LEVEL UP WITH MULTIMODAL COMPOSITION IN SOCIAL STUDIES

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If you’re a gamer or someone like me who delights in words, you may know that to level up means to improve, or more precisely, “to increase one’s stature in life or performance at a particular task” (onlineslangdictionary.com/meaning-definition-of/level-up). Last spring, I felt the need to level up my multimodal composition performance. I’d worked with students on designing digital retellings and multimodal poems. Consistent with other research, my colleagues and I found that students were highly engaged in designing multimodal pieces that would appeal to a peer audience and reveal their unique talents as multimodal storytellers (Dalton et al., in press; Dalton & Smith, 2012). Further, interviews and observation revealed students’ confidence and intentionality in designing with multiple modes—words, image, sound, and movement—to create a unified piece. In this work, I relied on PowerPoint, Photo Story 3, and Paint as authoring tools, and students worked on desktop computers or laptops.

I learned a great deal about how to support students as multimodal composers, developing a digital writers’ workshop approach to apprentice students into new forms of composition (Dalton, 2012). At the same time, I felt as if there was a huge chasm between what is happening outside of school and what we know about teaching multimodal composition in school (an expectation of the Common Core State Standards Initiative [National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010] and core to IRA’s position statement on 21st century literacies [International Reading Association, 2009]). To level up, I needed to branch out to try new devices (iPads), modes (adding live video into the mix of words, images, and sound), and authoring tools (an e-book authoring tool, a drawing tool, and iMovie). In an earlier Reading Teacher column, I described a Digital Writers Workshop model (Dalton, 2012). In this column, I want to focus on some key lessons I learned last spring as I worked with a group of fourth graders and their teacher. I hope you will find this information useful in leveling up your own multimodal composition teaching.
Multimodal Composition: Adding Modes, Authoring Tools, and Devices to the Mix
There is no doubt that digital multimodal composition teaching processes are complex. The product that is composed is likely to be an interactive function of the available modes, authoring and media tools, and devices. Modes carry particular affordances and constraints (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996), as do the authoring and production tools and devices (Gilje, 2011).

For example, communicating a process such as pole vaulting is easier with the modes of animation and video than with the verbal mode. Similarly, the interface of the Photo Story 3 authoring tool requires that you select an image first, in contrast to PowerPoint, which allows you to start with any mode—image, text, sound, or video—depending on your preference. The structure of Photo Story 3 might support or constrain the design process, depending on what you want to accomplish.

Finally, the device used also influences composing possibilities and processes. An iPad or other tablet encourages you to physically move around and work in different kinds of spaces; tablets allow you to take photos and video on the spur of the moment and integrate them later into your final multimodal composition. Different possibilities exist when you compose with a desktop computer, which anchors you to one spot. Although it lacks the flexibility of the mobile device, a desktop computer often has the advantage of a larger monitor that makes it easier to view your work and to work in multiple programs simultaneously. Increasingly, research shows how students’ goals, processes, and eventual projects are realized in relation to the affordances and constraints of the modes, tools, and devices available to them. Yet our teaching models tend to overlook the potential interaction of the tools, modes, and devices we use when composing for a particular purpose.

To level up, I knew I needed to explore new tools, genres, and devices and to stretch from language arts to another content area. So that’s what I did last spring, volunteering in a fourth-grade classroom, collaborating with Ms. S. and her students, many of whom are Spanish–English emergent bilinguals. Ms. S. was a technology-savvy veteran teacher who was eager to develop her students’ digital literacy skills and deepen their engagement with social studies through technology and media.

During our initial planning meeting, Ms. S. introduced me to the Colorado history unit they were studying, highlighting the academic standards and sharing students’ work displayed on the bulletin board and in illustrated flip books. We quickly realized that we didn’t know enough yet to design effective classwide multimodal projects. Instead, we gave ourselves the freedom to explore a few projects to see what might be worthwhile to pursue in the future.

Ms. S. would continue with guided reading and social studies instruction in the classroom while I worked with small groups of students in the adjoining pod space. I had several iPads loaded with apps for composing multimodal books (Book Creator), drawing and painting images (Drawing Pad), and filming and producing video (iMovie).

Over the next several weeks, two graduate student volunteers and I worked with children to compose three different kinds of multimodal compositions that connected across modes and tools (the iPad was the constant technology device across projects). Students designed a multimodal poem or informational text about ancient Colorado times; remixed historical images of Spanish explorers, Native Americans, and miners with thought and speech balloons; and in a switch to current events, they scripted and produced video reports about wildfires and critter crossings (see Table). Here are some of the most important lessons we learned from the students and ourselves as we ventured into this new territory.

Set the Vision and Dive Into a Multimodal Composition Project
Students often think that writing is what they do in school and that the other kinds of digital composing and communication they engage in outside of school is something else (Purcell, Buchanan, & Friedrich, 2013). The first step in this process is to develop a
vision of what it means to compose in a multimodal, networked world. We are all designers: we consume and produce multimodal communications every day. Consider, for example, websites, games, movie trailers, text messaging, photo essays, and podcasts. Each is designed with different modes and tools to create a message, tell a story, and influence an audience. I think it is important to be explicit about the value of this kind of composition and let students know that both writing and multimodal composition are important to their future, in school and out of school. And, since technology and media is changing all the time, the ways that we compose and communicate with one another will continue to evolve, too. The message is that we are all becoming multimodal designers and will learn and develop together as we compose with digital tools and media.

**Leverage a Current Writing Project**

Before working with small groups on different projects, we wanted to engage the entire class in composing a multimodal text for an e-book anthology. This was important to developing students’ identities as multimodal composers and to begin conversations about design. These fourth graders were studying the early days of Colorado history, from Paleolithic times to early Spanish settlement, and had just finished writing a poem, letter, or informational paragraph in response to what they had learned. Ms. S. and I decided to leverage this writing assignment so that students could focus their attention on their multimodal design and on learning how to use the Book Creator app.

I introduced the project in class, focusing on the notion of design. I projected a PowerPoint slide with a poem that I had written about the buffalo and then asked students to help me create a visual design. I showed them a few different designs, varying the image, image placement, background color, and font style, color, and size. We discussed the different kinds of impact the different visual designs had on viewers, and students voted on what they thought was the best visual design for my poem (see Figure). Next, I showed them how audio-recording a narration of the poem could be used to create a podcast (see Table). Before working with small groups on different projects, we wanted to engage the entire class in composing a multimodal text for an e-book anthology. This was important to developing students’ identities as multimodal composers and to begin conversations about design. These fourth graders were studying the early days of Colorado history, from Paleolithic times to early Spanish settlement, and had just finished writing a poem, letter, or informational paragraph in response to what they had learned. Ms. S. and I decided to leverage this writing assignment so that students could focus their attention on their multimodal design and on learning how to use the Book Creator app.

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point. That would wait until we worked in small groups so they could get more customized coaching. Instead, I gave students the big picture of what we were going to create together—an enhanced e-book anthology of their creative work—and encouraged them to think of themselves as multimodal designers who would express themselves with words, images, color, and sound.

**Teach With Guided Multimodal Composition Groups**

My usual approach was to introduce a project and model the process for the entire class before having students try it out on their own. This time, I decided to try out a guided multimodal composition group approach. In the pod space outside the classroom, we set up tables to accommodate four students and an adult (some days, I was there on my own; other days, there were two other volunteers). Each student and I had an iPad. I showed students how to turn on the iPad and open the Book Creator app so that they could see how the e-book would display their page (again, it’s important that students understand the larger purpose and context before they start working on the different parts of the process).

The first priority was to find one or more images for their poem, so I prompted students to open their browser and use Google Images to search for images (the school had an Internet filter that blocked potentially objectionable content). I showed them how to enter a search term, scan images, and select an image to save to the photo library. We shared some possible search terms (“Ute Native Americans,” “horses galloping Colorado”) and students quickly found one or more images to save to their photo library.

Now they were ready to compose in Book Creator. Some students had a digital copy of their text and could copy and paste it into their e-book page. Others needed to type it in. Some even tried the voice-to-text tool that allowed them to record what they wanted to say and see it transformed into written text. In addition to entering their text, they needed to visually design their page. Since students varied in how much time they needed for their typing and visual design, the other adults and I guided them individually, showing them how to insert their graphic, choose the background color, manipulate the font design, and lay out the page. Sometimes, we would stop the small group and direct students’ attention to a particular feature. Of course, students also observed each other to learn about the Book Creator features.

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**Develop a Cascading Expert Model and Just-in-Time Help**

Students’ design processes vary, and they need flexibility in how they proceed so that they are able to accomplish their goals. As soon as students had their visual design and written text in their Book Creator page, they needed to audio-record their narration of the text. We asked them to do this so that they could see how one mode (writing) could be transformed through another mode (oral expression). We also knew that narrating the text was likely to contribute to fluent reading, since most children want to re-record themselves a few times before they are satisfied with the quality of their narration.

At first, we worked with students individually on their narration, prompting them through the recording process. However, as soon as we had a few students who had successfully completed their recordings, we enlisted their help as expert recorders and asked them to work one-on-one with other students who were ready for this step. This turned out to be a critically important strategy that we applied across tools and projects. Students who knew how to search, save, and insert images helped other students with image work; students who knew how to use the text editing tool helped others with editing. Increasingly, we relied on teaching some students and then asking them to help other students.

A really useful variation of this strategy was to cascade the expertise. We started in small guided composition groups with two or three pairs of students who composed a piece together, such as an enhancement of a historical photograph. Once a pair had successfully completed their project, each member of the pair would invite a classmate to collaborate with them on enhancing a new image. This allowed us to work with more students and to learn how the “expert” students collaborated with their new partners and taught them how to design their multimodal piece with the modes and digital tools available. Students especially enjoyed this process of being in charge of their learning.

**Layer the Learning of New Digital Tools and Composing Practices**

To create their e-book anthology, students had to use the Internet browser and the Book Creator app, which had embedded tools for text, visual, and sound design. Book Creator allowed them to build a multimodal composition in layers of text, image, sound, and so on. We deliberately began with three modes—writing, visual, and sound—to capitalize on what we thought might be students’ strengths and interests. We also wanted to avoid the complexity of live video until they had more experience designing with modes.

After their first multimodal composing experience, we increased the composing tool complexity for students’ second project. In addition to the Book Creator app, students used a new design tool (the Drawing Pad app), a new design skill (drawing or painting on an image), and a literacy skill (taking on the perspective of one of the historical figures in the image and communicating their thoughts and feelings through speech balloons).

Since the class was learning about Colorado’s gold and silver rush during the 1800s, we searched for historical photographs and illustrations of early mining days and saved them into the photo library. We saved more than 20 images so that students would have a range of photos from which to choose. Choice, even when constrained, contributed to students’ investment in the project. Providing a set of photos also reduced the complexity of the task so that students could focus on how they were going to express the miners’ thoughts and feelings rather than navigating the Internet search process.

Working with a partner, students opened their image in Drawing Pad and used the drawing tool to add speech or thought bubbles to the image. Then, they saved the image to the iPad’s camera roll so that they could insert it into Book Creator and finish composing their page with audio-narration. This historical photo enhancement experience introduced students to a new composing tool and genre. It also connected their work with the Drawing Pad app to the Book Creator app that...

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they had used for their previous e-book anthology project. This gave students the opportunity to further develop their skills with the Book Creator app and develop skills with the new Drawing Pad app. Increasingly, multimodal composition will involve the use of multiple apps and tools that students will weave together to create a specific project. Becoming fluent with a range of tools and modes will be an expectation of the effective communicator.

Try a Rapid-Prototyping Model of Innovation
I’ve worked with software design teams on several literacy projects. It’s common practice to use a rapid-prototyping process that allows you to develop a program or product in a series of stages, trying out different features with users along the way as you build out and test the final product. This kind of fast-prototyping is necessary to keep costs under control and to end up with something that has promise as a learning tool and is easy for children to use.

We are fairly new to teaching multimodal composition in the elementary school classroom and have a lot to learn. I think it might be useful if we gave ourselves room to fast-prototype in the classroom—that is, to develop and try out different kinds of multimodal compositions that vary in tools, modes, and technology devices and that vary in genre, purpose, and audience.

For example, for students’ third social studies project, we added a new mode (live-action video), a new authoring presentation tool (iMovie), and a new genre (video news report) and purpose (to inform). The technology device, the iPad, remained constant. The class was reading about forest fires and firefighting. To extend students’ learning across modes, we found several short video clips of fires and firefighting on the Internet for student pairs to view, then compose their own news report. They did this by muting the video’s sound and recording their own narration. The plan was to combine the news reports into a class video news report.

We tried the video news reporting with a few pairs of students and quickly learned that students did much better when one of us scaffolded their scripting process by pausing the video at key points so that students could jot down on sticky notes what they planned to say. We knew that it would be important for students to eventually learn when to pause the video on their own, but at this point in the learning process, they needed the scaffold. In this case, we modified the learning process so that students would experience success and have a sense of what they could do the next time around. We were able to figure things out on the fly and adjust the learning process so that it was more efficient and productive for the next round.

Another aspect of rapid prototyping is to try things out with one or two small groups rather than the whole class. This allows you to focus intently on the teaching and learning processes, adapting as needed, and letting go of what initially seems promising but turns out to be very difficult to accomplish. For example, we never tried the news report video remix project with the whole class. Although we figured out the value of the “pause video and sticky note” scaffolding, we also learned that there were some video format technical issues that would be difficult to resolve. Until we solved the technical issues, we had to put the video news remix project aside.

Not including all of the students in each learning activity required a shift in my thinking. It was important for the class to understand our rapid-prototyping process so that they wouldn’t feel left out. We explained to the class that we were going to be exploring different kinds of multimodal composing and that everyone would have a chance to be a designer and use the iPads. However, some projects would only involve a handful of students so that we could learn quickly and try out more kinds of composing. The students seemed to understand the value of this approach and appreciated that they were part of a team that was exploring new ideas for using technology and media in their classroom.

On Leveling Up
Beginning with a whole-class project that allowed us to see how 25 different children composed a multimodal text in response to what they were learning in social studies gave us a broad overview of students’ processes and products. It took several composing sessions to ensure that each student had a completed page for the e-book. I also spent a few hours combining students’ individual e-book pages into one e-book anthology that could be presented in class and shared with others. It was a successful project, engaging each child in becoming...
a multimodal composer and developing some new digital literacy skills. However, we knew we needed to move more quickly if we were going to try out a range of multimodal composing experiences.

Applying a rapid-prototyping approach and leading guided composition groups allowed us to explore different modes, tools, and genres. We designed and revised our teaching on the fly as we worked with small groups, alert to potential barriers and affordances in the tools and modes and the device, the iPad.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson we learned came from students when we employed a cascading expert model. This positioned students as experts and allowed us to spread the workload to reach more students. It gave students additional experience developing their multimodal composing skills and digital tool skills in meaningful and motivating contexts of use.

Observing students working in pairs also helped us understand how they were thinking about their multimodal designs and audience, their practical applications of the various digital tools, and the ways in which they supported one another to accomplish their compositions. Collaboration was valued in their classroom, and students had developed ways of working together that were respectful and inclusive and got the job done within a reasonable amount of time.

By the time this column appears in print, I should be back in the classroom working and learning with Ms. S. and her students. We have plans to refine the multimodal compositions from the spring so that they are productive and efficient for the whole class. There will still be room to explore and rapid-prototype some new experiences. After all, the teacher, students, and I all want to level up!

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