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# Sound engineering: Toward a theory of multimodal soundness

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## Abstract

The activity-based multimodal theory of composing presented here offers us a way to better understand how, when, and why students might choose to explore the affordances of sound (oral, aural) in their work. Importantly, however, insofar as it resists attempts to bracket off individual senses and the uptake of select semiotic resources, it presents a more robust, integrated approach to theorizing, researching, and teaching multimodal production, one that facilitates the move toward *multimodal soundness*. An activity-based multimodal approach to composing provides us, but perhaps more importantly still provides students, with strategies for attending to the complex ways that a greater variety of senses, semiotic resources, and rhetorical positionings might be taken up and brought together, if only briefly, and if only in sound-for-now ways, to help them accomplish specific kinds of work in specific contexts. To illustrate how an activity-based multimodal theory of composing achieves these ends, I present two accounts of first-year composition students who explored sound's potential in their work after determining that the uptake of sound could help them, at least in part, accomplish the work they hoped to do.

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Wisdom does not lie in becoming mesmerized by that glimpse of reality our culture proclaims to be ultimate, but in the discovery that we can create various realities by alternating between different goal structures. [. . .] Play can only exist when there is awareness of alternatives: of two sets of goals and rules, one operating here and now, one that applies outside the given activity. [. . .] If we could not conceive of acting by a set of rules that are different from those to which we have learned to adapt, we could not play. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, pp. 18–19)

There is little or nothing [in new media scholarship] that encourages someone composing a Web page to think about how and why, in her place and time, her choices of color and typeface and words and photograph and spatial arrangement shape the relationship she is constructing with her audience and hence shape how the audience is asked to act [. . .] There is little or nothing that asks composers and readers to see and then question the values implicit in visual design choices, for such design is often presented as having no value other than functionally helping readers get directly to the point. (Wysocki, 2004, p. 6)

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Although they are writing years and fields apart, I begin with Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's (1981) attempt to underscore play's rigorous potential and Anne F. Wysocki's (2004) critique of new media scholarship because of the emphasis each places on the importance of purposeful choosing and intellectual and material flexibility—activities that afford players and composers alike opportunities to consider how material, social, geographical, technological, economic, institutional, and historical realities (or differences) impact what one is able to accomplish and, perhaps more importantly, at least in terms of both anticipating and working toward change, to *imagine*. Like Csikszentmihalyi, Wysocki's work is invested in creating “more room for play” (p. 15) and exploring the “possibilities of other choices” (p. 13). Her work makes a compelling case for the importance of examining the “material functioning” of texts (p. 7) by insisting that students ought to be composing texts “using a wide and alertly chosen range of materials” while attending to how those texts are produced and consumed (p. 20). A potential difficulty is encountered, however, as many of the “wide and alertly chosen materials” students may draw upon while composing multimodal texts are often equated with playing, or with *artist- or child-like expressions* of feelings and emotions—this as opposed to the *communication* of scholarly, rigorous arguments or ideas, something more often associated with the production of linear, print-based texts (Fortune, 1989; George, 2002; Kress, 1997; Simons & Murphy, 1986). I refer now to the material use of color, still and moving images, embodied performances, objects, textures, tastes, scents, nonlinear movement, and sound. In keeping with those who have challenged the “single, exclusive and intensive focus on written language” (Kress, 1999, p. 85) and the exclusion of the (much wider) range of meaning-making devices students are routinely called upon to negotiate, I have been inviting students to choose their mix of materials, methodologies, technologies, and rhetorical strategies for the past nine years. Given the mixed reactions that my students' work has received, I am cognizant of the challenges faced by those who support the production of texts that do not appear to look, function, or sound like the linear, print-based texts that are often associated with writing courses. In fact, of either of the sound-based texts featured later in this article, one might ask: “I grant you that the text *makes* sound, but is it also *sound* in the sense of being purposeful, rigorously crafted, or *soundly constructed*?” (Or less tactfully put: “Is this really rigorous academic work, or are students just playing around? What, if anything, are they learning about writing or composing? Is the theory supporting this work really sound?”)

It is this double sense of sound/soundness that I will explore here through the examination of two texts that feature sound and demonstrate a kind of conceptual, material, and rhetorical soundness resulting from their producers thinking carefully and critically about the impact of the various choices they made throughout the process of composing. I begin by describing how an activity-based multimodal theory of composing offers students opportunities to engage in the highly reflective, rigorous-productive play that Csikszentmihalyi and Wysocki advocate. After describing how this theory, one that has been intentionally designed to resist attempts to bracket off individual senses and the employment of select semiotic resources, has been taken up in the first-year writing courses I've taught, I present readers with two accounts of students who produced complex multimodal texts that happened to explore sound's potentials. I say “happened” because, in both instances, the inclusion of a sound component was not something I required of students, nor was it part of the overall concept or goal structure either student initially envisioned themselves pursuing. Rather, the decision to use sound

came after the students had determined that the goals they were hoping to achieve with their work might be satisfied, at least in part, through the uptake of sound. In presenting these accounts, I have attempted to let the students speak to the sound/soundness of their work with the intent of amplifying another sound that has been largely absent in our scholarship, that of students accounting for rhetorical objectives and the choices they made in service of those objectives.

## 1. Supporting the move toward multimodal soundness

As I treat in greater detail elsewhere (see Shipka, 2005), an activity-based multimodal theory of composing draws on theories of mediated activity and rejects the highly decontextualized skills and drills linear, single-mode approach to writing instruction, offering participants instead a richer and more intricately textured understanding of how communicative practices are socially and historically mediated. In keeping with Wysocki's definition of new media texts, the complex work students produce in my courses need not be digital, but might be composed, or as I prefer to put it, *soundly engineered*, out of anything. Of primary importance is that the text's materiality is foregrounded thereby reminding the recipient(s) that "any text—like its composers and readers—doesn't function independently of how it is made and in what contexts" (Wysocki, 2004, p. 15). Instead of "taking talk and writing as [its] starting point" as first-year composition courses often tend to do, an activity-based multimodal theory of composing privileges purposeful choosing, experimentation, and communicative flexibility by treating all modes, materials, and methodologies "as equally significant for meaning and communication, potentially so at least." (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 4). Students who enter the course hoping that I will provide them with "the" formula for good writing learn that the successful production of texts (including but not limited to the production of linear, print-based texts) is not determined by a stable set of universal composing laws that the student has somehow yet to discover or master but by how successfully they are able to negotiate (i.e., to recognize, respond to, and align with) the objectives, tools, rules, materials, and conventions of a specific communicative genre, activity system, or discipline.

In stressing the importance of communicative soundness and rhetorical flexibility, I am not suggesting that an activity-based multimodal theory of composing is alone in recognizing the importance of having students attend to the ways writing is taken up differently depending on what one intends to do, why, how, and with/for whom. The Council of Writing Program Administrator's Outcomes Statement adopted in 2000 also encouraged rhetorical awareness and flexibility by recommending that writing courses require students to respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations and to use conventions of genre, format, and structure appropriate to those situations (pp. 520–522). Similarly, this framework is not alone in recognizing the value of destabilizing final products and compositional processes by inviting students to produce complex multimodal texts instead of, or in addition to, the linear, thesis-driven, argumentative, print-based texts that composition instructors have become most familiar with assigning and responding to (see, e.g., Bishop, 2002; Bridwell-Bowles, 1992; Davis & Shadle, 2001; George, 2002; Selfe, 2004; Sirc, 2002; Wysocki, 2004; Yancey, 2004).

What makes an activity-based multimodal theory of composing unique has to do, in part, with the responsibility it places on students to determine the objectives and outcomes of the work they produce for the course. While, for instance, the [WPA's \(2002\)](#) statement is a bit fuzzy when it comes to specifying who will be responsible for determining the purposes, genres, technologies, and audiences students will engage with throughout the semester, this framework asks students to assume responsibility for determining the conditions and contexts of their work. Instead of my telling students what the final product will be—what it will look like, which modalities or literacies it will foreground, who it will be directed toward, how it will be delivered, circulated, or responded to—an activity-based multimodal theory of composing facilitates greater communicative flexibility by providing students with a series of open-ended tasks<sup>1</sup> that ask them to consider how even a seemingly simple, straightforward, and relatively familiar communicative objective might be accomplished in any number of ways and with any number of semiotic resources depending on how they choose to frame or coordinate their response to that objective. To this end, students are responsible for determining:

- The product(s) they will formulate in response to a given task; depending on what a student aims to accomplish, the product might take the form of a printed text, a handmade or repurposed object, a film, web page or a performance—or should students choose to engineer a multipart rhetorical event, as many often do, any combination thereof
- The operations, processes, or methodologies that will be (or could be) employed in generating that product or multipart event
- The resources, materials, and technologies that will be (or could be) employed in the generation of that product or multipart event

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<sup>1</sup> When I refer to “a series of open-ended tasks,” I do not mean to suggest that there is a set collection or sequence of tasks associated with an activity-based multimodal framework for composing. Throughout the years, I (as well as students) have tended to favor certain tasks over others—two of these tasks, in fact, are described in the accounts sections—but I want to underscore that the framework is not dependent upon a series of specific tasks but on how tasks are conceived of and presented to students. What each of the tasks has in common is that it presents students with some call to (or motive for) action/response and requires that students come up with at least two ways of responding to that call. For instance, a task I have recently developed for an upper-level undergraduate “Theories of Technology and Communication” course asks students to use an online patent archive to research the history and development of a product or invention. They are then required to reinvent that product and to create a patent for their work. Students may choose to follow the moves of the online patent or invent the look and sound of the patent. They must also come up with at least two ways of re-presenting (or pitching) their reinvention to the audience(s) of their choosing. In this way, students are required to decide what they will reinvent (and why), they must locate that reinvention in the context of other inventions, and they must determine how they will represent the constraints and affordances associated with that reinvention. For another task, one recently adopted for an upper-level undergraduate “Language and Society” course, I ask students to choose a literate activity or practice that they would consider themselves “experts” at (i.e., blogging, creating scrapbooks or maps, song-writing, facebooking, writing memos) and to create a context in which one of their objectives is to teach an audience of their choosing how to engage with that activity or practice. Beyond determining what they will teach, and who they will teach, students need to determine how, when, and where they will teach others about their activity or practice. For instance, will lessons take place online, face-to-face, in a classroom, or at some other location? Will lessons be hands-on, or lecture-based, discussion-based, or other? And so on.

- The specific conditions in, under, or with which the final product will be experienced by its audience—this involves determining or otherwise structuring the delivery, reception and/or circulation of their work

Importantly, asking students to take responsibility for the conditions, contexts, and communicative soundness of their work is not something this approach requires (or allows) them to do once or twice during the semester. Unlike, for instance, Wendy Bishop's (2002) radical revision assignment or Robert Davis and Mark Shadle's (2001) multi-genre alternative research writing projects, this approach to composing is not intended as an alternative to what Bishop has called "the backbone of program work: essay writing as usual" (p. 206). Rather, each of the tasks students are provided with during a semester requires that students determine the most fitting, or soundest, way of conveying, communicating, or representing the work they mean to do in response to a task. In some cases, students may decide that a series of emails, or Web postings will help them accomplish their goals. In other cases, a board game, a live performance, a linear, thesis-driven print-based essay, or a series of business or medical reports may make more sense given what they are attempting to accomplish. To ensure that students are thinking about communicative conditions and contexts in highly flexible, or sound-for-now ways, the tasks ask students to consider how the adoption of alternate goal structures, genres, or materials might impact the work they are hoping to accomplish. Asking students to imagine two or three ways of responding to a task helps to underscore the point that rhetorical and material soundness is not about producing the perfect text (i.e., one that works equally well for every audience or in every context), but about being willing and flexible enough to think beyond, or to think in addition to, the repertoire of choices one eventually commits to as deadlines approach and texts are due.

In this way, the kind of work that activity-based multimodal courses take as usual is not defined by the production of a particular kind of text that I, as instructor, have determined students need to accomplish (i.e., for Bishop, usual work refers to linear, print-based academic essays; in other instances it could be a Web page, a business memo, or a visual argument). Rather, what these courses take as usual work has to do with presenting students with ongoing opportunities to demonstrate their increasing rhetorical awareness and communicative flexibility and to articulate both why and how the goals they set and the rhetorical, material, and methodological choices they make in service of those goals allow them to accomplish something that the adoption of other goals or choices might not have afforded. Put otherwise, an activity-based multimodal theory of composing is supported ("backboned") by the goal of ensuring that students become increasingly cognizant of the "alternative *assumptions*" (original emphasis Royster, 2002, p. 26) that occasion, support, surround, and complicate the production and consumption of the wide variety of texts they routinely engage with, whether by necessity or choice.

To ensure that students are attending to the ways the goals they adopt for their work and the various choices they make in support of those goals simultaneously afford and constrain potentials for knowledge, participation, and (re)action, students are required to compose a statement of goals and choices for each of the texts they produce. These highly detailed texts provide students with the opportunity to communicate to me how, why, and under what conditions they made the rhetorical, material, and methodological choices they did. While the

questions students are asked to address in these statements vary slightly with each task, they are always asked to respond to the following:

1. What, specifically, is this piece trying to accomplish—above and beyond satisfying the basic requirements outlined in the task description? In other words, what work does, or might, this piece do? For whom? In what contexts?
2. What specific rhetorical, technological, and material choices did you make in service of accomplishing the goal(s) articulated above?—This is the longest section of the student's statement of goals and purposes as it is comprised of all the specific choices he/she made in his/her work.
3. Why did you end up pursuing this plan as opposed to others you may have thought of? How did the various choices listed above allow you to accomplish things that other sets or combinations of choices would not have?—For the majority of the tasks assigned students need to come up with three or four plans of action, or alternate goal structures, for approaching the task.
4. Who and/or what helped you accomplish your goals.

As students often choose to work with materials, methodologies, and technologies I am not familiar with, these complex statements serve an additional purpose in providing me with a way of navigating and responding to texts that may not look or work like the texts I am more familiar with. In this way, I am also able to learn more about how the meaning-making resources and genres students choose to employ in their work simultaneously provide shape for, and take shape from, the tasks they encounter in my course.

To illustrate how an activity-based multimodal approach to composing requires students to think about composing practices, communicative goal structures, and their potentials in increasingly complex, rigorous, flexible, and sound-for-now ways, I offer two accounts of students who decided to produce sound-based texts after determining that the goals they were most interested in pursuing with their work might be satisfied, at least in part, through the use of sound.

## 2. "I too can Musick above dead sounds of Man": presenting Oblivious Ed

After receiving a task assigned during the fourth week of the semester that requires students to research the history of a word using the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary* and to use this data as the basis for a text that attempts to teach an audience of their choosing something about what the word means and how it has been used over time, Dan Frey,<sup>2</sup> a history major, described in the statement of goals and choices accompanying his assignment that he considered using definitions of the word "student" as "the basis of a class session." He soon rejected the word and the concept, explaining that the idea of creating lecture notes and a series of readings, assignments, and in-class activities designed to teach students about the word "student" seemed boring, "perhaps a little too tried and done." Dan credited his classmates with helping him come up with a more compelling goal structure for his work:

<sup>2</sup> With their written permission, I refer to both students by their real names.



I didn't know what word to choose or how to go about making a really cool project. Then during our first class workshop, someone said something about doing something that you found fun and interesting. I love listening to [music] and I love playing it, so why not incorporate that interest into this project? After class, I called the singer/guitarist from my band and asked him if it would be feasible to write and record some songs all based around the definition of the word music. After he said he'd be glad to help, I got to work, trying to somehow arrange the seemingly endless stream of data into songs.

Dan, a songwriter and drummer, had access to many of the resources he would need while creating his collection of *OED*-inspired songs entitled *Oblivious Ed Presents Music*. Beyond having the ability to compose and perform music, he had bandmates willing to assist him with the project, access to instruments and recording equipment, and a space to record the songs. As many of these resources were back at home, Dan arranged for a weekend trip and spent the better part of the week composing song lyrics and deciding on a name for his band's "alter ego." Dan again credits his classmates for helping him come up with a name:

I originally went with OED. Then in my head, it changed to The OEDs. During our second workshop someone mentioned that [it] was not a very original name. Someone else mentioned that it might be cool if [OED] stood for something completely different. I came up with "oblivious" and couldn't think of anything for the E or D but then noticed that together they made Ed. Thus the band Oblivious Ed was born.

A crucial component of the concept Dan chose to explore with this piece had to do with how Oblivious Ed was, in keeping with its name, completely *oblivious* to what it took to succeed in the music business. For Dan, the most appealing part of the task had to do with how it would allow him to create something of a musical train-wreck (think *This is Spinal Tap*; Murphy & Reiner, 1984), one that would elicit a somewhat puzzled response from listeners:

My intention was to entertain [listeners] with the strange varieties of music that [Oblivious Ed] played and with their lyrics, which were all comprised from the *OED*. I'm trying to show that with the word music, you can make music. I wanted [the CD] to be funny, interesting, at times appealing to the ear, at times just ridiculously awful. I wanted the audience to question how this band got a record deal [...] and why they would record this CD.

From Dan's perspective, the most challenging aspect of the task concerned finding ways to turn *OED* data into songs. With each song, he did what he could to make his juxtaposition of the *OED* data seem less like various spellings for and definitions of music and more like a collection of actual (albeit perhaps not very good) songs. The task's three-fourths rule (i.e., three quarters of the text that appears in or on the final piece must be *OED* data) posed a unique challenge in that he needed to keep himself from "straying [from the data] too much," he said. While composing the song "Stevie's Abiding Obsession," for instance, Dan found the *OED*'s 1990 reference to "a boy who loves to play the guitar" so "intriguing" that he considered "making an entire song about this boy" because he wanted to "know more about him." Not wanting to violate the three-quarters rule but wanting to ensure that Stevie remained the focus of the song, Dan "made him into the title and first line, and wrote the song in a minor key because the title seemed a bit sad."

Dan composed seven songs for the CD, but due to a miscue during the recording session, two of the songs ("Verb" and "Loftiest Strains") appeared as a single track on the CD. The

Table 1  
Song selections from Oblivious Ed

Definition Part I	The Verb (Loftiest Strains)
A musical art, performance, or composition	To perform or compose music
It's the art or science of combining	To entertain oneself with music
Vocal or instrumental sounds to beauty	From R. Lovelace Poems in 1649
Form, harmony, rhythm, expressive content, Etcetera	I too can Musick above dead sounds of Man
The occupation or profession of musicians	In 1788 I supposed you're reading
The word has often been used specifically	I suppose you're drawing and musiking
To denote the art of musical performance	In 1846 they superintended their affairs
Sometimes with particular reference to	They read a little and musicked a little
Instrumental performance, although	In 1900 we met together in Leipzig
Contextually it can denote other branches	We met, ate, and even together
As composition, musicology	In 1999 we wondered how late
Etcetera	How late he be musicking this year?

songs “Definition Part I” and “Definition Part II” were comprised entirely of definitions taken from the noun and adjective portion of the database. The song “Compounds” consisted of “all the compounds that the word music can go with.” “Stevie’s Abiding Obsession” consisted of a sampling of the sentences he found in the noun and adjective portion of the database, and the song “Spelling Bee”—what Dan described as his “attempt to write a spoken word song”—consisted of the various spellings of “music.” The song “The Verb (Loftiest Strains)” consisted of definitions of the verb form of “music” juxtaposed with sentences that “helped define the word.” The verb entry for “music” did not contain as much data as the noun/adjective entry did, so Dan found himself needing to include references to the “years and contexts in which these definitions came to be used” to avoid creating a song comprised of the same few bits of information repeated over and over. Dan was pleased with the way the lines of the song seemed to “come together to form a kind of musical history of the word in its verb form” and to create “a story [with] characters” even if the story was, at times, “impossible to follow or understand.” He felt strongly that this blending of definitions, people, allusions, and dates gave the song a “feeling of tightness that was a little lacking in the other two Definitions songs.” Compare, for instance, portions of “Definition Part I” with portions of “The Verb (Loftiest Strains)” in Table 1.

After composing the lyrics for seven songs and settling on a band name, Dan went home and connected with the two other members of Oblivious Ed. The songs were performed and recorded at “Ungodly Studios” (a reference to what the singer/guitarist of his band calls his basement recording studio) in an impromptu, jam-band manner. That the recording session was primarily one devoted to experimentation, having fun, and making decidedly bad music is suggested by these excerpts from Dan’s statement of goals:

[I knew] “Compounds” would be a tedious song to write, to sing, and most importantly to listen to. It is played as a metal song—a bad metal song—because we thought it would be fun to show off different kinds of bad music and this, we felt, was a great example of this bands lack of talent and direction.



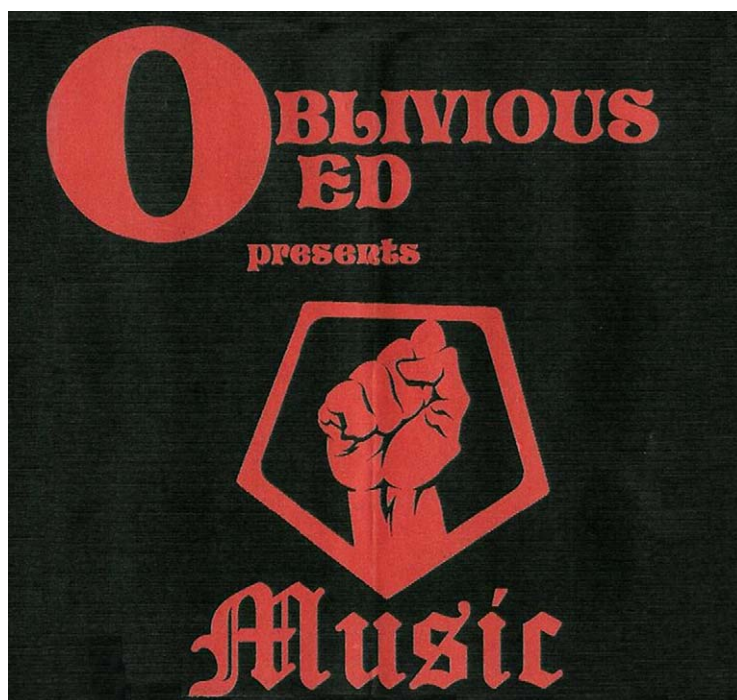


Fig. 1. “Oblivious Ed Presents Music.”

The title [“Spelling Bee”] comes from the fact that all that spelling out reminded me of an elementary school spelling bee and I thought it would be a funny way to sum up the entire song. We had no idea how to play a spoken word song and thought that would make it all the more funny. We had a lot of fun with it. At one point you can hear the singer laughing while singing. It’s supposed to be a horrible song and I think we succeeded with that.

The title [“Loftiest Strains”] came from a line in the *OED* that reads “Music shall waft her loftiest strains whilst joy beams from all eyes.” I thought that sounded really beautiful and wanted to bring attention to that particular line. Initially this song was supposed to be two songs, but my singer accidentally starting singing “Loftiest Strains” right after “The Verb” so that is how this wound up as the longest song on the CD.

With the seven tracks successfully recorded and burned onto disk, Dan began designing the packaging for the CD. The fist on the cover of the CD (Figure 1) was, at once, Dan’s way of referencing and honoring the work of two bands whose CDs he had enjoyed while working on this task: Green Day’s *American Idiot* and Metallica’s *St. Anger*. While satisfied with the cover for the CD, Dan was disappointed with how the rest of packaging turned out. The information that appeared inside the “corny-looking, taped together” booklet that came with the CD was “basically illegible,” something Dan blames on the printer he “had to use” while working on the piece at home.

Cognizant that readers would not be able to read the information presented in the booklet (i.e., song lyrics, information about where the CD was recorded, on what label, the list of

credits where Dan thanked every person from the *OED* whose work was referenced in his lyrics), he created reader-friendly copies of the booklet's contents to turn in with the CD. He recalled how the piece suddenly "began to change meanings in [his] head:"

My original plan was to just turn in the CD case with the booklet, but once I had to include [the manila envelope that held the 8.5" × 11" copies of the lyrics and production credits], I began to think of this as a press package. I thought this would add an extra element of how the CD was supposed to be received and who the intended audience was [...] and I felt it was a unique and interesting way to show how music truly works for bands these days. If a band wants to play places, they have to work at it and send out [press] packages to venues they would like to play at. If a venue doesn't know a band exists, they can't book the band.

In keeping with the genre of the press package, Dan took the materials his band sends out to venues (i.e., a photo, bios, and contact information) and altered them to reflect his understanding of who Oblivious Ed was and what the band was about. The repurposed band bio, in particular, allowed Dan to highlight the fact that the individual members of Oblivious Ed were all over the place in terms of musical tastes, backgrounds, and creative visions in hopes that this might explain why the CD was such a disaster.

On the day the OEDs were due, Dan turned in a manila envelope addressed to me (configured now as a venue owner) that contained the CD, the transcripts of the booklet's materials, and his six-page statement of goals and choices. While the idea of representing his songs as part of a press package allowed him to further fine tune the collection's purpose, its intended audience and, more generally speaking, the specific work it meant to do, Dan was careful to note his awareness of having to break, however slightly, with the genre of the real press package, underscoring that a real one would not include transcripts of lyrics, or, of course, an explicit statement of one's goals, motives, and choices.

### **3. "Just like stepping into another room": touring "The American Museum of Greed"**

Typically assigned during the tenth week of the semester, the "Research/Re-Source" task asks students to research the way a person, place, or thing has been represented in a wide range of sources (scholarly texts, cards, memos, children's books, songs, bumper stickers, film, photographs, web sites, and so on) and to create a context that allows them to represent (for an audience of their choosing) their analyses of their sources. When Val Musolf, a biology major, received the task, she was interested in collecting sources that portrayed the U.S. population (which she referred to by the colloquial term, "Americans") as generous. Maintaining that Americans had been "somewhat blacklisted internationally for removing some of the liberties of the Iraqi people while trying to give them freedom," Val was troubled by the idea that "many countries" had skewed representations of what Americans were really like. Hoping to create a text and a context that would allow her to "refute this argument" (that *all* Americans are "greedy and selfish"), Val began collecting "articles, shows, etc. of Americans helping people in far lands."

Unable to find the number and variety of sources she needed to fulfill the task requirements, Val took the opposite point of view and began collecting sources that perpetuated the idea that all Americans are greedy, materialistic, and self-involved. In reversing her approach to the task, Val hoped to create something that would motivate readers to examine their own value systems and to ask themselves, “Do these sources ring true? Are *all* Americans *really* this greedy?” She also hoped that a more sardonic, in-your-face approach to the topic might also motivate those who would actually experience her work (i.e., her classmates, her friends, and family members) to take more control over the way they were being negatively represented in various types of media.

Val first decided to create a pamphlet for “tourists who had never been to America.” Realizing, however, that the amount of information her pamphlet would have to contain would make it seem less like a pamphlet and more like the chapter of a book (i.e., in keeping with the task description, analyses of *at least* eight different kinds of sources), she decided that it made more sense to adopt a different goal structure and create “one of those tourist guide books that tells you all the best places to go.” In this case, each of the places featured in her guidebook would inform readers of where “crimes” of American “greed” took place. While fond of the idea of creating a text that attempted to cross the genre of the travel guide with the whodunit, the guide book concept proved “too complicated” to produce because she felt that she needed to know “where everything exactly took place.” For instance, if she were going to refer to a movie, an ad for a beauty product, a series of songs, or a set of statistics, she would need to know *exactly* where the movie was shot, the ad produced, the songs recorded, and so on. Since she did not have that information for all of her sources, she grew discouraged with the guidebook idea.

In her statement of goals and choices, Val reported that that the “biggest move” she made with the piece had to do with coming up with the idea of creating a museum. Adopting this context for her work allowed her to represent her sources as exhibits while still retaining the sense of location, placement, or arrangement associated with the pamphlet and guide book ideas. In other words, as Val was unaccustomed to creating an extended research-based project that integrated scholarly and everyday texts—such as songs, ads, images, chat spaces, and film—the museum, with its variously themed rooms, allowed her to transition between types of sources without having to rely solely on the written conventions she practiced in high school:

[The museum] helped me to categorize my information in a coherent manner and allowed the many different resources to be linked throughout the entire museum. [. . .] The rooms also provided fluency when [they] were switched. Just like stepping into another room with different people, different furniture, etc., the topic and the things discussed changed greatly.

By moving the bodies of her audience members through a physical (albeit imaginary) space, Val found a way to transition visitors out of one themed room into another, confident that even if the movement between exhibits or rooms seemed abrupt, the experience of the museum as a whole would hang together since it was focused on American greed.

In her statement of goals and choices, Val explained the purpose of this new museum located in Beverly Hills, California, the place she called “the home of greed”:

Each source is used to prove to the public that American society is perceived as greedy to other countries. Some of the explanations of the exhibits are juvenile because much of today's public would already know the background and that the situation involved greed. This is meant to bore the American listener which drives the point of American greed even more; Americans would know the story, and be much less interested in hearing it, even if it would be from a different perspective. Foreigners, on the other hand, might find the [exhibits] more interesting, paying attention better, and because of their interest, really see that these exhibits prove Americans are greedy.

Thus far, Val and I have referred to her museum in ways that may strongly suggest that it was a concept she explored *as well as* a physical, three-dimensional “museum-like” object she produced for the course (i.e., something constructed of tangible stuff divided into a series of separate rooms with walls filled with “exhibits of greed”). In fact, there is only one place in her statement where Val refers to the piece in a way that more accurately describes what the piece was—namely, when discussing the audio component for a “walk-along-tour” of the museum.

Val's museum was, in effect, an imagined space, one that she knew well, and one for which she created an audio guide that she later burned onto CD, housed in a plastic case and handed in—along with a 10-page typed transcript of the tour, a works-cited page containing references to 17 of the sources featured on the tour, and her 6-page statement of goals and choices. Before describing what Val did with the audio component, it may be helpful to understand why she opted to do an audio component at all. In her statement, she explained that having a laptop computer and microphone in her dorm room made the process of recording an audio guide fairly “easy” as she didn't need to purchase or borrow equipment or spend her time seeking out a potentially more public space on campus, one that would have the tools she'd need to realize the tour. Given the number of false starts she had experienced thus far, it was crucial that Val be able to create the tour as well and as quickly as she was able to in order to get the piece submitted on time. Otherwise put, as she didn't have time to create a physical prototype of the museum, she opted instead to create the illusion of being at a museum. Working in her dorm room with the equipment she had on hand allowed her to read the written portions of the scripted tour while utilizing the songs and various sounds she had decided to feature in each of the museum's rooms—again, sound being one of the ways Val worked to sustain the illusion that tourists were, in fact, entering radically different spaces as they took the tour. Another advantage to working in the (relatively private) space of her dorm room had to do with how it allowed her to use “the intonation of [her] voice to [her] advantage.” She could assume an enthusiastic, “somewhat mocking” tone as tour guide without having to worry about what others thought or having to stop and explain what she was doing, why, and so on.

Val created her own packaging for the CD, explaining that she used “a wide Latin font” for the cover and the track index “because it most closely resembled the font used on the dollar bill.” The decision to print the text in green was intended as a way to further “entice feelings of greed.” The clip art images featured on the cover were intended to provide a visual link to the tracks (or individual rooms) featured on the CD: The sports room, Hollywood room, music room, government room, and the “catch-all” Joe Schmo room, represented by the stacks of money (Figure 2).

On the audio disk's introductory track, Val (as tour guide), welcomed the listener to the museum and explained that the CD was meant to function as a “brilliant companion to the

# The American Museum of Greed



Fig. 2. "The Museum of American Greed."

interesting exhibits," one that had been designed to help visitors "navigate the many visual, audio, literacy, and other types of displays." Although she provided visitors with the option of tailoring the tour to their own interests by "skipping around" the tracks if they would like to, the tour proper began with the sports room—the "room located to the right, and nearest to the entrance of the museum"—after which listeners would be guided through the museum in a "counterclockwise direction."

Val explained that the rooms were intentionally arranged to make the tour seem, at least to start, far more exciting than it would actually prove to be. To this end, every track on the CD, save for that which guided visitors through the government room, had a greed-themed song playing in the background. In addition to allowing Val to set "a greedy tone" for the tour as a whole while working to maintain the illusion that one was really moving through space, the background audio tracks allowed her to play with audience expectations.

For instance, explaining why the sports room with its background audio track featuring "voice recordings from ESPN, the sports network and other [upbeat] music that would generally be heard at a sporting event" had to come first, she wrote:

[The sports room] is the most exciting. When you are watching or participating in sports, adrenaline starts pumping and you get excited, but only for a short period of time. This is like the sports room itself. This is the first room and the listener is excited to be in the museum and see displays. But the excitement only lasts until you realize that [the exhibits] are going to be incredibly boring. The intonation of my voice is mocking this fact through its enthusiastic, informative tone.

The decision to make the Hollywood room the second stop on the tour was one that Val hoped would further confound the visitor's expectations: "The general public would probably think that this room was going to be exciting but [it] is actually filled with stories that most Americans already know," such as "stories" about Martha Stewart's incarceration, Winona Ryder's shoplifting, and the details of how much money top Hollywood actors currently earn. Non-American visitors, on the other hand, might experience the exhibits differently, paying closer attention to them as they might contain new information, Val suspected.

The music room was Val's favorite room, given her interest in, and appreciation for, music. It was also the one room she thought would have "been kind of cool" to have actually realized in a three-dimensional form. As tourists entered this third stop on the tour, Val began pointing out the room's special features and explained how the exhibits were designed to be experienced:

The music room is one of our more exciting rooms because it is interactive! As you follow along the wall, you can press each red button below the video screen and hear the song that is evidence for American musical greed. If a music video isn't available for that song, a picture of the artist will simply show on the screen. A brief explanation will follow the end of the song [or video] explaining why it is [here].

After "pointing out" (i.e., playing and analyzing) certain exhibits she insists visitors "cannot miss," such as Jennifer Lopez' "Jenny from the Block" and Nelly's "Greed, Hate and Envy," Val treats the final source featured on the room's interactive displays, The Flying Lizards' cover of the Beatle's "Money (That's What I Want)," a song that she suggests is "so unpleasing to the ear, [it] must be purely enjoyed for its greedy lyrics!" In her statement of goals, she suggested that the more "astute" listener would have noted the irony in her final song selection. That is to say, when the music room is first entered, the Beatle's version of "All You Need is Love" had been playing in the background.

If American visitors had not already grown bored with the tour (perhaps bored enough to insist on getting their money back?), the government room, with its purposefully simplistic treatment of the Watergate scandal and its explanation of pork barrel politics was intended to seal the deal. In her statement of goals Val explained why she didn't have a background soundtrack for the room:

By the time you reach the government room, the listeners should be so bored that they can't keep their eyes open. [It] didn't have any music because it was supposed to be dull. While I was listening to the tracks, I found myself listening to the background music when I got bored. Because there was no background music, there wasn't a possibility of trying to entertain oneself during this part of the tour.

Despite the emphasis placed here, and elsewhere, on boring her audience, Val's statement of goals made it clear that this was not her only goal for the piece. She was much more interested in creating a rollercoaster-like experience that would play with audience expectations—recall how in the sports room she used sound to suggest that the tour would be more exciting and more interactive than it actually proved to be. Cognizant of the risks involved with taking on this kind of a goal (What if the audience members are so bored, confused, or offended they just quit the tour or stop listening?), Val explained why the Joe Schmo room was placed last on the tour:



It requires a lot of interaction from the crowd. If the museum was boring [so far], it may help to end on a good note. The exhibits that I used in this room were everyday stories of greed, and illustrations of everyday people. The point of having a wide variety of everyday stories in this room was to hit home with every person: Don't be greedy because you don't want to be like this person.

While describing and analyzing the exhibits featured in the Joe Schmo room, Val took care to underscore that this room, like the other rooms, was still undergoing development. That is to say, there is a clear sense that the museum is still in its infancy and that the museum's sponsors are both eager and willing, perhaps even *expecting*, to continue increasing their collection of greedy exhibits. What makes the Joe Schmo room particularly intriguing, and a particularly fitting way of closing the tour, is that here Val actively solicited new stories of greed from the visitors, a greedily American move in and of itself:

If you have a story that would add to the exhibits found in the museum please share with those around you! Have fun and stay open minded to the stories that others tell you. If you hear an excellent story, there is a greed box in the front where you can suggest one to become part of our museum. We hoped you enjoyed our museum and please come back again!

#### 4. Soundly unstable: reinforcing the concept of soundness-for-now

To claim that Dan and Val's sound-based texts demonstrated a kind of conceptual, material, and rhetorical soundness is not to say that either of the text's producers felt that they had perfectly imagined or flawlessly articulated the best or only way of producing a press package for a band or creating the experience of touring an imaginary museum. Rather, the kind of soundness demonstrated here had to do with both composers having had thought carefully about what they hoped to achieve and how they might achieve those goals given the resources they happened to have on hand.

In the end, Dan felt his CD booklet looked unprofessional or "corny" because it was taped together. While the botched print job ultimately provided him with a way of creating a richer context for presenting and promoting Oblivious Ed's work, he wished he had had time to create a "behind-the-scenes" mockumentary about the making of the band and its music—an idea inspired by VH1's series *Behind the Music*. Val might have attempted to create a prototype of the music room had she not devoted as much time as she had to working through ideas for creating an "Americans-as-generous" piece, a pamphlet, and a guide book. In the end, she expressed reservations about sounding too "cheesy" and "annoyingly optimistic" in her role as tour guide. That both students were imagining ways in which their texts and the contexts governing the production of those texts might be richer, more complex, or simply *other* than they ended up being underscores again that soundness has less to do with creating the perfect text than it has to do with being both willing and flexible enough to think beyond or in addition to the repertoire of choices one finally commits to when a text comes due.

To further underscore the idea that seemingly simple, straightforward, and relatively familiar communicative objectives might be accomplished in any number of ways depending on how one chooses to frame or coordinate their response to that objective, I often ask students to

produce portfolios in which they de- and recontextualize the work they have produced over the semester. Students may choose to de- and recontextualize their own collections of work or they may choose to swap all or some of their work with a peer and allow him/her to imagine alternate goal structures (i.e., new objectives) for that work. Students who may not have opted to explore the affordances of sound, tastes, textures, visuals, performances, or linear, print-based texts are now provided with opportunities to imagine or, if they so choose, to enact those differences at the end of the semester. While de- and recontextualizing their semester's worth of work, students are again required to think about the implications associated with at least "two sets of goals and rules" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 19). One of these "sets," those "operating here and now," as Csikszentmihalyi said, are comprised of the objectives and choices students actually pursued in the work they produced earlier in the semester while the other set(s), those that "apply outside the given activity," involve the networks of similarities and differences associated with adopting other goal structures or contexts for that work (p. 19). Since students have already spent time speculating on how the adoption of alternate goal structures might have enhanced, distracted from, or (not-so-simply) altered in interesting ways the work they accomplished for a particular task, many find that the statements of goals and choices they composed earlier in the semester are particularly valuable resources for helping them come up with ideas for de- and recontextualizing their work at the semester's end.

Dan opted to de- and recontextualize his own semester's worth of work by creating a historical–legal context for that work, something that he, as a history major, was particularly interested in exploring. In this new context, Oblivious Ed was put on trial—sued by the *OED*, in fact, for making bad music in a document Dan entitled "Oxford vs. Roland." [Note: Roland was the last name of one member of Oblivious Ed.] Val chose to work with nine of her classmates, all of whom were interested in collaborating on a catalogue project for people interested in purchasing products featured in the catalogue with an interest in de- and recontextualizing that work so as to "make it one's [i.e., the consumer's] own."

Space precludes me from detailing all the choices Dan and Val made while de- and recontextualizing their bodies of work, but I want to conclude by highlighting some of the ways Val imagined the de- and recontextualization of her "American Museum of Greed" as a way of underscoring how an activity-based multimodal theory of composing supports the move toward multimodal soundness by encouraging students to think purposefully and flexibly about potentials for (re)making and (re)negotiating meaning when they are provided opportunities to work with a much wider variety of semiotic resources than composition courses have traditionally allowed.

In keeping with the context that the collaborative catalogue group had decided to explore with the portfolio task, contributing companies (i.e., students involved in this collaboration) were asked to create individual catalogues of the stock they had on hand and to describe and assess the value of each item contained in the collection. Importantly, contributors were also asked to come up with several ways that consumers might take each existing item and make it his or her own through this process of recontextualization.

For example, Val described her "interactive Museum of Greed" as her company's "best product offered" and set its price at \$95.00, almost double the cost of the other items featured in her portion of the catalogue primarily because the greatest amount of time and effort had been devoted to this task. Less-motivated (read: lazy) consumers were afforded the option of

letting Val's company de- and recontextualize the piece for them by substituting Val's voice for another—to do so, the consumer needs only send a check and a voice sample. Prospective consumers who might be interested, however, in enacting more significant changes to Val's work were provided with the following (excerpted) suggestions:

*Choose another topic other than greed.* While greed is a major problem in the United States, there are many other topics you could focus on: Americans as war-hungry, vulgar, loud/obnoxious, and immoral

*Take another perspective on the topic.* While the author of this item decided to use American proof for the museum, you could also use an outsider's perspective [although] this research might take a little more time to conduct because of the language and distance barriers between you and your sources

*Research different sources and add another room if necessary.* The author's assignment was to have 8–10 different sources. She has a total of 17 [but] some of these sources are weak and could be replaced by stronger ones. Also, more everyday sources could be used such as advertisements of billboard, flyers passed out on the quad, and interview with an American or foreigner that thinks that Americans are [insert topic of your choice]

*Change the intonation of your voice.* Throughout the entire voice recording, the composer/author's voice portrays certain feelings toward what the rooms include. You can change these to [reflect] the way you think about each room or greed in general

*Use different background songs.* The background songs that were chosen for the original piece were from a restricted collection of songs. But we also have a much larger library of songs. To see the list of songs in our library, visit our web site. The use of [different songs] will provide small changes that send subtle messages to the museum's tourists

The way Val imagines alternatives to, and new potentials for, her work illustrates how providing students with the option of pursuing sound in their work helps move us toward an understanding of sound (or, anticipating next steps, of student's use of textures, scents, objects, embodied performances, and so on) that is infinitely richer and decidedly more compelling than when instructors determine for students that sound—or any other meaning-making device—necessarily provides the best, only, or preferred way for students to engage with course objectives. Given what Val hoped to achieve with the greed piece, the use of sound was sound—that is to say, it made sense as it provided her with a way of achieving an interactive museum-like effect when time, talent, desire, or access to resources may have prevented her from realizing the piece on paper (i.e., through a series of sketches or blueprints, or a series of published reviews) through a collection of still or moving images or in a three-dimensional form.

A pedagogy of multimodal composition has been made stronger by the attention paid to visual and digital rhetorics, and it might be made stronger still by attending to the use of sound. And perhaps a bit further down the road, it might be made stronger still by attending to the use of textures, and then scents, objects, embodied performances, and so on. What I propose here and now, however, is a more integrated (or sound) approach to multimodal production—one that resists attempts to bracket off the individual senses and the uptake of required/assigned semiotic resources for one that is both inclusive and robust enough to allow us to examine the complex interplay that exists between the various modes, materials, methods, and technologies students choose to take up (or that they may only imagine themselves taking up) in their work.

In privileging rigorous play, purposeful choosing, alternate goal structures, and the articulation of choices in relation to goals, an activity-based multimodal theory of composing provides us with a way, but, perhaps more importantly still, it provides students with a way to begin attending to the various ways a greater variety of senses, modes, and materials might be brought together, if only briefly and if only in sound-for-now ways, to help them accomplish the kind and quality of work they are most invested in pursuing.

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