

Digital multimodal composing pedagogy in a university writing course

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Abstract

Digital multimodal composing (DMC) allows students to mobilize a wide range of multimodal resources to make meaning. While studies in DMC tended to focus on language-learning contexts, few of them examine its use in content-based courses whereby students are proficient L2 users expected to demonstrate understanding of abstract concepts using DMC. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with English-major students who attended a writing course in an English-medium instruction university in Hong Kong, the study investigated how the students' view of DMC was transformed after exposure to DMC pedagogy. The study findings suggest that students developed an increased awareness of the affordances and constraints of (new media) writing, and they strategically bring in and bridge 'in-class' and 'out-of-class' digital practices. Students also reported on the opportunities and challenges of DMC pedagogy through reflecting on their DMC experiences. The study proposes suggestions for implementing DMC in diverse teaching and learning contexts.

Key words: digital multimodal composing, L2 writing

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been an increased interest in the use of digital tools to facilitate language teaching and learning. The affordances of digital tools, namely hypertextuality (the link between electronic texts), interactivity (the ability to read and respond to electronic texts), and multimodality (the combination of multiple modes) has brought about more hybrid, multimodal, and multilingual forms of expression in (language) classrooms across the globe (Jones and Hafner 2021). This development urges writing teachers to embrace the new potentials offered by digital tools and integrate them in their teaching. In line with this development, there is a need to reconceptualize writing as multimodal design, and to reposition writing teachers as facilitators (Belcher 2017).

Digital multimodal composing (DMC) involves using digital tools to produce texts that combine multimodal resources, such as image, sound, and video. From students' perspective, it means moving away from the 'traditional' five-paragraph essay to composing texts such as websites, videos, infographics, podcasts, and so on. Such composition allows students to combine different resources with language in an effective way that is appropriate to the genre, audience, and purpose of writing. The present study seeks to examine the implementation of DMC in a university writing course for English-major students at an English-medium instruction (EMI) university in Hong Kong, drawing on students' reflection of their DMC experiences. The current study aims to shed light on the implementation of DMC pedagogy in contexts where not only is there a need to focus on language, but also on the representation of concepts in a way that lay audience can understand. It is hoped that this

study will generate implications on how DMC pedagogy can be used in a diverse range of teaching and learning contexts.

Modal and medium affordances

An effective implementation and creation of DMC relies on students' and teachers' understanding of modal and medium affordances to engage in a process of multimodal design, which is explained by Kress (2010: 139) as the use of different modes 'to present, to realize, at times to (re-)contextualize social positions and relations, as well as knowledge in specific arrangements for a specific audience'. Mode is a resource for expressing meaning; examples include image, writing, speech, and so on (Kress 2010). Taking into account the entire DMC production process, the notion of affordances operates at multiple levels. Developing an understanding of affordances is crucial to students' production of DMC in terms of selecting suitable modes and media to showcase their findings. For teachers, it means understanding the key concepts in multimodality, such as affordances and modal interactions, in order to scaffold students' DMC experience. This understanding also contributes to the creation of assessment rubrics that can effectively grade students' DMC based on evaluating their understanding of what a particular mode can or cannot do, and how to effectively combine modes.

Modal affordances describe what a mode can or cannot do in a multimodal ensemble. For example, image and language as modes have distinct affordances: images can demonstrate continuum phenomena such as varying shades of colours which are difficult to explain by language. Conversely, language can represent causality and sequences, aspects that may be difficult for images to convey.

Medium affordances consider what a range of modes (offered by a particular tool or medium) can or cannot do in a collective sense. They encompass the affordances of the hardware and the software of the tool and what potentialities and constraints they create. For example, video affords the simultaneous display of visuals, language, and sound, which is conducive to explaining complex processes such as scientific procedures (Hafner and Miller 2019). Videos can also be posted online to an authentic audience, with the possibility of them being shared and commented.

DMC and L2 writing

The move from page to screen creates new affordances for writing because the screen is organized not only by the logic of writing but increasingly by the logic of image (Kress 2003). This fundamentally changes how writing should be conceptualized. Writing is reconceptualized from the 'traditional' five-paragraph essay confined within the boundaries of paper, to writing as 'limitless' multimodal design that makes use of interactive screens. Considering writing as multimodal design requires writer and reader to work together to construct a reading path. In line with these new changes to writing, considerable work has been done on the implementation of DMC to facilitate L2 writing, including its benefits on fostering student engagement and peer learning (Hafner and Miller 2019), increased L2 investment (Jiang 2018), as well as a comparison between DMC and 'traditional' essay-writing tasks in terms of linguistic performance and learner perceptions (Kim and Belcher 2020). Jiang (2017) developed a framework to account for Chinese students' engagement

with English learning, which includes technological affordances, educational affordances, and social affordances. These three aspects of affordances allow students to develop competencies that are conducive to the development of a ‘socioculturally relevant and responsive multimodal curriculum for EFL learners in a digital age’ (Jiang 2017: 422).

DMC pedagogy involves bringing digital, multimodal practices into the classroom, thereby providing opportunities for students to draw on resources beyond language to facilitate language and content learning. To date, much of the discussion on DMC centres around the context of language learning, with a scarcity of empirical research on the design and implementation of DMC in proficient L2 writers in EMI universities. To fill this research gap, this article presents a case study of implementing DMC pedagogy in an EMI writing course, with a view to expanding the scope of DMC research and implementation across different contexts.

The study

The study focuses on students’ creation of digital genres in a writing course designed for English-major university students at a Hong Kong university where English is used as the medium of instruction in most courses. Based on the post-course semi-structured interviews conducted with students in the course, the study aimed to address the following questions:

1. What are the impacts of implementing the DMC pedagogy in a university writing course for English-major students?
2. What are the opportunities and challenges of implementing the DMC pedagogy in courses that have a dual focus on language and content?

Research context

The course in focus is an elective course for students majoring in English. One of the intended learning outcomes of the course is to provide students with a solid understanding of the concept of multimodality and multimodal design principles so that they can creatively and effectively combine language and other multimodal resources to create a variety of new media writing genres. This is achieved by a combination of input in the form of lectures and seminars, as well as students’ creation of a range of digital genres (Table 1).

The course is a one-semester course that lasts for thirteen weeks. Students meet once a week, and each class meeting lasts for three hours. The approach adopted is a genre-based one modelled on Hafner and Miller (2019) (Figure 1, Table 2), which includes three assessment tasks: (1) new media writing portfolio, (2) instructional video, and (3) analytical essay.

The choice of genres in the course attempts to mimic as closely as possible the kind of digital genres that students are familiar with in their out-of-class digital practices, but are unfamiliar with as (semi-)academic practice. This ‘tension’ is especially felt for the instructional video assignment—where academic and social media discourses intersect—which requires students to be aware of interdiscursivity (the mix of genres and discourses within a text). This

‘familiar yet unfamiliar’ nature of the DMC task was designed to prompt students to transcend the sociohistorical boundaries of genre conventions (Ho 2022).

Participants

This study reports on the data collected from two cohorts of students enrolled in the course between 2020 and 20221. The course had a total enrolment of forty-seven students, thirty-three students in its first year of iteration, and fourteen students in the second. The author, who was also the teacher of the course for two years, explained the aim of the research in class, and distributed an information sheet and consent form for students to sign up to take part in the research voluntarily. Across the two cohorts, nine students gave their informed consent to take part in the research. The participants were all local students from Hong Kong who are L2 writers of English, with Cantonese as their L1.

Data collection and analysis

The present study focuses on semi-structured interviews, focused group interviews, and follow-up email correspondence² with the student participants after the course had finished. Data collection was conducted after assignment scores and feedback were released to students in order to allow students to share freely their impressions of the course. All email correspondence and interviews were conducted in English.

Data collected from students’ semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and follow-up email correspondence were coded inductively to allow themes to emerge organically. The transcripts were coded manually according to the thematic analysis procedure (Braun and Clarke 2006). The data were read repeatedly to identify themes, and the themes were reviewed, defined, and cross-checked with other data sources, such as course documents and the students’ digital artefacts, to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis process. Representative extracts from the interviews were reproduced in the Findings section, and students are referred to by an identification number to protect their identity.

Findings

Based on the data collected from interviews, the students appeared to show a positive attitude towards the use of DMC pedagogy in the writing course, and they generally saw the need to reconceptualize writing as multimodal design (Belcher, 2017).

Awareness of the key components of effective DMC

One of the impacts that students experienced after attending the writing course which adopts a DMC pedagogy is that they developed an enhanced understanding of what makes ‘effective’ DMC after having hands-on experience of creating a range of new media genres themselves. Four of the students emphasized the importance of attending to the affordances and constraints of the mode and media, and how DMC is not a random process, but a systematic one:

I think for the podcast and for the video it's something we have to try to think of the affordances of those media as we have to maximise those affordances. (#1)

For example, in the essay, I can't add any sound effects or animations, and so I tried to make use of the text font size and the colour so to express my research and my findings in a reader-friendly way. For the digital story, I think writing a script is very important, and because it helped me to structure my video, like what I can put it in to make the text and the image concurrently. (#3)

In particular, it was found that all of the nine students developed a change in attitude in their own creation of DMC before and after attending the course. One student reflected on her previous DMC experience and how it has changed after learning about multimodal design principles in the course:

With my [previous multimodal] composing, how I plan the layout everything, it's all based on aesthetic elements. Do they look good together? Is it readable? But then I would not go in-depth as to what feeling am I conveying to my readers or that I'm just basically following corporate guidelines and that's all. [...] Throughout this course, I took the perspective of both a reader and a designer. (#9)

Instead of focusing on the aesthetic aspects of DMC, the students appeared to have developed a new perspective in their role as a writer and appeared to adopt multiple discursive identities in the process (Hafner, 2015). The ability to adopt different identities and roles in writing enables students to develop as confident users of English for academic/specific purposes who can adopt appropriate voices for different genres, audience, and purpose.

Crossing boundaries between 'in-class' and 'out-of-class' digital practices

Another impact that was observed in the data is students' attempts to negotiate and challenge what was considered 'out-of-class' and 'in-class' digital practices in creative ways. As mentioned in Jiang 2017, one of the technological affordances of DMC allows students to translate meanings from one mode to another, which involves a process of transduction (Kress 2010). The hybridity of linguistic and modal resources means that students are given the freedom to deploy resources, and it creates a space for students to 'transcend and negotiate the artificial boundaries of registers, genre conventions and modalities' (Ho 2022: 7). In the case of DMC, not only do students rely on the 'input' provided by the teacher in class, but they are also influenced by 'out-of-class' digital practices which serve as a 'model' on which students refer to. All of the students acknowledged the influence of 'out-of-class' digital practices in the creation of their DMC for assessment, as shown in the extract below:

Because we're constantly exposed to all these multimodal creative aspects on YouTube, so hearing that we could make this video, to me it was an opportunity to sort of showcase how I could put the skills that I watch other people produce and make these great quality videos and how I could do the same, to sort of mimic their style and sort of put out something that was just as good as what I see on YouTube. (#6)

[I was] influenced [by the DMC examples shown in class] in terms of appreciation and creation. In the past examples that we watched in class or even in my own time, I

realize they give me a manner, a guideline. This is what should happen in podcast, and they give me somewhat of a guideline and an example of what the genre is like. But then with creation, I feel like as long as I follow the general idea I can have as much creative freedom as I want, especially with podcast. (#9)

Students were found to connect ‘in-class’ digital practices for assessment, and ‘out-of-class’ digital practices for recreational purposes, and treated them as equally significant resources for their own DMC creation. They also appeared to reject the artificial boundary between ‘out-of-class’ and ‘in-class’ by bringing the ‘outside-in’, and the ‘inside-out’ (Teo 2008). Bringing ‘outside’ digital practices into the classroom positions them as ‘experts’, as they see this as an opportunity to ‘showcase [one’s] knowledge’ to their peers, and possibly to the teacher. This comment echoes the call by Belcher (2017) for writing teachers to become ‘facilitators’ rather than authorities of knowledge as writing is reconceptualized as multimodal design.

Opportunities of DMC pedagogy: Giving students agency and a sense of control

While it is widely acknowledged in studies of DMC that the enlarged set of resources available to students allows students more ways to make meaning and to enact their identities, it is not yet clear how this expansion of resources is perceived by students in terms of their actual DMC creation process, and how they perceived this affordance in comparison with ‘traditional’ modes of assessment. Eight of the students perceived the differences in potentials in DMC and traditional essays. In particular, one student elaborated on the sense of control that she felt when doing DMC:

I would say that when you're given many multimodal elements to work with, in terms of producing a video, it just feel as though you have more control as to how you want your creative piece to turn out, because you can control how fast you want to speak, you can control what elements you want to add in [...], whereas on paper, you're confined to what you can do, [...] there's not really other options that you can really use apart from using words, so that sort of freedom and creativity that you have is really defining and it really makes videos sort of stand out. (#6)

Challenges of implementing DMC pedagogy

Despite the aforementioned opportunities that DMC brings, students reported that they faced challenges during the planning and production process. Six students reported that DMC tasks were more time-consuming to complete than ‘traditional’ assessments, and interestingly, while the enlarged set of resources available for expressing meaning was often perceived as positive, it can also create challenges for students, especially when the DMC is completed collaboratively. Students also reported that the unfamiliarity of the instructional video genre made the task challenging. These challenges are noted in the following extracts:

I think it's challenging because it's not like other assignments that we usually just type out an essay. This [video] is not just about the narration, it's not just about the script, but it's more, it's more about how we present our ideas. (#1)

I think it's a big challenge because it's a group video, and we are not doing it on our own, and so we need to gather our ideas, even from the script and for the design of the video, and sometimes we have different ideas and opinions, but we at last manage to make a consensus. (#4)

You're given so many options, so many ideas, it's easy to get lost in what you want to do because there're so many different things you can do. (#6)

Furthermore, the practice of incorporating existing digital materials in students' own production which is commonly expected in DMC brings to the fore the issue of using copyrighted materials in students' own production. This results in some form of 'compromise', as noted by one student:

In one of the podcast soundbites I wanted to include a Marvel music, but I understand that Marvel music probably have copyrights to them, so I must not use that. So that is one of the challenges, so instead I compromised and found something that signals a fighting music, to give an exciting element to the podcast and draw my audience's attention. (#9)

As noted in Hafner (2015.), copyright is an area that teachers need to tread carefully. Nevertheless, such 'compromising', or the lack of ready-made materials, has eventually led to some creative practices, as further explained by the same student:

I like to draw your attention to a saliva music, the soundbite of salivating. I recorded it myself (laughs), because I couldn't find one on the internet, so I did it myself. (#9)

Discussion

Based on the findings reported above, DMC pedagogy appeared to have transformed and expanded students' conceptualizations of writing from considering it as a linguistically-oriented activity, to a process of multimodal design. Students appeared to have also developed the necessary multimodal design principles for the effective production of DMC which is appropriate to the genre, audience, and purpose of the task. Students also appreciated the sense of control afforded by DMC tasks, that they can creatively bridge 'in-class' and 'out-of-class' digital practices to showcase their expertise. Nevertheless, despite the positive experiences and outcomes of DMC, students reported that DMC is a challenging process because of the sheer variety of options available, and the lack of resources they can readily incorporate into their DMC due to copyright issues.

The study offers pedagogical implications of the use of DMC not only in language classrooms, but also a diverse range of learning contexts whereby students' ability to demonstrate understanding of abstract concepts is valued. One important implication is that this study reiterated the call by Belcher (2017), that writing is about self-expression and discovery. Hence, the shift in thinking about what writing is calls for writing teachers to

position themselves as facilitators rather than as the provider of knowledge. In DMC, students are given the freedom to make decisions as to what ideas, forms, and modes to use to best represent the content. As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 2, the success of the DMC pedagogy hinges upon the balance between theoretical input and hands-on DMC workshops. As can be seen in the data, students feel empowered and are proud to showcase their digital literacies which were traditionally regarded as ‘out-of-class’ digital practices that were separated from the more formal ‘in-class’ practices. The bridging of the ‘in-class’ and ‘out-of-class’ gap is what Teo (2008) called *connected learnings* which can enhance students’ engagement with the task using digital practices that they are familiar with (‘outside-in’), and develop transferable skills that can be applied beyond academic contexts (‘inside-out’).

There are some practical issues that teachers need to consider in order to maximise the benefits of DMC pedagogy. To begin with, teachers’ attitude towards DMC is an important factor contributing to the success (or the lack thereof) of DMC implementation. As Jiang (2017: 421) reminds us, ‘teachers’ willingness to accept DMC is a precondition for the affordances to be actualized’. Teachers need to show openness in allowing students to bring outside digital practices into the classroom and appreciate the diversity and fluidity of such practices. Such openness to discuss, appreciate, or critique different digital artifacts, combined with the spirit of a genre-based approach (Hafner & Miller, 2019), allows the creation of a safe space to develop students as (emergent) writers. The questions remain, however, firstly, to what extent should teachers give ‘compositional freedom’ (Smith, Pacheco and de Almeida, 2017) to students, and secondly, how should teachers refrain from ‘over-domesticating’ students’ ‘out-of-class’ digital practices which risks compromising students’ creativity (Albawardi & Jones, 2019).

Conclusion

The implementation of DMC pedagogy in classrooms requires the concerted effort of students and teachers. While students need to embrace the idea of writing as multimodal design and engage in the use of multiple resources to present their ideas that show appropriacy to genre, audience, and purpose, teachers need to be equipped with the metalanguage of multimodal design and be open to the fluidity and mobility of ‘in-class’ and ‘out-of-class’ digital practices flowing in and out between the classroom and the outside world in order to make the best use of DMC pedagogy. While it appears that the DMC pedagogy has multiple benefits (Jiang, 2017), future studies could adopt a longitudinal approach to understand how students transfer their DMC practices learned in class to the workplace in order to better align DMC pedagogy to students’ actual need in the workplace.

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