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Readings: *Response to Reilly and Atkins*

English 998, Multimodality, Multimedia and Digital Rhetoric in Composition

Reilly and Atkins write, “In fact, two recent articles assert that some instructors elect not to assess the digital or multimodal portions of assigned projects; instead these instructors consider only the textual essay or reflective portion of the project in their evaluations (Murray, Sheets, Hailey, & Williams, 2010, Sorapure, 2006).” During the first-second year workshop on English 101 course goals and outcomes, I brought this type of situation up with my colleagues because I think it’s a trap a lot of us fall into: we don’t know how to assess multimodality, so we assign an alphabetic text rationale and only focus on that. In English 101, I wonder if the Unit I assignment (zines) cultivates this idea. There seems to be a bigger focus on the rationale paper than the zine itself. Even the criteria (the proposed questions) leads us to this type of thinking: 4 questions for the zine, 8 questions for the rationale. To me, that seems a bit problematic. The guiding questions are even focusing on the rationale.

Reilly and Atkins write, “Creating digital texts often requires that students learn new skills, which simultaneously requires that they take risks and even experience failure. Deliberate practice—one manner in which the acquisition of expertise has been theorized—overtly requires a process that includes trial and error, the experience of which leads to expanding proficiencies and developing expertise.” This is one point I was pointing to on my mid-term paper: the ability to take risks and not be punished for it. I think portfolios and grading contracts are the two assessment methods that we have available to us that definitely cater to that ideology (probably the grading contract more so than portfolios). In the grading contract, according to Elbow’s (2009) model, students know exactly what requirements to meet for the B letter-grade. They can take as many risks as they want to and know that they won’t be punished for that. I think this could be of great use in our own program. After all, one of the main focuses and outcomes for even English 101 is to demonstrate rhetorical flexibility. I think we understand rhetorical flexibility by being able to see what works well (what’s effective) and what doesn’t work well (ineffective) in a genre and specific rhetorical situation. Rhetorical flexibility and rhetorical awareness lends itself to multimodal pedagogy because the pedagogical approach embraces these concepts.

Their criteria for assessment reminded me a lot of Elbow’s grading contract: “Accomplishing these goals in completing the group project assured the students of earning a solid score, equivalent to a grade of B, on the project. However, to move beyond the baseline…” They outlined three goals, which I assumed they discussed in depth with the class, which would guide students to a B letter-grade.

It seems like they ended up using a form of primary trait analysis as their means of assessment. But, they do so with a catch. In all honesty, I have a problem with the “fixed-ness” of PTA because, usually, PTA cultivates notions that lend itself to general terminology (e.g. clearly developed thesis) and is ultimately decided by a teacher’s perception of the text. For example, I might look at one trait and interpret meaning completely different than say Casey. What’s “clearly developed” becomes arbitrary. But, what Reilly and Atkins did is different. They seemed to incorporate flexibility within their PTA assessment method. I’m still a bit confused as to how they did this.

Questions:

1. How do we embrace and incorporate a conversation about assessment in our first year writing classrooms? I think it’s important for assessment to be a part of our pedagogy, not hidden.
2. In what ways are we rewarding risks in our classroom and through our assignments? And, in what ways does a multimodal pedagogical approach provide more opportunity to do that? What do these assignments look like?

Side note: I like the audio file the authors included describing the criteria; that, to me, is the heart of a multimodal composition.