DIGITAL WRITING ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION

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Chapter 6

STIRRED, NOT SHAKEN: AN ASSESSMENT REMIXOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing student work was already a challenging issue for compositionists during the heyday of print culture. As composition studies further evolves to accommodate multimodal compositions, however, the problem of assessment has become increasingly complicated. Changes in the technological landscape over the last quarter-century have brought forth an array of form-bending, genre-blurring ways of composing that we are still trying to figure out—the same holds true, perhaps acutely so, for those whose business it is to teach students how to create these new media objects. This is evidenced in the work of people like Pamela Takayoshi (1996), on that assessment models need to change to better address the fluid, nonlinear character of computer-generated texts lest they retain an uncharitable bias toward print-based textual production, and Meredith Zoetewey and Julie Staggers (2003), who championed “rhetorically-grounded strategies” (p. 133) for evaluating student-produced multimodal work that transcends medium and allows for flexibility when considering the various shapes digital media texts can take.

In 2004, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s clarion call, “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” urged the field to reconsider what counts as writing and how to teach it in the face of newly emerging technologies, and was closely followed by generative work on multimodal assessment by Diane Penrod (2005), Cheryl Ball (2006, 2012), Madeleine Sorapure (2006), Sonya Borton and Brian Huot (2007), Jody Shipka (2009), Susan Katz and Lee Odell (2012), Virginia Kuhn, DJ Johnson, and Dave Lopez (2012), and others. Following the call to action of these voices from the field, professional organizations such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication (2004) and the National Council for Teachers of English (2009) have also made the case for creating adaptable assessment instruments that are explicitly connected to good pedagogical practices when it comes to digital media.

For those who assign student projects involving remixes or mashups—where the bulk of the raw material comes from other sources and the creative and cognitive challenge for the student lies in developing a rationale for combining and juxtaposing that material in new and imaginative ways—the question of assessment becomes even more complex. How can we evaluate the transformative nature of a remixed project in light of the already contentious disciplinary conversations about originality, authorship, and intellectual property? How can we adequately discern intent, gauge sophistication, appraise complexity, assess argument? How do we evaluate student work that often challenges our sense of the way texts “ought” to behave?

In this chapter, we draw on our experiences with incorporating multimodal composing into the writing programs on our campuses, and address the concerns specifically associated with assessing student remix projects.

Assigning and evaluating these projects becomes additionally complicated when held against the larger socio-political and economic backdrop of issues of intellectual property rights and fair use, the politics of reader vs. writer, and the very shape these new forms and intertextual genres will take over time. On a practical level, bringing remix assignments into the classroom provides students with the opportunity to engage with new tools, techniques, and technologies of multimodal composition. On a conceptual level, remix assignments also invite occasion to reflect upon and raise critical awareness of how student projects fit into this larger contextual framework of intellectual production and derivative use.

We do not believe that remix culture shakes the intellectual and pedagogical foundations of our discipline. Rather, it stirs new and vibrant digital forms and media into the existing mix. Because of this, we can apply many of the analytical and evaluative tools that we already have at our disposal. Even in the digital age, after all, rhetorical theory has much to say about how we can approach these new forms as creators, as readers, or as teachers. As Sonya Borton and Brian Huot (2007) stressed, "all composing tasks, including multimodal projects, should be informed both broadly and deeply by a rhetorical understanding of composition" (p. 99). Often, this rhetorical understanding is shaped by real-world factors: Cheryl Ball (2012) drew upon her editorial experience at the online journal *Kairos* to contextualize the quality of work she asks of her students, and maintains that her "grading of that work must shift to accommodate what that work means in relation to the academic world of peer-reviewed scholarly multimedia" (p. 75).

We agree with the call Diane Penrod (2005) made in *Composition in Convergence* for syncretic thinking about assessment in the face of new technological paradigms:

> Syncretic thinking about technological convergence in Composition indicates that we won't necessarily scrap older ideas in favor of newer ones. Syncretic thinking also implies that there are ways to blend seemingly disparate traditions and habitual practices. There is no doubt that syncretic thinking about the convergence of computers and writing assessment will continually challenge us to revisit and rearticulate what we value about each technology and what we value when the two technologies are blended into our pedagogy. The hope is that compositionists discover what mix of the old and new technologies works best for their programs before external pressures force a remediated writing assessment plan that fits no one's interests. (p. 170)

In our teaching practice, remix assignments allow us to rethink the very act of assessment so that it becomes not just an after-the-fact judgment, but also a heuristic that guides production of appropriately transformative texts. We engage in a process-oriented and collaborative approach to assessment along the lines of the model Christopher E. Manion and Dickie Selfe (2012) advocated in their study of the use of wikis in writing-across-the-curriculum classes. They suggested designing "the workflow of our courses" around the habits of mind and values about scholarly communication that we want students to enact and, "more importantly, turn over the responsibility for enacting this knowledge practice to our students" (p. 26). Such a model of "distributed assessment," as they call it, weaves assessment throughout the course and invites students to participate and reflect on the assessment of their texts.

In this chapter, we demonstrate how several critical frames (rhetoric, cultural criticism, design, the law, etc.) can be used in combination to articulate remix assignments and inform remix evaluation. We will also explore the development of potential assessment areas—compositional, technical, aesthetic, contextual, rhetorical, reflective—that may be brought to bear in evaluating remix assignments. What follows, then, are three case studies detailing our individual experiences employing these revised models of assessment, along with some practical "lessons learned" for those considering adopting or adapting such instruments in their classrooms. And, given our central topic for this piece—the remix—we have deliberately designed it so that you can follow the case studies in whatever order you prefer.

In "The Evolving Rubric: An Assessment Tool," Susan Delagrange proposes the use of rubrics as an assessment strategy that promotes revision and student buy-in. Developed collaboratively with and by students and emerging organically throughout the composing process, evolving rubrics identify and establish criteria for assessing rhetorical, technical, design, Fair Use, and other categories of multimodal compositions. Ben McCorkle discusses how Fair Use guidelines can be deployed to inform a student remix assignment from inception to final assessment in "Fair Use: It's Not Just for Lawyers Any More." More than just an end-stage

rubric, this approach also introduces students to the larger social conversation concerning the state of intellectual property rights in an era when the re-appropriation of content has become one of our most prominent cultural practices. And Katie Braun's "Remixing Learning Outcomes: Reframing Print-Centric Expectations" considers broader institutional and programmatic contexts within which our courses are embedded and which often put forth their own assessment criteria, which may or may not encourage remix assignments. In addition, she explores the use of distributed assessment practices that help students reflect on different forms of composing, understand and internalize the academy's values about processes of knowledge production, and confront the academy's print-centric expectations about writing.

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