

Writing as Embodied, College Football Plays as Embodied: Extracurricular Multimodal Composing

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Abstract: Recent explorations position multimodality as a largely curricular practice wherein the body typically is not figured as a potential mode of meaning making. Such a projection not only fails to acknowledge extracurricular uses of such a rhetoric but also fails to acknowledge the role of the body in and especially for composing. In hopes of countering this limited yet common understanding of multimodality, I consider an Auburn University 2004 defensive football play and sketch a picture of how embodied multimodality figures heavily in the literate activity surrounding college football. I end with a brief word on how Gunther Kress's theory of multimodality encompassing the material and the bodily—two important concepts at play when examining football as literate activity—informs classroom practice through paving the way for embodied multimodal pedagogies. Ultimately, I hold that an analysis of extracurricular embodied multimodality in college football invites student-athletes to hone a beneficial form of second-nature embodied rhetoric absent in curricular multimodality.

During the 2003-2004 college football season, the Auburn Tigers sliced through their opponents en route to an undefeated 13-0 record, a Southeastern Conference Championship, a Sugar Bowl victory, and a final #2 ranking in the Associated Press and Coaches' Poll. Captained by four future NFL draft picks, the Tigers yielded less than 11 points on defense per game, tallied more than 30 points on offense nine times, and compiled an average margin of victory of over 20 points per game. But these brief statistics are indicative of more than the pure talent on the field for the Tigers. These stats point to the preparation of the coaches, the intense spring, summer, and fall practices, and the well-tuned plays run on offense and defense.

The seemingly chaotic assemblage of symbols and signs known as football play are central to game preparation and execution, from basic youth football all the way to the professional National Football League. For some college coaches, the playbooks are more tome than book—massive binders of upwards of 400 plays for offense, defense, and special teams. For others, playbooks are tiny index cards. Yet thick or thin, playbooks are the concrete, visual representation of a team's unification and textual evidence of a team's preparation. Coaches, as an innately secretive community, are not apt to share their plays with outside members. But generally after several years, these playbooks find their way into the public domain.

In what follows, I recall Cynthia Selfe and Pamela Takayoshi's definition of multimodality as that which "exceed[s] the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music, and sounds" (1), to read Auburn University's 2004 football defensive play "Cov. 4 play action" as representative of college football plays and, more importantly, as an instantiation of extracurricular multimodal rhetoric. [\[1\] \[note1\]](#) To do so, I first examine recent treatments of multimodality and illustrate how it is generally projected as a *curricular* practice wherein the body typically is not figured as a potential mode of meaning making. Such a projection not only fails to acknowledge extracurricular uses of multimodality but also fails to acknowledge the role of the body in and especially *for* composing. In hopes of countering this limited yet common understanding of multimodality, I turn to Auburn's football play and sketch a picture of how embodied multimodality figures heavily in the literate activity surrounding college football. [\[2\] \[note2\]](#) I end with a brief word on how Gunther Kress's theory of multimodality encompassing the material and the bodily—two important concepts at play when examining football as literate activity—informs classroom practice through paving the way for embodied multimodal pedagogies. Ultimately, I hold that an analysis of extracurricular embodied multimodality in college football invites student-athletes to hone a beneficial form of second-nature embodied rhetoric absent in curricular multimodality.

Positioning Multimodal Rhetoric

In her 2008 NCTE Presidential Address, "The Impulse to Compose and the Age of Composition," Kathleen Blake Yancey asserts "we have moved beyond a pyramid-like, sequential model of literacy development in which print literacy" precedes digital literacy and networked literacy practices (330), and now "we have multiple modes of composing operating simultaneously" (331). From this assertion, Yancey offers three challenges for teachers of writing: "developing new models of composing, designing a new curriculum supporting these models, and creating new pedagogies enacting that curriculum" (333-334). In response to Yancey's challenge, various scholars have pushed for greater awareness and use of multimodal rhetorics in the college writing classroom, and grafting onto Yancey's discussion of "multiple modes of composing operating simultaneously," scholars have largely lauded the pedagogical benefits of such an understanding of composing. In "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing," Jody Shipka describes how her pedagogy stresses the "rhetorical, material, methodological, and technological choices students make while engineering these complex rhetorical events" (282), and she expresses frustration with assignments that "perpetuate [an] rhetorical . . . one-sided view of production" (285). Illustrative of Shipka's argument are specific assignments her students completed. One student "arranged to have a large blue bag containing eleven numbered gift boxes delivered to [Shipka's] office" (279) on the day portfolios were due. Attached to the bag was a card that served as the table of contents for the "text." Inside the eleven boxes was the student's work from the semester with specific directions for "receiving and recirculating that work" (279). Such a project shows how the student displayed a rhetorical awareness when selecting appropriate composing modes and demonstrated an understanding of the role of delivery and reception, roles generally curtailed in traditional monomodal assignments. In her follow-up book length study of multimodality, Shipka describes a student who transcribed by hand a research-based essay onto a pair of pink ballet shoes (*Toward*2), and one who used an Abercrombie & Fitch shirt as a medium of expression (*Toward* 62, 63). This brief sampling helps us visualize the work students are capable of producing when given a beneficial level of autonomy in making specific choices among myriad material, methodological, and technological options.

Shipka's positive position on multimodality is echoed by Cynthia Selfe's recent work on aurality as a subset of multimodality. In "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning," Selfe undertakes an investigation into "the ways in which U.S. composition studies has subsumed, remediated, and rediscovered aurality during the past 150 years" (604, 641). For Selfe, this rediscovery of aurality by college composition teachers affords composers the opportunity to "realize that different composition modalities carry with them different possibilities for representing multiple and shifting patterns of identity" (645). Like Shipka, Selfe holds that espousing a print-centric focus in the writing classroom deprives "students of valuable semiotic resources for meaning making" (617), thus impinging on their rhetorical sovereignty. [\[3\] \[note3\]](#) Though she argues ardently for infusing the classroom with multiple modes of composing, Selfe is careful not to sketch an either/or argument where print is set up against aurality. Instead, she believes "we need to pay attention to *both* writing *and* aurality, *and* other composing modalities, as well" (618; emphasis in original). To illustrate her claims regarding the rise, fall, and rise again of aurality in college composition classes, Selfe sprinkles "sound essays" throughout the piece. These sound essays, composed by graduate students and complete with traditional print and alphabetic explanatory text, are located on an Ohio State website, which Selfe encourages her reader's to look-up.

While carrying out important explorations of multimodality's potentials—Selfe is often praised for taking the heady theoretical concept of multimodality from the New London Group and placing a practical pedagogical bent to it; Shipka provides practical guidance for assessing multimodal work—both Selfe and Shipka are concerned with curricular multimodality and largely fail to account for not only the role of the physical body in the composing of these texts but how the body itself can be deployed as a mode. While scholars have begun to investigate how multimodality manifests itself in extracurricular literate practices, for example in film (Gilje) and Amish quilting (Rumsey), scholars have largely left unexplored embodied approaches to multimodality.

Yet, a move toward a more embodied understanding of curricular multimodality is crucial as, according to Mark Johnson, "Our embodiment is essential to who we are, to what meaning is, and to our ability to draw rational inferences and be creative" (13). What is worth noting here is that Johnson attributes creativity and rationality to an embodied sense of our self. Additionally, through the phrase "what meaning is," Johnson tiptoes close to discussions linking embodiment with epistemology, all the more intriguing to the field of composition and rhetoric as epistemology, according to James Berlin and others, undergirds theories of composition and rhetoric. Dovetailing with Berlin's interest in epistemology and Johnson's work with embodiment is Kristie Fleckenstein's argument that "we write as bodies . . . We immerse ourselves in . . . our

own bodily reactions as writers. We *are* our bodies; we are writing bodies . . . (297; emphasis in original). Following this powerful claim, Fleckenstein pushes for the “need to attend to visceral rhythms as we compose writerly identities, readers, and textworlds” (297). Like Fleckenstein, Margaret Syverson contends that our understanding and subsequent pedagogy of writing should account for the central role the body plays in composing, for, as she argues, “writers, readers, and texts have physical bodies and consequently not only the content but the process of their interaction is dependent on, and reflective of, physical experience” (12). For Syverson, writing is real people working in a real world. While this point may seem moot, it is important to acknowledge the physical action of holding a book, flipping pages, typing words on a keyboard. What I find curious about Syverson’s argument is her inclusion of “texts” in her listing of things that have a physical body. Typically when embodiment is constructed, not as a metaphor but as a concrete practice and pedagogy deriving from a theoretical foundation, living, breathing organisms are configured. But Syverson moves past this myopic view and suggests exploring how the physical existence and attributes of the text before us—be it a book, a scrap of paper, a PDF—facilitates or stymies its attempt to carry meaning. While this point may be clear enough, Syverson holds that “[o]ne of the salient features of academic life is the massive suppression of awareness of this physical relationship” (12), namely our tactile interaction with a text.

I agree, and linking the body with epistemology is making its way into scholarship in composition and rhetoric. One of the more helpful developments in theories of embodiment comes from A. Abby Knoblauch, who sets out to classify what she terms “embodied terminology”(50). Delineating embodied terminology into three terms (“embodied language,” “embodied knowledge,” and “embodied rhetoric”), Knoblauch attempts to “differentiate the ways in which we talk about embodiment, particularly within English studies broadly, and Composition and Rhetoric more specifically (51). Doing so, and not erroneously conflating the terms as Knoblauch believes previous scholarship has done, allows “embodied writing and ways of ways of knowing within the academy” (51) to no longer be marginalized. Defining embodied knowledge as “that sense of knowing something *through* the body” (52; emphasis in original), Knoblauch provides a succinct definition of embodied rhetoric: a “purposeful decision to include embodied knowledge and social positionalities as forms of meaning making within a text itself.” (52). Such a definition connects strongly with the forms of embodiment seen in college football, which I detail shortly. Moreover, it calls to mind Kathryn Perry’s powerful query: “How do we distinguish between the physical and conceptual work of composing?” This question strikes to the heart of the warrant undergirding Fleckenstein’s claim that “we are writing bodies,” and the efficacy of Fleckenstein’s claim casts Perry’s query as all the more pertinent. Perry leaves her audience to ponder this question, and I am left feeling as if the line between the physical and conceptual work of composing is increasingly blurred. This blurring is especially evident with how student-athletes approach extracurricular multimodality as an embodied rhetoric.

In her work with student-athletes and the issue of transfer, Julie Cheville, like Syverson, takes Johnson’s concept of linking creativity and rationality with embodiment to stage her argument that “cognition might be conceptualized in a way that recognizes both language *and* the human body as mediational tools” (332; emphasis in original). The emphasis Cheville places on mediational tools connects with Shipka’s work—which is also informed by mediated activity—and underscores the need to understand embodiment’s role during the composing process. Like Cheville, Debra Hawhee’s interest in the merger of rhetoric and athletics for the Sophists of fifth and fourth century BCE Greece provides a foothold and need for further exploration of how athletics and the bodily exertions therein figure into a rhetoric exercise such as a multimodal project. Arguing that the “*bodily art*”(“Bodily Pedagogues” 144; emphasis in original) of sophistic rhetoric was “learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind” (“Bodily Pedagogues” 144), Hawhee contends that “sophistic pedagogy emphasized the materiality of learning, the corporeal acquisition of rhetorical movements through rhythm, repetition, and response (“Bodily Pedagogues” 160). In *Bodily Art*, Hawhee continues the connection between athletics and rhetoric: “rhetoric’s connections to athletics enable a view of rhetoric as a bodily art” (14). Taken together, then, Cheville’s and Hawhee’s work constructs athletics as an appropriate vehicle for ushering in more robust understanding of embodiment during rhetorical exercises.

More directly connected with multimodality, Kress underscores the central place of the body when he argues that the recent move toward multimodality “represents a move away from high abstraction to the specific, the material; from the mentalistic to the *bodily*”(13; emphasis added). Kress carves space for a rich discussion of embodiment with the use of “bodily.” However, he fails to follow through and largely restricts his theory on multimodality to texts and not how the body interacts with and through these texts. While there is space for the body to be a larger and more acknowledged component of multimodality, few scholars—Laura Micciche, Hannah Rule, and Liv Stratman’s “Multimodality, Performance, and Teacher-Training” being an exception—have yet to explore this component fully.^{[4] [note4]}

In thinking about college football plays as extracurricular instantiations of multimodal rhetoric, theoretical attention to embodiment highlights the inclusion of a vital mode utilized during the composing process: skin and bones, the physical body. Theories of embodiment help us capture how the body and the mind are inextricably linked during the composing process, how our skin and bones impact our writing, how our breathing and heart beat impact how and what we write.

Terminology & Multimodal College Football Plays

In what follows, I provide a textual analysis of Auburn’s “Cov. 4 play action,” visual multimodal text.^{[5] [note5]} Specifically, I focus on the symbolic and iconic signs of the text. My understanding of symbolic and iconic signs follows the lead of M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Michael K. Gilbertson, who define an iconic sign as an image that constructs an analogous resemblance to an object (47)—an example would be an image of a file folder on a computer screen *iconically* representing electronic documents stored on the computer—while symbolic signs “bear an arbitrary relation” to a referent “based on a law or agreement” (50). While I provide an extended textual analysis, for the student-athletes many of us teach, a textual analysis is not needed. Student-athletes in the high-profile sport of football have been systemically socialized to internalize and provide a near automatic embodying and enactment of these texts. The seemingly chaotic arrangement of modes, chaotic to those of us outside of what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger refer to as a “community of practice,” is immediately evident to players at this high level of competition. Interpretation and execution of such multimodal texts must be immediate and nearly flawless if the student-athlete is to retain the favor of his coaches. The reading and enacting, then, become forms of second-nature embodied rhetoric. In sum, college football players develop a unique “play literacy,” which I understand to be a second-nature form of embodied rhetoric, a way of being and making meaning in the world.

Auburn University’s “Cov. 4 play action”

Taken from Auburn’s 2003-2004 defensive playbook, the chaotic sprinkling of squiggly and solid lines, Xs, squares, arrows, and numbers represent and communicate the reactionary play “Cov. 4 play action”(see Figure 1). This play captures multimodality as I and others, such as, Kress, Shipka, and Selfe and Takayoshi understand it to be—multiple modes operating simultaneously and coalescing into a constellation of meaning: the mode of alphabetic text deployed to connote one thing; the mode of geometric shape used to represent another.

While there are eleven men on the field at one time, this play is directed to only the four defensive back (dbs)—hence the title “Cov. 4” where “Cov.” is short for “Cover”—and three linebackers (lbs). To navigate around cumbersome position titles, players and coaches use abbreviations and nicknames: the middle linebacker is nicknamed “Mike,” the weak side linebacker is “Will,” and the strong side linebacker is “Sam;” these positions are further shortened to a single letter. The dbs receive abbreviations: the cornerbacks are “C;” the strong safety is “SS,” and the free safety is “FS.”

While the lbs are trained to cover offensive players, the four dbs are trained to be responsible for covering particular “zones” of the field—four zones in a Cov. 4 defensive scheme—and any offensive player who may enter their particular zone. The phrase “play action” refers to the predicted offensive play, in this case a play action, which the defense believes the offense will run. During a play action, the QB receives the ball and has been trained to fake a handoff to the TB with the halfback running ahead to block the defense. Ideally, the defense has been tricked by the fake hand-off and is rushing toward the TB, leaving the offensive receivers open to catch the ball. The QB, still in possession of the ball, runs out to either side of the field looking to throw the ball to an open receiver. To counter the play action, the defense needs to “read” the fake handoff. Once they have successfully identified the fake handoff, the defensive players have been trained to cover the receivers. For this text, the defensive coach believes the offense is preparing to run a play action, thus the title of this play: “Cov. 4 play action.” The circles are symbolic signs that the coaches have trained the players to view as representing offensive players.



Figure 2. Signaling the defensive play, a coach holds up a yellow sign inscribed with a black number during a 2008 game between Auburn and Georgia. Notice the thick stack of cards in his left hand. He is flanked by two coaches sending hand signs who are partially obstructed by the goal posts cutting horizontally across the image. (Photograph taken by the author.)

Despite all the work that goes into constructing and teaching a play and then transferring it across various representational media, the play remains an empty vessel—a multimodal text such as in Figure 1, a number as in Figure 2, or a verbal command—until it is embodied on the field (see Figure 3). When the play is visually flashed to the captains, and when the captains verbally relay the play to their teammates, the play ceases to be a floating and empty text—how ever complex it may be—and becomes embodied and then enacted publicly. Prior to this public embodiment, these plays are clandestine documents, hidden from the public and performed in the privacy of a team’s practice or written in the secrecy of a locker room. Prior to this public embodiment, these texts are guarded carefully, yet, paradoxically, have no present, only future, value. In other words, a team does not win a game simply by sketching a creative and innovative play, circulating solely in their narrow community of practice. Accolades are not awarded for plays. A team wins a game, accolades on showered on players, coaches, and programs, based on the effective *embodiment* of these plays.

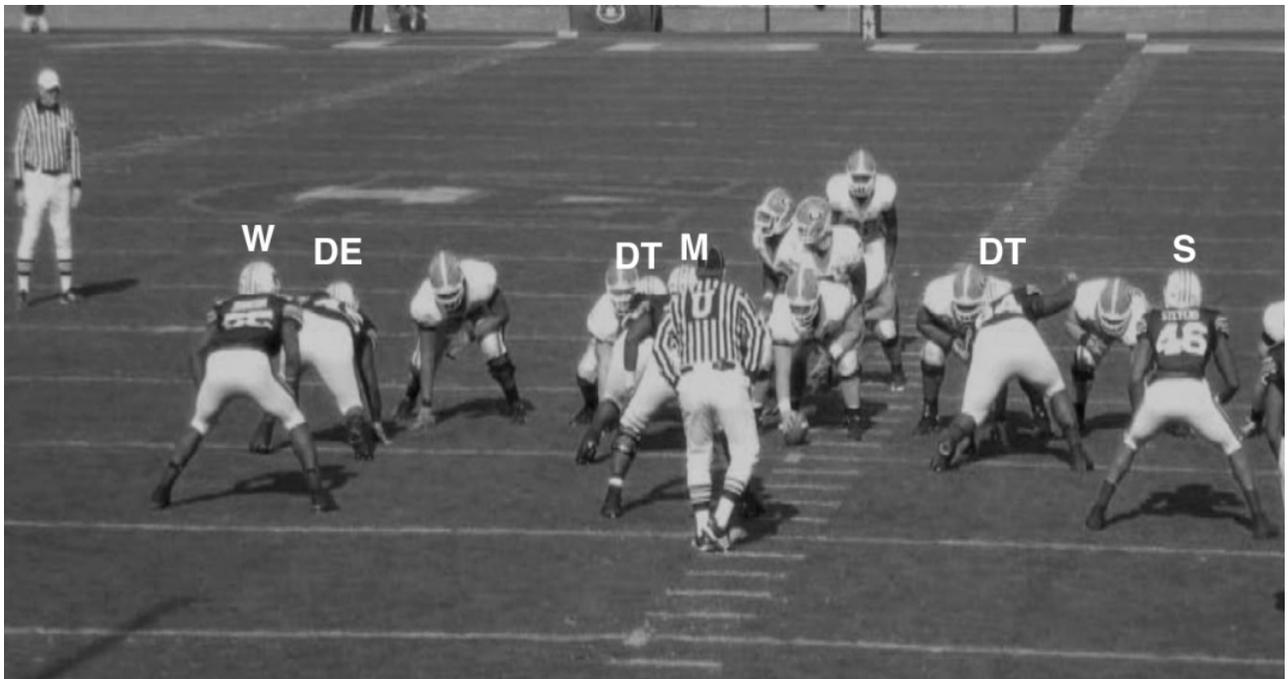


Figure 3. Taken during Auburn's 2008 match-up against the University of Georgia, Auburn lines up in their traditional defensive formation: four linemen (DE, short for defensive end, and DT, short for defensive tackle) and three linebackers (W, M, and S). The SS, creeping close to the line of scrimmage, is not counted in a 4-3 formation. The position of the linemen is not given in Cov. 4 play action. Most likely they are operating in formation set for the duration of the game. (Photograph taken by the author.)

During a game, these plays move from being impotent yet complex texts to effective and public performances of the text. Embodiment not only moves these texts from the private to the public sphere, but embodiment gauges the effectiveness of these plays. Again, it does not matter if a play looks good on paper or on a placard; it matters if the play can be properly embodied.

Returning to one of Syverson's arguments adds an additional wrinkle to embodiment: "writers, readers, and texts have physical bodies and consequently not only the content but the process of their interaction is dependent on, and reflective of, physical experience" (12). I agree with Syverson's point here—that texts have physical bodies—as I can think of how words look on a page gives me a certain physical reaction, how certain color ink, a font—Calibri has always made me a little nauseous—the weight of a book, impact my physical relationship to the text. If this holds, then we need to consider how a football play itself has an embodied presence. The question that follows then is how a play's embodiment interacts with a football player's embodiment: more specifically, how embodiment is transferred from text to player and back again. Using the term "transfer," I am aware of the various understanding that may arise in the reader's mind. While I acknowledge the work of, for example, David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon, and the recent special issue of *Composition Forum* on writing and transfer guest edited by Elizabeth Wardle, I am thinking of transfer a little differently. For those in education and composition and rhetoric, transfer has largely focused on how students—more often than not those in first-year composition courses—are able to transfer or, what Wardle calls "repurpose," the rhetorical and cognitive moves asked of them in their first-year composition courses to their upper-level and discipline specific courses. The emphasis in this line of research (while productive in that it asks tough questions and poses even tougher suggestions) is largely on the student and what she or he is able or not able to transfer.

Instead, here I am thinking of a text-focused understanding of transfer and am curious how a single embodied play transfers meaning across various representational media: a sheet of white paper, a placard, a hand signal, a verbal command, and then an embodied presence on the football field. As issues surrounding transfer continue to animate our field, it is worth examining how football has constructed an extracurricular community of practice in which embodiment is effectively transferred from several iterations of a text to a person in less than 35 seconds and where this transfer rarely breaks down. Sure, there are differences between examining transfer in the context of college writing and examining transfer on a football field; however, additional research on successful transfer—regardless of the area in which it occurs—can glean insights into writing transfer and is worthy of further pursuing. It is this transfer of embodiment that I find most curious. During the course of a game, teams run upwards of 100 total offensive and defensive plays. In all these plays embodiment is transferred. Again, while we can conceptualize via Syverson how a text is embodied, the embodiment of such a text is not assessed until the text is embodied by a football player. It is this important moment of transfer, happening publicly and quickly, that positions football in a complex arena of literate activity.

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Here is multimodality for football. Representative of Selfe and Takayoshi's definition of multimodality and Stephen Witte's understanding of a "text" as an "organized set of symbols or signs" (237), these plays are football writing. While football is a complex literate activity imbued with a great variety of multimodal literacy practices beyond the enactment of the playbook, this partial analysis signals the role of embodiment undergirding the meaning making processes of this extracurricular rhetoric. And this is a mode of writing that resonates with how current scholars and organizations conceptualize writing, though the field has long ignored the athletic part of the university experience. When Yancey noted that "we have multiple modes of composing operating simultaneously" ("Impulse to Compose" 331), she could have, however unlikely, pointed to a college football play for evidence. Yet, football plays, with their deconstruction of a hierarchical system of meaning making (i.e., alphabetic text dominant over image, sound, and other modes), adhere to Yancey's vision of the New Age of Composition. A similar issue occurs in Andrea Lunsford's 2005 *Computers and Writing* Conference keynote in which she recasts writing as "epistemic, performative, multivocal, multimodal, and multimediated" (171). Like Yancey, Lunsford doesn't move toward college football to illustrate her argument, though, again like Yancey, college football provides appropriate fodder for just such an argument. My quarrel is not with Lunsford and Yancey for failing to acknowledge football; instead, I stress the need to see football writing, like curricular writing, as performative—an extension of embodiment—and multimodal.

Moreover, under the NCTE's 2004 position statement "NCTE Beliefs about the Teaching of Writing," the Executive Committee provides a section titled "Composing Occurs in Different Modalities and Technologies." They assert that "as basic tools for communicating expand to include modes beyond print alone, 'writing' comes to mean more than scratching words with pen and paper." While the NCTE is largely concerned with classroom practice and the multitude of modes and composing choices at a writer's disposal with the development of technology, the emphasis on what writing means, the nod toward the unlimited possibilities of what writing is and can be, resonates when viewing football plays as writing. When our professional organizations increasingly push for a larger understanding of what counts as writing and argue for an understanding and acknowledgement of extracurricular writing, room is open for an examination of college football plays as an instantiation of writing worthy of our attention.

Representing the Body as a Mode of Meaning-Making in Our Teaching

Sitting in Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium one November day—disappointed Auburn came up short against their rival Georgia Bulldogs—I was able to witness the embodiment of Auburn's "Cov. 4 play action." While I am hesitant to make the extracurricular curricular, further research should move toward how embodiment—central to this extracurricular multimodal rhetoric—can and should inform our classroom multimodal practices. I end on this note: what college football plays can teach those of us who engage with multimodality in our classroom.

In the opening chapter of *Multimodality*, Kress muses on Saussurean semiotics and juxtaposes Saussure's "very high degrees of abstraction" (13) with multimodality. [\[7\]](#) Doing so allows Kress to argue that

By entire contrast [to Saussure], the study of *modesis* multimodal social semiotics focuses on the *material*, the *specific*, the *making* of signs *now*, in this environment for this occasion. In its focus on the material it also focuses on the bodilyness of those who make and remake signs in constant semiotic (inter) action. It represents a move away from high abstraction to the specific, the material; from the mentalistic to the bodily. (13; emphasis in original)

While I am theoretically in agreement, Kress's theory does not hold when considering classroom practice. Kress suggests that through multimodality's focus on the material, it is also focused on the bodily. Thus, this turn away from Saussurean structural semiotics—which largely ignored the material and the bodily—is toward a social semiotic theory, which accounts for and acknowledges the material and the bodily. I take issue with this argument. Current multimodal pedagogies crafted by Shipka, Selfe and others largely do not conflate the material with the bodily as Kress suggests. While all three point to the material objects circulated in and around the composing process—an Abercrombie & Fitch shirt, ballet shoes, for Shipka, audio sampling, for Selfe—the living, breathing body is not configured in the material. These material objects clothe the body, but like molted snake skin they point to the *existence* of a body, not the *presence* of a body. Kress attempts to make the argumentative move of connecting material with bodily, as if a multimodal rhetoric including an emphasis on the material necessary includes an emphasis on bodilyness. But I don't buy it, and I don't see current multimodal pedagogies buying it either. Typically the material is devoted time and attention in one venue—John Trimbur's "Delivering the Message," for example—and the body is devoted time and attention in another venue—Selzer and Crowley's co-edited collection *Rhetorical Bodies*, for example. Yet an analysis of college football plays as extracurricular multimodality invites student-athletes to hone a form of second-nature embodied rhetoric absent in curricular instantiations of multimodality.

What this means for those of us who adopt multimodal pedagogies is that we are working with student-athletes who thrive with second-nature embodied rhetoric when engaging with multimodality for their sport but are often not encouraged to link the body with multimodality for curricular composing. As we continue to grow disillusioned with monomodal understandings of language and refine multimodal practices for our classrooms, we would do well to consider the role of the body during the composing process as well as the role of the body during the circulation, delivery, and reception of the multimodal texts our students compose. And here is where college

football—that multibillion dollar industry that shares our campuses—has a lot to teach us. The football plays we teach succeed in a community of practice that supports the body in the composing process of multimodal texts. When Laura Micciche, Hannah Rule, and Liv Stratman add “physicality, movement, and bodily comportment” to their understanding of multimodality in regards to teacher-training, I think *college football*.

Moreover, the “physicality, movement, and bodily comportment” of college football speaks to composition pedagogy in intriguing ways. In her 2013 CCCC presentation “Writing Bodies in First-Year Composition and the World Beyond,” Catherine DeLazzerro provided attendees with a pedagogy based on embodied approaches to teaching composition. DeLazzerro enacted her pedagogy as a graduate student at Florida State and brought one of her former students—now a second year undergraduate at Florida State—to reflect on the effectiveness of such an approach. For her third essay assignment, titled “Embodied Writing—Integrating Mind and Body, Self and World,” DeLazzerro invited her students to work in groups and explore a controversial issue that animates their local campus or surrounding community. Once the group selects an issue, DeLazzerro asks her students to use a model of embodied writing discussed in class (e.g., excerpts from Fleckenstein’s “Writing Bodies”) to explain how the chosen model of embodied writing can be used to interpret the problem in a way that moves the reader toward understanding, addressing, and experiencing a world without the controversial issue. At the close, the group is to then present a practical solution to the problem. In a similar vein, Barry Kroll’s “Arguing with Adversaries: Aikido, Rhetoric, and the Art of Peace” illustrates how he implements the Japanese martial art of aikido into the college writing classroom. Kroll contends that aikido provides a tangible framework for understanding argument as harmonization rather than confrontation. To show more clearly how “the movements of aikido provide a *physical, bodily* analogue for verbal argument” (464; emphasis added), Kroll has his students come to the fore of the classroom and “do a few simple maneuvers, such as basic escapes and turns” (464). This (literal and figurative) exercise allows Kroll’s students to tap into an “alternative modality” (464), but this alternative modality is the physical breathing body. Through this new bodily modality, students literally feel and touch the moves and countermoves of those with whom they are verbally/physically wrangling.

While DeLazzerro has her students engage with theories of embodiment and Kroll has his students engage with practices of embodiment, neither directly describes the body as a modality, ushering in and connecting with theories of multimodality—though the connections are there. In an effort to push our students and ourselves to connect embodiment and multimodality, we need to continue positioning the body as a mode of meaning-making, as Kroll does, but also as a mode of meaning-making that has gravitas, a mode not subservient to but concomitant with the written word. We need to push past the body as a theory or the body as a classroom exercise and toward the body as a vital avenue of composition to which the work of DeLazzerro and Kroll is a helpful start. As the field engages with ever-changing notions of what counts as composing, how composing should be taught, and, especially how composing should be assessed in the wake of massively open online courses and the rise in machine-scoring of high stakes assessment tests, research would do well to explore how to open up additional avenues for our students, or any writer for that matter, to make meaning—the body being just one of these advantageous additional avenues.

If we are sincere in our scholarship that addresses multimodality and are sincere in our scholarship that addresses embodied ways of knowing, then next time we find a football game on the television, we would do well to watch closely and ask ourselves the following: how do these players, the players who often struggle in our classes, publicly embody multimodal texts, and how can we bring their performative display into our classrooms? These are the high-profile student-athletes dotting our campuses, interviewed by ESPN, pasted on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, known and discussed on a national level, and the ones who have a great deal to teach us—scholars/practitioners of writing—regarding the role of the body in multimodality.

Notes

1. While I provide Selfe and Takayoshi’s definition here, it is worth calling attention to Claire Lauer’s “Contending with Terms: ‘Multimodal and ‘Multimedia’ in the Academic and Public Sphere” for readers interested in additional definitions. After drawing together a variety of definitions and uses for these two terms and crediting the New London Group with coining “multimodal,” Lauer argues “coming to more precise definitions and use of these terms must include attention to their histories and the contexts in which they have been used” (237). ([Return to text. \[#note1_ref\]](#))
2. In this article, I rely on the terms “literate activity” and “literate practices.” In differentiating between the two, I follow the lead of Paul Prior and Kevin Roozen. As members of the New Literacy Studies have persuasively asserted, *literate practice* refers to specific ways, shaped by cultural, historical and social conventions literacy is used by a community. While related to literate practice, *literate activity* focuses attention on what Roozen refers to as the “broader spectrum of action of particular communities” (569). Channeling Prior’s helpful definition of literate activity as “not located in acts of reading and writing, but as cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (138; emphasis in original), Roozen argues literate practices are “situated in and mobilized across broader literate activities” (569). Here, I understand the literate activity of football as composed of a wide variety of literate practices, such as reading and embodying a football play. ([Return to text. \[#note2_ref\]](#))
3. Selfe channels Scott Lyons with the term “rhetorical sovereignty” and carefully and sensitively extends the definition from Lyons’s initial use. ([Return to text. \[#note3_ref\]](#))
4. Micciche, Rule, and Stratman pull from theories of performativity and the body to sketch an argument about multimodality and teacher-training. They start from the premise that “teaching is an embodied, interactive practice.” Throughout the article, they stay true to their larger focus of linking performance with multimodality and by doing so are one of the few to chart a beneficial course for including the body in current multimodal pedagogies. ([Return to text. \[#note4_ref\]](#))
5. I intentionally deploy the adjective “visual” to bring to mind Stephen A. Bernhardt’s “Seeing the Text.” In one of the early pieces on visual rhetoric, Bernhardt calls attention to texts which convey “substantial information through visual cues” (66). According to Bernhardt, these texts “display their structure” visually and provide the “reader/viewer with a schematic representation of the divisions and hierarchies which organize the text” (66). The words “divisions” and “hierarchies” call to mind football, a sport heavily dependent on organization and a vertical understandings of leadership. ([Return to text. \[#note5_ref\]](#))
6. All schools relay plays in code to their players during a game; however, how these plays are coded depends on the school and the coaching staff. At the University of Oklahoma, for example, coaches hold up large (roughly 3 x 3) square cardboard signs divided into quarters. Each quarter is colored with a black letter written over the color. Two signs are held up, and one coach relays the play via hand signals. The University of Oregon also divides a large cardboard square into quarters, but they prefer to fill the space with images and not colors or numbers. Thus, Oregon flashes the image of a gopher, a picture of Bill Murray’s character in *Caddyshack*, or a map of the state of Louisiana. Regardless of the method preferred, the emphasis on transferring a multimodality text across different forms of representational media remains the same. ([Return to text. \[#note6_ref\]](#))
7. For an additional critique on Saussurean linguistics from a composition and rhetoric perspective, see chapter 1 of Paul Prior’s *Writing/Disciplinarity*.

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