multimedia Project | | Instrumental music plays throughout; it has a pleasant tone, and seems to be both strings and piano. | We are in a room full of portraits. The floors are a gleaming wood, and two windows (or a door?) peek out from the opposite side of the room). Each frame on the wall has a different image within it, all of Jamal's face. | The entire gallery is digitally constructed. The camera zooms around the room of the art gallery focusing on different pictures. | |

Figure 1. Example of multimodal transcript from Jamal's project and corresponding screenshot

meaning. I adapted a seven-column multimodal transcript from Hull and Nelson's (2005) work to record various aspects of each project and the modes used: linguistic (oral or written), visual (image), auditory (sound or music), special effects, and color. For projects involving student faces or bodies, I also recorded gazes and gestures. Figure 1 illustrates an excerpt from a multimodal transcript and a corresponding screenshot from a student composition.

Findings

Findings are presented in three sections. The first section explores how the use of composing tool (PowerPoint or digital video software) influenced student use and manipulation of different modes. The second section examines the work of three male teens—Ben, Adam, and Keenan—who emphasized visual and auditory modes in order to create a humorous tone in their multimodal video. The third section presents the work of Jamal, who uses similar modes to create a dramatic tone in his video. Student reflections on the project, as well as their responses to questionnaire items, are also included to further illustrate students' purposive use of modes and their beliefs about multimodal composition and its connections to literary analysis.

The Influence of Compositional Tool on Content: Explicit vs. Implicit Explanation

In the eight retellings with literary devices, the composing tool served as an important determinant of

the modes students included and emphasized in their final projects. Many of the projects included the same set of literary devices, such as metaphor, personification, and flashback. For example, all eight projects included a metaphor from the text, and some students even used the same quotes from the novel to illustrate Hosseini's use of this particular literary device. However, the ways in which students portrayed different literary devices varied by the tool that they used. All students working with PowerPoint provided written quotes from the novel with explicit written and oral explanations of the literary devices, sometimes using static images or color, but not music.

In contrast, none of the digital video composers included explicit written or oral explanations, and all used music throughout their projects, in addition to other modes, such as moving images and voiceover. PowerPoint allows the insertion of music within and across slides; this affordance was addressed in the class sessions where students explored digital composing tools and viewed examples of multimodal compositions. However, students either forgot about this feature or chose not to use it. Digital video software typically provides specific cues for including music in compositions; in addition, digital video composers may have been influenced by popular culture and other videos they had seen in the past, which often include music. This illustrates the specific affordances (and possible limitations) of working with a particular composing tool.

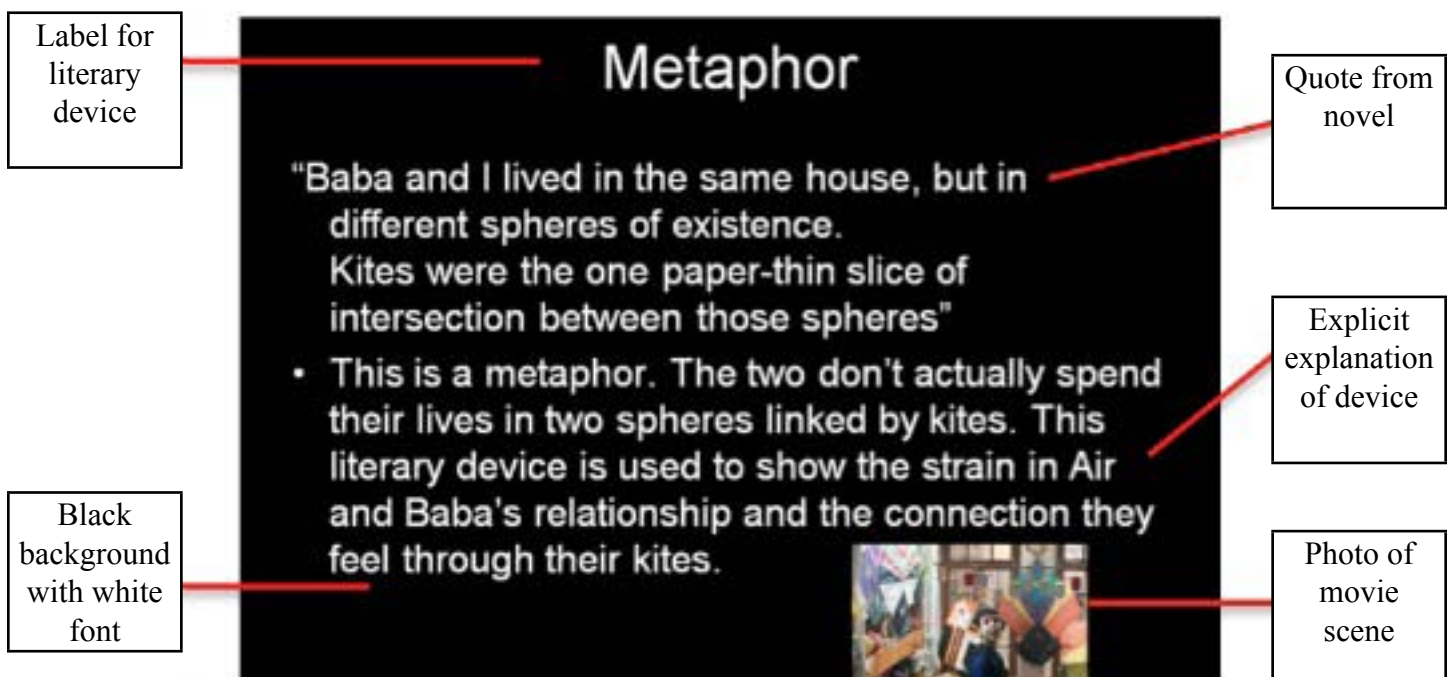


Figure 2. Screenshot from Keisha's PPT retelling including literary devices

Similarities exist between the composing/presentation tools (PowerPoint or digital video software). For example, all projects used both images and direct quotes from the novel, and all labeled the literary devices, usually with written words. In addition, five of the eight projects (three PowerPoints, two digital videos) used an image from the film version of the novel. The fact that these images from the film were widely available on the Internet and could be easily copied and placed in a PowerPoint or digital video may have contributed to this trend. However, the particular affordances of each composing tool seem to have influenced the type of content that students presented, which affected the tone and mood of their presentations and led to vastly different final products in terms of modes used and emphasized.

Keisha, a student working with PowerPoint, explored the metaphor of kites binding together the lives of human beings (figure 2). She chose the following quote to illustrate her point: “Baba and I lived in the same house, but in different spheres of existence. Kites were the one paper-thin slice of intersection between those spheres” (Hosseini 2003, 25). She also included a single image from the movie, showing the main character in a kite shop, as well as her explanation of why her chosen quote was an example of a metaphor.

Keisha’s project illustrates the trend of PowerPoint composers’ use of explicit explanation. In presenting her example of personification, she quotes from the novel: “I wondered if that was how forgiveness budded, not with the fanfare of epiphany,

but with pain gathering its things, packing up, and slipping away unannounced in the middle of the night” (Hosseini 2003, 359). In her explanation on the same slide, Keisha writes, “Baba denied Amir and Hassan the truth. And Amir betrays Hassan. Personification here is the pain. Pain cannot gather or pack or slip, but Hosseini gives it human qualities.” Keisha uses a red background with black lettering, but does not include any images, instead allowing the text, her words, and a dramatic color scheme to explain the quotation and the literary device.

For digital video composers, music often took the place of written explanation, with students ultimately combining auditory modes with others in order to create a compelling argument for Hosseini’s use of particular literary devices. As researchers have pointed out, music is one of five modes that come together to create meaning in multimodal texts—in addition to linguistic, visual, spatial, and gestural modes (Kalantzis, Cope, and Cloonan 2010)—although it is often given “short shrift” in examinations of multimodal composition (Hull and Nelson 2005).

In their digital video, Natalie, Krissy, and Maria created a digital video that used the lyrics to a song by The Killers, titled “Boots,” to highlight important literary devices in the novel (see figure 3). The lyrics used were:

No more trouble in this town
 Silent night for a change
 A brand new year coming up ahead
 You know it’s been so long since I rang one in



Figure 3. Screenshot of metaphor from Natalie, Krissy, and Maria’s digital video

I close my eyes
 Think about the path I took
 No more trouble in this town
 Silent night for a change.
 (The Killers 2010)

The girls manipulated the lyrics of the song so that each lyric corresponded to a quote from the text. Although the girls introduce each new literary device with a textual label (metaphor, personification, etc.), they do not offer explicit explanation, in either written text or in voiceover, of Hosseini's use of the devices. Instead, the quotes from the text are presented with images and song lyrics aligned to construct meaning. For example, they chose the quote, "Words were secret doorways. I held all the keys" (Hosseini 2003, 30), to illustrate the metaphor used in the novel of words serving as windows to another world (figure 3). This quote was superimposed onto an image from the film version of the novel, and corresponded to the lyrics, "No more trouble in this town; silent night for a change," indicating a moment of self-reflection.

The students who used music did not arbitrarily choose clips and insert them in their presentations; questionnaire responses, reflections, and verbal comments during presentations indicate that specific sound clips and songs were carefully selected to create meaning, to set a tone, and to invite participation and collaboration from their audience by provoking thought. As a student named Ben wrote, "It took me forever to edit the video, mostly because of the songs. I wanted to be sure that they matched with the literary devices and our scenes. I wanted for the songs to tell the story." In contrast, PowerPoint composers used written explanations to provide the thinking and reflections on the types of literary devices used.

In digital video compositions, music and image work in tandem to serve multiple purposes: setting the tone for the individual projects, contributing to the overall meaning of the composition, and helping composers explain the use of literary devices in the novel. Students creating PowerPoints used different tactics to create meaning and construct an argument. While students were effective in highlighting literary devices with both types of composing tools, different modes are foregrounded in each. In PowerPoint shows, linguistic and written representations are used most frequently; in addition, the quotes students chose to use are longer and the written explanations are more detailed and explicit. In digital videos, music and image instead carry more semiotic weight, and while literary

devices are labeled, explicit explanations are entirely absent.

The Creation of Tone through the Transduction of Modes

Bezemer and Kress (2008) point out that "by drawing on the specific affordances of different modes in the making of complex signs as modal ensembles, sign-makers can meet the complex, often contradictory demands of their own interest, the needs of the matter to be communicated, and the characteristics of the audience" (171-172). Within this project, multimodal composers were asked to accomplish multiple demands with their compositions—meeting standards for an academic assignment, pleasing and entertaining an authentic audience of their peers, creating a piece that enhanced their own understanding of the novel, and developing talents in terms of video composing, acting, selection of modes, and editing. The fulfillment of these multiple goals could only be attained through an extensive and complicated use of multiple modes.

In the analysis of the digital video retellings with literary devices, dramatic contrasts emerged between two distinct digital videos—one that developed a humorous tone and one that created a more dramatic one. While both digital videos use multiple modes, the emphasis on distinct modes in order to create different tones and moods could have important implications for students working as multimodal composers and teachers and researchers who are striving to understand how this type of composition practice can be used in classrooms and schools.

From Star Wars to The Kite Runner: Manipulating Modes to Manufacture Humor

Ben, Adam, and Keenan set the tone for their digital video with the opening frame. Before any images appear on the screen, dramatic music from the movie *Star Wars* plays, and words begin to scroll upwards, in a reference to the iconic opening of the movie. After the title of the project and the names of the authors appear, more words begin to fly into the screen—the name of the high school, the address (including county, country, and zip code), the names of the president and vice-president, and a final line that reads, "Okay, that's it. Enjoy the show." So, before any literary devices are presented, the authors of the project set the tone with words, music, and color that are carefully designed to make an audience laugh.

Throughout the video, linguistic representations

take multiple forms: names of literary devices flash in lettering on the screen, while voiceover details quotes that are illustrative of specific literary devices. In one scene of the digital video, the students “reimagine” a dramatic kite flying scene from the novel, transporting it to a suburban Midwestern street where flurries of snow fall (figure 4). The voiceover begins with a direct quote from the text:

I was going to win. It was just a matter of when. It turned out to be sooner than later. A gust of wind lifted my kite and I took advantage. Fed the string, pulled out, looped my kite on top of the blue one. I held position. The blue kite knew it was in trouble. It was trying desperately to maneuver out of the jam. But I didn't let go. I held position. The chorus of “Cut him, Cut him” grew louder, like Romans cheering for gladiators to kill, kill. (Hosseini 2003,128)

During this scene, the words *personification* and *simile* flash in white letters at different sections of the narration, clearly signaling where these literary devices are illustrated in the passage. The triumphant tone of the instrumental music contributes to the reading of the text in that it underlines the importance of victory. Humorously, the scene of kite flying in the Afghanistan desert is sharply contrasted by a contemporary, snow-covered, Midwestern neighborhood.

The remainder of the video presents additional scenes with live action shots, voiceover, labels for literary devices, and music purposefully chosen to highlight the scenes, contribute meaning, and create a humorous tone. All scenes follow a similar pattern, including music that corresponds with the chosen quote from the text, acting out of the text, and flashing words to indicate the literary device. Furthermore, the credits contribute to the tone: After an extensive listing of crew (including costuming, catering, props, make-up, and funding), the composers go on to offer special thanks to: “K-Mart for having kites when no one else did, the Bears for losing 36-7, the GI Joe kite, for getting wrapped around a tree, God for making a blizzard on filming day, and the Spiderman kite for breaking.”

These digital composers chose to emphasize linguistic modes in multiple ways. Unlike other students composing with digital video technology, the quotes they chose to highlight were often lengthy and extremely detailed. In fact, two of the selections included multiple literary devices, which Ben, Adam, and Keenan recognized with flashing text, incorporating another mode: special effects. This may be due to the fact that a quote appears text-heavy when presented on a computer or video screen, but voiceover can lend itself to the inclusion of more information.

In addition, auditory modes played a critical role



Figure 4. Screenshot of kite flying scene from Ben, Adam, and Keenan's video

here. Seven different kinds of music were chosen—the Star Wars theme song for the opening credits, a heavy metal/rock beat for the fight scene (Motley Crue, “The Animal in Me,”), instrumental triumphant music for the kite flying scene, “America the Beautiful” for the metaphor of America, polka music for the sexy pictures scene, “I’ve Got the World on a String” by Frank Sinatra for the credits, and another rock song, “Separate Ways” by Journey, for the outtakes (figure 5). The students’ questionnaire responses, reflections, and comments all indicate that the music was carefully chosen for both the beat and lyrical content. For example, “I’ve Got the World on a String,” seems particularly apt for the credits, given the apparent struggles with the kites. However, every piece of music chosen contributes to the overall mood and tone of the video and serves multiple purposes—indicating a change in scene, highlighting the literary device used and the content of the text, and adding humor.

Although different modes are used to meet specific demands, auditory and visual modes are of primary importance in developing a humorous tone. Removing the music from one section or removing or adding quotations would significantly change the impact, tone, and feel of the video. For example, other students used the same lines from the text to indicate metaphor and irony. Both Keisha’s project and the project that Ben, Adam, and Keenan completed together included the metaphor of America as a rolling river, untamed and free. However, Keisha uses a still image of a river in an iconographic fashion, while the boys juxtapose their tranquil image (accompanied by a dramatic gospel rendition of “America the Beautiful”) with a depiction of the seedy underbelly of San Francisco, where one character sells “sexy pictures” to another. Ultimately, the ways in which students manipulated these quotes depended on the compositional tool, as well as choices made in terms of tone, mood, and audience awareness.







| | | |
|---|--|---|
|  <p><i>Star Wars</i> theme</p> |  <p>Motley Crue “The Animal in Me”</p> |  <p>Triumphant music (instrumental)</p> |
|  <p>“America the Beautiful” (gospel)</p> |  <p>Polka music (instrumental)</p> |  <p>Frank Sinatra “I’ve Got the World on a String”</p> |

Figure 5. Screenshots and musical choices from Ben, Adam, and Keenan’s Video

Jamal's Tears of Joy: A Retelling with Drama

Jamal's digital video project demonstrates a stark contrast in terms of audience impact. As the video begins, the audience finds itself immersed in an art gallery (see figure 1, multimodal transcript). We are in a room full of portraits, some with simple silver or black frames, and some complete with ornate concoctions. Each frame on the wall has a different image within it; all of these images are screenshots of Jamal's face from his digital video.

The camera pans around the digitally constructed room, landing and centering on a frame reading, "Metaphor." As the camera moves to a new frame, we see the top of a head and dark brown eyes with beams radiating out from them (figure 6). The wide brown eyes open and close, as a voiceover starts: "Happy or sad, because only his slanted brown eyes glistened with a smile. People say that eyes are the window to the soul. Never was that more true than with Ali, who could only reveal himself through his eyes" (Hosseini, 2003, 36). Like other composers working with digital video, Jamal labels his literary devices, but does not offer any type of explicit explanation (written or verbal) for why his chosen quote is a metaphor. He instead relies on multiple modes, such as visuals, facial expressions, and music to make a compelling case for the use of the literary device.

In the representation of his second literary device, flashback, Jamal again presents the label before moving to an image of himself. The camera flashes

again, and all that is dark is now light; the frame has turned into a living version of a film negative. Instead of a close-up of Jamal's face, the camera is now panned out so that we can see that he is in the bedroom, and flashback is written across the bottom of the screen in yellow letters. For the first part of the scene, the room is filled with colors. But as the voiceover starts the last sentence, "For you, a thousand times over," the scene shifts so that everything is in gray tones, and a small boy appears suddenly over Jamal's shoulder to whisper in his ear. This use of color and emphasis on different effects again indicates the importance of the visual; while music plays in the background and linguistic modes are used to label the literary device and read the quotation, the mood and tone are created by the use of different special effects, facial expressions, and color.

The visual is of primary importance in these scenes, as well as in the rest of the video. Images are always manipulated, from the placement of the letters that spell out the names of literary devices within the frames, to the reconstruction of Jamal's face as a living beam of light, to the use of color to indicate flashback. Special effects, gaze, and gesture also play a large role in this composition, particularly when examined in contrast to the humorous video created by Ben, Adam, and Keenan. Throughout each individual scene, Jamal gazes into the camera, closing his eyes or moving only for dramatic impact. Special effects do not only indicate transitions, but are used within each frame. In addition, when the boy, as Hassan, whispers over the shoulder of Jamal (Amir), the gaze is immediate and direct, a play for



Figure 6. Screenshot from Jamal's video (metaphor)

dramatic impact.

In both digital videos, the composers manipulate various modes in order to achieve multiple goals: fulfilling requirements of an academic project, thinking critically about a contemporary text, setting a distinct tone for an authentic audience, and developing and displaying skill with digital video technology. Both videos used direct quotes from the text, included faces and bodies within the video, and used music to indicate transitions, while neither offered explicit explanations of the literary devices. While both videos were compelling in terms of content and digital expertise, the tone that each achieved was directly opposite, and this can be attributed to the employment of different modes.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Several findings have emerged from this study of adolescents' multimodal retellings with literary devices: choice of compositional tool has an important influence on the types of modes students employ, the emphasis on different modes within compositions ultimately results in the creation of varying tones and moods, and music plays an important role in constructing meaning. These findings have important implications for educators seeking to use multimodal composition in an academic setting; allowing students freedom in choosing their composing tool will result in different types of projects that use and blend modes in unique ways. As one student, Natalie, said, "The guidelines were so broad, so my class's projects could all be so unique." Understanding how choices in composing tool and project genre impact the final project can be considered essential knowledge for teachers wanting to incorporate multimodality in the classroom. As Mrs. Johnson told me after the project, "I was surprised at the different ways in which students depicted the events in the novel and the literary devices. I think that giving students choices in the composing tool and project type really gave them ownership over the work. I was also really impressed with their analytic and interpretive abilities and the different ways that they demonstrated this in their work." Calling herself a "digital convert," Mrs. Johnson has since incorporated other multimodal projects into her classroom: another iteration of *The Kite Runner* project, literary analyses of *Hamlet* using digital video technology, and a senior speech project that required students to synthesize their high school experiences and provide multimodal representations of their identities.

These findings also highlight the multi-faceted role of music in multimodal compositions, as the student

composers used music to suit various purposes: setting a tone and/or mood, making a major contribution to the overall meaning of the piece, and assisting in explaining why specific literary devices were included. Although the role of music has been undeveloped in many studies of multimodal composition, hopefully its importance will be more fully examined in future studies (Phillips and Smith 2011). As van Leeuwen (1999) writes, "The trend in communication is now towards immersion rather than detachment, towards the interactive and participatory rather than solitary enjoyments, towards ever-changing dynamic experiences rather than towards the fixed meanings as objected to be collected" (197).

These findings have implications in terms of student attitudes and beliefs towards multimodal composition, as well. As one student wrote, "The project forced us to rely on technology, which the world of education is being taken over by." Another student described it as "a breath of fresh air." While these comments do not represent the opinions of all students, the fact that an overwhelming majority of all students (94%) indicated that they would prefer this type of project to a traditional essay is worth noting. Even more striking is the students' reporting of their academic experiences with digital media. Despite the preferences of students in this study, many students (73%) reported that they had never done a project of this type in any academic course before. This unfamiliarity with using technology for academic purposes was also evidenced by a number of students reporting issues with technology and difficulties in creating their projects.

There are a number of reasons why multimodal composition may not be part of all high school English classrooms: the value placed on standardized assessments over more open-ended projects, tightly focused curricular standards and material, lack of teacher experience with technology, lack of available resources, and difficulties in assessing projects, particularly when there is choice involved. However, in order to prepare students to live and work in a world where texts are multimodal, where images and print and sound and nonverbal communication work together to create meaning, literacy educators need to better understand what choices students are making when they use different modes to respond to literature. We also need to understand their attitudes and beliefs about the validity of using multimodal practices in the classroom.

Appendix 1

Kite Runner Project Rubric: Retelling with Literary Devices

Teacher Name: _____

Student Name: _____ Project Title: _____

Partner's name (option): _____

| CATEGORY | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Content X2 | Retelling and device presentation includes details and extended examples. Subject knowledge is excellent. | Retelling and device presentation includes details and examples. Subject knowledge appears to be good. | Retelling or device presentation details is minimal. | Retelling and literary device presentation is minimal OR there are several factual errors. |
| Requirements: Content X2 | All requirements are met and exceeded. Student included at least 5-7 major events from the novel and a celebration of at least 3 literary devices. | All requirements are met. Student included at least 5-7 major events from the novel and a celebration of at least 3 literary devices. | One requirement was not completely met. | More than one requirement was not completely met. |
| Requirements: Media X2 | Product includes all required media elements: embedded images, video, and sound are relevant to the presentation of events and literary devices. | Product includes all required media elements: embedded images, video, and sound are mostly relevant to the presentation of events and literary devices. | One media element is missing; embedded images, video, and sound are generally relevant to the presentation of events and literary devices. | More than one media element is missing, or media elements are not relevant to the presentation of events and literary devices. |
| Originality | Product shows a large amount of original thought. Ideas are creative and inventive. | Product shows some original thought. Work shows new ideas and insights. | Uses other people's ideas (giving them credit), but there is little evidence of original thinking. | Uses other people's ideas, but does not give them credit. |
| Sources | Source information collected for all graphics, facts and quotes. All documented in desired format. | Source information collected for all graphics, facts and quotes. Most documented in desired format. | Source information collected for graphics, facts and quotes, but not documented in desired format. | Very little or no source information was collected. |
| Oral Presentation | Interesting, well-rehearsed with smooth delivery that holds audience attention. | Relatively interesting, rehearsed with a fairly smooth delivery that usually holds audience attention. | Delivery not smooth, but able to hold audience attention most of the time. | Delivery not smooth and audience attention lost. |
| Attractiveness | Makes excellent use of font, color, graphics, effects, etc. to enhance the presentation. | Makes good use of font, color, graphics, effects, etc. to enhance to presentation. | Makes use of font, color, graphics, effects, etc. but occasionally these detract from the presentation content. | Use of font, color, graphics, effects etc. but these often distract from the presentation content. |

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