

A HYBRID DISCUSSION OF MULTILITERACY AND IDENTITY POLITICS

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Much discussion has taken place in composition and writing center studies regarding “multi-”: multimedia, multiliteracy, multimodality, even multi-writing. The “multi-” that has received the most attention in writing center studies specifically is multiliteracy. This attention has manifested in some scholars calling for the writing center’s evolution to a multiliteracy center, or MLC (Trimbur; Sheridan, “Introduction”; Sheridan, “Words, Images, Sounds”; McKinney; Balester et al.). This call is contemporaneous with but virtually distinct from another important discussion in writing center studies. I am talking here about the politics of identity. The major questions in this discussion have been: What are the ways we can put into pedagogical practice a theory of identity that is based on discursive practices and intersectionality as opposed to one based on fixed, isolated definitions? Additionally, how can we ensure that this kind of pedagogy provides the grounds for subverting and resisting hegemonic discourses (Cooper; Bawarshi and Pelkowski; Grimm; Denny, “Queering the Writing Center”; Denny, *Facing the Center*)? While I do not propose here a comprehensive cultural studies pedagogy nor a comprehensive multiliteracy pedagogy, I do see an opportunity for consultant training in making these discussions *talk to one another*.

A largely unacknowledged similarity and even interdependence exists between identity politics and multiliteracy. Moreover, asking consultants—in the training course or during staff meetings—to discuss and critically reflect on this similarity and interdependence will produce for them greater awareness of, and richer insight into, both topics. This hybrid discussion will not only provide consultants with a broader understanding of diversity and privilege, of multiplicity and hegemony. It will also provide writing center administrators with a practical and effective way of introducing consultants to the concept of multiliteracy as well as its social, cultural, and political valences. The final section of this article includes a reflection on my experience facilitating such a discussion as the assistant director of the writing center at West Chester University of Pennsylvania.

The kind of hybrid discussion I am proposing has particular relevance for writing center studies. For

instance, the first collection of essays about multiliteracy in the writing center—David M. Sheridan and James A. Inman’s *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric*—does not account for identity politics whatsoever, when the point of multiliteracy (which I will discuss in greater detail below) is as much about access, difference, and rhetorical agency as it is about text forms. In a review of *Multiliteracy Centers*, Catherine Gabor calls attention to

the lack of discussion of gender, race, or class—they go virtually unmentioned. Given the vexed history of literacy, technology, and gender/race/class, one might expect the editors to have sought a chapter that explicitly addresses how multiliteracy centers can serve historically marginalized students. (Gabor)

Furthermore, Harry C. Denny’s *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, published the same year as *Multiliteracy Centers*, makes no mention of the social justice aims of multiliteracy despite Denny’s having written elsewhere that what’s at stake in any discussion of multiliteracy are “the social justice needs of our lifetime” (“Introduction” 85). Finally, the themes of two recent issues of *Praxis* are multiliteracy and diversity, respectively. I do not elicit all these publications in critique, but rather to show the close proximity yet distinct separateness of these two conversations.¹

In general, I believe writing center folks are ready to bring these conversations together, to talk about the similarity and interdependence of multiliteracy and identity politics. However, I am not making just a theoretical argument. Little has been written about the practical and inexpensive ways of incorporating multiliteracy into consultant training. After first defining exactly what I mean by multiliteracy, I will argue that much of the existing scholarship on MLCs is based on a narrow interpretation of multiliteracy, resulting in a detriment to the work of writing centers.

The idea of multiliteracy comes from the 1996 article “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures.” The ten authors—some of whom include Norman Fairclough, James Gee, and Gunther Kress—congregated in New London, New Hampshire, for a week in 1994. Coming from varying

disciplines and areas of specialization, they sought to collectively rethink and expand the scope of literacy pedagogy in light of “our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies” as well as “the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (New London Group 61). These text forms, the authors write, involve the multiplicity and interplay of different communicative modes, be they linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, or spatial (65). Communication that combines two or more of these modes is multimodal, while reception of this communication depends on the receiver’s multiliteracy (63-5). The New London Group’s inclusive attention to text forms relates to their social justice *telos* in that the proliferation of communicative modes and technologies “supports and extends cultural and subcultural diversity” (61). The purpose of multiliteracy pedagogy is to enable students and educators to become “active participants in social change” (64). In summary, the multiliteracy project has as much to do with access, difference, and rhetorical agency in students’ private, public, and professional lives as it has to do with text forms.

Despite the sweeping social justice aspirations of the New London Group’s multiliteracy project, writing center scholars espousing the writing center’s evolution to an MLC have largely over-emphasized the importance of purchasing sophisticated digital technology and hiring and training multimodal specialists. Jackie Grutsch McKinney lists the financial burdens should a writing center administrator desire to move toward what McKinney calls the All in One model: The estimated cost to equip three consulting stations with the necessary hardware, software, and the accompanying security measures would exceed \$15,000, not including costs of software upgrades and maintenance; foregoing these costs by requiring writers to already own the equipment precludes the possibility of training consultants on the equipment; finally, if these consultants are being trained more, they should be paid more (McKinney 212-214). Certainly, to the extent that we define the MLC in these terms, the MLC appears to be an impractical aspiration for most writing centers. But if writing center administrators value multiliteracy education in whatever form it takes, digital or not, more than they value the “necessity” of sophisticated technology and specialized consultants, then the decision writing centers seem to face—between either becoming obsolete or transforming into glorified computer labs—is an either/or fallacy. McKinney makes this very point (219) and so, too, does Sheridan (“Introduction” 8).

However, there is a second axis on which to evaluate multiliteracy education in the writing center. By this, I mean an MLC’s consideration of text forms and social justice. The hyper-technological All in One model, which thus far has been predominantly the field’s solution to the multiliteracy problem, places unbalanced emphasis on text forms, contradicting the New London Group’s *balanced* emphasis on text forms and social justice. The tendency not to observe this balanced emphasis results in a gap in the scholarship and a limited range of options for multiliteracy education in most writing centers.

A more balanced approach can be accomplished if we remember that multiliteracy is intended to serve as a broadened, more inclusive idea of literacy, not as a discipline unto itself. Much of the emphasis on purchasing sophisticated digital technology and hiring and training multimodal specialists comes from a reading of multiliteracy as if it were an academic discipline—as if only students studying, for example, film and digital media can benefit from an awareness of multiliteracy. Transforming the writing center into the All in One MLC, however incrementally, and generalist consultants into multimodal specialists are not the only ways of incorporating multiliteracy into writing center pedagogy. Moreover, the vast majority of writing centers cannot afford to purchase sophisticated technology or to be staffed by specialists. If all writers deserve to benefit from an awareness of multiliteracy, then all writing centers should have practical, effective, and inexpensive ways of enabling consultants to talk with writers about their writing—linguistic or multimodal—in a multiliterate way. The question is not: How can we turn the writing center into a technological utopia with fully trained multimodal specialists? Rather, the question is: What is the minimum that all writing centers can afford and accomplish in the way of making writing center work multiliteracy work?

I propose that writing center administrators, during a staff meeting or in the training course, facilitate a group discussion that 1) gives generalist consultants awareness and understanding of the concept of multiliteracy and 2) is informed by recent scholarship on culture and identity.

One theoretical component of this hybrid discussion is an analogy that brings together multiliteracy and identity politics. The analogy goes like this: The multiplicity of communicative modes is not unlike the multiplicity of cultural identities, and the hegemony of the written word is not unlike the hegemony of the “universal” subject. Multimodality and multiliteracy are not unlike intersectionality, a theory of identity as “constituted by mutually

reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” and variances in social and cultural privilege and oppression (Nash 2). A richly multimodal text, such as a website, for example—one that is constituted by multiple communicative modes—is analogous to intersectional identity—one that is constituted by multiple historically and socially constructed categories of identity. Moreover, each identity, which is always multiple, is constituted by a multiplicity of subject positions. Individuals come to occupy different positions within different discourses. For any one identity, there are many meanings and many subject positions. Analogously, for any one mode of communication, there is not one but many genres. For example, the genres of writing include academic, journalistic, technical, professional, narrative, etc. The flip side of this theme is this: Just as academic discourse has historically excluded and marginalized various cultural identities, composition theory has excluded and marginalized, for example, the visual (George) and aural (Selfe) as illegitimate communicative modes. Likewise, as academic discourse has historically privileged the straight, white, able-bodied, middle-class, male, SAE speaker, composition theory has privileged the written word as the only legitimate communicative mode. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that multiliteracies and cultural identities are of equal importance or that the material consequences of these exclusions and marginalizations are in any way equally unjust. Still, much can be illuminated and mutually reinforced by discussing the similarities and interdependence of multiliteracy and identity politics.

Consideration of these ideas’ interdependence will directly shed light on the ways in which the hybrid discussion can progress from theory into practice. If we agree that no cultural identity is stable—that is to say, there are no fixed, essential definitions of masculinity or femininity, whiteness or blackness, straightness or gayness, and so on—then we subscribe to the anti-essentialist theory of cultural identity. Using Foucauldian terminology, Stuart Hall defines identities as narratives “produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (4). Identities only come to exist within and through discourse. As effects of discourse, identities are always already fragmented, discontinuous, and constantly open to being reconstructed, to being transformed by way of a variety of discursive practices. This openness to transformation is often referred to as performativity (Butler). Through repeated acts, gestures, and signifying practices, individuals perform—and thus continue to bring into existence—a variety of cultural

identities. However, these performed identities are recognized and legitimated only to the extent that they conform to a given discourse community’s existing categories of identities. In other words, for those identities to continue to exist “legitimately” or “illegitimately,” their performance depends on an interaction between actors and audiences. To put it another way: *performance is a kind of communication*.

Performances of cultural identity employ different, often multiple, communicative modes. For example, Denny writes: “For people of color and women, their bodies usually speak their marginality before their words are audible, and many would argue class and sexuality articulate their presence in non-verbal ways” (“Queering the Writing Center” 46). One might also consider the social significations of clothing, hairstyle, hair removal, gestures, accent, and so on. But completing the cycle of communication depends on the intelligibility of these visual and aural performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality. In other words, it depends on a discourse community’s multiliteracy. Therefore, the continual construction of identities depends on one’s ability to communicate through “multimodal performance” as well as on a discourse community’s ability to recognize that performance as such with the aid of the community’s “cultural multiliteracy.”

Asking writing consultants—in the training course or during a staff meeting—to think about the ways in which their cultural identities are communicated, or how they may interpret the communicated identities of others, would generate a lively, insightful discussion. The writing center director or assistant director can begin the discussion by introducing either multiliteracy or cultural identity, given the knowledge base and interests of his or her consultants. Perhaps multiliteracy will present itself as a more accessible or familiar topic to a particular group of consultants; multiliteracy can then be analogized to the more unfamiliar topic of anti-essentialist identity. Or vice versa. In my experience facilitating a hybrid discussion at West Chester during a one-hour staff meeting last spring, the consultants were less familiar with multiliteracy and more knowledgeable about theories of cultural identity. The discussion largely consisted of my introducing ideas and using analogies to make them accessible for consultants. I also asked consultants to share relevant personal experiences in order to keep them engaged with the theoretically dense subject matter. This hybrid discussion was overall a success, but a number of changes will be made for future implementation during the fall semester.

I began the meeting by describing multiliteracy as the holistic view of literacy, broadly defining it as the ability to perceive difference. For example, when looking at types of trees, what I see and what a biology student sees are two vastly different phenomena. As an illiterate observer, I see sameness (trees), whereas the literate observer, the biology student, sees difference (types of trees). Consultants provided other instances of (il)literacy such as a layperson and a mechanic looking at a car engine. Similarly, ideological discrimination against individuals with certain identity markers—skin color, facial and bodily features, etc.—can be partially explained as a form of illiteracy, as one’s perception of sameness. For example, one consultant, referencing the Trayvon Martin case, brought up the prevalence of negative media stereotypes of African American male teenagers. Another consultant added that positive stereotypes (such as that of high-achieving Asian American students) can also be harmful, though not to the same extent. If an individual perceives members of a community largely through stereotypes, s/he is seeing sameness where there is difference. This is a form of illiteracy.

To connect multiliteracy with cultural identity, I noted that cultural identities can also be viewed holistically: one’s identity comprises multiple, intersecting categories such as gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and so forth. With this established, I explained that none of these identity categories possesses a single, perfect, all-encompassing definition, that it is more a matter of *doing* than *being*. Consultants shared personal experiences of either grappling with this view of identity or advocating for it. For example, an undergraduate consultant described the frustrating and conflicting experience of being perceived by others as white but having Puerto Rican heritage. I then explained that identities are more accurately equated to the discontinuous and contradictory *stories* we tell to and about ourselves. To borrow Hall’s phrase, identity is more about coming to terms with one’s *routes* than with one’s *roots* (Hall 4). At this point, a number of consultants voiced their anticipation of how these ideas—multiliteracies and identities-as-stories—related to one another through linguistic and non-linguistic communication. Finally, I asked them to think about how they tell their stories: Are they told verbally or in writing? Aurally through dialect or accent? Or visually through gestures, clothing, hairstyle, or lack of (body) hair? Consultants were quick to offer examples of non-linguistically coded messages in a variety of contexts. For example, a female consultant described others’ perception of her short hair and their assumptions about her

personality and sexuality. As the conversation progressed, clothing emerged as the most accessible and dynamic example, specifically as it relates to one’s class, gender, and sexuality. At the end of the meeting, the consultants expressed that they felt more confident should a writer come in with a multimodal assignment (such as an online portfolio or Prezi presentation) or one concerned with multiliteracy (such as a rhetorical analysis of a magazine advertisement or film clip). They would be able to assist the writer by talking to him or her in a multiliterate way. This positive feedback strongly suggested the efficacy of our hybrid discussion in giving them a basic awareness and understanding of multiliteracy.

I faced several challenges and surprises during this staff meeting, leading me to compile a number of recommendations for future implementation. One major challenge was the high level of theoretical density given the various levels of academic progress and various disciplines in our group. While many of the writing consultants at West Chester were graduate students in English, others were secondary-education undergraduates and graduate students in communication studies and social work. However, Director Dr. Karen Fitts and I were pleasantly surprised by the group’s ability to follow my presentation and the level of their engagement. While this observation does not absolutely confirm the accessibility of multiliteracy when presented through the hybrid discussion, I believe it bodes well for future implementation, especially considering the degree of *generalist* training each of the consultants had received up to that point.

Nonetheless, we as a group could have benefitted from additional time. This particular meeting was near the end of the semester, and it was unfeasible to hold an entire follow-up meeting. In the future, I would plan to devote one meeting early in the semester to introducing the relatedness and interdependence of multiliteracy and cultural identity, and I would dedicate a separate meeting (or meetings) to discussing the ways in which cultural multiliteracy and multimodal performance play out in the context of the writing center. Giving consultants a week to mull over the ideas and have them in the backs of their minds throughout a week of writing conferences would be highly beneficial for the subsequent meeting’s discussion. Additionally, I would ask them to look for examples to bring up at the next meeting. Finally, another limitation presented by the lack of a follow-up meeting was my inability to hear consultants reflect on their conferences after the initial meeting. While consultants did informally approach me in the following weeks, reiterating the helpfulness of the

hybrid discussion, further research would include observing and evaluating the ways in which writing conferences are affected by consultants' new awareness of multimodal performance and cultural multiliteracy.

While many writing center administrators may face some of the same challenges and limitations I faced, many would still benefit from asking their consultants some of the same questions. Specific questions may include the following: Which modes do consultants employ when discursively positioning themselves at the beginning of a conference, as a conference progresses, or when controversial topics emerge in a writer's paper? Under which circumstances might one mode serve better to position the consultant than another? Might there be alternate modes to more subtly or more clearly position oneself in relation to the writer? How might the consultant's discursive positioning change, based on a different set of available communicative modes, when the conference is in a synchronous or asynchronous online context, for example? Conversely, how do writers utilize semiotic systems to continually transform intersectional identities both within their (multimodal) texts and within the dialogue of the conference?

More importantly, directors and consultants can discuss the ways in which consultants can use their insights from discussing multimodal performance and cultural multiliteracy to talk with writers. For instance, consultants can help writers actively use multimodality and multiliteracy to rhetorically negotiate his or her subject positions both inside and outside of academic discourse. This is, after all, the main purpose of the hybrid discussion. If generalist consultants understand that meaning can be articulated and interpreted through multiple modes—and that this communicative multiplicity is both analogous to, and interdependent with, the ongoing process of anti-essentialist identity formation—consultants will be able to more fully help writers achieve the rhetorical agency necessary for the production and critical interpretation of texts in their private, public, and professional lives.

As stated at the outset, I do not pretend to be presenting a comprehensive pedagogy of either cultural studies—discussing how exactly a critical eye toward power relations can be brought to bear on the writing conference—or multiliteracy—discussing how exactly a writer might be schematically introduced to the production and critical reception of multimodal texts—in the context of writing centers. Additionally, I have not presented a new hybrid pedagogy or even a rigorous empirical study of the hybrid discussion's

efficacy. I merely seek to return culture and politics to the center of the discussion of multiliteracy in writing center studies. One way of accomplishing this is by using the “multi-”s of cultural identity to make more accessible to consultants the “multi-”s of literacy, or vice versa. Anti-essentialism can be quite heady, but an understanding of multiliteracy may perhaps help the performative aspect of anti-essentialism become more accessible. Conversely, multiliteracy can seem irrelevant to those not writing about film or digital media, but anti-essentialism may perhaps reinforce the social justice *telos* of multiliteracy pedagogy.

Multiliteracy work occurs on a continuum between the “obsolete” writing center and the glorified computer lab known as the All in One MLC. However, if we are to fulfill the promise of the New London Group's 1996 article, we must also keep our focus balanced between text forms and social justice, between digital technology and identity politics. Balance will ensure multiliteracy remains transdisciplinary. The hybrid discussion is one practical and inexpensive way of achieving that balance. As such, the hybrid discussion is a promising point of entry into multiliteracy work in the context of consultant training. This point of entry involves discovering the ways in which everyone involved—directors, consultants, and writers—can talk about pictures like we talk about paragraphs like we talk about politics.

Note

1. The one exception to this lack of crossover is the history of scholarship on language diversity, on the existence and legitimacy of World Englishes, and the implications for racial justice (for some of the most recent work, see Diab et al. and Wilson). While this is an excellent start, I would want to expand the scope and thrust of the discussion of language diversity to include all aspects of multiliteracy and cultural identity. For example, just as descriptive linguistics can account for both “standard” and “nonstandard” Englishes, multiliteracy can account for not only writing and image, but also “standard” and “nonstandard” Englishes.

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