Worth A Thousand Words: Assessing Multimodal Composition as a Replacement for Traditional Composition at an Art and Design College

By: Jessica Ngo, Assistant Professor of English, Otis College of Art & Design and Natalie Arps-Bumbera, Lecturer, Otis College of Art & Design

May 31, 2016
Table of Contents

1. Purpose, p. 3
2. Why Multimodal Composition?, p. 3
3. What is the Multimodal Project?, p. 3
4. Annotated Review of Literature, p. 4
6. Assessment Part 2: Student Surveys, p. 8
8. Assessment Part 4: Faculty Interviews, p. 16
10. Final Summary of Results & Recommendations for the Future, p. 21
Purpose:

The purpose of our OARS grant was to thoroughly assess the Multimodal Project in Otis College of Art and Design’s Foundation English course ENGL107 Writing in the Digital Age (WITDA). Our research question was:

*What are the benefits of integrating a multimodal project into the curriculum of a foundation level English course at an art and design school? Are there any potential challenges to integrating this into the curriculum? How might potential challenges be mitigated, and benefits maximized?*

Why Multimodal Composition?

Faced with credit reduction a couple years ago, the Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS) department at Otis—a private art college where we teach—went from offering two English courses in the Foundation (Freshman) year (ENGL 104 Critical Analysis and ENGL 106 Composition) to offering just one: ENGL 107 Writing in the Digital Age (WITDA). In considering what this one Foundation English course should look like, it was determined that it should focus on multimodal composition, meaning composing using not only text but also other modes of communication. Why? We live in a digital world where communication takes many different forms besides just written text. Sometimes an image or audio clip could be even more powerful than words—a text could also become more potent when joined by audio or visuals, etc.

We believe it is essential that students—especially art and design students—consider their purpose, audience, and context for composing / communicating and then make use of whichever modes and genres are at their disposal. Thus, the composition course should no longer be seen as simply an essay generating factory. Rather, it should be seen as an environment in which students learn to communicate successfully and persuade an audience, across multiple platforms. A multimodal composition course allows for this sort of environment.

What is the Multimodal Project?

The Multimodal Project is what makes WITDA a unique English composition course. Students begin the semester by composing an Argument Essay on a topic of their choice under the
umbrella of the larger “pop culture” theme. Then, they must transform their essay into a multimodal text, selecting from amongst the New London Group’s five modes of communication: linguistic, aural, visual, gestural, and spatial. As they compose, they must also keep in mind the “rhetorical situation”: audience, purpose, context, and genre.

Here is the current prompt, as stated on the class ePortfolio syllabus template:

**Multimodal Project**

“Convert your Argument Essay into a Multimodal Project. Use mode(s), genre(s), and design choices that will successfully present your argument to your intended audience. Note: If you choose to compose a video/audio project, please limit the final version to 5-6 minutes. There must be clear evidence of research and all sources, images, media, etc MUST be cited.

*Note: keep your readers/viewers in mind when posting the final draft of your Multimodal Project. Do not simply drop links / videos / images onto an Ospace page. Make use of captions when necessary to make your work easy to navigate / understand!*

Our main goal with this grant is to figure out how to improve this assignment as well as the course learning outcomes that relate to it.

**Annotated Review of Literature:**

Before beginning our assessment, we spent some time reviewing current literature and studies on multimodal composition. The following proved to be useful resources for us to gain some knowledge before doing our own assessment:


http://josotl.indiana.edu/article/view/12829/19590

Dr. Marion Engin is a senior lecturer in the Department of Education at Sheffield Hallam University in London. Her main interests are English for academic purposes, discourse analysis, methodology, and teaching practice. She has been teaching and training for 28 years. Her work has appeared in numerous scholarly journals as well as in presentation format at multiple conferences. This particular article was published in Indiana University’s *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, a peer-reviewed publication that, according to its website, “is a forum for the dissemination of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in higher education for the community of teacher-scholars.” The purpose of the article is to present research on how student-created videos can contribute to learning in a second language classroom. Engin ultimately concludes that, “students developed their language fluency and
accuracy through the project. However, students were clear that they still want teacher explanations in class” (21). In terms of timeliness, the article is only a couple years old, and as Engin noted herself, “To date, there has been little examination of how student-created videos can contribute to language learning in a flipped model classroom” (21) -- this still holds true today. This article was useful to our research because Otis has a large population of students who speak English as their second language. So, this gave us a snapshot of how collaborating on multimodal projects (in this case videos) in an English class affected student learning.


Laura Gonzalez has a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing--with concentrations in Digital Rhetoric and Professional Writing--from the University of Michigan. Her dissertation is entitled Sites of Translation: What Multilinguals can Teach us about Writing, Rhetoric, and Technology. She has received numerous awards and scholarships for her work, which has been widely published. This particular article was published in Composition Forum, a scholarly journal of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition published with the support and financial assistance of Penn State University. As stated in the journal’s abstract, in this piece, Gonzalez, “argues the translingual practices of L2 students can bridge connections and help develop pedagogical applications of multimodality and RGS, primarily by helping writing instructors teach genres as fluid and socially situated. In addition, the researcher presents a methodology for analyzing the embodied practices of composition students, which can further expand how genres are theorized and taught in composition courses.” Published in late 2015, this article is quite up to date in terms of exploring current implementation of multimodal composition. This information was useful for us because, again, Otis has a large L2 (English as a second language) student population, and we believe that multimodal composition is an important skill for them to learn in order to communicate better when words alone are not enough.


Halliday has directed a writing and academic skills center at Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD), a Canadian art and design university, since 2002. She also teaches first and second year writing courses for the liberal studies department. This article was published in the Canadian Review Of Art Education: Research & Issues, which is “a refereed journal, published annually by The Canadian Society for Education through Art. Its readers include members in Canada, the United States, and many other countries around the world,” according to its website. Halliday’s
main argument is, “It remains for teachers and curriculum planners of this context to continue to develop and test liberal arts instruction with a multimodal approach—particularly in the area of composition—to meet the learning and composition needs of emerging artists and designers” (61). Published in 2009, the piece is still surprisingly up to date, sharing many of the concerns and wishes Otis had when implementing multimodal composition. We found this article particularly applicable, as it opened our eyes to the significance of multimodal composition not just for college students as a whole, but for art and design students like those we teach at Otis.


Parker Beard has a doctoral degree in English, Professional Writing, and Rhetoric from Georgia State University. She has 10 years of experience teaching first-year college students and adults learning English as a second language. She has received numerous awards for her work on composition and multimodality, which has been published and presented at conferences. The piece referenced here is her dissertation, which was published on Georgia State University’s English Department open access website. The audience is therefore others in the field of English composition and rhetoric. To quote Parker Beard, her main argument is, “When college composition teachers carefully consider the role and function of multimodal composition in their classrooms, they can enhance the teaching of writing and communication, engage and empower students, and better prepare students for the challenges and possibilities of life in our rapidly changing digital age.” Published in 2012, Beard’s work is still quite relevant today. We found Beard’s dissertation quite inspiring -- it was her work that gave us ideas of what our assessment should consist of: surveys, interviews, and reflection coding to gage student perceptions of multimodal composition.


As stated on their website, the National Writing Project “is a network of sites anchored at colleges and universities and serving teachers across disciplines and at all levels, early childhood through university. We provide professional development, develop resources, generate research, and act on knowledge to improve the teaching of writing and learning in schools and communities.” Their mission statement says that they “focus the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of our nation’s educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all learners.” Digital Is is a project of NWP, best described as “an emerging and open knowledge
base created and curated by its community of members. [They] gather resources, collections, reflections, inquiries, and stories about what it means to learn and teach writing in our increasingly digital and interconnected world.” The audience is quite obviously others in the field of writing / composition instruction. The purpose of this particular blog post / article is to share the findings of NWP’s Multimodal Assessment Project Committee (MAP). Posted to the site in 2011, the piece is just a few years old and brings light to many concerns with assessing multimodal composition that are still being discussed to this day. As the goal of OARS is to assess, this exploration of assessment in the field of multimodal composition proved to be quite valuable, as we were able to learn new terms and see how others in the field are assessing multimodal projects.

Assessment Part 1: Review of Portfolio Read Scores

One of the goals of our assessment was to determine whether WITDA is a valid replacement for the prior Foundation English courses that have been removed from the curriculum: ENGL 104 Critical Analysis and ENGL 106 Composition. To this end, we decided to follow our review of literature by reviewing and comparing the portfolio read scores for the final academic year of the prior ENGL 106 Composition course (2013-2014) to the most recent year of the newly developed ENGL 107 WITDA course (2015-2016). ENGL 106 was a writing intensive course in which students revised a portfolio of three essays throughout the semester. WITDA, on the other hand, requires only one essay and a multimodal project. So, we were curious if students fared better on their final portfolios in the prior writing intensive course or in the new multimodal composition course. We figured that comparing the read scores would also tell us how well students were adjusting to the multimodal approach to composition versus essay writing, which they are probably more accustomed to. To our surprise, the portfolio scores were rather similar:

(Note: each student’s work was read and scored by at least 2 readers. Also, the passing grade for ENGL 106 Composition was a C, and the passing grade for ENGL 107 WITDA is a C-).

- **Fall 2013 Composition Portfolio Read**
  - 251 scores given
  - Most common score A- (46) -- 18%
  - 228 passing scores (C or higher) -- 91%
  - 23 scores below passing (C- or lower) -- 9%

- **Spring 2014 Composition Portfolio Read**
  - 236 scores given
  - Most common score B+ (51) -- 21%
  - 236 passing scores (C or higher) -- 100%
  - 0 scores below passing [lowest score was C (22)] -- 0%

- **Fall 2015 WITDA Portfolio Read**
What we learned from this comparison is that pass/fail rates for WITDA (which requires one essay and one multimodal project) are very similar to those for the prior Foundation English course ENGL 106 Composition (which required three essays). This reassured us, as we saw it as a sign that WITDA could be considered a valid replacement for the now defunct Foundation English courses that were eliminated due to credit reduction, even with the new focus on multimodal composition.

Assessment Part 2: Student Surveys

After comparing portfolio read scores, we decided to put together a series of surveys to gage student reactions to the Multimodal Project throughout the Spring 2016 semester. We thought this would give us a good idea on how to make the assignment more successful in the future. To this end, we communicated with Otis’ Instructional Designer Jean-Marie Venturini for advice on a free, easy-to-use online survey creator. After some deliberation, we decided to create our surveys using Google Forms. Inspired by Jeanne C. Parker Beard’s students surveys as discussed in her dissertation *Composing on the Screen: Students Perceptions of Traditional and Multimodal Composition*, we ending up creating a series of three surveys: a pre-survey to be completed during the first few weeks of the semester, well before students began the Multimodal Project; a mid-term survey to be distributed a couple weeks after students began working on their Multimodal Projects; and a post-survey to be completed the last week of class at which time the students would have finished their Multimodal Projects and submitted them for the portfolio read. We created the surveys prior to the beginning of the Spring 2016 semester and then placed links to them in the Spring 2016 WITDA syllabus ePorfolio template. The surveys were anonymous and included a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions. The surveys were labeled and presented to the students throughout the semester as “optional.” There were 4 sections of WITDA for the Spring 2016 semester, which amounted to 71 students. 39 students took the pre-survey, 35 took the mid-term survey, and 32 took the post-survey.

Here is a link to Survey #1 (pre-survey): [http://goo.gl/forms/LYcaVPB75TGPeb3](http://goo.gl/forms/LYcaVPB75TGPeb3)
Here is a link to Survey #2 (mid-term survey): [http://goo.gl/forms/4KcYEbdKGYApWe822](http://goo.gl/forms/4KcYEbdKGYApWe822)

Here is a link to Survey #3 (post-survey): [http://goo.gl/forms/E89RWbC4seeQAGh1](http://goo.gl/forms/E89RWbC4seeQAGh1)

**Analysis of Survey #1 (pre-survey) -- 39 student responses**

Survey #1 (pre-survey) was geared toward figuring out what interest/ confidence students had in completing a multimodal project early on in the semester, well before they began working on it. Also, with this first survey we wanted to compare student interest/ confidence with traditional essay writing versus multimodal composition. We also wanted to know how confident students were writing in English to see if language barriers would affect their preference for traditional versus multimodal composition. Here is a summary of what we learned (percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number):

- 39% of students surveyed felt at least average in their essay writing skills
- 59% of students surveyed felt somewhat confident in their multimodal composition skills
- 59% of students surveyed felt either neutral or comfortable with their ability to write in English
- 77% of students surveyed were at least slightly interested in writing an essay
- 90% of students surveyed were at least slightly interested in composing a multimodal project

The most interesting thing we learned from our open-ended questions was that though they had not even begun working on the Multimodal Project yet, multiple students were already concerned about being able to manage their time.

Overall, what we learned from this survey was that students were both more interested and more confident in composing a Multimodal Project versus composing a college-level essay. We also learned that nearly half of the students were concerned that their level of English negatively affected their ability to write in English.

**Analysis of Survey #2 -- 35 student responses**

Survey #2 (mid-term survey) was geared toward determining student interest / confidence in multimodal composition a few weeks into working on their projects. Here is a summary of what we learned (percentages are rounded to nearest whole number):

- 6% of students surveyed would rather be composing another essay than working on their multimodal project
23% of students surveyed said the essay required more work than the multimodal project
31% of students surveyed said the multimodal project was requiring more work than the essay
43% of students surveyed were very frustrated with the multimodal project
43% of students surveyed were concerned about finishing the multimodal project on time
49% of students surveyed said the multimodal project was challenging but they were enjoying it
77% of students surveyed were glad to have the opportunity to do something other than write an essay

For this survey, we asked two open-ended questions and got some interesting responses. The first open-ended question was: Are you confident that you will have access to and easily learn how to use the tools necessary to complete your multimodal project? Why or why not? More than half of the students surveyed said they felt confident about having access to the tools needed because they had learned about them in class or already had prior experience using them. However, there were some concerns brought up that are worth mentioning, such as the ones stated below:

“I am not [confident]. Because my essay’s topic is difficult to explain, I need to think creatively and carefully to choose my genre of multimodal project.”

“Not so confident, because I’ve never use any tools to present such a new assignment -- multimodal project. I also need more time learning and preparing it.”

“Yes and no, i know i will have a ton of access to tools useful for my project but I’m not sure which ones will be credible or appropriate because my topic is on Instagram ,which can have a lot of pointless tools.”

“Not really, I feel it’s gonna take ages to learn how to use the tools and I’m having problems to login on Linda website. And I found that I only get to learn several skills form one video, that means I have to watch many videos to make my own videos.”

The second open-ended question we asked was: So far, what problems have you encountered when working on your multimodal project? Have you had problems deciding which web tools to use for your project or how to use such tools? Explain. Though many students said they had not encountered any problems, once again, many discussed time being a concern. Here are some of the issues they mentioned besides time management:

“I need combined so many tool together to make the project.”
“Making up a story is very difficult for me to make a comic. I have no problems of deciding which web tools to use for my project.”

“I have problem about thinking many ideas to make more fun for classmates to read interesting.”

“I am having trouble deciding which genre and tool should I choose. Also I am having problems of how do I explain my main ideas.”

Overall, what we gathered from this survey was that while students were glad to have the opportunity to compose something other than an essay for the class, a few weeks into working on the project, nearly half of them were at least slightly frustrated by the assignment and concerned about finishing it on time.

**Analysis of Survey #3 (post-survey) -- 32 student responses**

Survey #3 (post-survey) was aimed at uncovering student sentiments after having submitted their final drafts of their multimodal projects AND their essays for grading. We also wanted to see if they thought their level of English had affected their final work. Additionally, we were interested in how they thought the Multimodal Project aligned with the WITDA Learning Outcomes. Here is a summary of what we learned (percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number):

- 0% of students surveyed had a negative experience of working on the Multimodal Project
- 9% of students surveyed were happy with the final drafts of neither their projects nor their essays
- 16% of students surveyed were more satisfied with their final Argument Essays than with their final Multimodal Projects
- 19% of students surveyed said their level of English proficiency made them confident in composing their Argument Essays
- 31% of students surveyed were more satisfied with their final Multimodal Projects than with final Argument Essays
- 44% of students surveyed were equally satisfied with the final drafts of their projects and essays
- 53% of students surveyed said their level of English proficiency made them confident in composing their Multimodal Projects
- 78% of students surveyed said their experience of working on the Multimodal Project was at least somewhat positive
- 88% of students surveyed would rather compose a Multimodal Project than an essay if given the choice in the future

As we think student perceptions of the Multimodal Project’s alignment with WITDA Learning Outcomes is very important in helping us to improve the assignment, we have provided a graph of responses to that question here:

**12. Which WITDA learning outcomes do you feel your multimodal project helped you improve upon?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlling syntax, mechanics and design elements</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking critically and with a questioning/evaluating attitude</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composing effective texts using a variety of modes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researching, evaluating, incorporating and citing multiple sources</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applying a basic rhetorical analysis to American popular culture</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining the concept of writing as a process</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering and exploring thinking and writing process through reflection</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguishing audience, genre, purpose, disciplinary conventions, and context for communication</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As seen above, the WITDA Learning Outcome that students thought the Multimodal Project helped them improve upon the most was “Distinguishing audience, genre, purpose, disciplinary conventions, and context for communication,” followed by “Composing effective texts using a variety of modes.” Less than 25% of the students thought the project helped them examine writing as a process or learn to apply a basic rhetorical analysis to American pop culture. Moving on to our open-ended questions, we learned that only a handful of the students surveyed thought the Multimodal Project ended up being more difficult of an assignment than the Argument Essay. Here are some of the responses from students who found the Multimodal Project more challenging:
“I think it is more difficult than writing an essay. Because I am not good at using computer and website technology and composing a multimodal project will spend a long time.”

“I think making a multimodal project is more difficult than writing. I just think writing essay does not develop as much more as project.”

“It is more difficult but it also fun. so I don't mind to do it.”

Another open-ended question we asked students was: **What similarities and differences do you now see between writing an essay and composing a multimodal project?** It turns out that they saw quite a few connections between the two assignments, which excited us. Here are some of the most interesting responses we got:

“It is pretty much the same to me. The audience and the purpose are the same. Essay uses words and the project is using a more interesting way to tell the audience our purpose.”

“The essay was more just writing how I thought, but the multimodal project had more audience and purpose focus to convince them of my project.”

“Regardless of the freedom I had in writing it, the essay did take on a considerably more academic tone than the multimodal project. The project was created for the express purpose of presentation in front of the class, which gave it a more casual, interactive vibe overall.”

“Similarities: they both need to be designed logically and interestingly for audiences to read, watch and understand more easily. Differences: the essay should be more specific about every word, to make readers understand. But the project should be less information but easy for viewers to comprehend. Less is more.”

“The similarity between an essay and a multimodal project is, they both need a logical body. The body paragraph is a significant part of an essay, as well as I need to keep in mind of what I aim to introduce in the multimodal project. Or it will be easy to put something unnecessary in the multimodal project.”

Overall, what we learned from this final survey was that most students had a positive experience while working on their Multimodal Projects and would like to compose another one in the future if given the choice between that and composing an essay. We also learned that students with a low level of English proficiency were more confident when composing multimodal projects than when writing essays.

**Assessment Part 3: Student Interviews**
Although our communication with students was primarily via the surveys discussed above, we decided it would be a good idea to conduct a couple of interviews to get some more detailed responses. Our pre-survey had a question asking students if they were willing to be interviewed throughout the semester and we had many students say that they were. So, we selected four random students and contacted them via the email addresses they had provided, asking if we could schedule a time to interview them. Unfortunately, this did not go quite as planned. Only one of the four students we reached out to via email responded to our request: Daniela Gonzalez. So, we ended up reaching out to another student (Byron Cota) in person, and he agreed to do an interview as well. We would have liked to have more than just two student interviews, but by the time we tracked down these two students it was already time to begin composing Multimodal Projects and we figured it was too late to be tracking down students for pre-interviews.

So, we put together a pre-interview script with questions very similar to those on the pre-survey students had already taken in class. Then, we interviewed each of our two interviewees separately face to face in an empty classroom and recorded it using the iPhone Voice Memo app. We made sure to have each interviewee state that they agreed to be interviewed. Our plan was to then post-interview these same two students at the end of the semester after they had turned in their final projects. Unfortunately, we were not able to reach Daniela for her post-interview. However, we did get a post-interview with Byron. Here are summaries of important things we learned from these student interviews.

● Link to Pre-Interview Questions:
  https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbUWifw0NS6Z5vHMkY3tdg-oU1ij_3TWQwwc9zX06PA/edit?usp=sharing

Summary: Pre-Interview with student Byron Cota, 3/3/16

Byron’s main emotions described during the pre-interview were excitement and fear when confronted with so many options for composing a multimodal project. “I have like four different [ideas] I want to start with, like I want to do a video and comics. I want to do most of them, and I really don’t know what to pick,” he said. As expected, he was concerned about managing his time and noted that meeting deadlines was something he had struggled with in the past. He thought it would take “at least a month” to complete his project. Byron said he was not concerned about having access to the tools he needed to complete his project, as he thought there were all the tools needed on campus. Lastly, when asked if he thought a multimodal project would allow him to convey his ideas better, equally, or worse than an essay, he said, “I feel like it’s better than an essay and some people probably want to watch a video or read a comic besides from reading the essay, a long essay.”
Summary: Pre-Interview with student Daniela Gonzalez, 3/3/16

Daniela’s sentiments during the pre-interview were similar to Byron’s. She used the words “excited” and “nervous.” She added, “I guess when you were first describing it about the different tools, like different ways to do a multimodal project, I was a little bit confused. I didn’t realize how easy... that like, you use your hands in videos and drawing all in like daily use for everything. So it was kind of obvious once it made since; you just put names to it.” In terms of time management, Daniela was quite ambitious, hypothesizing that she needed less than 12 hours to complete her project. However, she did admit that she tends to struggle with managing her time. Finally, like Byron, she thought a multimodal project would allow her to convey her ideas better than an essay, allowing her message to be “clearer for the reader.”

• Link to Post-Interview Questions: https://docs.google.com/document/d/179ZosUa89bAcAl9A4jumuUPbz0UB_U_rkYM91NpUH/edit?usp=sharing

Summary: Post-Interview with student Byron Cota, 5/3/16

During his post-interview, Byron explained that it had taken him at least two months to complete his Multimodal Project. Byron ended up making an animated video for his project. “It was really cool,” he said, “because I did get to learn how to use a lot of new tools.” Once again, Byron noted that the biggest problem he encountered while working on the assignment was time management. He said he spent so much time drawing out detailed plans for his Multimodal Project that he was falling a bit behind in his other classes. So he realized he needed to simplify things. He noted that he wished the class had spent more time introducing tools students could use to make their projects, as he did not end up using any of the tools introduced in class. An interesting comment Byron made was that he posted his final project on YouTube and he is “really scared of self publishing...putting it out there, like, breaks me down a little bit, and it’s kind of scary.” In thinking about his final project, Byron said, “...I really like it. It was worth it. I had a lot of fun.” He did say that he wished they had started working on the projects earlier than Week 8, which would have allowed for him to make a better project. He suggested introducing it Week 4 while students are still working on the Argument Essay. Compared to his Argument Essay, Byron thought his Multimodal Project helped convey his message more successfully, as he was able to combine images and words. He said that he thought both the Argument Essay and the Multimodal Project taught him useful skills for his future. He has recently started to enjoy writing, he said, so working on the essay allowed him to write. And, “[t]he Multimodal helped me with learning new things. I think continuing to make projects like that will help me learn a bunch of other new stuff,” he said.

Doing these student interviews gave us a lot of detailed feedback on the assignment. With Byron in particular, we were able to really compare what his expectations of the project were
prior to beginning it to his thoughts after having finished. We were glad to see he had taken so much away from the assignment and that he had suggestions for how to make it more successful: introducing more tools during class time and beginning the project earlier than Week 8.

**Assessment Part 4: Faculty Interviews**

Though the majority of our research centered on student interest, confidence and success related to WITDA’s Multimodal Project, we also thought it was important to talk to a couple faculty who teach the course. To that end we set up interviews with two faculty members who have been instrumental in the initial design/development of the course and have also taught the course multiple times: Jean-Marie Venturini and Maggie Light. We also selected these two faculty members because they had experience teaching the prior Foundation English courses and we wanted them to weigh in on whether they believe WITDA to be a valid replacement. We conducted the interviews face to face in an empty classroom midway through the Spring 2016 semester and recorded them using Apple’s Voice Memo app. We had a prepared script of questions but also allowed the interviewees to discuss whatever they wanted to in relation to the WITDA, the prior Foundation English courses, and the Multimodal Project. Here are some important things we learned from those interviews:

- Link to Pre-Interview Questions:
  [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbUWifw0NS6Z5vHMkY3tdg-oU1lj_3TWQwvc9zX06PA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fbUWifw0NS6Z5vHMkY3tdg-oU1lj_3TWQwvc9zX06PA/edit?usp=sharing)

**Summary: Interview with WITDA Instructor Jean-Marie Venturini, 2/24/16**

We got a lot of interesting commentary from Jean-Marie during our interview with her. We asked how she felt when she learned that the former Foundation English courses would disappear in Fall 2014 and a new course (WITDA) would replace them. “First impression was concern,” she said. “Not because we were changing the curriculum in terms of reimagining the curriculum, concern because we were losing an English class...However, once we kind of worked out how those two classes were combining, I liked the idea that we were taking the best of each class and merging it together.” Jean-Marie went on to say that once she saw the WITDA curriculum, she was excited because the approach to writing seemed quite appropriate for the time period we are living in and would help teach students “how to function in this digital world.” She also said she was quite excited about the focus on multimodality, as she was already accustomed to bringing a lot of technology into her classroom. She said the multimodal approach would be a chance for our students to leverage their skills as visual artists. She reinforced what we had already heard from many students: once they take the class and have the chance to design a multimodal project, students much prefer it to writing an essay. She also echoed what many students have said which is that the class is a challenge, but worth it.
Summary: Interview with WITDA Instructor Maggie Light, 2/25/16

Maggie also had a lot of interesting things to share with us. Like Jean-Marie, she had some concerns when she heard that the two Foundation English courses would be disappearing in Fall 2014. Her main concern was that students would spend less time on drafting and writing than they had previously. Also like Jean-Marie, Maggie explained that once she learned more about what WITDA would entail, it seemed quite fitting for our art and design students. “It does seem to make a lot of sense with what these students are studying and where they’re going after graduation,” she said. She said that she thinks the focus in WITDA is “on rhetoric, not exclusively writing,” which she considers “valuable.” She also said that overall she does consider WITDA a valid replacement for the former Foundation English courses. “It seems like the best possible solution for the day,” she said.

Overall, we found our interviews with WITDA faculty reassuring, as they both stated that they found WITDA a valid replacement for the former Foundation English courses.

Assessment Part 5: Review of Critical Process Reflections

As the final component of our assessment, we decided to gather linguistic data from Spring 2016 WITDA students’ Critical Process Reflections, (“CPR’s”), and we coded the content based on the Response Coding Index Worksheet. The CPR is one third of the elements required for the Signature Assignment (other components being the Multimodal Project, and the Argument Essay). All three elements of the Signature Assignment are submitted by WITDA students at the end of the semester.

While we used several modes of gathering information in the study, (surveys, interviews, so forth), we believe that coding the linguistic data from student CPRs plays an equally significant role in our overall understanding of student learning outcomes as they relate to multimodal composition. Whereas surveys and interviews feature questions pre-selected by researchers and posed to survey participants, linguistic analysis of texts generated by students (such as the CPR) are not guided by research questions, and thus provide insight into the topics and issues that students are most focused on. Moreover, analyzing student texts may yield new, and unexpected information about what issues students were most interested in, or most concerned by, or patterns of student thoughts or behavior, that researchers may not have hypothesized would play an important role in student outcomes.

We gathered eight student CPRs for content coding. Two student CPR samples were taken from each of the four Spring 2016 WITDA classrooms. Each student CPR was assessed based on the
factors mentioned in the *Response Coding Index Worksheet*, and then sorted into two categories, “1’s” and “2’s.” Being sorted into the “1” category was based on a “successful” CPR (“1”), being sorted into the “2” category was based on a “less successful” CPR. A “successful” CPR was one that thoroughly addressed all the prompt questions for the CPR section of the signature assignment; a less successful CPR was one that neglected to address several critical areas in the CPR prompt.

Our selection of student participants was not random; rather, the selection of study participants was made with an eye towards including equal amounts of data from both students who were more successful on their Signature Assignments, as well as students who struggled somewhat with their Signature Assignments. As a result, the study generates information on both outcomes that can be studied and emulated, and outcomes that can be improved upon, thereby optimizing the aims of the study by exploring and improving on student outcomes in multimodal composition classes.

- Link to “Textual Analysis Coding Worksheet”:
  [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgNUJoUno1WUxxUHc/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgNUJoUno1WUxxUHc/view?usp=sharing)

- Link to Group #1 and Group #2 “Textual Analysis Coding Results”:
  [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgQkl3dFNxVGVpZk0/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgQkl3dFNxVGVpZk0/view?usp=sharing)

- Link to Coded Student CPR Worksheets (Group #1 and Group #2):
  [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgY05jT21Nd3dSNDg/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0FejViuqVqgY05jT21Nd3dSNDg/view?usp=sharing)

**Group “1’” Findings and Recommendations:**

All “1’s” mention starting the signature assignment by coming up with a question that had personal resonance for them. The question was broad enough to be applicable to both the essay and the multimodal, and fell into one of two groups: either exploration for their major at Otis, or a topic that they were passionate about, and had personal experience with.

- *More successful students thus worked on topics that were either burning questions they wished to answer for themselves, or were connected to issues that the student already cared deeply about. The students’ interest in, or familiarity with their topic area also likely contributed to their ability to research the topic, as they might have come to the topic already knowing basic terminology, or current events related to their issue. Finally, their connection to their topic also may have helped them to develop more nuanced discussions of the subject, based on having a greater knowledge base on the subject to draw on. Overall student success might be improved by asking all students to pick topics that they have a personal connection to—either a cause they care about deeply,*
a career they would like to explore issues connected with (such as exploring sweatshop production for individuals interested in fashion careers).

Many “1s” mentioned utilizing a skill they already possessed some facility with, but were by no means experts at, when designing their multimodal projects. Practicing a skill they already had enabled 1’s to further hone their technical skills in a focused area. Using a skill that was already somewhat familiar also allowed “1s” to focus more singularly on the requirements of the assignment, rather focusing on two potentially competing demands (the time investment required to learn a new technical skill, and the time investment required to complete the multimodal project).

- **More successful students thus tended to set goals for themselves related to building upon existing software/technology skillsets, and used the course as an opportunity to hone and upgrade transferable technology skills while working on classwork. Successful students thus established two goals for the course for themselves, and both goals reinforced the other in a way that may have increased students’ intrinsic motivation to complete projects to the best of their ability. Overall student success might be increased by asking students to set small, personal goals for themselves to accomplish at each stage of the project.**

Many 1’s made connections between classroom and homework assignments, and the components of the signature assignment, and mentioned that each pieces of the assignment relied on another part of the assignment that came a step or two before.

- **Successful students tended to adopt a holistic approach to WITDA, viewing all classroom, homework, and signature assignment prompts as components of the same whole. Perhaps because successful students view all elements as building to the signature assignment, they made efforts to master each individual step in the process (database research, narrowing scope of project), which contributed to success down the road. Overall student success might be increased by reminding students that the essay and multimodal assignments are connected, and that coursework and homework are all directly related to success on the signature assignment, and that they should seek help immediately if they do not understand or need assistance with elements of the essay, because those elements will be used again in the multimodal project.**

Many 1’s did not perceive themselves as better writers, and reported negative affect when working on the essay portion of the assignment. That said, most 1’s mention both wanting to gain feedback/have a discussion with peers on their topic, and also mention discussing their topic with a professor, friend, or classmates.
Thus while “1’s” were not necessarily better writers, and were no more excited to be working on the essay than other students, the “1’s” interest in conveying their research topic/essay idea to others, and dialoguing with others about their topic helped them identify key issues to discuss, and questions their audience might have, and helped them shape the scope of their signature assignment early on in the process. 1’s also actively sought out project design feedback from at least one other person early in the process of designing their multimodal, which helped them form more complex research questions, and find more sophisticated connections between the essay and the multimodal project. Overall student success might be increased by having students give “demo” presentations of both their essay, and their multimodal project to at least one other person very early on in the genesis of both projects, and create “next steps” for research or project design based on the feedback they received.

Group “2” Findings and Recommendations:

Many “2s” mention struggling with poor time-management skills.

● “2s” might benefit from lessons in time management/project management.

Many “2’s” mention difficulty/anxiety related to learning new technology for the multimodal project.

● “2s” might benefit from being required to pick multimodal technology they are already familiar with, rather than those they have to learn. This would also allow “2s” to spend more time focusing on and perfecting skills crucial to their Signature Assignments (exe: research skills, formulating a convincing argument).

Many “2s” had difficulty seeing the connection between WITDA content and their lives as artists, writers, or seeing how skills from the class might transfer over to their lives as future professionals, and digital citizens. Most viewed the course through a narrow scope (exe: to “meet school requirements”).

● “2’s” might benefit from more frequent reminders, and examples of WITDA course content being “transferrable” to their lives as artists, future professionals, and digital citizens.

Many “2s” mentioned wanting to “entertain” or “impress” peers, which indicated they had begun to think about the concept of “audience” in a rudimentary way. That said, they did not expand on the topic of audience past a desire to be entertaining, and did not explore how having an audience would affect how they conveyed their message, and the tactics they used to “convince” their peers of their position.
The presentation aspect of the project does get “2s” thinking about issues of “audience,” but “2’s” may need more explicit guidance in learning how to think about their audience as a population to be convinced, rather than merely entertained.

Many “2s” mentioned being overwhelmed by potential multimodal project platform options (exe: Instagram, Prezi, YouTube). They also mention having difficulty narrowing down the field choices based on their project aims (rather than which project platforms might be appealing at first). Several “2s” also mentioned bad matches between their argument and their project platform, and needing to change their project to a new platform the course of the assignment.

“2s” might benefit from having much more limited options for multimodal project platforms (exe: only choosing from an infographic, video, or a blog).

Many “2s” mentioned needing additional time: both to compose essays and to work on multimodal. One of the most widely cited reasons mentioned was a lack of confidences with writing, and with generating ideas/topics for both the essay and the multimodal.

Few if any of the “2s” mentioned improving their research skills, or visiting the library and seeking help finding research.

“2s” might benefit from additional opportunities to get familiar with researching at the library.

Few if any of the “2’s” mentioned perceiving the essay and the multimodal as connected projects. Most viewed them as two very different assignments.

“2s” might benefit from regular reminders that the essay and the project are interconnected, and skills used on one are transferrable to the other.

Overall, our study of student CPRs revealed that both students who are “1s” (successful) and “2s” (less successful) begin WITDA at roughly the same starting point: both “1s” and “2s” mention they view themselves as average writers; express anxiety about the essay assignment; mention feelings of concern about whether their writing skills will be equal to the task of composing a college-level essay; and express excitement about having the opportunity to compose a multimodal project. What ultimately separates 1s from 2s then appears to be two things. The first is time management skills, which 2’s mention experiencing regular struggles with, and which 1s do not mention. The second is intrinsic motivation to explore a question or idea, which 1s regularly mention motivates them to choose their topic in the first place, and which helps motivate them even as the multimodal project demands time and effort.
Final Summary of Results & Recommendations for the Future:

We are very pleased with everything we learned while working on our grant. We are proud to say that after all of our assessments—reviewing portfolio read scores, conducting surveys and interviews, and deciphering student critical process reflections—we do consider WITDA a valid replacement for the prior Foundation English courses, and we are excited for what the future holds for this course, as there are so many ways to improve it.

We started off wanting to know the benefits and challenges of integrating a Multimodal Project into the curriculum of a first year composition course at Otis. Here is a final summary of the benefits and challenges we observed followed by our recommendations for the future.

Observed Benefits of Integrating a Multimodal Composition Course at Otis:

- Students are highly interested and invested in composing multimodal projects and are therefore committed to being successful in WITDA.
- Students appreciate the opportunity to apply their skills as visual artists in an English course, and to learn and practice new technological skills.
- Early in their academic careers, students begin to practice time management and project management skills that they will use throughout their time at Otis.
- Students begin to consider incorporating research and critical thinking into their projects and artwork.
- Students are able to use the Multimodal Project to explore personal passions and potential areas for future study and make more informed decisions about their academic careers.
- Students continue to succeed in Otis’s Foundation English program, even with cutting down from two courses to one course, as evidenced in a high rate of passing scores on final portfolios (“Signature Assignments”).
- Students who speak English as a second language are able to make use of other modes of communication to supplement their linguistic skills in English, and feel more confident when presenting a highly visual final project to the class.
- The “unexpected” nature of the opportunity to compose a multimodal project in an English class allows students who have previously characterized themselves as “not
good at English/English Composition” to approach the subject from an new, less threatening angle, and engage with it again in a creative, exploratory manner.

**Observed Challenges of Integrating a Multimodal Composition Course at Otis:**

- The time required to work on a multimodal project becomes an issue for some students who struggle with time management.
- Less technologically apt students express frustration with having to learn new tools in order to design their projects.
- Students struggle with seeing a connection between the Argument Essay and the Multimodal Project.
- Because most students are not familiar with multimodal composition and are not used to considering the “rhetorical situation”, they often feel overwhelmed with how many choices are available and have difficulty selecting genres/ modes to successfully present their topics.

**Final Recommendations: Employing What We’ve Learned in Future WITDA Courses**

- By including time management/project planning lessons into coursework.
- By reminding students that WITDA is a holistic course, and skills used on the essay will also be used on the multimodal. Reminding students that coursework and homework directly relate to skills needed for the signature assignment. Placing emphasis on students seeking help immediately, and early on, if they have difficulty with assignments/coursework.
- By limiting technology options on the multimodal to technology the student has used at least once prior to WITDA.
- By asking students to set small, personal goals (as artists, students, writers, and /or digital citizens) for each stage of the essay, and the multimodal project.
- Asking students in the draft stage of both the essay and the multimodal to do preliminary presentations of their topic to one other person for feedback and discussion. Asking students to assess how their audiences’ feedback might be used to make their final essay/multimodal “stronger.”
● Introducing and beginning to work on the Multimodal Project earlier in the semester. Do not wait until Week 8. Consider having students work on the Multimodal Project alongside their Argument Essay rather than afterward.

● Spending more time on rhetorical analysis and using rhetoric as the bridge to link the Argument Essay to the Multimodal Project so students see a connection between these two major assignments.