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A Different Kind of Sponsorship: The Influence of Graphic Narrative Composing on ELA Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions of Writing and Literacy Instruction

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Abstract: The authors present research findings from a collective case study (n=5) conducted in a multimodal composition course for pre-service English teachers. Researchers studied how a course focused on how multimodal composition influenced pre-service teachers' identities as writers and their stances on literacy instruction. Data consisted of students' reflective writing on a graphic narrative assignment and were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Five themes characterize the data: the varied rhetorical decisions used to compose the graphic narrative; the recognition of multimodal composition as process-oriented; the paralleling of "writing" and "composing"; the interrogation of what counts as academic text; and the misreading and misunderstanding of the rhetorical situation and of multimodality. Implications for the field are offered as well.

Keywords: multimodal literacy, pre-service teachers, identities



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Creating my graphic narrative was probably the most exciting project I've worked on since I've been in college. I know that is a big statement to make, but I feel like comics, and visuals in general, are thought of as childish and inappropriate for higher cognitive development. At the beginning of this course I also had low expectations of comics in the classroom. In reality, creating this graphic narrative took more thought and time than any essay I have written.

—Kara, pre-service English teacher.

Introduction¹

Research has long supported that a significant factor in how teachers will teach is how they themselves were taught (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 1983; Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Lortie, 1975; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998). What Lortie (1975) termed the “apprenticeship of observation,” the collective and powerful influence of prior schooling and observational experiences, makes innovative teacher education all the more important for shaping how PSTs are prepared for 21st century classrooms. In other words, if pre-service teachers (PSTs) teach like they were once taught, a limited range of textual practices may be privileged in literacy and English classrooms. A robust literacy education, in the contemporary moment, accounts for consuming and composing information in a variety of rhetorical situations, across a range of modes (Council of Writing Program Administrators, National Council of Teachers of English, and National Writing Project, 2011). Even as teacher educators continue to sanction print-centric literacy practices, the need for more inclusive pedagogies that account for

multimodality is of paramount importance for supporting the development of 21st century citizens. The undergraduate writing methods course, as recent scholarship by Tulley (2016) argues, is a playground of controversy in the education of teachers. Teacher educators may be confounded about the best approach. Should such a course, they might ask, focus on theory or practice? Are traditional academic literacies positioned as sacrosanct or exclusionary? What role should vernacular literacies play in the writing classroom? As literacy continues to evolve, via technology innovation and the numerous exigencies of reading and writing that compose our lives, students need instruction that accounts for a variety of texts and text-types (i.e., modalities). The following article presents research from an undergraduate writing methods course (Rhetoric and Composition for Teachers) that was designed to focus on multimodal literacy instruction in ELA teacher education. Our research questions included:

1. How does focused multimodal literacy instruction influence how PSTs see themselves as writers and composers?
2. How does multimodal literacy instruction influence PSTs’ perceptions of academic and school-worthy discourse and literacy practices?
3. What are PSTs’ views about the potential of graphic novels and graphic narrative texts to serve as multimodal literacy sponsors for their future classrooms and students?

For the purposes of our study, we were most interested in how comics and graphic novels—

¹ We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we will use “he” to refer to individuals who identify as male, “she” to refer to individuals who identify as

female, and “ze” for individuals who identify as gender-neutral. We have selected these pronouns because we believe they are more familiar for a diverse audience of readers.

specifically a unit culminating in composing graphic narratives—influenced PSTs’ perceptions of themselves as writers and their approaches to literacy instruction.

Review of the Literature

Since the New London Group (1996) called for increased attention to new and multimodal literacies, scholars have continued the push to recognize the importance of texts and practices which utilize more than alphabetic text alone. Others (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Jewitt, 2008; Snyder & Bulfin, 2008) have taken up the banner and crafted arguments and practices for an expanded literacy instruction, one that harnesses the rhetorical power of multiple modes of communication, to foster a fully-literate citizenry. One method, as researchers and practitioners alike have posited, for fostering such multimodal literacy skills involves the use of comics and graphic novels in the classroom—for both reading and composition purposes (Jacobs, 2007; Schwarz, 2002). This, of course, requires rethinking more than just literacy as a concept and literacy at the K-12 levels; it requires rethinking literacy teacher education. This shift in literacy instruction has not been accomplished across the board, especially with regard to incorporating comics and graphic novels. As such, there continues to be a call for using a variety of multimodal texts to engage PSTs throughout their teacher training (Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006; Schieble, 2011; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007). The literature review that follows provides an overview of the scholarship supporting this ongoing call for change.

Multimodal Literacy

Takayoshi and Selfe (2007) described multimodal texts as those “that exceed the alphabetic” (p. 1), which draws attention away from traditional notions and definitions of literacy toward a more robust

acknowledgement “that literacy pedagogy must account for the multiplicity of texts allowed and encouraged by digital technologies” (p. 2). In line with the original New London Group (1996) report, other scholars (see for example, Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Jewitt, 2008) also suggested the need to rethink and reframe the concept of literacy to include all methods (i.e., modalities) of creating and sharing information, including text, image, sound, etc. and any combination therein. To account for this rethinking and reframing of literacy, Yancey (2004) noted the necessity of redefining composition and composition instruction to go beyond traditional uses of alphabetic text alone. Similarly, the National Council of Teachers of English (2011) has argued that to be literate in the 21st century, citizens must be able to effectively analyze and compose a wide variety of multimodal and multimedia texts.

To be fully-literate, Snyder and Bulfin (2008) suggested students must note “how different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning...In an increasingly multimodal communication landscape, understandings of language are no longer limited” (p. 809) to traditional texts and notions of literacy. This evolution in the literacy landscape calls for a shift in education toward multimodality (Schieble, 2011), where teachers assist students in creating and making meaning from a variety of texts and modalities (Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Wysocki, 2003).

While traditional notions of literacy continue to be vital, it is increasingly important to assist students in becoming multi-literate (i.e., literate across multiple modes of communication). Graphic novels foster this by serving as complex visual and multimodal literacy sites (Jacobs, 2007; Schwarz, 2002). Comics and graphic novels are, by nature, multimodal and utilize the juxtaposition of images and text (e.g., speech balloons, captions, or sound effects). Readers

of comics and graphic novels are required to simultaneously make meaning from a variety of elements, ranging from words to layout to panel composition to body language.

The literacy skills developed from interacting with comics and graphic novels are transferable to other literacy tasks. Jacobs (2007), for example, stated, “By teaching students to become conscious and critical of the ways in which they make meaning from multimodal texts such as comics, we can also teach students to become more literate with a wide range of multimodal texts” (p. 24). Hoover (2012) echoed Jacobs’ argument by suggesting that much of the value of teaching graphic novels is in their potential to help readers develop the skills to decode (as literacy sponsors and mentor texts) other multimodal texts. In this way, comics and graphic novels serve as mentor texts and literacy sponsors, which Brandt (1998) defined as agents that model and help readers attain literacy skills.

While the reading of graphic novels is a complex task, the creation/composition of graphic novels is equally, if not more, complicated. Engaging students in composing graphic novels can also serve as a bridge to composing other multimodal texts. There are, however, fewer studies discussing comic/graphic novel creation to foster multimodal literacy. Much of the literature discussing comics as multimodal literacy sponsors focuses instead on text consumption (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Hammond, 2009; Jacobs, 2007; Schwarz, 2002). Kennedy, Thomsen, and Trabold (2015) argued for the need to embrace multimodal literacy pedagogies that are production-based (e.g., composing comics) to address the existing consumption-production gap in the study of composition. The authors also suggested that comics potentially help students analyze the sophisticated rhetorical moves made by authors/artists and utilize those moves in their own compositions.

Graphic Novels and Pre-Service Teachers

While much has been written on graphic novels in K-12 classrooms (Bakis, 2012; Carter, 2007; Carter, 2009; Frey, 2010; Frey & Fisher, 2008; Rudiger, 2006), a relatively small amount of this scholarship has been empirical in nature (Brenna, 2013; Cook, 2017; Moeller, 2011), and much less attention has been paid to PSTs’ perceptions of and interactions with graphic texts (Schieble, 2011), specifically with regard to literacy instruction. Scholars have often argued for a restructuring of teacher preparation programs to prepare PSTs to question traditional notions of literacy and to embrace the literacy practices of the multimodal world in which they will live and teach (Beck, Brown, Cockburn, & McClure, 2005; Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006; Hagood, 2000; Johnson, 2005; Luke, 2000; Sheridan-Thomas, 2007).

To ensure PSTs enter the classroom ready to utilize multimodal literacy instruction with students, Cervetti, Damico, and Pearson (2006) offered three recommendations: provide opportunities (1) to analyze multimodal and multimedia texts, (2) to develop a more comprehensive definition and understanding of literacy, and (3) to understand the multiple literacies that they and their future students use. The few studies examining PSTs and multimodal literacy instruction suggest the need for additional inquiry and understanding. Benevides and Pearson (2010) found that the reading and literacy practices of PSTs determine their attitudes toward their own future literacy instruction. Similarly, Ajayi (2009) found the perceptions PSTs hold of the literacy practices they use in their own learning are important in determining how they will integrate multimodal literacy instruction into their own classrooms.

Examining the ways pre-service English teachers use graphic novels to assist students in exploring critical issues, Schieble (2011) found that PSTs designed lessons based on images in the graphic novel to

encourage more critical questioning from students and displayed abilities to make intertextual connections to graphic novels. As McVee, Bailey, and Shanahan (2008) posited, if PSTs are to feel comfortable implementing multimodal literacy instruction in their classrooms, teacher educators must provide meaningful opportunities for them to learn from, explore, and design a range of text-types.

This study aims to contribute to the existing gap in the literature by examining the impact of focused literacy instruction (i.e., instruction in reading, analyzing, discussing, and composing graphic texts) on PSTs' perceptions of themselves as composers and of graphic novels as multimodal literacy sponsors.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is informed by three areas of literature that make an argument for the potential of multimodal literacy instruction in teacher education programs to support the growth of PSTs as teacher-writers in communities of practice. The theoretical perspective offered here makes an argument for the necessity and benefit of instruction to support PSTs as they learn to value and practice multimodal writing in and out of the classroom. First, the concept of multimodality and the evolving notions of literacy influence instruction students receive and the ways in which they perceive themselves as literate individuals. Thus, this course was designed to offer PSTs opportunities to engage in multimodal consumption and composition first as students before transitioning to apply those experiences to their discussions and design of instructional practices. Second, the concept and ethos of the teacher-writer from the National Writing Project (NWP) serves as

an instructional frame for the course and for the design of instructional (and thus research) materials, which are grounded in the belief that teachers learn to teach writing by writing and intentionally reflecting on process. Third, PSTs bring with them their own experiences with and beliefs about literacy that impact how they view their literate self and future students. Keeping this in mind, students were provided ongoing opportunities to reflect on their experiences in the course and the ways in which their understandings of literacy instruction continued to evolve.

Multimodality and Evolving Notions of Literacy

Our students inhabit a world in which the texts they consume continually change to include a variety of mediums (e.g., print and online) and modalities (e.g., textual, visual, multimodal), which holds implications for literacy education. As noted in the literature review, literacy can no longer be defined as traditional, alphabetic reading and writing alone (Garcia, 2012). An abundance of scholars

(Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Jewitt, 2008; Kittle, 2009; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Wysocki, 2003) have echoed the call to recognize the importance of new literacy practices and multimodal texts in literacy instruction. To prepare students to communicate through and across multiple types of texts, educators need to redefine and conceptualize literacy in ways that recognize and value multimodality.

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Teacher-Writers: Creating a Professional Development Culture

Professional development in the teaching of writing has been framed in composition studies and teacher education as identity work (Cremin, 2006). Following the NWP ethos of teachers learning through disciplinary practice, teachers develop and grow as teachers of writing through writing. In this professional practice, importantly, teachers reflect on their identities as writers, including their beliefs about the writing process, and this can have profound implications for classroom practice. It is well documented that teachers' identities as readers and writers influence their beliefs about literacy and literacy instruction (Clark & Medina, 2000; Hall, 2009; Margolis, 2002; Parr & Campbell, 2011). Teachers may even recreate or reproduce themselves as literacy learners through their classroom teaching (Gennrich & Janks, 2013). When PSTs experience opportunities to compose, talk, and reflect on writing pedagogy in a community of practice, this underscores, forms, and changes their beliefs and identities as writers and writing teachers (Cremin, 2006; Whitney, 2009). Research on teacher-writers and professional development strongly suggests that opportunities to compose together is critical in forming teachers' writerly identities and supporting their pedagogical imaginations about what is possible in the writing classroom. PSTs learn to teach writing by writing themselves; in creative activity, teachers have the opportunity to reflect on and imagine writing pedagogy—including how they might teach and model process, collaboration, feedback, and assessment. Research on teacher-writers informs the ethos of the research setting and the pedagogical goals of the multimodal composition course.

PSTs' Beliefs about Literacy

Scholarship suggests that the K-12 literacy experiences that PSTs have influence their attitudes

toward and perceptions of their future literacy instruction (Ajayi, 2009; Benevides & Pearson, 2010). In other words, the beliefs they hold are at the heart of their own perspectives on and approaches toward teaching (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992). Moreover, scholars have posited for years that the ways PSTs are instructed within their teacher education programs influence their future instructional choices (Holt-Reynolds, 1992; Richardson, 2003). This includes, of course, pre-service ELA teachers and their future literacy classrooms. Thus, this course and study were designed to provide ELA PSTs with broadened conceptions of and experiences with literacy and composing, with an emphasis on multimodality, in order to help them reflect on their beliefs and perceptions of literacy instruction and to reimagine their future classrooms.

Methods

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in an undergraduate English Education course on multimodal composition at a large university in the Southeast. The course is a requirement for all English Education students, and is generally one of the first classes they take in the program. Thus, it is designed to introduce future ELA teachers to methods and approaches for using multimodal reading and composition in their future classrooms. There were a total of 23 students in the course (17 females and six males). One of the goals of the course is to help students think about how multiple modes of communication can be used to generate meaning and to create rhetorically powerful texts, which responds to the National Council of Teachers of English's (2011) definition of 21st century literate individuals. To clarify the instructional context of this study, we want to make visible a pedagogical ethos inspired by the NWP and recent research on writing identity and the teaching of writing (Whitney, 2009; Zoch, Myers, Lambert, Vetter, &

Fairbanks, 2016). This ethos, communicated to students in course documents and conversation, infuses the research setting, the English Education program generally and, specifically, the multimodal composition course. Rigorous and relevant teacher education must foster scaffolded and increasingly complex thinking through communities of professional practice. A goal of the course is to form a community of practice with PSTs through shared disciplinary language and common literate activity, in this case reading, composing, assessing, sharing, and reflecting on graphic narrative composing.

Collective Case Study

This study made use of Creswell's (1998) notion of case study. Specifically, we utilized collective case study to examine the individual experiences of five PSTs (Stake, 1995). This allowed us to conduct in-depth analyses of multiple students, bound together by, and inseparable from, our classroom (Yin, 2003) and allowed us to take individual cases and study them as one unit in order to more thoroughly examine the phenomenon. Case study participants (n=5) were selected (using a random number generator) from the seventeen students who agreed to participate in the study. Specifically, collective case study afforded detailed analyses of individual students' experiences and perceptions as well as analyses between and among students, which helped us better understand the themes and tensions that characterize their learning. The random selection of case study students ultimately represented the range of students taking the course. Elise, Sally, and Stephanie (all names are pseudonyms) were first semester juniors, taking their first course within the English education program. This meant they (1) had not taken any methods courses and (2) had no previous field placement experiences. Kara was a

first semester junior and, unlike the other first semester students, was simultaneously enrolled in her first methods course, which contained a field placement component. Cheryl was a first semester senior, in her final semester prior to internship. She had taken one methods course and was enrolled in the second. Thus, she was in her second round of field placement.

Instructional Context

For the purposes of our study, we were most interested in how comics and graphic novels—specifically a unit culminating in their composing graphic narratives—influenced PSTs' perceptions of themselves as writers and their approaches to

literacy instruction. Before asking students to read the graphic novels, they were provided instruction in *how* to interact with graphic texts. To that end, we call attention to the scaffolded instruction and experiences provided for students regarding interpreting, understanding, and creating graphic texts. As part of the course, students read,

analyzed, and discussed a variety of comics and graphic novels. Additionally, the class read user-friendly texts designed to help them better understand the graphic form. First, students were provided excerpts from a variety of student-friendly texts (e.g., McCloud's, 1993, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* and Rudiger's, 2006, *Reading Lessons: Graphic Novels 101*). Second, students were introduced to reading multimodal texts through a group discussion of *Detective Honeybear* (Zalben & Kenfield, 2012). In this conversation, the instructor showed how the interaction of image selection, panel and page layout, typography, perspective, and coloring contributed to the narrative. Additionally, students received explicit instruction (e.g., instructor modeling, whole class discussions, small

“Rigorous and relevant teacher education must foster scaffolded and increasingly complex thinking through communities of professional practice.”

group work, etc.) using several sample comics, such as *Black Panther* (Coates & Stelfreeze, 2016), *Supergirl* (Perkins & Johnson, 2015), *Scott Pilgrim's Precious Little Life* (O'Malley, 2004), *Archie* (Waid & Staples, 2015), and *V for Vendetta* (Moore & Lloyd, 2005), which we have previously used with a variety of composition classes. Additionally, these diverse texts represent powerful authorial (i.e., artistic) rhetorical moves and approaches to the comic format and allow for in-depth analyses of multimodal composition, all of which offer students important insight into composing graphically. *Scott Pilgrim*, for example, serves as a useful mentor text for exploring intentional (and limited) use of color. Similarly, *Detective Honeybear* uses an abundance of black and white to create a film noir feel. While using rich color, *Supergirl* is perhaps more useful as a mentor text because it includes varied perspectives that allow readers to experience multiple points of view throughout the comic. As part of instruction, students were guided through an analysis and discussion of the graphic elements (e.g., paneling, image selection, use of color, and transitions) of the text. After three weeks of instruction (meeting three days per week), students were asked to read *Daytripper* (Ba & Moon, 2011) individually. Finally, students were asked to find their own comics and graphic novels and work together in small groups to rhetorically analyze and discuss model texts.

After receiving instruction on how to engage with comics and graphic novels, including guided analyses of and instructional approaches for using the course texts, students were asked to use their experiences reading, viewing, and discussing the course texts to compose their own graphic narratives representing their analysis of and reactions to our class texts. Specifically, students were asked to use the methods and approaches used by one of our graphic novelists to create their own (see Appendix A for graphic narrative assignment).

In conjunction with the graphic narrative assignment, students also completed a hybrid (images and alphabetic text) reflection essay that included panels from both the graphic novel they analyzed and the graphic narrative they created. The purpose of this assignment was to allow students the opportunity to (1) explain how their own compositions were informed by the methods used by the graphic novelist—their ability to articulate why and how they made specific rhetorical decisions—and (2) discuss their perceptions, at the end of the study, of graphic novels and multimodal texts as literacy sponsors (i.e., any changes in their perceptions and what specifically led to those changes). Students were provided four specific prompts to respond to (see Appendix B for graphic narrative reflection assignment).

Data Collection and Analysis

While we nod to the content of the graphic narratives, the graphic narrative reflections became the data of focus for this study for a variety of reasons. First, we wanted to focus on students' reflections because, as teachers, we are interested in not only how PSTs compose, but also in their changing attitudes and values relative to multimodal composition. Second, we were drawn to student commentaries on their composing processes, particularly their perceptions of their own deficiencies (e.g., "I can't draw"). Given that these students are one or two years away from having their own classrooms and designing their own literacy instruction, focusing on their reflections offered us some insight into their current perceptions of literacy instruction, as well as the ways in which those perceptions evolve (or perhaps do not) as a result of taking a course designed as a multimodal composition course for PSTs.

To guide our analysis of the data, we utilized Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006). As such, we acknowledge that the data was collected

within the context of the classroom and generated collaboratively, between student-student and student-teacher interactions. Following Charmaz's suggestions, we approached data analysis as an emergent process leading to an interpretive portrayal of student experiences. We initially organized data by emerging theme from each individual case and then used these themes to conduct a cross case analysis to investigate both thematic patterns across cases and incongruities between.

Findings

Five themes related to student experience and perceptions of multimodality and literacy instruction emerged as a result of the data analysis. (1) Students discussed the intentional rhetorical decisions they made while composing their graphic narratives. That is, they understood and articulated what they did and why they did it, which demonstrates a practical understanding of themselves as writers, which is a vital foundation to quality teaching. (2) Students' comments suggest they recognized that composing multimodal texts involved a learned and evolving process (rather than a fixed skill), linking their perceptions of multimodal composition with their more traditional understandings of and experience with writing. Here, students better understood their own processes, as well as the scope (or plurality) of composing, a notion that connects with the concept of teacher as writer and has positive implications for their teaching. (3) Student discussions of their experiences creating graphic narratives suggest that they were able to think about "writing" and "composing" as parallel processes. The PSTs began to see traditional and multimodal writing as similar or synonymous. Seeing this similarity could be the first and most important step toward recognizing multimodality as academic discourse and worthy of attention in school. (4) Students used the graphic narrative composing experience to interrogate what

counts as academic text and noted newfound respect for the comic format. They demonstrated evolving ideas of what counts as literacy and what is useful in schools. By composing and reflecting, they began to think about these types of multimodal composition experiences as important to their growth as teachers and to their students' growth as literate individuals. (5) Students expressed doubt about their composing ability—represented in their frequent admission, "I can't draw." Expressions of doubt served as overlapping examples of misreading the rhetorical situation of the assignment and a misunderstanding of multimodality itself. While the data suggested numerous positive benefits to graphic narrative composing, including an emerging respect for multimodal composing as a school-worthy, academic literacy, their admission of "I can't draw," we argue, reflects a traditional view of composing and echoes entrenched hierarchies privileging print-centric over new literacies. Generally, PSTs variously struggled seeing themselves as teacher-writers, accounting for the primary tension in the data—PSTs valuing multimodal composing and, at once, even unconsciously, sanctioning print-centric values and perspectives.

Making Intentional Rhetorical Decisions

As part of their graphic narrative reflections, students demonstrated an ability to begin articulating what they did while composing—that is, they provided examples of the rhetorical decisions they made. This involved both what they included in their graphic narratives and what they chose not to include. In her discussion of paneling, Kara shared how she made the decision to work outside the traditional boundaries by intentionally breaking panels to communicate. She wrote, "I broke panel several times in my narrative, one example being when my main light bulb drops his dictionary on his desk in frustration." See Figure 1. While she does not offer an explanation for *how* this decision impacted

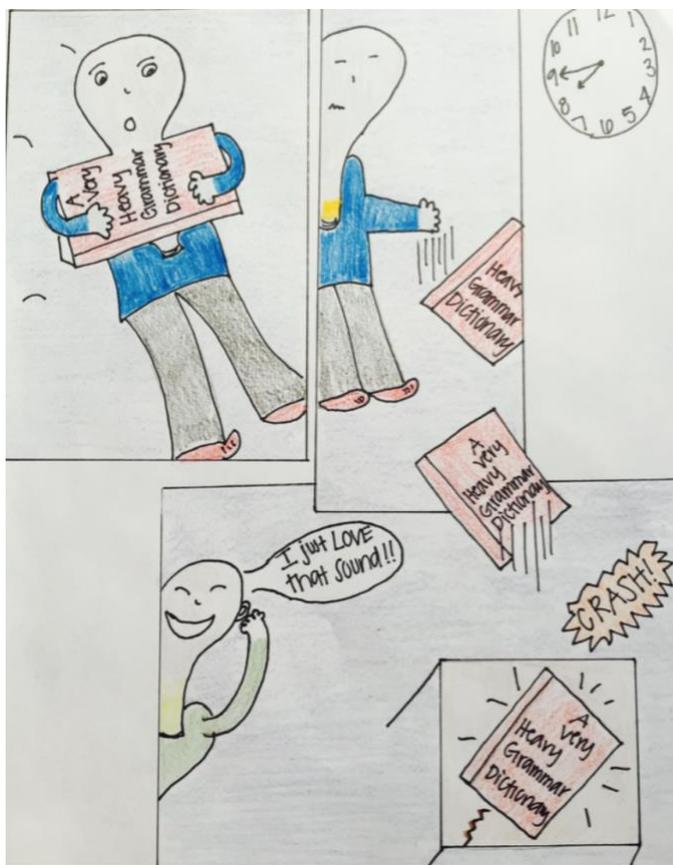


Figure 1. Kara breaking panel

her composition, she seems to have understood that she could be more effective by experimenting with the format and parameters. Stephanie also demonstrated an understanding that making intentional composing decisions would positively affect her narrative: “I’m much more pleased with the fine-tuning aspects and details like how I split the panels, color scheme, and the simplistic depictions than I am with the...illustration quality.” Here, she shared a variety of decisions she made—paneling, color, and illustration—which led to a composition she was pleased with.

Equally informative were the rhetorical decisions students made to leave something out. In the following excerpt, Elise shared her goal(s) for her composition and the difficult decisions she wrestled with throughout the process. First, she articulates her awareness of a rhetorical roadblock she perceived in the initial stages of her planning:

Drawing people is hard in itself, and then having to draw people in a way that highlighted a certain body characteristic...added a new layer of challenge...I wanted my graphic novel to appeal to and encompass women and girls without any exclusion. If I had colored the novel, I would have had to make the choice of race or ethnicity in the shading of their skin, hair, and facial features. (See Figure 2)

By recognizing that drawing humans is difficult and is even more difficult when attempting to highlight certain bodily features, she entered the planning process from an inquiry, or problem solving, standpoint. She then went on to share exactly what her goal was and how she planned to achieve it. In this case, she made the decision to avoid the use of color. What is perhaps most noteworthy here is that, while many of her classmates shared rhetorical decisions, they often did not go on to discuss (or rationalize) *why* they made those decisions. Elise argued in her reflection that by avoiding the use of color, she made her character more abstract, potentially connecting with a broader audience. The ways students make intentional rhetorical decisions connects to the importance of recognizing and utilizing new literacy practices, including multimodality (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Likewise, this finding is related to multiple scholars’ (e.g., Cremin, 2006; Gennrich & Janks, 2013; Margolis, 2002) concept of teacher-writers, where the PSTs learned to teach writing through doing and reflecting. This ultimately influences what they believe about writing and the teaching of writing as they work to iteratively recreate themselves as teachers.

Composing as Process

Students began noting an understanding of composing (beyond just traditional writing) as a process that is learned and fluid. For our purposes,

writing denotes traditional methods and processes of textual production that characterize academic discourse. *Writing* is largely monomodal in nature and recognized by PSTs as academic text production, funded by (again) familiar process methods, such as brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, and peer review. *Composing* includes traditional methods and processes of writing and denotes a wider range of modalities and methods of text creation and publication. For our purposes, PSTs' understanding and production of writing may be leveraged to participate meaningfully in multimodal composing processes.

Kara's and Elise's use of mentor texts to guide their work serves as an example of PSTs' understanding of composing as a process. Kara, for example, wrote, "I remember enjoying one of your former students

showing a character flying through a panel, so I used that idea when thinking of the dictionary scene." She used an example from a previous student to solve a composing problem. Similarly, Elise cited a text (*Detective Honeybear*) analyzed in class as a mentor for her decision: "I loved how...the black and white of the two men at the top makes their body shapes and stances so blatantly stand out." She went on to connect this to her use of body shape and body language in her own narrative (as evidenced in Figure 2 above) and how she focused "more on these aspects of people opposed to colors and distractions."

Students also referenced the role pre-writing played in their individual composing processes, as well as the iterative nature of those processes. Stephanie, when discussing her non-linear approach, shared

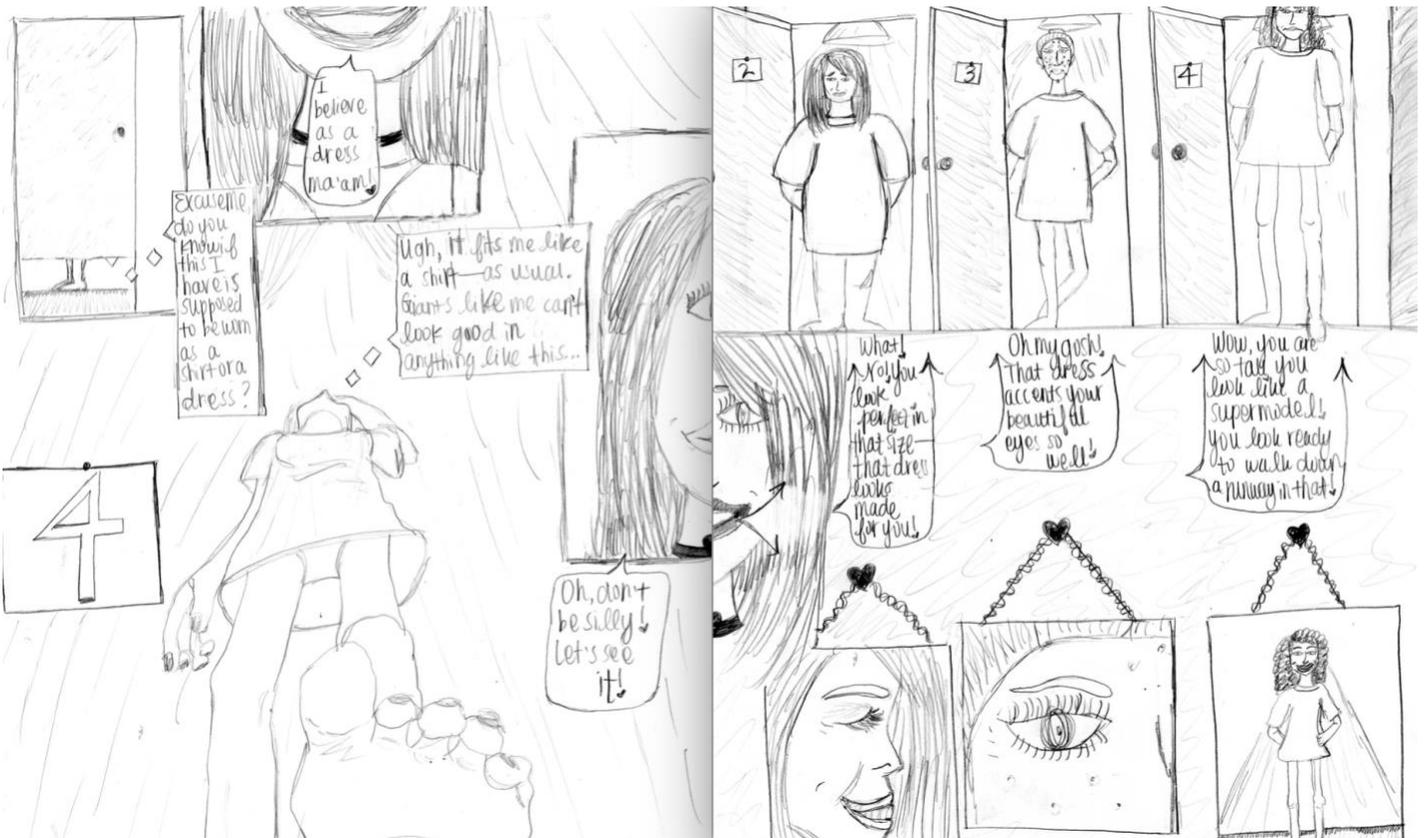


Figure 2: Elise Focusing on Human Traits Instead of Color

that working out of order provided her an effective starting point. She wrote, “I found myself working out of order, sketching panel ideas on a scratch sheet before I decided where to place it,” which suggests her sketches guided her process, a goal of pre-writing in all composition formats. Kara provided evidence that she recognized the utility of iteration in composing by describing the ways she continued the loop of process writing: “As I completed each page I found myself wanting to go back...I felt like I was getting better and better as each panel and page was created. I was constantly completing research and learning new ways of composing during this process.” Here, Kara notes her decision to move within (and without) of the composing process, pausing to conduct additional research and redrafting current work. The PSTs in this study better understood both the scope of process within “composition” and their own processes, which allowed them to begin growing as teachers and teacher-writers (Cremin, 2006; Gennrich & Janks, 2013). These experiences in teacher education, as Ajayi (2009), Benevides and Pearson (2010), and Brookhart and Freeman (1992) point out, help PSTs grow as writers and teachers who value multiple modes of communication.

Paralleling Writing and Composing

Kara and Elise were able to use their reflective discussions to further parallel writing and composing, often in quite explicit ways. Kara shared, “If anything comics take every aspect of composing traditional writing and turn it into a process that asks us to *show* what we are trying to convey.” Alone, this comment suggests an appreciation for the relationship between writing and composing (multimodally), but coupled with her notation of the role of pre-writing in both, we see a more nuanced understanding developing: “This (the role of pre-writing) was another instance where I saw the traditional use of pen and paper coming to play in multimodal composition...it also shows how easy it

can be to use pre-writing to make a graphic narrative.” Kara made a second parallel with revision. Interestingly, while she was able to recognize a parallel, she focused her discussion on the issues she encountered during her own composition. Because she put so much work into every page, she found it difficult to change paneling, especially if it already looked good enough. She described this as problematic “because in writing it is so easy to go back and delete what does not sound good and rewrite it.” Through these statements, Kara appears to struggle—as do many students—with revision (of traditional writing) versus redoing (multimodal composition). This finding is noteworthy, as it suggests that composition instructors must help students go beyond recognizing parallels to using these parallel processes toward similar ends (i.e., to effectively address the rhetorical situation). Unless that happens, students may continue to see writing and composing as disparate activities.

Elise also experienced frustration during her process, even though she acknowledged a relationship (alphabetic text, in her case) between traditional and multimodal texts. In discussing alphabetic text, especially how she perceived text to be used for different purposes in traditional writing and in graphic narrative composition, she shared how she struggled to reconcile writing and composing. She wrote, “I found in writing comic dialogue, I struggled making [it] sound normal opposed to formal. I guess since I am usually writing formally for papers and such, writing realistic, believable dialogue was out of my comfort zone.” We found this statement to be intriguing and worth unpacking. Within, she notes a clear parallel between writing and composing—the use of alphabetic text. However, she describes one as more difficult than the other and suggests that may be because she has more experience writing “formally for papers and such.” Embedded in her statement is

an implicit devaluing of the graphic format, at least in school spaces, by suggesting it is informal (“I ended up...writing the dialogue based off how I would normally converse with someone”) and thus does not align with what students are generally expected to do. This, too, has import for composition instruction and furthers the argument for the inclusion of multimodal composition across secondary and post-secondary contexts so that students (1) experience a variety of composing activities in school and (2) begin to see the relationships between multiple forms of composing. Generally, PSTs in this study have begun broadening their views on literacy and what counts as literacy acts (Serafini, 2011). These recognitions—specifically of parallels between writing and composing—within their teacher preparation provide opportunities for PSTs to reflect on their own beliefs about literacy and what constitutes composition and meaning making by seeing “writing” and “composing” as synonymous (Ajayi, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), which can impact their future instruction (Richardson, 2003).

That said, PSTs such as Elise continue to struggle, implicitly at least, with recognizing the relationship between traditional writing and multimodal composing and in seeing them both as academic tasks.

School Worthy Texts

As noted earlier in the course description, the Rhetoric and Composition for Teachers course was designed as a space for future teachers to develop as consumers and composers of multimodal texts in a supportive community of practice. They were invited to interrogate what counts as traditional

academic writing in school contexts and to think broadly about academic discourse, what counts as sanctioned, school-worthy texts, and the interplay between vernacular and academic literacies. In the graphic narrative reflections, students voiced excitement and newfound respect for the process and product of graphic narrative composing. Kara, for example, noted that:

Creating my graphic narrative was probably the most exciting project I’ve worked on since I’ve been in college. I know that is a big statement to make, but I feel like comics,

and visuals in general, are thought of as childish and inappropriate for higher cognitive development. At the beginning of this course I also had low expectations of comics in the classroom. In reality, creating this graphic narrative took more thought and time than any essay I have written.

Students emphasized the importance of *composing* in changing their mind about comics. When Elise, for instance, engaged in the writing process, comics moved from a

“simple, surface level entertainment” to a complex cognitive and rhetorical occasion. Cheryl echoed this sentiment: “I think people who criticize comics for not being advanced enough should have to create a graphic narrative, because I think they might change their mind.” Students developed respect and appreciation for graphic novels through the composing process, noting “graphic novels will have a place in my future classroom” several times. A representative example, from Stephanie, follows:

As far as the process of creation goes, I can only say now that I greatly respect it ... it

“They were invited to interrogate what counts as traditional academic writing in school contexts and to think broadly about academic discourse, what counts as sanctioned, school-worthy texts, and the interplay between vernacular and academic literacies.”

would be a very interesting assignment to include in my classroom one day and I would probably attempt to create one alongside my students so as to remember the struggle... I do think that having students create their own narrative increases the worth of these texts in their minds. Not only do they have to struggle through the process, but they are contributing to the genre in their own way.

The value of graphic narratives in the classroom was linked, as the above examples suggest, to their perceived difficulty and not to their pedagogical utility. The following excerpts support PSTs valuing the graphic narrative assignment and the place for consuming and composing graphic narratives in their future classroom.

It definitely will have a place in my future classroom. (Sally)

I think it would be a very interesting assignment to include in my classroom one day. (Stephanie)

My stance on graphic novels in the classroom has shifted completely because of this course and assignment. (Elise)

As teachers we want all types of learners to thrive in our classroom setting. Comics are a way of composing across modes and thinking critically. I will definitely use this in my future classroom. (Kara)

We find it encouraging, but not surprising, that students state a commitment to incorporating graphic narratives (reading and writing) in their classrooms. Kress (2003), the New London Group (1996), and others (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Jewitt, 2008) have long argued for the importance of recognizing the evolution of literacy (especially in school settings) to account for multiple modes of communication. The PSTs in our study appear to

have begun recognizing and considering the roles multimodality may play in literacy classrooms, facilitated by their engagement in the processes of doing, reflecting on (Margolis, 2002), and translating those experiences to their future classrooms (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992; Holt-Reynolds, 1992). However, these statements of intent, lacking in detail and rationale, are too vague to be professionally valuable reflection, as they stop short of connecting to students' own teaching philosophies, stances on literacy instruction, and specific pedagogical examples. In other words, while the PSTs appear to believe that comics and graphic narrative composition will have a home in their future classrooms, they offer no explicit instructional ideas or rationales. This suggests that even though they have noted parallels between traditional writing and multimodal composition, they struggle with articulating exactly what that means for their future teaching. The lack of detail is possibly due to several factors: the result of how the student feels the need to perform as a future teacher for the instructor; a misunderstanding of the assignment; and poor reflecting skills. Vague applications, composed without a thorough and detailed rationale and defense of graphic narrative reading and composing, ultimately reinforce traditional print-centric curricula, which constitutes the bulk of their previous educational experiences. In this instance, graphic narratives may be lost amid more traditional curricula, pedagogies, and varied pressure to keep instruction teacher-centered and traditional.

Vulnerability, Rhetorical Awareness, and Understanding Multimodality

In the graphic narrative reflections, students noted "I can't draw" frequently, often in those exact words, other times in ways that indicated they were placing a priority on aesthetics instead of communication. Overall, the frequent appearance of these statements suggests a pattern indicative of implicit

values and stances on composition. In her graphic narrative reflection, Stephanie notes,

I had no problem thinking of ideas for graphics either; I just had some trouble expressing those ideas due to the fact that I can't draw well. It was frustrating not having the ability to draw well enough to get my whole vision on paper [...] but going back and forth between trying to draw and composing digitally (because I kept failing at drawing) was probably the most frustrating.

Stephanie's open declaration might be read in several ways. "I can't draw" serves as a hedging statement, whereby she hopes to forestall harsh judgment from the instructor and/or peers; this reading suggests that students, like Stephanie, see themselves primarily as students, in an instructional context where judgment is inevitable, and less as teacher-writers growing in a community of practice. Stephanie also privileges ideas over the expression of those ideas, a gesture that subtly devalues multimodal composing. By saying, "I had no problem thinking of ideas for graphics," she suggests that thinking of ideas is the real work of the assignment. "I *just had* some trouble expressing those ideas," suggests that the work of expression is a relative afterthought, an embellishment added after the hard thinking is done. Additionally, "I can't draw" serves as evidence that students have misread the rhetorical situation provided by the graphic narrative assignment. They have placed undue importance on aesthetics, equating "drawing well" with effective communication, perhaps even "what the professor wants"—an inference that parallels PSTs operating more as students than as writers. Related to the misplaced importance on aesthetics, "I can't draw" suggests that composing is a gift that one has or doesn't, not a skill that one can acquire through practice and feedback, a problematic assumption for a teacher of writing. PSTs negotiated competing conceptions of multimodal composing as

"process" and "gift" (as alluded to in earlier findings). This is an important finding for teacher educators as it suggests how vital establishing a culture of teacher-writers is for supporting PSTs as teachers of writing. Additionally, PSTs struggled to fully reflect on and see themselves both as teachers of writing and teachers who write (Whitney, 2009) by instead offering hedging statements for their attempts. This hedging serves as a potential roadblock to what Gennrich & Janks (2013) and Cremin (2006) discuss about growing and evolving as practitioners and professionals.

Coupled with the frequent admission that "I can't draw" is evidence of intense enjoyment when the composing process is finished or deemed successful. In this case, similar to the previous scenario, there is evidence that multimodal composition is misunderstood or undervalued. The following example from Elise illustrates how multimodal composition is framed as diminutive work even when students are expressing enjoyment in the composing process:

What I enjoyed seems small, but still sits as my favorite part of the composition. Upon finishing a page, I would spend about fifteen minutes adding embellishments, shading, or attempting to perfect the characters on the page. Because the main content, images, and paneling were already on the page, I found myself really able to enjoy the creativity of tweaking little things and adding glimmers of personality to the graphic novel as the stress of my composing the main chunk of the piece on that page had been completed. In these moments, I found myself pleased the most with my piece. I am pleased with my novel not only because of the extensive amount of time and thought I put into it, but also because I feel proud of my work — a feeling, no matter how old the student, still holds that warm feeling as it did in

kindergarten [sic] upon receiving a gold star of sorts.

There are many elements of this reflection that composition teachers and writing teacher educators would find encouraging. Elise views and engages in the multimodal composition assignment as process work, completed with an “extensive amount of time and thought.” She also voices considerable pleasure in completing her work while showing “glimmers of personality.” What writing teacher would not be “pleased with” such responses from PSTs about their own composing? Elise has found a way to mesh academic content and “the personal” in a way that seems and feels authentic to her.

She has engaged in school writing while retaining a sense of her voice as a writer-composer. However, what do these details point to in a university writing economy and culture that privileges traditional academic writing and alphabetic text over multimodal composition? We may also read these details as reinforcing traditional hierarchies between serious/fun, learning/pleasure, and academic/informal writing.

Elise frames her favorite elements of multimodal composition as *small, minor details*. She reduces what she enjoys.

What I enjoyed seems *small*

Still *sits*

Tweaking *little things*

Adding *glimmers* of personality

Warm feeling as it did in *kindergarten* [sic] upon receiving a gold star of sorts

The nod to kindergarten and gold stars, perhaps obviously, suggests that Elise associates, even unconsciously, the process of composing a graphic narrative with less serious, juvenile content. Moreover, the “embellishments”—including shading, perfecting characters, tweaking little things, etc.—are actually of paramount importance in multimodal composition. Elise has experienced these elements and reflects on them as afterthoughts, the pleasurable residue, the less “stress[ful]” composition done after the main content, story, has already been completed. While part of the main content that the student stresses over is paneling, a key narrative feature of graphic

narratives, other elements of multimodal composition are framed as incidental to the more serious work of thinking and learning. This suggests some PSTs, even after experiencing an entire course on multimodal composition, may have feelings and attitudes that subtly devalue multimodal composing. The reproduction of entrenched binaries (learning/fun, academic writing/personal writing) points to the complexities that accompany becoming a literacy

teacher and the often confounding previous experiences and beliefs students bring with them to the classroom (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992).

Implications/Discussion

Our findings point to a variety of implications for the field. Given the struggles students experienced composing multimodally and seeing themselves simultaneously as students, teachers, and teacher-writers, it is important for teacher education programs to rethink how they position multimodality within curricula. One way to begin this repositioning—as we have done in response to

“This ongoing interaction between students and texts at the intersection of theory and practice can assist in their development of teacher identities (i.e., moving from thinking like a student to thinking like a teacher).”

this study—is to ensure that multimodality (consumption and composition) is woven into and reinforced throughout the teacher education experience. This includes specific attention in methods classes, where PSTs interrogate and design instructional methods. Likewise, methods classes are often sites where text-types are intentionally sanctioned and positioned as academic and/or classroom-worthy. Not only does this emphasis suggest the importance and validity of multimodal texts to PSTs, but it also emphasizes growth and learning over time, which can potentially counter some of the “natural” and “fixed” conceptions of literacy and identity (e.g., I’m an artist or I’m not) our students held. Moreover, it can help them move beyond beliefs that aesthetics, rather than content, drive multimodal texts and to better understand, broaden, and utilize the rhetorical situation (which includes more than traditional, alphabetic text) in their own teaching. This ongoing interaction between students and texts at the intersection of theory and practice can assist in their development of teacher identities (i.e., moving from thinking like a student to thinking like a teacher).

Yet another implication from our findings is the need to harness the power and relevance of multimodal literacy prior to students entering post-secondary institutions. One way to accomplish this is for teacher education programs to partner with schools—in ways that reinforce the student-writer/teacher-writer development—so that PSTs can witness, design, and reflect on multimodal composition in practice. Experience with multimodal literacy in methods classes alone may not help PSTs think practically about multimodal instruction in 6-12 classrooms. Providing PSTs with multiple lenses and contexts for engaging with and considering multimodal composition is also important in their development of a working multimodal language and a language of rationale for the purposes of transfer across contexts. Partnering

with in-service teachers and schools who integrate multimodal reading and writing may help PSTs value multimodal texts as school-worthy, in addition to the obvious benefits of K-12 students being introduced to multimodal texts early and often during their education.

Students’ discomfort with multimodal composing also creates opportunities for productive reflective practice, one of the clear values of the graphic narrative assignment. Students felt vulnerable, out of their comfort zones as composers—such cognitive and affective disarray is an ideal time for PSTs to reflect on the kind of structured support they need to be successful writers. Multimodal composing, compared to more traditional academic writing tasks, offers more opportunities for discomfort and productive reflection. PSTs can empathize with their future students—likely new to and uncomfortable with a variety of academic writing tasks, both traditional and multimodal—and plan writing instruction that takes a productive view of failure, values process and revision, and includes a generous amount of collaboration and feedback.

This study also suggests the degree to which teacher educators need to pay attention to and redirect the language PSTs use around multimodal tasks when needed. In subtle and perhaps unconscious ways, PSTs in this study devalued multimodality, often in the context of expressing enjoyment. Teacher educators have a great opportunity to push PSTs to expand their thinking about legitimate academic discourse and literacy tasks; vernacular literacy activity—what PSTs name as fun and enjoyable—is bound up with, not opposed to, academic literacy (Roozen, 2008).

Conclusions

As we noted above, our data analysis suggests the benefits of a multimodal composition course for pre-service ELA teachers. Throughout the course, and

the graphic narrative unit in particular, students began to parallel multimodal composition and traditional writing. This, we feel, is of vital importance to composition and literacy instruction, as it represents a move away from traditional definitions of and approaches to composing (and in fact literacy more broadly defined), especially in K-12 classrooms, toward a more relevant and fully-inclusive view of the myriad ways (i.e., multiple modes) in which we create and consume information. We also found that PSTs, as a result of their own composing, were able to begin articulating their own intentional rhetorical decisions. Lastly, we found evidence that while PSTs struggled with language and practical lenses they were able to begin making the mental transition to their own future classrooms.

Our findings also point to the need to provide PSTs with ongoing opportunities (across teacher education programs) to consume and compose in multimodal ways. Recent research in literacy education has called for more authentic learning opportunities for PSTs, in contexts that

teachers (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016; Stover, Yearta, & Sease, 2014). In addition to incorporating theories of multimodal literacy and case studies of practical and successful applications, multimodal composition courses, as we have demonstrated, should feature writing-composing assignments across modes and rhetorical contexts. Authentic learning opportunities invite PSTs to think critically and address open-ended rhetorical problems, both as “here and now” writers and as future teachers (Crawford-Garrett & Riley, 2016). PSTs need time and space to design and try out multimodal assignments in a variety of settings (e.g., methods classes, field placement, internship, etc.). Moreover, they need more opportunities to engage as students and as teachers in ways that help them bridge the existing gap between theory and practice. Such opportunities can help PSTs identify with and grow as teacher-writers. Ultimately, investment in and repositioning of multimodal literacy as school-worthy practice may also help bridge the divides between 6-12 schools and teacher education programs.

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Appendix A

Graphic Narrative Assignment

For this assignment, you will compose your own graphic narrative. You may choose the content of your composition, but it should represent your reaction to and/or analysis of one or more of our readings/viewings. To do this, you will utilize the same approaches as one of our authors to create your own graphic narrative (i.e., you will select one of our graphic novels, study the author's/artist's methods, and then mimic them to compose your own graphic narrative). For example, in *V for Vendetta*, Moore and Lloyd (2005) often utilize small/narrow panels to focus our attention on important concepts and include borderless panels at the beginning of chapters to suggest a fade-in—thus, you may choose to utilize one or both of these methods to create a similar rhetorical effect in your own composition. In other words, this assignment is a multimodal way for you to demonstrate your critical thinking, your ability to compose in non-traditional ways, and your learning. Your final product will include (1) a front and back cover with relevant information (title, your name, etc.) and (2) five-seven pages of graphic text; each page should have three-to-six panels.

Appendix B

Graphic Narrative Reflection Assignment

In the reflection, you will discuss (1) the decisions you made concerning images, text, color, paneling, etc.; (2) an explanation of your process; (3) a self-evaluation of your product; and (4) your opinions of the educational (i.e., literacy) value of interacting with graphic novels and the graphic format itself and of composing your own graphic narrative.