

Response to Doug Hesse

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Doug Hesse's thoughtful response to "The Movement of Air" gets right to the heart of the profession's favorite questions about integrating digital and multimodal assignments into composition classes: "What is the proper subject matter for composition classes?" (often asked, "Is the composition classroom *really* the right place to teach video production/audio editing?" or "Why should I teach audio or video composing when I don't even have enough time to teach writing?") and "Whose interests are we serving with composition curricula?" (also asked, "Do we really need to teach students how to compose YouTube videos?")

Let's start with the first question, "What is the proper subject matter for composition classes?" As Hesse articulates the question, "Is the curricular space that our field inhabits "rhetoric/composing" or is it "writing/composing?" Here, I'll throw down publicly as an adherent of rhetoric/composing as the more capacious choice; to me, it suggests an openness to multiple modalities of rhetorical expression. In this admission, however, I refuse to leave "writing" out of the equation. As I said in my CCC article, "my argument is not *either/or*, but *both/and*" (641).

For me, the inclusion of multiple modes of rhetorical expression represents a simple acknowledgment that a literacy education focused solely on *writing* will produce citizens with an overly narrow and exclusionary understanding of the world and the variety of audiences who will read and respond to their work. In the twenty-first century, we live in an increasingly globalized world where people speak different languages, come from different cultures, learn and make meaning in different media contexts and with different expressive modalities. In such an environment, although writing retains a privileged position, literate citizens, increasingly, need to make use of *all* semiotic channels to communicate effectively among different groups and for different purposes. To educate students appropriately and responsibly for this world, I try to design my composition classes as places where students *begin the complex process* of learning how to make use of all sorts of design resources (New London Group)—spoken and written words, still and moving images, sounds and music, among them—to communicate in rhetorically effective ways.

This approach doesn't mean that students will learn the *advanced* skills they might encounter in more specialized creative writing classes, technical communication classes, photography classes, digital audio or digital video production classes, or art classes. Instead, they'll learn how to go through a set of basic rhetorical processes: analyzing the rhetorical context and purposes for communication tasks, thinking about audiences and their needs, conducting research on related communications and how others have addressed similar tasks; deploying rhetorical strategies of invention, organization, arrangement, and delivery; composing drafts that address particular rhetorical contexts by combining modes of expression, responding to critically informed feedback on their own rhetorical communications, and offering feedback to other communicators on their own drafts. For me, these rhetorically informed activities *are the proper content for composition classes*.

Because writing continues to occupy a privileged position in the world (and because I am particularly tied to writing as a mode of expression), I involve students in *lots* of reading and writing tasks. But I also recognize that some of the students with whom I work and some of the audiences with whom these students are communicating—some visual artists; scientists; individuals in deaf and hard-of-hearing communities; musicians; some individuals who are blind or have limited sight; some individuals from other cultures or who speak English as a second, third, or fourth language; some individuals who have different learning styles, among many, many others—may, on occasion, find it useful to acquire information and to compose it not only through writing alone, but also through photographs, charts, graphs, still and moving images, and aural elements as well. Indeed, many audiences benefit from *several* semiotic systems to make sense of communications in certain rhetorical contexts. So, I want students to think about such people and to compose communications that might convey meaning appropriately and effectively to various groups and individuals.

Theoretically, I locate my educational theory on these matters in the concept of “civic pluralism,” as a goal for education in a globalized world. The term alludes to the understanding that—in a twenty-first-century world plagued by wicked problems like poverty, war, disease, and ecological degradation—differences (in peoples, perspectives, modes of expression, cultures, discourses, languages, identities) can be *productive* rather than *problematic*, especially when they are considered relationally and serve the goal of extending our own limited understandings and lifeworlds (Cope and Kalantzis 148) and helping us

address some of the problems that face the human race. Within this context, I understand written words, photographs, video and audio clips, drawings, and animations as valuable cultural resources that can be combined to compose texts that communicate meaning in a variety of rhetorically effective ways for a variety of audiences.

Pragmatically, of course, I can only teach so much in any one course, so I try to teach some basic rhetorical processes for analyzing and composing meaning that can serve students well in a range of communicative situations, with a range of audiences, and for a range of purposes. We write lots, but we also compose in different modalities as well—and we try to compare the effectiveness with which each one of us assembles and deploys different semiotic resources to communicate in the context of each task.

The second thoughtful question that Hesse raises is, “Whose interests are we serving with composition curricula?” Here, Hesse points out the key “tension between the ‘rhetorical sovereignty’ of individuals and the expectations of the work and civic realms in which they might participate,” between “self-sponsored” and “obliged and sanctioned” forms and modes of composing. We can’t, in short, simply let students use the composing modalities they prefer; rather, we are also obliged to teach them how to compose with modalities that may be unfamiliar and difficult but expected of educated citizens and within workplaces. On this point, we agree: one goal of education is to broaden students’ thinking and abilities, to add to their composing repertoires, rather than to limit them artificially. I might, in fact, go farther with this point, suggesting that faculty in rhetoric and composition should serve as role models in this regard, showing students that they, too, are willing to learn new ways of composing, to expand their own skills and abilities beyond the alphabetic by practicing with different modalities of expression that may be unfamiliar and difficult but increasingly expected and valuable in different twenty-first-century rhetorical contexts both in and out of the academy.

There is one more important point I’d like to make about Doug Hesse’s response. In discussing the ethical responsibilities of composition teachers, Hesse gives the example of the current health care debate and confesses that he longs for “more reasoned and developed rationales.” On this point, we agree. We part ways, however, when Hesse equates “more reasoned and developed rationales” with the *written word*, and less reasoned “glib” reasoning with “sound[s] and image[s].” This last move comes too close, for me, to re-inscribing a mistaken and problematic dichotomy between word and image; in this dichotomy, alpha-

betic writing is aligned with high art, seriousness, intellectual understanding, and rigorous exploration while images and aural forms of expression are aligned with low art, vernacular understanding, frivolity, and entertainment. The work of scholars like John Berger, Diana George, and William Costanzo, among many others, argues that such distinctions are both mistaken and inaccurate. So it is not surprising that I don't buy this part of Hesse's argument. Indeed, I consider it indicative of our profession's single-minded focus on the alphabetic, a focus that can sometimes blind us to other ways of knowing and making meaning.

This point can be made on a practical level as well. I can certainly identify what seem like glib print essays on health care that I, personally, believe fail to contribute productively to an understanding of complex health care issues. And, conversely, there are texts in other forms—video, audio, image—that I, personally, find well reasoned, well documented, carefully thought out, and informative. Of course, the reverse is also true—there are well-reasoned, extended printed reports that contribute to our understanding of the health care crisis, and there are many multimodal accounts that are glib and fatuous.

My point is that no one medium or modality—certainly not writing—has a corner on reason, thoughtfulness, effectiveness, *or* glibness. Personally, I think that the complex constellations of problems associated with our health care crisis will not be addressed or understood through printed reports or essays alone. Rather, the individuals and groups who need to come together to address health care will require multiple semiotic channels and multiple modes of expression to share their various perspectives; exchange information and insights; understand what each other is getting at; figure out what is at stake for various groups; and invent new ways of thinking about healthy populations, lifestyles, and medical care.

Doug Hesse and I both believe that there are important “ethical as well as rhetorical dimensions” to the exploration of the “affordances and constraints of modes and media” and that the stakes in discussing the role of multimodality in composition classes focus our attention on the “boundaries of our curricular landscape and our sense of its stakeholders, interests, and purposes.” From my own ethical perspective, I have found it increasingly difficult to understand why we think writing is the *only* rhetorical tool composition specialists should teach or deploy, and why we have come to believe that “writing is not simply *one* way of knowing” but, rather “*the* way” (Dunn 15). I wonder if this overly narrow focus on the printed word isn't an artifact of our own education, our own historical worldview, our own personal investment in print and its products. Similarly,

I wonder why the multimodal texts that we and students now so frequently encounter in the world shouldn't inform some of the rhetorically based reading and composing activities we take up within our classes.

Works Cited

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