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Developing Multimodal Academic Literacies among College Freshmen

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Abstract

This article describes a semester-long freshman learning community in which multimodal texts were used as primary texts along with traditional texts to support students' academic literacy skills. Analysis shows that an expository video created by students contains elements of academic literacies and qualities of multimodal texts. An unexpected finding was the presence of play within the process and product. These elements combine to create multimodal academic literacies. The author argues that multimodal academic literacies should be taught alongside traditional essayist forms in order to create rich learning opportunities.

Keywords: academic literacy, multiliteracies, multimodalities, new literacies, video production

Despite the prevalence of multimodal texts in everyday life, education continues to privilege traditional texts. Media literacy education (MLE) generally serves as a way to enter, build on, or enhance traditional literacy skills (Young and Daunic 2012). In this article, I propose that multimodal academic literacies, which include the qualities of academic literacies combined with those of multimodal texts, hold promise as an everyday instructional approach. I illustrate the development of multimodal academic literacies through a descriptive study of student work within a course designed to merge students' cultural interests with school requirements. The principles of MLE that hold that literacy includes all forms of media and that individuals use their "skills, beliefs, and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages" (National Association of Media Literacy Education 2007, 1.1e) informed the course design. Thus, popular and multimedia texts were used alongside traditional academic texts. Analysis indicates that students were able to create multimodal texts that included many of the elements and ways of thinking valued by academic literacies. An unexpected finding includes the presence of play, a learning skill necessary for success in today's world (Jenkins et al. 2009).

I first set forth the key concepts that guided the development of the course as well as my analysis of the student work. I then describe how I developed the course and examine one group project, and two students' responses to that project, as a way to clarify multimodal academic literacies.

Key Concepts

This research investigates how the use of popular and multimodal texts might contribute to the development of college freshmen as academic writers and thinkers. This section describes the concepts of academic literacies, multimodalities, play, and multimodal academic literacies that informed the course design and analysis of student texts. I believe that the integration of multimodal texts into daily instruction is an effective way to support students, and I wanted to see whether the data supported my stance.

Academic Literacies

The New Literacy Studies (NLS) view literacy as a social practice in which people engage with texts for culturally meaningful purposes (Brandt and Clinton 2002; Gee 2000; Hull and Schultz 2001; Street 2003), and text use occurs within communities of practice (Wenger 1998) or groups of people who share a commitment to a goal or objective. Academic literacies involve the learning of specific cognitive skills, socialization into the academy, and institutional discourses (Lea and Street 2006). Thus, academic literacies are ways of using text that mark a person as a member of an academic community.

Academic literacies are marked by features such as summarization and analysis, the use of quotations and citations, transitions, the use of organizational structures such as argument that include the use of claims or thesis statements, the gathering of evidence

to support the claim or thesis, and interpretation of evidence in light of the claims being made (Graff and Birkenstein 2010). As such, development of academic literacy can be assessed in part by the presence of those features. Additionally, student reflective writing can provide insights into learning. First semester college composition courses generally focus on the explicit teaching of academic literacies. In the course described in this article, academic literacies were taught in the freshman composition course and reinforced in the content course.

Multimodalities

Multimodalities refers to using more than one semiotic form simultaneously (Jewitt and Kress 2003; Kress 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). Gunther Kress and colleagues point out that multimodal authorship involves mixing modes in ways that the modes inform one another and the reader through juxtaposition and flow. Picture books, newspapers, magazines, and informational books are multimodal (Walsh 2004); however, the emergence of digital texts has led to additional multimodal forms such as video mash-ups, digital stories, podcasts, and video games.

A growing body of research has shown that multimodal texts are rich in literacy practices. For instance, Constance Steinkuehler (2010) argued that video gaming contains a “constellation of literacy practices” (61) and fans “collectively read and write vast cascades of multimodal text as part of their play” (61). Rebecca Black (2005), and Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Donna Mahar (2003) similarly documented the playful literacy practices of individuals involved in online fanfiction communities; and Lalitha Vasudevan, Kathryn Schultz, and Jennifer Bateman (2010) argue that multimodal storytelling brings about a rethinking of what it means to compose.

Play

Henry Jenkins and colleagues (2009) define play as “the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving” (4) and argued that play and a number of other skills are learned through engagement in online participatory culture and are necessary for successful engagement in the new media culture. Albert Rouzie (2000) defined play as an activity “that blurs, traverses, combines, and challenges the work/play, serious/frivolous dichotomies” (142) and suggested that injecting play into composition courses enriched the experience of the students.

Play is pleasurable even if it involves work. In his discussion of video gaming, James Gee (2005) discussed how video games involve deep learning that is pleasurable. The youth in Black’s (2005) and Chandler-Olcott’s (2003) descriptions of fanfiction communities also experienced pleasure as they wrote and shared their work online. Vasudevan et al. (2010) also included pleasure as part of the composition process. Although play was not an intentional element in the course described here, the data show it played a role in the students’ work process and product.

Multimodal Academic Literacies

Arlene Archer (2006) argued that multimodal texts in academic settings allow students to explore what happens when different kinds of cultural knowledges encounter a range of genres, modes, and approaches for presenting information. As such, the use of multimodal texts within academic literacies may open up ways of thinking not ordinarily afforded by traditional texts. In this article, I use the term multimodal academic literacies in an effort to position multimodal texts as instrumental to instruction rather than supplemental. Furthermore, it should be recognized that although academic literacies, as defined by Russell, Lea, Parker, Street, and Donahue (2009), are inherently multimodal, I suggest that by using the name multimodal academic text we are able foreground the multimodal nature of the text.

Context of the Study

The work described in this article took place within a freshman learning community at a private liberal arts college in western New York State. Learning communities consisted of an English composition course paired with a content area course. The learning community included thirty-three students, the English composition instructor, and me (the content instructor). Of the thirty-three students, thirty agreed to participate in the study.

The content course, “Literacies and Justice,” included a group project that required students to investigate and create a multimodal report on one of six nontraditional literacy forms. Allie and Anna (pseudonyms) were members of a group investigating turntablism, the art of using vinyl records to create beats by mixing segments of audio from different sources (Gustavson 2007). I focus on these students and their project as representative of the work done in the course. Other groups investigated flash mobs, slam

poetry, graphic novels, video mash-ups, and video gaming.

Anna and Allie's group contained six students. The group divided responsibilities based on the strengths of the individual members. Even though they had no prior experience with audio or video editing, Anna and Allie took charge of the technical aspects of the project because Anna owned a MacBook laptop and Allie lived down the hall from her. Anna's laptop had GarageBand, a program for mixing and creating audio, and iMovie, a simple video production program. One of the men of the group voiced the narration for the video. He, along with the remaining three members of the group, also gathered information and images. All of the students wrote article summaries and contributed to the script.

Research Methods

In this section I first describe the overarching design of the learning community and the specifics of the "Literacies and Justice" course. I then describe data collection and analysis.

Learning Community and Course Design

The composition instructor and I initially focused on ensuring that the learning community objectives and key assignments met the requirements set by the college and dovetailed our readings and writing assignments. For instance, in "Literacies and Justice," students read literacy and social theory and learned to write summary and thesis-supported microthemes (Bean, Drenk, and Lee 1982). Later in the semester, the composition instructor helped the students select scholarly articles and write summaries for those articles. The assigned and self-selected articles were used in the "Literacies and Justice" course to create the multimodal presentations, and the information gathered for the multimodal presentation was used in a critical analysis paper for the composition course. When selecting texts for the "Literacies and Justice" course, I included popular and multimedia texts along with traditional scholarly texts and literature.

For the multimodal presentation, the students could use whatever technology they wished. I intentionally did not teach the students how to use various technologies because I wanted to focus on course content rather than technical skills; however, I did model the use of different technologies, texts, modalities, and genres. I also created and showed movies and PowerPoint presentations with embedded sound that ran automatically to teach content. After

showings, I answered questions about the creative and technological aspects of the work as well as content. I provided in-class workshop time for the students to brainstorm, plan, and create using their personal laptops. During those times, I circulated around the room observing and answering questions.

Data Collection

At the beginning of the semester, the students completed a web-based questionnaire that assessed their experience with literacy and technology. The questionnaire contained forty-nine questions (see appendix 1). The first set of questions provided demographic data as well as general background information of the students' general educational experience. The remaining questions were derived from the research of the Stanford Study of Writing (2008), the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2012), and the Kaiser Family Foundation Report on Youth Media Use (2010) and focused on literacy and technology. The data elicited from the questionnaire guided instructional decisions when designing activities or organizing groups. During the second week of the semester I explained my research to the students and obtained informed consent. Students submitted all assignments electronically, and I maintained a digital archive.

Data Analysis

Initial analysis of the multimodal project occurred when each group presented. We used a rubric, co-constructed by the students and me, to determine the effectiveness of the presentation. Each student in the class rated each presentation. I collected the ratings sheets, tabulated the results, and shared the aggregate responses with each group along with my rating and comments. I used this assessment for grading purposes.

Once final grades were posted, I removed data associated with students who chose not to participate in the study then sorted the material by group and conducted multiple readings of the data with a different focus for each reading. Data analyzed included: microthemes, blogs, writer's memos, essays, assigned texts, the multimodal presentation, the multimodal presentation script, article summaries, and end-of-semester reflection (see appendix 2).

The first read-through of the data included viewing of the video and reading the script to gain general a sense of the work. Other texts written by the students were compared to the multimodal project in order to see how students drew on different materials

to create the multimodal piece. Student reflections were analyzed to discover their perspectives on the process and project.

Analysis involved a priori and open coding followed by categorization. A priori codes were drawn from the literature on academic literacy and multimodalities and were used for identifying aspects of academic literacies and the use of multimodal tools such as juxtaposition. Open coding involves reading data line-by-line in order to identify and label the concepts found within the data (Charmaz 2006). Open coding allows for discovery. Once all data were coded, open codes were categorized to organize concepts into abstract themes. The themes of play and multimodal academic literacies emerged out of the data.

Academic Literacies

I compared the script to the texts the students read and wrote for both courses in order to see where different ideas originated. I coded for content, phrasing, and lexical choices and created open codes. I used those same codes and created new open codes when analyzing the article summaries, writer's memos, and blog entries.

Multimodalities

I open-coded the script as the video played as a way to compare the narrative to the visual. I also used open coding to analyze the end-of-semester reflective memos. The memos provided insight into the decisions students made while creating the multimodal assignment as well as their perspectives on their work.

Findings

The multimodal project contained elements of academic literacies and integrated multiple modes. Play as an important aspect of student engagement emerged as a second theme. Multimodal academic literacies emerged as the overarching concept that connected the different aspects of the students' work. In this section I describe the findings in more depth.

Academic Literacies

The data show that the multimodal project contained qualities of academic writing. Specifically, the multimodal project included an introduction, definitions, a statement of the significance of the topic as well as a clear thesis statement or claim, transitions, summaries, clarifications, examples, a critical stance or opinion, rhetorical questions, a conclusion, and citations.

The video began with clip of a turntablist at work. The next shot was of a puppet, "DJ Literacy." DJ Literacy, voiced by one of the male members of the group, introduced himself as the narrator for the video and explained the initial video clip by defining turntablism. Thus, the presentation, like an academic or research paper, started with a "hook" immediately followed by needed background information. Throughout the presentation, DJ Literacy guided the viewer with explanations and quotes from the texts the students used as resources. When using quotes, the students used MLA style in-text citations, and the end of the presentation included a reference list.

The overall organization and structure of the multimodal presentation was academic. The students introduced the topic, stated the significance of the topic, included a claim or thesis, defined key terms, provided examples and clarifications, and ended with a conclusion. The rubric required a claim, definitions, and examples, but the inclusion of quotes, citations, and references was unexpected.

Multimodalities

The project required multiple modes of representation in order to receive a passing grade. The groups of students chose the modes they wanted to use, and most integrated voice, music, alphabetic text, and images. Anna and Allie's group included voice for narration, video of turntablists at work, video of the puppet, audio of beats downloaded from the Internet, audio of the beat they created, photographs of vinyl records and turntables, and text taken directly from the script as well as quotes from articles.

The different modes and juxtaposition of modes contributed to the overall message of the project. For instance, images of vinyl records and turntables accompanied the narrative explanation of the tools of turntablism. Audio clips clarified the definition of beats. The audio along with the video of a working turntablist reinforced the definition of the form. Additionally, the use of onscreen text along with the narration reinforced what the students felt were important points.

The video closed with a series of quotes accompanied by the beat the students created. Much like a turntablist, the students selected the quotes and placed them in juxtaposition. Thus the students not only experimented with turntablism when they created their beat, they also extended the concept of turntablism to their multimodal project.

Play

Play was apparent in the students' decision to use a puppet for the narrator. The idea for "DJ Literacy" developed from a video I had shown the students earlier in the semester. In a writer's memo, Allie wrote,

We loosely based the concept off of the video games video we watched in class with the cartoon narrator. We really enjoyed the video because it mixed an interesting concept of video games as an alternative literacy with the humorous side of a cartoon.

The students adapted the concept to fit the tools and materials they had available: a puppet, GarageBand, and iMovie.

Learning through play also appeared in the students' experiences with technology. Anna described the process of using GarageBand as one of experimentation, mistake-making, and learning. She wrote,

[I]n the early stages we simply experimented with the piecing together of sounds, however, by the end, we developed a level of competency that made the process go a little quicker. When all was said and done we spent close to four hours experimenting to make our three minute sample beat. Exploring the process of turntablism, in it's [sic] digital form, allowed us to better understand the true complexity of beat mixing. I think that working on this component of our project, even more so that [sic] researching, shaped my appreciation for the art of turntablism.

Allie further described their process in her blog. She articulated the frustration and difficulties experienced as well as the accomplishment felt after achieving some facility with the software.

Earlier today, we decided to sit down and try to figure out how to work the program. At first, we were EXTREMELY confused and it took a good 30 minutes to figure out the basics of the tools...I'm sure we still don't know everything GarageBand can do! Even with our limited knowledge, we made a pretty awesome beat mix. We couldn't stop listening to it and although some of the parts are a little rough still, we're very excited about it...I ended up playing around with the beat for almost 2 hours and came out of it with less than 2 minutes of music...I'm actually not even sure if it's a minute long. This made me think about how long it must take DJs to make music on actual turntable.

As a result, Allie and Anna gained technological skill and deepened their understanding and appreciation of their topic.

The opportunity to be playful by using a puppet as narrator also affected the students' writing style. According to Anna,

Developing his [DJ Literacy] voiceover as the script of our presentation ended up making things a lot easier for us. We were able to write the script in a way that was more informal and as if we were directly talking to someone.

(Writer's memo)

Although the students never explicitly named play as an aspect of their work, the fact that they reported spending close to six hours to create a short beat speaks to the pleasurable aspects of learning identified by Gee (2005) and the enriched experience described by Rouzie (2000).

Multimodal Academic Literacies

The students' work resulted in a multimodal text that contained elements of a traditional academic paper, multiple modes, and included play. I suggest the intersection of these elements contributed to the development of multimodal academic literacies. In this section I discuss the academic literacy skills and ways of thinking afforded by multimodal academic literacies as evidenced in the students' work.

An academic literacies approach to writing instruction includes the understanding that learning to write academically involves being socialized into the ways of thinking and acting valued within higher education as well as mastering the cognitive skills required of the institution (Lea and Street 2006). I argue that the multimodal academic text created by the students indicate that the students moved toward the ways of thinking valued by the academy. Furthermore, they showed evidence of mastering the cognitive skills that are directly assessed in freshman courses. Specifically, the multimodal academic text shows that the students developed their critical reading and viewing skills, their ability to synthesize information, and their content knowledge.

Synthesis involved the reading of academic texts, making connections between those texts and popular texts, summarizing those texts, determining whether texts were trustworthy or useful and then using that information to develop an original argument. These steps were, in fact, no different than the steps they would have completed if they were writing a traditional

research or expository paper.

The multimodal text also demonstrates an understanding of the content by presenting the information in a popular form. Developing academic writers often write empty sentences when they do not understand content (Lanham 2006) or intentionally or unintentionally plagiarize when struggling to take ideas from resources and integrate those ideas into a paper (Rose 1989; Shaughnessy 1977). The creation of a multimodal document that used an informal voice provided a means for the students to avoid these pitfalls. The informal voice, which was inspired by the puppet, in essence forced the students to recast the academic language they found in their source documents into their own words.

As well as avoiding plagiarism and empty sentences, this recasting brought about clarity of concept. As Anna noted, "I think that working on this component of our project, even more so that [sic] researching, shaped my appreciation for the art of turntablism." Anna's comment suggests that for some content, multimodal academic literacies may be a powerful tool for learning that traditional academic literacy. As such, multimodal academic literacies hold promise as part of the regular set of tools instructors use when engaging students, but as in all instructional decisions, the tool selected should match the desired learning.

Additionally, the evidence indicates that the conventions typical of a traditional expository essay were part of the multimodal academic text. The data do not provide insight into where these conventions were learned. The students may have brought them from their high school experience, or they may have learned them in their freshman composition class or another class. It is clear, however, that operating in a multimodal environment does not preclude academic form. If an instructional goal is to guide students toward understanding the structure of an academic argument or expository text, a multimodal academic text may be an appropriate choice. In sum, multimodal academic literacies offer instructors another approach for teaching students how to engage in ideas.

Conclusion

The research began as an exploration of how popular and multimodal texts as an integral part of instruction can support student learning. Two companion courses, "Literacies and Justice" and English composition, provided students with support in

developing multimodal literacies alongside traditional academic literacies. Analysis indicates the emergence of multimodal academic literacies that include elements of academic literacies and multimodal texts. A second finding was that play served as an important aspect of learning.

Multimodal academic literacies included the conventions of traditional academic literacies such as introductions, transitions, definitions, examples and clarifications, citations, and references. Students also engaged in the higher order thinking skills of summarization, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in order to read and understand the textual resources and create the multimodal text. As such, the cognitive work involved in creating the multimodal text paralleled a traditional expository or research paper.

The primary difference between the multimodal text and a traditional text was in how the use of multiple modes enriched the content the students were working to share. Specifically, the use of audio combined with images and video allowed the students to demonstrate their topic rather than simply describe it. Furthermore, video permitted the playful use of a puppet as narrator, which lead to the adoption of a more informal voice. Student reflections also indicated that content learning occurred as a result of the students playing with the technology. Specifically, being able to experiment with GarageBand gave them a deeper appreciation of the art of turntablism.

Finally, the data indicate that engagement in multimodal academic literacies when taught alongside traditional composition helped students gain a better understanding of how academic arguments are constructed. For instance, Allie wrote, "I can see how writing a paper and beat mixing are related. They both take bits and pieces of something bigger and combine them to serve a purpose. It's a very interesting concept" (Writer's Memo). For Allie, the act of writing for academic purposes became more concrete.

As the world grows increasingly multimodal, instruction needs to move beyond traditional texts and include opportunities for engagement in multimodal academic literacies wherein students not only "read" multimodal texts, but also create multimodal texts. Doing so may be an important part of guiding their development as academic thinkers and writers, as well as preparing them for engagement in a media rich society.

Appendix 1: Literacy and Technology Questionnaire

1. What is your gender?

Male Female Transgender

2. How old are you?

17 18 19 20 21 Over 21

3. What ethnic/racial group do you identify as? Select as many as appropriate.

White/Caucasian Latino/a
 African American Native American
 Asian American Multiple Ethnicity
 International Other

4. What languages do you speak with some level of fluency (other than English)?

First language
 Language spoken with family members
 Other languages

5. What is your parents' or guardians' highest level of education? Mark those as appropriate.

	Did not graduate from HS	GED	High School	Post Secondary Technical Certification	Associate's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Master's Degree	Doctoral Degree
Parent 1								
Parent 2								
Guardian 1								
Guardian 2								

6. What is your home state?

NY Other (please indicate)

7. How would you describe the school you graduated from?

Urban Suburban Rural Private Homeschooled Other

8. How would you describe the school you attended most of your youth? (If different from the one you graduated from.)

Urban Suburban Rural Private Homeschooled Other

9. What was your high school grade average? (If you attended a school that used grades.)

<70 71-80 81-90 91-95 >90 Ungraded

10. What were your SAT scores?

Math Above 520 Below 520
 Writing Above 510 Below 510
 Critical Reading Above 508 Below 508
 Did not take the SAT

11. Did you take any AP, college credit or International Baccalaureate courses when you were in high school? If so, please list the course(s) you took.

Yes No

Appendix 1

(continued)

12. What is/are your intended major(s)? Select as many as appropriate.

Humanities (for example, English, Education (elementary)

History, Communications)

Social Science (Sociology, Education (secondary)

Psychology, Anthropology)

Math/Science/Computer Science Interdisciplinary

Business Pharmacy

Nursing Don't know yet

13. How confident are you as a writer?

Not	Somewhat	Confident	Mostly	Highly
confident	confident		confident	confident

14. What are your strengths as a writer? (open response)

15. Where do you think you need to improve as a writer? (open response)

16. What kind of writing do you do on your own? (open response)

17. What other kinds of texts (for example podcasts, making beats, videos, fanfiction, mashups, anime, mixes and remixes, etc.) do you create? (open response)

18. Use of Technology (please choose any or all that apply).

 I own a computer My family owns a computer I had access to computers in high school I am taking (or have taken) one or more classes in a computer classroom I use the Internet regularly I know how to create a web page I use a word processor to complete most of my written assignments I use assistive technologies for my writing/reading

19. Do you text?

Yes No

20. How many texts do you send each day?

1-5 6-10 7-15 16-30 30-50 More than 50 (estimate the number)

21. Do you use email?

Yes No

22. How many emails do you send each day?

1-5 6-10 7-15 16-30 30-50 More than 50 (estimate the number)

23. Do you use instant messaging?

Yes No

24. How much time do you spend on instant messaging each day?

Less than 1 hour/day 2-3 hours/day More than 3 hours/day

Appendix 1

(continued)

25. Do you have a Facebook, MySpace, or other social networking page?

Yes No

26. How often do you check your social networking page?

1-3 times/day 3-5 times/day 5-10 times/day More than 10 times/day

27. Do you own a cell phone?

Yes No

28. What kind of cell phone do you own?

iPhone Blackberry Droid Conventional Cell Phone Other (explain)

29. What services do you have on your cell phone. List as many as you can think of. (open response)

30. What types of things do you use your cell phone for? List as many as you can think of. (open response)

31. How much time do you spend listening to music each day?

Less than 1 hour/day 1-2 hours/day 3-5 hours/day More than 5 hours/day

32. What device do you use to listen to music? Check all that are appropriate.

iPod MP3 player CD player Radio Smartphone Other (explain)

33. Do you own a television?

Yes No

34. How many hours of television do you watch?

Less than 1 hour/day 2-3 hours/day More than 3 hours/day

35. If you own a computer, what kind of computer is it?

Apple Laptop (MacBook) Apple Desktop PC laptop PC desktop Netbook iPad
Other (explain)

36. What kinds of things do you do on your computer? List as many things as you can think of. (open response)

37. Do you own a game system?

Yes No

38. What game system do you own?

Xbox PSP DS Other (Explain)

39. How many hours a day do you spend gaming?

Less than 1 hour/day 2-3 hours/day More than 3 hours/day

40. Do you own a video camera or flip camera?

Yes No

41. Do you know how to edit video?

Yes No

Appendix 1

(continued)

42. Have you ever uploaded a video to Youtube or other video sharing site?

Yes No

43. Do you own a digital camera?

Yes No

44. How you ever uploaded photos to Flickr or other photosharing sites?

Yes No

45. Do you know how to digitally record or mix audio (including music)?

Yes No

46. Have you ever uploaded music mixes you created to an Internet site?

Yes No

47. Do you have a blog that you maintain?

Yes No

48. Have you ever created or contributed to a wiki?

Yes No

49. What other digital tools or ways of communicating and writing do you do that this questionnaire left out?
(open response)

Appendix 2: Data Corpus

Type of document	Specific document
course planning material	documents describing the college requirements for the course lesson plans emails between learning community instructors
course materials	assignments sheets and rubrics assigned texts (traditional and multimodal) handouts/worksheets
beginning of semester survey student writing	end of semester reflections double entry notes taken for composition course summaries of scholarly articles and popular articles on turntablism written for both courses summaries of texts assigned in Literacies and Justice course a thesis supported microtheme written for Literacies and Justice course creative responses to the novel <i>Call Me Maria</i> (Cofer, 2006) student blogs written for the Literacies and Justice course the group critical analysis paper the group multimodal text literary analysis papers written for the composition course writer's memos written for the composition course "Literacy and Me" narratives written for the composition course reflections written for Learning Community portfolio
instructor/student, student/instructor communications field notes	emails text messages

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