

Beyond the Written Word: Embracing Multimodality as Equity-Centered Practice

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As a white, upper middle-class, monolingual, cis-gendered woman, I have spent my lifetime swimming, to use Kelly Maxwell's (2004) metaphor, in the "'water' of whiteness" that has obfuscated what is taken-for-granted, yet deeply problematic and often oppressive to others. Tema Okun (2021) conceptualizes this 'water' as white supremacy culture— "the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of...our communities, our town, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, that whiteness is value" (p. 4). One of the characteristics of white supremacy that remained unchallenged early in my tenure as a visiting assistant professor in a bi-college education department in two small, elite, predominately white institutions, was the worship of the written word (Okun, 2021)—the valorization of text defined by a white, middle and upper-middle class, English-speaking grammatical standard (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Baker-Bell, 2020). Having been raised in a predominantly white suburb and educated in predominantly white schools from preschool through graduate school, I had internalized the belief that to be "rigorous," particularly in spaces of higher learning, course assignments needed to be written. More than that, this written work needed to meet a clearly defined academic standard—blemish-free "Standard American English" without a trace of the personal and emotional (e.g., the use of "I"). Despite my own dislike for this detached way of communication and my preference for arts-based methods and multimodality, I originally accepted this bias for the written word without question. As a result, in early iterations of my courses, I relied heavily on written assessments even as I sought to cultivate and enact what I believed to be an explicitly equity-centered, anti-racist practice.

Over the past two years, I have strived to make visible and, thus, better understand the insidious nature of white supremacy culture and the way in which it powerfully renders classrooms, including my own, oppressive rather than emancipatory. As part of this process, I engaged in dialogue with students about their experiences with my monomodal coursework, particularly on assignments designed to prompt critical self-reflection around identity, privilege, and power. Such intentional introspection is a prerequisite for the development of a culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogical approach (Howard, 2003; Sealy-Ruiz, 2022) and is a key objective across all of my teacher education courses. For some students, including but not limited to multilingual learners, reflective assignments that limit expression to the written word alone stifle their ability to communicate the depth of their experiences. Students revealed that they spend more time seeking to sufficiently “attend to conventions,” euphemistic language for alignment with white ways of communicating, rather than on introspection and application. Without access to their full linguistic and semiotic repertoires, they are performing rather than reflecting.

After considering the pedagogical implications of their feedback, I have shifted my practice to invite students to represent their learning on these assignments through the modality or modalities in which they feel most comfortable and confident. To illustrate, in an undergraduate course on the education of emergent multilingual learners, I invite students to represent their relationship with language and reflect upon how it may impact the lenses through which they experience the course context, content, and fieldwork in a modality or modalities of their choosing. While some students have decided to utilize text alone, others have utilized collage, video, audio, and movement among other forms of communication. For instance, one self-identified multilingual student drew upon her passion for video production to create a video linguistic autobiography that took the viewer from her upbringing in Beijing to her present undergraduate experience. Utilizing the unique affordances of multiple modalities including image and audio, she was able to create a product that conveyed not only her story, but also the nuanced feelings that she associated with her identity as a multilingual learner. Another student in the same course chose to create a minimalist movie poster in gradients of black, pink, and white that combined the text “I place my friend’s words under a microscope and analyze the

anatomy of their accents” with a graphic of a letter “a” designed to resemble a scientific slide of an onion epidermal cell. Through the combination of text and image, this student conveyed a lifetime of both dissecting the language of others and of being the recipient of such scrutiny, the depth of which would have been challenging to communicate using the written word alone.

While I believe that this multimodal shift in my pedagogical approach to reflective coursework has allowed more students to effectively realize the desired learning outcomes, implementing this shift has not been without issue. Part of the beauty of a multimodal invitation is also part of its challenge— interpretation. How do I know that I am experiencing the work as the student has hoped? What am I potentially missing that may be central to their presentation? In response to these questions, I have begun asking students to, in addition to their reflective assignment, prepare a short artist statement either in prose or as an audio file where they describe their intention for their final piece, the rationale for their chosen modality or modalities, as well as their process of creation. In doing so, students can provide direction and guidance in accessing their work. For example, in an undergraduate course on urban education, I invited students to reflect multimodally upon their racial and cultural heritage and the way in which it may influence their experience of the course content as well as well as the experiences of stakeholders with whom they engage weekly through community partnerships. In response, one student created a vibrant watercolor painting depicting the San Francisco Bay area beside a silhouetted figure encircled by a dome with visible cracks. While the piece alone was dynamic in its presentation, through the artist statement, the student was able to explain the importance of San Francisco, their home and the place in which they developed a sense of themselves as an Asian American, as well as the symbolism of the cracks— ruptures created by active, intentional efforts to better understand who they are as a racial and cultural being that they believe will impact their work with urban youth, schools, and communities. By viewing the work with the artist statement in mind, I felt a greater sense of confidence in my ability to engage with the work in a way that honored the student’s intention.

As I look to the future, I will continue to offer students opportunities to engage in multimodal composition in my courses, particularly on assignments that seek to elicit critical self-reflection. In addition, I hope to begin to find outlets for students to share their dynamic creations

with others in our community. Multimodality lends itself to being shared—a conduit for connection with a range of audiences with different backgrounds, learning styles, and preferences. Leaning into these affordances, I hope to co-curate with students an annual gallery exhibit on campus where each class cohort can self-select to display their work. There is so much time, talent, and deep thinking that goes into these creations, and I hope that by creating a space for our community to bear witness, engage with, and celebrate students' work, we can amplify students' distinct voices and affirm their chosen modes of expression in ways that challenge monomodal, monoracial, and monocultural conceptions of rigor in higher education.

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