Expanding Multimodality by Acknowledging Embodiment

In his best selling book, *Hamlet’s BlackBerry*, William Powers provides what he believes is a “new digital philosophy; a way of thinking that takes into account the human need to connect outward…as well as the opposite need for time and space apart” (4). Powers claims that a healthy relationship with technology lies in “master[ing] the art of disconnecting” (6). According to Powers, our increasing use of digital technologies, which facilitates outward thinking, results in the misfortune of lost opportunities for deep, introspective thinking. While Powers advocates the obvious benefits of technology, he asks his readers to consider prioritizing regular, temporary opportunities that distance oneself (or provide “gaps” (his preferred term)) from one’s digitally-mediated activity.

Through a critical self-reflective narrative, Powers shares several scenarios in which he physically separates himself from the screen of his BlackBerry (smartphone) or computer in order to replenish himself spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally. As Powers argues throughout his book, in order to experience “the real magic of these [digital] tools, the catalyst that transforms them from utilitarian devices into instruments of creativity, depth, and transcendence, lies in the gap” (31). That is, the user benefits most from one’s digitally-mediated activity not during that very activity, but rather once that activity has ceased.

While I agree with Powers that it is often essential to distance one’s self from the very thing one is trying to examine or reflect upon, particularly in times of analysis and reflection; what Powers fails to recognize is that “gaps” from one’s digitally-mediated use can be achieved through the notion of embodiment. That one can excavate a “gap” from the outward thinking championed in digitally mediated rhetorical practices, while still in front of one’s computer if one is able to ground oneself in one’s body; That is, if one is actively (and/or mentally) aware of one’s body during one’s “connected” activity, one can have a richer, more inclusive meaning-making experience. Again, while I agree with Powers’
premise that we must give ourselves time away from the screen in order to cultivate introspective and creative thinking, I also believe that we must be mindful of our bodies both in front of and away from screens, in order to cultivate the kind of experience necessary for mindful and meaningful digital rhetorical practices.

Like Powers, I propose a way of being with technology; but unlike Powers, my suggestion accounts for the body. Furthermore, my proposed way of being with technology accounts for the connection between the mind and body. For the body and mind facilitate our technological practices, as well as the meaning we derive from those practices. By actively acknowledging the body in our digital and computer-mediated practices, a more inclusive understanding of multimodal knowledge construction can be cultivated for students and teachers. A better understanding of multimodal meaning-making must be cultivated in order to prevent the mind/body separation (or in order to prevent the invisibility of the body) which often results from digital and computer-mediated activity (see Haynes, Luke, Kolko).

It has been my experience that while amid intense and busied digitally-mediated composing practices, such as navigating the associative space of hyperlinked web pages, if I even briefly give my mind a moment to consider my body in such acts, I experience the kind of “gap” Powers is advancing. That is, awareness of my bodily unawareness during computer-mediated practices facilitates more conscious thinking. If I am searching for a way to phrase a sentence, I look no further then the confines of my body. Bringing my mind back into my body actually facilitates more effective discourse.

During my screen encounters, I actively bring my attention into my body. I regularly feel tense shoulders, which have the habit of traveling up near my ears every time my fingers dance on the keys of my laptop. Having awareness of this bodily tension (however fleeting it may be) spurred by outward focused, technological activity, causes me to bring my mind back into myself. It is this embodied awareness that is often neglected in our technological and digital interactions, but is inherent to those very interactions. For, it is our bodies, which
make these very interactions possible.

This paper considers meaning-making, composing practices, and embodiment, exploring the possibilities and limitations in digital and computer-mediated practices akin to multimodal composition pedagogy. By drawing on the work of scholars inside and outside New Media Studies, my aim is to encourage instructors and students of multimodal composition to more fully acknowledge and articulate how multimodal composition is an embodied endeavor. Opportunities, which encourage a more inclusive understanding of multimodal composing in the multimodal classroom, would allow for the analysis and production of compositions that honor the role of the body in such practices.

Jody Shipka advances an argument that accounts for a more inclusive understanding of the term multimodality in her book, *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. Shipka claims, “if we acknowledge that literacy and learning practices have always been multimodal…the challenge becomes one of finding ways to address—in our scholarship, research, and teaching—the multimodal, technologically mediated aspects of all communicative practice” (13). It is Shipka’s claim that supports my proposed way of being with technology; inspired by Shipka and in search of a way to suggest how multimodal composition pedagogy can acknowledge and articulate that all composing practices are embodied endeavors, meaning can be enriched for both composer and audience. I begin by acknowledging scholarship that explicitly accounts for the body in meaning-making practices, followed by analysis of scholarship that only implicitly accounts for embodied meaning-making. My purpose for doing so is to advance a way of being with technology that is embodied, which will lay the ground work for a brief multimodal assignment sketch that acknowledges the body in constructing meaning while
engages in a digital, computer-mediated experience (see appendix).

In the book *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, The New London Group (NLG) argue that “Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning” (Cope and Kalantzis, 5). The fourteen contributors, which comprise the NLG, acknowledge six “functional grammars…that describe patterns of representation, one of which is gestural design” (25). According to the NLG, “gestural design” is a mode of meaning facilitated through “behavior, bodily physicality, gesture, sensuality, feelings and affect, kinesics, [and] proxemics” (26). The authors’ acknowledgement of the body as part of literacy learning is helpful in understanding the meaning-making practices made possible through digital and computer-mediated activity, precisely because it accounts for embodied ways of making and conveying meaning.

However, the authors do not explain how instructors or students may be encouraged to incorporate embodied means of making and conveying meaning through multimodal composing. I suggest that the fields of multiliteracies and multimodality could be enriched by scholarship that suggests the use of the body during digital, computer-mediated practices. To be fair, I am not aware of scholars who argue for utilizing the body in the composing of traditional, alphabetic texts, that is, aside from Sondra Perl.

Sondra Perl articulates the concept of “felt sense,” (in her book, aptly titled) which acknowledges and capitalizes upon explicit bodily awareness in the act of composing. Through her “guidelines for composing,” (a series of questions posed to
inspire invention in the writing process) Perl provides student writers with the opportunity “to examine how our bodies and our minds are connected, how meaning emerges not only from cognition but also from intuition, and how the body itself is implicated in knowing and in the construction of knowledge” (xvi). While Perl advocates that the “guidelines” can and have been used in various rhetorical contexts, Perl does not make mention of how computer or digitally-mediated composing practices may impede or facilitate “felt sense” in writers.

To be fair, I assume that Perl would have no problem in using the “guidelines for composing” to spur invention in a multimodal or computer-mediated composition classroom. But I would argue that such “guidelines” need to be adapted, in order to account for the unique mental and bodily experiences multimodal composing offers students.

A means for adapting Perl’s guidelines could occur from a situation in which an instructor asks her students to reflect upon what one feels in his/her body during or after the activity of viewing and composing on a social networking site. The instructor could do as Perl indicates when laying out her “guidelines for composing,” which is an oral prompting of possible feelings one may or may not experience during the invention-writing activity the “guidelines” provide. Perl’s “guidelines” could be adapted for composing through digital/computer-mediated in the situation proposed above through the following: Can you describe any sensation in your body during this experience? Do you ever move a part of your body when you type or read online, such as your foot or knee? Does moving your body help you think, please explain; why or why not? The
purpose of such prompting is to facilitate students’ awareness of their bodies in front of a screen as they engage in digital/computer-mediated composition practices. This activity could facilitate a more inclusive meaning-making experience of one’s technological practices. Potentially, this activity could facilitate a class discussion in which students are invited to consider the role of the body in relation to their being with technology. It is safe to assume that students rarely (if ever) think of their body during composing or technologically-mediated activities. Awareness and articulation of how the body aids in multimodal composition encourages a more inclusive understanding of multimodal composing, thereby inspiring the analysis and production of compositions that honor the role of the body in such practices.

Various scholars in New Media studies champion a kind of critical self-reflective stance toward student’s use of technologies, but do not make explicit attempts to acknowledge the body in such practices. I will limit my analysis of such scholarship to three articles that advance pedagogical theories for multimodal composition pedagogy.

In their essay “Variations on a Theme: The Technology Autobiography as a Versatile Writing Assignment” Karla Kitalong, Tracy Bridgeford, Michael Moore, and Dickie Selfe share a project each have used in their composition courses. The essay promotes the importance of the assignment, which encourages students to “reflect upon their own experiences with technology, which leads them to think critically about technology” (219). Kitalong et al. argue that, “students seldom consciously reflect on their relationship with technology…given a reason to…examine the evolution and current state of their technology attitudes, habits, and practices, most of them gain new insights”
The authors provide fifteen questions serving as the assignment prompt for the Technology Autobiography. These questions encourage the kind of introspective and critical-reflective thinking about being with technology Powers claims we no longer make time for.

By inviting students to examine their relationships to technology, Kitalong et al. encourage students to make meaning of their technological experiences, experiences which have generated knowledge, insight, and were made possible through embodiment. However, their questions while extensive and thought provoking, only implicitly consider the body in one’s technological experiences. The most explicit bodily-aware question asks, “What technologies are you carrying now?” The verb “carrying” obviously denotes the use of the body, in the act of carrying such technologies. However, students’ analysis of their technological use would be heightened if they were to consider questions that more explicitly asked them to consider the role of their bodies in their technologically-oriented lives. Because the Technology Autobiography asks students to recall personal memories, how might the questions more adequately account for the role the body plays in “carrying” such memories? The Technology Autobiography could be enriched if the questions directed students to consider how the body aids in making meaning. Such would facilitate a more inclusive understanding of multimodal composing, thereby inspiring the analysis and production of compositions that honor the role of the body in such practices.

New Media scholars Kristin Arola and Lisa Blackmon stimulate students’ employment of a critical-reflexive stance toward technology by focusing on web
interfaces. Arola advocates student and instructor “interrogation” of “the interfaces of Web 2.0,” which privilege “template-driven design” through acts of analysis and production of design (12). Such practices invite students to “become attuned to the ways in which design encourages users to participate in online spaces” (13). This critical self-reflective stance occurs, as Powers advocates, by separating one’s self from one’s activity in Web 2.0—by holding that activity at a distance for further inspection. While Arola doesn’t say so explicitly, she does imply that the profile picture on the template designed Web 2.0 space, promotes a disembodied notion of the user. According to Arola, in order for one’s genuine identity to emerge on the web, one must design one’s own e-space.

Samantha Blackmon asks her students, regardless of their race, “to focus on, think critically about, and represent their individual identities on the WWW as they see fit” (93). The purpose of such “diminishes the feelings of disconnectedness that some students feel toward computers in an attempt to make technology a more effective teaching tool and in order to provide all students with a more equal educational playing field” (100). Blackmon goes further by stating, “more important than leaning technological skills is adopting the practice of thinking critically about technology” (100). Critical thinking of technology and our relationship to technology is indeed crucial, but in order to best understand multimodal composing and our relationship to technology, instructors must encourage students to examine and work with various modalities which make meaning possible, one of which is undeniably the body.

Imperative to the pedagogical agendas of Arola and Blackmon is the use of both analysis and production of digitally-mediated compositions. It is this two-fold, reciprocal
agenda that is essential in forwarding the awareness of embodiment in technologically mediated composition practices. Neither Kitalong et al., Arola, nor Blackmon explicitly mention bodily awareness as important to these acts of composing.

Lauren Marshall Bowen on the other hand, makes the case for embodiment in acts of digital composing in her article, “Restricting Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research,” which is the observation of an eighty-one-year-old Beverly’s “embodied habits at the computer” (587). Bowen claims, “Through the recognition of the ways literacy is part of our emotional and even physical selves, we can recognize the richness of what literacy in digital times really is, what it does, and what it means—at any age” (602). This argument is most effectively supported by the evidence Bowen begins and ends her article with: the focus and eventual explanation of Beverly’s preference to “sit up straight” in her computer chair (601). As Bowen explains, Beverly is quite aware of her body when using the computer. This is indicated when Bowen states: “her awareness of [the chair’s] position [is] an important part of her literate activity…Her body is inextricable from her literacy affinity…With the proper body position…she feels at home even in digital literacy practices” (602). This way of being with technology in an embodied manner Bowen describes through her observation of Beverly, can and must be encouraged in the multimodal composition classroom, in order to facilitate a more inclusive understanding of multimodal composing. Awareness of one’s body, or to state it more precisely, thinking or experiencing in an embodied manner as one is constructing knowledge or processing information in digital / computer-mediated means, allows for the kind of introspective, critically aware being with technology that Powers and other contemporary writers
champion (see Carr, Lainer, Turkle). If embodiment was encouraged through digital / computer-mediated composing practices in multimodal composition pedagogy, twenty-first century composers could counterbalance the treat of isolation, egocentrism, and invisibility Powers and others claim digital composing provides.

Multimodal composition pedagogy facilitates experimentation as well as creative and critical reflexive thinking (Branscum and Toscano, DeVoss et al.). These acts are made possible through opportunities to make meaning through various modalities; opportunities that often come in the form of assignments (the creation of a website, video or audio composition, etc.). Multimodal assignments and the instructors who design such composing opportunities ought to make more of an attempt to account for the various ways literacy occurs (orally, gesturally, aurally, spatially, visually, and linguistically (Cope and Kalantis)). Multimodal composition pedagogy should provide a more inclusive meaning-making experience for composers by acknowledging and accounting for the fact that the body makes possible the construction of knowledge and composing practices facilitated through digital and computer-mediated means. Composers in the twenty-first century must arrive a more inclusive understanding of knowledge creation by acknowledging and utilizing embodied meaning making practices while composing in digital and computer-mediated environments.
Works Cited


Appendix

Below is a brief assignment sketch, which invites students to acknowledge and articulate how their bodies aid in making meaning during (and as a result of) an experience made possible by a digital/computer-mediated composition.

**Embodiment and SootheTube.com**

Goals:

- To allow students the opportunity to think about their computers in a different way (to facilitate embodiment).
- To invite students to experience an embodied sensation in being with technology/in front of a screen.

Description:

Students are to view a video from SootheTube.com, (a repository of videos which encourage sensory awareness) and compose a reflection in the modality that best communicates their viewing and sensory experience. This activity inspires students’ production of video compositions that acknowledge audience members’ body in the act of spectatorship. Videos on SootheTube labeled Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) provide the greatest level of sensory awareness. ASMR can be described as a tingling sensation that can occur in both external acts, as when receiving a head massage; or internally through aural means (ASMR-Research). Students should begin this activity by viewing the video “Cleaning A Laptop With Q-Tip.” After which should prompt a discussion promoting a critical-reflective way of being with technology that acknowledges and accounts for the body. Such questions could include, but are not limited to the following:
• What if any sensation(s) you felt during this activity?
• Did you watch the entire video or did you stop watching (or close your eyes) and just listen?
• What are your general reactions to this experience?
• How do those reactions differ from your initial assumption about this activity?
• What ideas do you have for making your own video composition to acknowledge your audience’s body?
• After this experience, how (if at all) do you think/feel differently about your relationship to the computer?

Acknowledgement and articulation of how the body facilitates meaning-making in our digital and computer-mediated activities is essential for a more inclusive understanding of multimodal composing. It is my hope that more instructors can encourage embodiment as a legitimate way of making meaning in multimodal composition pedagogy.