

Learner-Audience Connections:

Using Music to Enhance Rhetorical Understandings of Communication

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The memoirs were dreary. I read a play-by-play of a soccer game; the obtuse, technical narration of a student's legal battle; the minute-by-minute dialogue between a student and passengers on a bus as she became lost and penniless on a summer trip to a foreign country; and the record-like documentation of multiple students' medical conditions. While I knew that my students were relatively inexperienced with creative nonfiction, I had hoped that both reading about the craft and analyzing strong examples of the genre would provide enough scaffolding for them to begin to step away from writing the traditional academic essay. It wasn't enough.

I was teaching "Writing in the Public Sphere," a course which aims, among other objectives, to engage students in service-learning and multimodal composing grounded in the art of creative nonfiction. Assignments expose students to ways in which multiple genres function to fulfill a common purpose. In this particular class, students began with writing a mini memoir, an assignment designed to engage students with their own emotional experiences and to write creatively, in a form they had rarely (if ever) been called upon to write as college students and professionals in training. From there, the course called for them to take the ideas in their written memoirs and convey them in a video essay. Then, after engaging with additional course materials and in-class assignments, students would work in teams and submit a proposal for how

their team would contribute to the final project.

The final project for this class, specifically, was to write a book chapter about the issue of hunger faced by senior citizens, a chapter which would include the personal stories (written in the form of creative nonfiction) of senior citizens serviced by the Campus Kitchens Project (CKP).¹ In addition to contributing to the book, students were developing a survey to collect quantitative data about CKP services, as well as creating digital marketing materials for Kent State University's CKP website. In this way, students were responding to the needs of others, realizing the importance of literacy outside of the classroom, and gaining valuable experience to display in professional portfolios or discuss during job interviews. My students, however, had stumbled on the first level of the scaffold. In order for them to create meaningful, poignant stories, and put them into the forms of a written book chapter and digital marketing materials, students needed a greater understanding of "writing[ing] about the *real* world with grace, power, and personal commitment" (Perl & Schwartz, 2014, p. xiii).

To explain students' rhetorical tasks in more familiar terms, I turned to music. After all, I could rarely exchange greetings with students making their way across campus, due to the music blaring through their headphones at every opportunity. In my office and at home, I too could frequently be found working to the sounds of various musical artists. As a matter of fact, I had recently joined a choir, because music performance was an important part of my past, but also because I thought the weekly rehearsals would make the dissertation writing process more tolerable and productive.

Cognitively, the parallels were easy to make. My class had been talking about tone,

¹ The Campus Kitchens Project (CKP) is a national organization that works with colleges to provide food to those who need it, through recovering food from cafeterias and having students prepare and deliver meals to community partners.

rhythm, repetition, and performance in writing. We also talked at length about the importance of reading their work aloud as a way of hearing their writing as a performance, an attempt to move an audience. Cross (2003) argues that “Music embodies, entrains and transposably intentionalises time in sound and action. In this view, music is not restricted to sounded events but extends to actions” (p. 24). This argument about music and its intentions furthered the connection I was making to other forms of communication. So, after discussing with students the issues with their first attempts at writing creative nonfiction in the form of mini memoirs (the rate at which the stories progressed, the inefficient use of repetition, the lack of technical complexity that would keep a reader engaged), I instructed them to take the ideas of their memoirs and compose them multimodally, with the comparisons to music in mind.

The multimodal compositions incorporating music made it easier for students to understand the tone and timing of their writing as it related to capturing and holding the attention of an audience. For example, one student, Jenna Chilinski², turned her mini memoir about her skydiving experience into a video, following the conventions of suspenseful movie trailers.

Jenna wrote:

When writing creative nonfiction you get to experiment with different styles of writing and use tools to make the content sound more interesting... I kept it interesting by changing the music, my tone of voice, and switching from pictures to video. I added suspenseful music and different video effects to give the viewers a sense of wonder when they were watching it... I made sure to time up the music I chose so when the chorus got loud that was when the video footage was of something exciting, like me taking my first

² Material was used with students’ written permission. Students chose to be cited by name rather than anonymously. To preserve the authenticity of their voice, material was cited as written by students, without my making corrections to their work.

jump. It is important to pay attention to all of these aspects when creating a visual essay because all of these little details put together create an exciting story line.

Another student (who is also a musician), Sam Lasko, actually wrote a song and produced a music video for his memoir project. He wrote:

The pressure from society to be in a relationship is a big part of the song... The second half of the second verse goes, "I'm too tired to love, so I'm alone." These are heavy words coming from a 19-year-old but it was so true in the moment. After being a part of several failed relationships and weird love interactions I started losing faith in my compatibility. I am less naïve about these customs now, however at the time I felt like just making myself look crazy and going into public like, "look... I don't care about anything!!!"... The reason I chose this song is not just because it was from this part of my life. I have a handful of songs that were inspired by this sadness. I chose this song because the words still ring true to me today. I have made a lot of art in my short time on earth and it's not often that I like my work enough that it sticks with me. Not just the music, but the meaning of the words. I am blessed to have a medium of expression that allows me to document my emotion with such accuracy.

While Jenna and Sam chose music, at least in part, to reflect on their experiences, writers have written about the role of music in their own experiences of adventure, love, and loss. For example, music has been featured in *New York Times* bestseller narratives like Sheffield's *Love is a Mixtape* (2007) and Logelin's *Two Kisses for Maddy* (2011), both of which detail the loss of a spouse and the ways in which music provided a guide through the grieving process. Similar to the role of music highlighted in these books, music taught my students about what composing with and writing about music reveals about our relation to others. With music, I taught my

students about listening as a rhetorical practice, about listening as a writer and listening as a reader. This helped my students to *write* as readers. I also demonstrated that emotion has a place in writing, even “academic” writing, and that music can help them identify how best to express emotion in various modes.

My students’ experiences with music and writing mirror those explored in neuroaesthetics, the discipline devoted to understanding properties of the brain as it engages in aesthetics (Chatterjee, 2010) such as art and music. Music and its relation to perceptual and cognitive skills has been well-researched (Brattico et al. 2009; Kraus & Chandrasekaran 2010; Pallesen et al. 2010; Schulze, Zysset, Mueller, Friederici, & Koelsch 2011). For instance, explorations of the dynamics between music and emotion suggest a Music-Emotion Framework. This framework asserts three types of emotion: induced (emotion felt by a person in response to a “stimulus”), expressed (emotion conveyed in “audio, visual, or other forms of stimulus”), and perceived (emotion “sensed/detected as being expressed in the stimulus”) (Livingstone, 2010, p. 88). The notion of inducing, expressing, and perceiving emotion as it relates to music parallels Ede’s and Lunsford’s (1996) notion of writers addressing and invoking audiences.

Ede and Lunsford synthesize “audience addressed” and “audience invoked” to create an interdependence between writer and reader. In this interdependent relationship, the audience addressed suggests the possibility of a writer knowing the audience, and the audience invoked suggests giving readers cues to fill roles desired by the writer. In other words, knowing the audience allows the writer to make particular rhetorical (emotional, ethical, and logical) appeals to that audience. Invoking an audience means that a writer intentionally tries to move an audience in particular ways, emotionally or cognitively. On the one hand, the writer caters to the audience; on the other hand, the writer guides the audience. In both the cases of the Music-

Emotion Framework and the concepts of audience addressed and audience invoked, performer and audience occupy complex rhetorical situations, a “give and take” amidst a variety of social influences.

Again, while Cross (2003) argues that “music embodies, entrains and transposably intentionalises time in sound and action” so too do written, oral, and visual communication. In each form, composers must pay mind to genre, mode, tempo, rhythm, tone, and technical and syntactic complexity as they relate to a relationship with an audience. For example, a writer determines the appropriate genre (prose, poetry, creative nonfiction, fiction) in which to compose based on the writer’s feelings, the purpose of the composition, and the audience to which the writing is addressed. Using purpose and audience, along with the writer’s emotions, a writer also determines the best mode for the genre, for example, creative nonfiction in the form of text, graphic, or digital representations. Rhythm and tempo are considered in the types of sentences created and the placement of punctuation marks such as commas, semicolons, and periods. Imagery and vocabulary determine the tone of a written composition. Similarly, a speaker might determine the genre of a speech as either commemorative, explanatory, or activist in nature (among others). The speaker also considers the modes involved, such as speaking only or speaking with the aid of Power Point slides, videos, or drawings on a white board or chalk board. The speaker considers tempo and rhythm by determining the timing of the speech, the use of silence, and the placement of transitions. Moreover, tone is expressed with the venue at which the speaker presents his or her speech, the wardrobe choice of the speaker, the use of humor, and the language used. As with writing, the technical and syntactic complexity used by a speaker is determined by audience and purpose as it relates to the subject of speech. Finally, visual/digital

composers consider the genre of their work and the combinations of modes they use (music, video, still photographs, text, other artwork); the pace at which those modes move; the tone the modes convey based on sound, color, and rhythm; and the technical complexity, or skill, involved in the composition.

As Friedmann (2012) points out, “The effectiveness of musical rhetoric has less to do with the music itself than the intention and conviction of the presenter(s) and/or composer”; the same can be said for writers, speakers, and multimodal composers. I caution my students when they speak of “good writing” or the “right way” to use facebook (or other social networks), reminding them that what determines “good writing” or the “right way” to occupy digital spaces is determined by their message, the purpose of conveying that message, and the most effective way to convey that message given a specific audience and context. When presented with complex or new understandings of communication, students naturally feel bewildered and frustrated. In the case of my upper-division “Writing in the Public Sphere” students, many of them were Electronic Media Production majors; writing in the form of creative nonfiction was quite overwhelming for them. When dealing with my lower-division “Practices of Academic Writing” students, they are, in many ways, pushed to think and write critically, and in an engaging manner, for the first time. But whether lower- or upper-division, and regardless of major, most of my students can be seen walking across campus with earbuds in their ears or talking in class about the latest pop culture music icons. While not all students have a deep theoretical understanding of the musical terms discussed throughout this piece, students easily relate to music and its connections to emotion and audience. Asking students to put their writing, speeches, or digital compositions to music, or even to make music an element of their compositions, helps students see and hear their work as rhetorical in nature. They begin to see

and hear not only the explicit arguments they make in their work, but also the implicit arguments they make through the elements discussed in this article.

The following list offers resources for using music in the classroom. While some of the resources pertain to reading and writing in particular, others offer deeper theoretical understandings of music in the classrooms, or offer suggestions for general uses of music in education.

Resources for Bringing Music into the Classroom

- Johns Hopkins School of Education, “Music and Learning: Integrating Music in the Classroom” (Boyd Brewer 1995)
Available at: <http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/Arts%20in%20Education/brewer.htm>
- *Huffington Post*, “Using Music in the Classroom to Educate, Engage and Promote Understanding” (Ferroni 2013)
Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nicholas-ferroni/music-in-the-classroom_b_2072777.html
- *edutopia*, “Building Reading and Writing Skills with Music” (Pflaum 2012)
Available at: <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/reading-skills-music-writing-jeffrey-pflaum>
- Street Smart Press, *Hip Hop Pedagogy* (2015)
Available at: <http://streetsmartpress.com/>
- *Soundtracks for Learning: Using Music in the Classroom* (Boyd Brewer et al 2008)

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