1450 Words

**Reconnecting the Disconnect: Consultations Focused on Multimodal Projects**

In an ever changing, technological era it is only logical that writers are now using digital platforms to present their written work, whereas they once solely used traditional essays to do so. As this change becomes visible to writing centers, the fact that students, in particular, are being assigned multimodal assignments in their academic classrooms can also be seen. Examples of multimodal projects that students are currently being assigned include web pages, PowerPoint presentations, essays with hypertext, and posters. Multimodal projects that professional writers are currently working on, and could bring into the writing center, could include work such as a graphic novel or an audible project with a written foundation, such as a podcast or video cast. This being said, the argument that university writing centers must be open to providing professional feedback on multimodal projects is not new, in fact the idea that these projects will be consulted on has even been called “inevitable” by John Trimbur (30). Despite this, there is a disconnect between what students find appropriate to bring in to consultations and the types of consultations and services the writing center provides. As a student myself, I can attest to the idea that students in particular are being assigned these types of projects, and are even confused as to how to go about completing them. Despite this confusion, the presence of multimodal projects still remains absent in university writing centers.

**The Occurrence of Multimodality and the Disconnect**

As an intern at the University of South Florida’s Writing Studio, I noticed that every work brought into the space during my own observations of consultations were considered to be monomodal, or rather non-multimodal writing assignments. From my observations and evidence from previously completed scholarly research, it is apparent that writers are not bringing in multimodal projects to their university writing centers. It is also known that currently enrolled students are continuously assigned academic projects, and not only this, but they are confused as to how to complete many of these assignments, lacking clear instruction from their professors on how to create them. According to Pantelides’ survey completed by students who came into the University of South Florida’s writing center the great majority had been given these type of assignments by professors: “Nearly all of the respondents reported creating discussion board posts for classroom purposes (90%), while 47.5% have composed blogs and 30% have contributed to a website” (271). Mckinney adds to the conversation as she concludes from her research that only 9.9% of all academic work that was brought into her own writing center at Ball State University was considered multimodal (59). From each research study it can be concluded that although students are certainly being assigned multimodal projects, they are not turning to their university’s writing center to aid their confusion. On the subject Pantelides comments: “Although evaluation data and usage statistics that students find writing center services helpful, based on my survey, some students did not see digital composition as an appropriate text to bring to a writing center consultation” (275).

This being said, it can be deduced that there is a clear disconnect between students and what they consider appropriate to bring into their respective university writing center. While doing my own research on how various writing centers use technology in their spaces, I noticed from academic articles that while writing center scholars wrote that their spaces provided consultations on writers’ multimodal work, the fact that they provided this service was not visible on their web pages. From this observation I offer the reason for this disconnect is due to lack of advertising. With the combined evidence that students do not see their university writing center as the place to turn to for feedback on their multimodal projects and the lack of advertising on main web pages, it is no wonder students are not bringing in their projects to be consulted on. In regards to advertising, the labels of consultations also present a problem. Berry and Dieterle suggest using titles that predict what type of work they would be engaging in, such as “digital workspace,” thus giving students an indicator that the work that they should bring in during these consultations should be both multimodal and in progress (29). If all university writing centers followed suite there will surely be an increase in writers bringing in multimodal projects to the writing center.

**Preserving Traditional Consultation Methods**

When accommodating for multimodality in consultations it is apparent that some of the same methods that are used for traditional academic essays are not appropriate when working with multimodal projects. On this subject Pantelides comments: “When students do bring their work to the writing center, consultants should not necessarily base their feedback on traditional academic writing guidelines. In many venues, digital composition is taking on new and exciting forms, and consultants should follow student moves in regard to each rhetorical situation and encourage experimentation when it is in line with instructor expectations” (276). During my own observations of traditional writing consultations, it has become apparent that the method of reading aloud and providing feedback on the flow of each paragraph in academic essays is not always compatible when working with a multimodal project, such as a web page or graphic novel. Instead these consultations will most likely be focused on if the information is being presented in a professional and understandable way. Provided feedback on the flow of the presented work would still prevail, but would simply change in physicality, as the consultations accommodate for hypertexts, bullet points, oral aspects, etc in the projects.

**Deciding How Many Consultants to Train**

The question of just how many consultants should be trained to provide feedback on multimodal projects has been touched on by scholars such as Mckinney and Pemberton. While Mckinney argues that all consultants be trained, Pemberton offers the idea of hiring “specialist tutors” (32; 19). I instead argue that only half of already existing consultants should be trained to work on these consultations. At the Writing Studio at The University of South Florida, many of the consultants are trained to work in various areas for the Studio, such as online consultations, social media, blogging, embedded tutoring, among others. This system works well, as it not only gives consultants relevant experience with diverse platforms, it also works to assure that none of the consultants become overwhelmed. Incorporating this method of separating consultants into teams would also work well when deciding how many consultants to train to work with multimodal projects. From previous research that concludes that a low number of students bring in multimodal projects, and my own observations which are in agreement with that conclusion, it can be seen that not only is training all consultants or hiring specialists excessive, it is just plain unnecessary.

**Conclusion**

It is apparent that it not necessary to train all consultants to work with multimodal projects, but it is imperative that at least half are trained as there is a need for professional feedback on multimodal projects in academic spaces. Writing centers are the ideal space to turn for this feedback, as they have an obligation to provide for the students of their university. As Pemberton states in his conclusion: “The important thing for writing center directors and administrators to remember is that they should remain attuned to changes in their students’ and institutions’ needs and not let apprehensions about technology interfere with their efforts to learn and work with the new rhetorical forms that technology brings about” (22). This suggests that a writing center which does not remain in tune with its students is not moving upward in terms of meeting the needs of the students. Without then integrating multimodality in the services of the writing center and advertising them sufficiently, the writing center in question limits itself in the intention to aid students and professional writers alike.

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