



Wearing Multimodal Composition: The Case for Examining Dress Practices in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

As the call for this special issue states, the definition of “multimodal composition” has been largely debated. Scholars have pushed the definition of multimodal composition to include practices and items such as sounds, images, colors, tastes, smells and graphics. Surprisingly, there is a dearth of discussion about including other material objects into the practice of multimodal composition. This article addresses the current literature from composition studies, fashion theory, and pedagogy in order to make the argument that everyday dress practices are a form of multimodal composition. The article will end with pedagogical implications for approaching dress practices this way, including the use of “what I wore today” blogs in the composition classroom.

Keywords

Multimodal Composition, Dress Practices, Embodiment, Fashion, Critical Thinking

Introduction

There has been a long, ongoing conversation in composition studies about what “counts” as writing in the composition classroom. Scholars have made the argument for assigning and working through student texts that engage the five senses—moving beyond traditional “print” text and expanding out to things that include video, sound, images, and taste.

All of these ideas are moving in the right direction, but still fall short of the full potential of multimodal composition. This piece advocates for a reimagining of multimodal composition that starts from the body, building from notions of embodiment in the writing classroom and utilizing Barbra Dickson’s (1999) notion of material rhetoric and Joanne B. Eicher, Sandra L. Evenson, & Hazel A. Lutz’s (2008) definition of “dress

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practices” in order to view the dressed body as always already multimodal composition. In what follows, “dress practices” are defined; next, the current conversations around multimodality in the composition classroom is traced, focusing on scholars who advocate for multimodal composing in ways that intersect with Eicher et al.’s definition of dress. Finally, there is an example of what this sort of assignment might look like and a discussion of the pedagogical implications for this approach, focusing on critical thinking take aways and implications for addressing teacher appearance in student course evaluations.

Review of the Literature

Defining Dress Practices

In *The Visible Self: Global Perspectives of Dress, Culture, and Society*, Eicher et al. (2008) define dress practices as including any “actions undertaken to modify and supplement the body in order to address physical needs in order to meet social and cultural expectations about how individuals should look” (p. 4). This definition of dress extends the practices it encompasses to include any body modification or supplement, including actions that effect all five senses and range from clothing choices, to washing hair, to putting on or taking off body fat. Eicher et al.’s definition of dress ties dress practices to culture and assumes that culture carries expectations for its participants. This definition is important to start with, because it is critical for scholars doing work in multimodal composition to have a working interdisciplinary definition of meaning making and the body. This definition of dress practices opens space for a productive rethinking of what it means to compose multi-modally—approaching and envisioning the body as a multimodal site for composition.

The next section reviews relevant literature that pushes for an expansive notion of multimodal composition, highlighting the places that the arguments intersect with Eicher et al.’s definition of dress.

Multimodal Composition

The academic arguments about what constitutes multimodal composition start with questioning definitions of terms like “writing,” “text,” and “composition.” The goal of this article is not to offer a literature review of all the speakers in this conversation, but rather to highlight the ideas most relevant to approaching the dressed body as multimodal composition. With this in mind, this section focuses on two authors, Cynthia Selfe and Jody Shipka, to discuss how they make space in conversations about multimodal composition in ways that overlap with Eicher et al.’s definition of dress. In her 2009 article, “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing,” Selfe argues that “teachers of composition need to pay attention to, and come to value, the *multiple* ways in which students compose and communicate meaning, the exciting hybrid, multimodal texts they create—in both nondigital and digital environments—to meet their own needs in a changing world” (p. 642). Selfe was mainly focused on aural communication (music, speaking, other sounds); her call for expanding the numerous ways that students are always already composing texts can be seen as a call

to return to the body—the body as speaker, the body as supplier of air that is used to create sound, the body as author. Selfe continues, explaining that, “we need to respect the rhetorical sovereignty of young people from different backgrounds, communities, colors, and cultures, to observe and understand the rhetorical choices they are making, and to offer then new ways of making meaning, new choices, new ways of accomplishing their goals” (p. 642). This call opens an expanse of space for thinking about “other” ways of composing—ways that start from the dressed body.

For example, the “rhetorical choices” that help students “accomplish their goals” could include composing an argument about why they should be hired for a job. This argument, delivered in the form of a job interview, might include a portfolio of work, a physical text like a resume or cover letter, or the sound of the voice of the job candidates as they explain their qualifications. But in the moment of the face-to-face interview, this sound and the accompanying materials exist along with the dressed body of the job candidate. A student trained in composing arguments would probably not dress in gym clothes for a job at a corporate office—doing so would “feel wrong.” While many instructors may not talk explicitly about what is worn while making arguments in the writing classroom, a student who is effectively trained to understand, critique, and create arguments will implicitly perform rhetorical analysis through his/her dress practices—or at least be able to think about the audience/purpose/style/genre/context of their body in a space.

Add to this Shipka’s (2005) call that, “we might also be asking how the purposeful uptake, transformation, incorporation, combination, juxtaposition, and even *three-dimensional layering* of words and visuals—as well as textures, sounds, scents, and even tastes—provide us with still other ways of imagining the work students might produce for the composition course” (p. 278, emphasis in the original). Sounds, scents, and tastes, textures are all connected to the five senses—thus connecting to dress practices, which include any body modification that affect the five senses. The “*three-dimensional layering*” could be extended to include the words on a T-shirt on a body, and would also include the way the material fits the body, how it places and displaces skin and body fat, how it covers and reveals in order to create a message.

In order to further explain this, this article adds discussions of expanding notions of rhetoric and composition, specifically about material rhetoric and embodiment. The article ends by discussing what dress as multimodal composition might look like in the writing classroom, focusing on a specific example from an upper level writing class at a midwestern university.

Material Rhetoric

Theories of material rhetoric offer a way into thinking about how the dressed body/dress practices might be considered as multimodal composition. For example, Barbara Dickson (1999) offers a definition of material rhetoric as “a mode of interpretation that takes as its object of study the significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (p. 298). She goes on to say that “of primary interest to material rhetoric are material objects that represent the human body, because of the way these representations are then taken up by and inscribed on

corporal bodies” (p. 298). Dickson is interested in the ways that objects that “represent the human body” as well as the human body itself makes meaning. In the case of dress practices, the objects that are used for body modifications such as make up, deodorant, clothing, etc. “represent the human body” and the whole body itself is also an object that can be seen rhetorically. I argue that dress practices are examples of material rhetorical practice and therefore can be considered as multimodal composition.

For example, here’s a picture of me in a dress that I would normally wear for teaching:

Figure 1



The dress, though, doesn’t exist out of the context of my body and other dress practices. For example, this photo also includes a black and gold necklace, black tights, and burgundy ankle boots. All of these pieces together with my hair and makeup create a multimodal statement about how I think a “teacher” should look. Before I left the house to teach, though, I would add to this outfit a belt at my natural waist and a jacket.

The second photo has all the same pieces as the first, but with a thin yellow belt worn at my waist:

Figure 2



Suddenly I have more of a defined shape. The dress is exactly the same, and my body is exactly the same, but one small accessory completely changes the effect.

Suddenly, I feel like I look “more presentable.” For me, the yellow belt holds power. As the composer of my identity through my dress practices, the yellow belt is an ethos builder.

This third photo has all the same parts as the second look, but with a denim jacket:

Figure 3



The jacket hides some of the parts of my body that the yellow belt accentuates. I am still lumpy and bumpy, but it is more controlled under the jacket. I see all of these accessories as rhetorical objects—material things that can be manipulated to cater to a certain situation (audience, context, purpose). This is not an exercise in personal preference—in a society where bodies, beauty, and gender are commodified, the woman in the third picture is more likely to be taken seriously than the woman in the first picture because of her appearance, manipulated through dress practices, even though the *person* is the same in both photos. This is explained further in the next section, which discusses theory about embodiment.

Embodiment

The final theoretical thread of this argument for dress practices as multimodal composition comes from ideas of embodiment in the writing classroom. Christina Haas and Stephen P. Witte (2001) describe embodiment as “a unification of mind and body that...denies the possibility of abstracting the body as an analytic category, at least in studies of everyday human acts” (p. 417). In this definition, embodiment means that things cannot be known or experienced outside of the human body—similar to what was previously discussed in the context of Selfe’s argument about auralty. This is similar to Will Banks’ (2003) discussion of how learning happens through our bodily experiences. The idea that the body cannot be “abstracted as an analytic category” means that it is impossible to separate the body from the mind—and that to try to do so can be

dangerous. Finally, Jason Alexander (2005) describes embodiment as being “as much about feeling one inhabits material flesh as the flesh itself” (p. 70). People bring all of their life experiences with them wherever they go/whatever they do, and the ability to understand that they are only able to see things from their bodies could open spaces for better understanding students (and other people) as well as ourselves as teachers, theorists, scholars, and activists. In the example of the teaching outfit, this means that who I am is still the same person in all three of the iterations of the teaching outfit, but that I am part of my dress practices as the dress practices are a part of me—and that the construction of my identity through manipulating clothing is an example of multimodal composition.

Pedagogical Practice

So, what might this look like in the writing classroom? There are many possibilities, and this section focuses on an example of a student project from a class taught in the fall of 2014 at Michigan State University. The class was a 300-level writing center tutor training class. Over the course of the semester, the class discussed strategies for consulting one on one, dwelled in reflecting on individual writing processes, and worked with community partners to expand our thinking about what it meant to help others with their writing. Throughout the course, the class looked, wrote, and revised “consulting philosophies”: texts that expressed the individual’s approach to working with others on writing. The final project for the course was a multimodal project; the description read:

Building from your reflections on consulting in Project 2 and the information you gathered in Project 3, create a multimodal composition of your consulting philosophy. This should encompass what you have learned, what this means for writing centers, and what this means for you as a consultant (so, I am asking you to expand on the genre of the consulting philosophy). I also want you to consider the work you’ve done with your community partner. (2014)

The class had read pieces about multimodal composing, and the assignment was open to any format that the students wanted to work in. The final results produced a variety of multimodal work, including baked cookies with recipe cards, board games, a painting, and a “What I Wore Today” (WIWT) blog (<http://writingcenterfashion.tumblr.com/>).

This blog (used with the student’s permission) showcases an example of how the dressed body is an example of multimodal composition. In her post, “Creative Workshopping” (<http://writingcenterfashion.tumblr.com/post/104268681162/creative-workshopping>) she starts with a picture of herself wearing a dress with a cardigan and flat shoes:

Figure 4

Creative Workshopping



The post starts with a description of where she bought each piece of clothing (common among WIWT blogs) and moves on to discuss what she did that day. In addition to showing her awareness of the genre of WIWT blogs, the student's blog also offers an analysis of how her clothing choices help manifest her consulting philosophy, explaining that,

My role in these meetings is 'facilitator,' to lead the group through discussion and help them to reach points of constructive criticism to better themselves and their fellow writers (in some instances, I have to step in as mediator, too!). To keep this air of casual informality, I decided to mock the assumed authority I have as a "tutor" and dress like a school teacher! (2014)

She goes on to state "I printed the apples on this dress for a Fantastic Mr. Fox halloween [sic] costume, so I was overjoyed to have a reason to wear it again! The necklace is a little hidden, but it's my favorite garage sale find, with a tiny apple, book, school bus, eraser, etc." (2014). Here, the student is comparing her outfit (and her role as a consultant) to putting on a costume—putting on an identity. This can be an especially useful tactic for new consultants and teachers. She purposefully uses pieces that remind her that she is performing a role by "mocking" the "assumed authority I have as a 'tutor'." She built and performed her identity as a consultant through her dress practices—and as a result, she was able to talk about dress practices as multimodal composition. This student's project shows multiple things: a professional awareness of what she "should" be wearing to work (which is complex—it shows *kairos*, *ethos*, audience, etc.), a material rhetorical construction of an embodied identity, and a sharp expression of her consulting philosophy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this student's outfit can be "read" to show a valuable moment for teaching critical thinking in the writing classroom. The student explains that her sartorial

choices are meant to be “mocking” the traditional idea of what a teacher looks like. Her outfit might not have been seen by the people in the workshop as “mocking,” though; people could have thought she was simply a young woman dressed up for a workshop, or perhaps dressed whimsically, which her age allows her to do in ways that other people might not be able to “get away with.” These multiple interpretations reinforce the idea that the author of a text ultimately does not have control over the readers’ interpretation.

Seeing dress practices as multimodal composition offers a valuable, everyday learning moment in the form of “ethical reading.” Ethical reading is the idea that in a visual culture bodies are “read” everyday, often in subconscious ways that reveal personal biases and systems of power. For example, fat people are often assumed to be lazy (Wann, 2009), while attractive people are often seen as successful and approachable (Rhode, 2010). Most of these judgments are made subconsciously in the first few seconds of seeing a person, without any knowledge of the back-story of the person that is being “read.” Considering dress practices as multimodal composition means realizing that appearance is something that is constructed for a purpose, and that the only way to know for sure what the author’s intended purpose is, is to ask them. For the student with the WIWT blog, clothing was constructed to remind herself that she wasn’t supposed to be too “serious,” but the only way to know if this came across to the participants of the workshop would be to ask them, and the only way for the students to know why she chose to look the way she did would be to ask her.

Discussing dress practices as multimodal composition also has implications for student comments in teacher evaluations that often address appearance (especially for women). By seeing dress as multimodal composition, instructors and students have a shared approach and vocabulary to explicitly address this in the classroom. Further work would explore other potential assignments and include student feedback and interviews.

This article ends by referencing Doug Hesse’s (2010) response to Selfe’s 2009 article about aurality and multimodal composition. Hesse asks, “If we’re going to use it as the umbrella for a wider host of textual practices than academic writing or public argument, then we ought to be clear in our catalogs and to our colleagues that we’re shifting the definition” (p. 603). Scholars in rhetoric and composition should embrace that composition is tied to critical thinking, and that critical thinking comes from the body. Examining dress practices as multimodal composition, then, serves as an opening to think further about the disciplinary implications of this path.

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