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Facilitating Creativity through Multimodal Writing: An Examination of Students' Choices and Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Creativity has long been central in multimodal writing. Unlike traditional writing, which uses text alone, multimodal writing relies on the use of a combination of modes to convey meaning such as text, speech, images, audio, gesture, and space. Scholars of multimodal writing stressed that using multiple modes allows for greater creativity and newness. Recently, however, scholars have questioned whether creativity is so straightforward in students' multimodal writing. Students may resist producing new types of writing. Their creativity outcome is dependent upon their preferences and their goals in the writing assignment. This article examines students' choices when given the freedom to compose in any mode and their perceptions of their multimodal writing experience in comparison with traditional essay writing. Drawing on data from students' multimodal products, surveys, and interviews we show how students simply used available resources in their multimodal composing and how creativity was negotiated. Although they identified several affordances for multimodal writing and described it as more interesting than conventional essay writing, they seemed to resist incorporating a variety of semiotic resources into their projects because their goal was to showcase their writing skills. We argue that developing explicit knowledge about various modes helps improve students' understanding of multimodal writing as creative design.

KEYWORDS:

creativity, choices, mode, multimodal writing, perceptions

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INTRODUCTION

Multimodal writing is defined as texts that "exceed the alphabetic and may include still and moving images, animations, color, words, music and sound" (Takayoshi & Selfe, 2007). The concept has originated in social semiotics, where modes (visual, textual, audio, gesture) represent socially and culturally shaped meaning-making resources (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). Multimodal writing has become increasingly popular at the advent of digital technologies. Specific examples of multimodal texts include websites, presentations, infographics, videos, posters, collages, and podcasts.

Multimodal writing is increasingly significant as there is more and more opportunity to communicate effectively and creatively. Many pedagogic approaches have adopted multimodal writing as a way to develop students' creativity (Walsh, 2007). Creativity is defined as "the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)" (Sternberg & Lubart, 1999, p. 3). It is now privileged in many classroom settings as an essential component of human intelligence regardless of a person's major or career path (Burnard, 2006; Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021; Williams, Runco, & Berlow, 2016). To deal with new and unfamiliar tasks and situations, every person is required to be creative.

Creativity is central to multimodal writing. Through the integration of multiple modes, students have the opportunity to produce something new and useful. Researchers argue that the more choices students have, the more creative they might become (Amabile & Gitomer, 1984; Greenberg, 1992; Henriksen & Mishra, 2015; Ranker, 2015; Walsh, 2007). Among the many approaches in giving students choice and flexibility in their multimodal writing experience is the *unessay* (Jakopak, Monteith, & Merkle, 2019; O'Donnell at al., 2016; Sullivan, 2015). The unessay is an extremely open-ended type of multimodal writing. In the unessay assignment, students choose their own topic and present it in any way they wish. They can design a poster, write a poem, create a webpage or any other visual product. Unlike the traditional essay, in the unessay students do not follow instructions on style and content and do not conform to a predetermined template. Thus, the unessay allows students to spend more time developing their thinking skills instead of worrying about length and layout. The unessay also allows students to view writing from a different perspective by incorporating multiple modes in creative ways.

However, assignments that present students with an issue and require them to respond in all flexibility have not yet been explored. It is unclear how students will respond when given choices. Will they create familiar products or new ones through which they manifest creativity? Will they understand multimodal writing as described by writing scholars? Or, will they simply transfer traditional writing practices into their multimodal writing experience?

The purpose of this study was, then, to examine what modes students choose when they are given an unessay assignment. We also aimed to investigate how students perceive multimodal writing in comparison with traditional essay writing to see if they are constrained by the traditional

view of writing while working on the unessay assignment. The study was designed to answer the following research questions: **What modes do the students prefer to use in their unessay assignment? How do the students perceive the unessay (i.e., multimodal) assignment in comparison with traditional essay writing?**

The study reported in this paper builds upon research on the use of multimodal writing to enhance creativity (Hafner, 2015; Howell, Reinking, & Kaminski, 2015; Walsh, 2007). The novelty of this research is that we examine assignments where students have flexibility to use any mode, namely the unessay. Additionally, the study contributes to and extends past scholarship by focusing on mode choices, specifically the choices made by university students. We believe that an examination of students' choices and perceptions may provide useful insights into potential affordances and constraints of the unessay assignment, which reflect the application of creativity during the multimodal writing experience.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Multimodal writing has received considerable research attention not only as an opportunity for expressing meaning in multiple ways, but also as a way to inspire creativity. Many studies have demonstrated that creativity is enhanced when students engage in multimodal writing (Lee, Meloche, Grant, Neuman, & Tecce DeCarlo, 2019; Zhao, Djonov, & van Leeuwen, 2014; Hafner, 2014; Yang, 2012; Ducate, Anderson, & Moreno, 2011; Hundley & Holbrook, 2013; Bohannon, 2015; Kilickaya & Krajka, 2012). These studies focused on the analysis of students' products and reflections, which indicated the potential of multimodal writing to develop creativity by integrating and combining multiple semiotic modes. For example, Walsh (2007) found that by drawing on multiple semiotic modes, students were able to express themselves more imaginatively and creatively than they could in words alone. Similar results were reported in Vasudevan, Schultz, and Bateman's (2010) study who analyzed adolescents' composing practices while they were engaged in a multimodal storytelling project. The students were asked to use a variety of digital tools (videos, photos, recordings, etc.) to tell stories about their families to their classmates. Results showed that the opportunity to compose multimodal texts helped students express themselves in innovative ways and learn to make meaningful connections between in-school and out-of-school lives. The students' digital stories were expanded and enriched by the creative use of pictures, music, and the students' voices.

These findings were also supported by Jones's (2010) study in a different context; the author showed that in her advanced writing class, podcasts were used to harness risk-taking, which alleviated anxiety and allowed students to interact with their peers in unfamiliar ways. She showed that by talking aloud, her university students took more risks and became more confident about their abilities to think creatively. Likewise, Yeh (2018) investigated multimodal writing practices in an

advanced English as a foreign language class. The researcher found that through the production of a digital video students learned to be more creative and gained more expertise at utilizing different modes, which helped them become more engaged in their learning. Shin and Cimasko (2008) involved their EFL students in the creation of online webpages. Findings also showed that the multimodal writing process enabled their students to develop capacity to experiment with new things and thus to express their cultural identities and personal feelings more effectively.

Findings from the above studies appeared to be limited to assignments where students were dictated to compose in specific modes and not specifically given the freedom to choose any mode. Very few studies focused on investigating ways of enhancing creativity by being granted the freedom to choose any mode and these have focused on the potentials of the unessay (e.g. Jakopak, Monteith, & Merkle, 2019; Sullivan, 2015) but not on the challenges students might face. While giving students many choices can encourage creativity, it is still unclear whether it will lead to more creativity than if students were asked to write a traditional essay.

In general, previous studies found potential problems when students engage in multimodal writing, including students' preferences as well as their understanding of writing. For instance, Jiang (2018) showed that students may resist moving away from traditional writing. Through analysis of observation, interview, and student-authored multimodal texts, the author revealed that when asked to move away from conventional writing and compose using different modalities students may not accept the change. The participants were grouped into three categories based on their patterns of change: 1) from resistant writer to active composer, 2) from textbook decoder and exam-oriented writer to multimodal designer and 3) little change. a student belonging to the 'little change' category perceived multimodal writing as a waste of their precious time because they were training for a standardized exam and multimodal writing is a form of entertainment with focus on image and sound. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that the learning environment might have a significant impact on learners' perceptions, which might ultimately impact their creativity. Likewise, the participants in Kim and Belcher's (2020) study had divided opinions with about half of them feeling that the digital multimodal composing was helpful and the other half feeling that traditional essay writing was helpful. Many students explained that the traditional essay task allowed them to focus more on improving their language skills. The study suggested that while creativity can be enhanced by engaging students into multimodal writing experiences, the way in which an assignment is framed might affect students' attitudes towards writing with new modalities and the outcome of creativity.

Furthermore, past research, which involved multimodal assignments that gave students two modes options, indicated that students privileged certain modes that could restrain their creativity. For instance, in a recent study, which required students to choose one mode to deliver their multimodal products, Chen (2021) found that the most frequently used medium for students' multimodal projects was video, which incorporated words, sounds, and visuals. Text was an indispensable mode in almost every student's composition. Responses on the questionnaire revealed that most students felt that for their particular topic, their multimodal products helped them to convey

their ideas better than the short paragraph because they managed to provide the audience with more visuals. Chen (2021) called for more efforts to look into students' choices of mediums and modes when creating multimodal compositions to gain further insights into the affordances and constraints of multimodal writing as compared with print-based writing.

Therefore, it seems that the way students engage in creativity is guided by what captures their interest while designing their products. Students' perceptions and preferences are important factors to consider when designing multimodal writing assignments (Smith, Amgott, & Malova, 2021). In this paper, we argue that the effect on creativity might be differentially beneficial, depending on students' perceptions and mode preferences.

METHODOLOGY

Context and participants

In the current study, a mixed-method approach was selected to examine students' choices and experience with nurturing creativity *via* the unessay assignment. The study was conducted in a general English class at a small public university in Abu Dhabi after obtaining approval from the research ethics committee. The course, ENG210, is part of a 3-year writing program and is primarily taught by PhD holders. It was designed to develop students' lexis as well as listening, text analysis, and writing skills. The participants consisted of 45 males and 1 female with fairly homogenous demographic (age, first language, background, majors). Their IELTS scores ranged from 5.0 to 6.0 and so they were mainly intermediate level students. Before the study began, each participant signed an informed consent form and agreed to participate in the study

Data collection

In the first class of the semester, students wrote an IELTS-type 250-word conventional essay about a future technology they would like to see become real. The topic was chosen because it seemed to appeal to students who had already completed a similar reading unit in the previous course, ENG110. Students wrote their essays at home and were required to submit their complete draft after one week. In the second week, students were provided with the unessay assignment. The assignment is designed to awaken, draw attention to, and help develop students' creativity, and to familiarize them with recent thinking from cognition theorists who now regard creativity as an essential component of human intelligence. Students were told that any form should be accepted, as long as it was visual. They could use pictures, videos, and text. They could make videos, write poems, draw pictures, and create presentations. The term unessay was explained and several examples of unessays were discussed (e.g., PowerPoints, videos, wikis, posters). The essay and unessay prompts can be seen in Appendix A.

In the last week of the semester, students responded to an online survey about the unessay and the essay writing assignments (Appendix B). The survey included 3 parts. In the first part, the

students answered dichotomous questions about which assignment they preferred, which assignment was more interesting, which assignment was more challenging and whether they wished to complete similar projects in the future. In the second part, the students were required to self-assess their ability at completing essays and unessays and their comfort level with regards both tasks. In the third part of the survey, the students were provided with statements relating to aspects of traditional essay writing and required to indicate the extent to which the project was helpful in improving each aspect. The survey was revised for readability and then reviewed by methodology experts who judged the survey to be valid based on previously conducted studies. In order to provide additional data on their understanding of the unessay, follow-up interviews with 11 students were conducted (Appendix D). During the interviews, the students were asked to justify their choices of a particular mode, indicate whether they preferred one task over the other, and explain what challenges they faced while completing both tasks.

Data analysis

The first step involved the students' final project. I developed a chart to keep track of the frequency and types of modes used in each project following a modified model that Danielsson and Selander (2014) developed for analyzing multimodal texts (See Appendix E). Two experts graded the students' essays and unessays using an analytic rubric (Appendix B). The rubric contained five criteria and was designed to grade students' essays and unessays in terms of quality of writing and creativity. It was important to understand how creative the students' unessays were and to determine whether there were any differences in the students' performance on the two assignments.

The second step of data analysis involved the students' surveys. Items on the survey were tested for reliability by analyzing internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values show a good reliability for all items ranging from 0.7 to 0.85. Descriptive statistics were used in order to explore aspects of the students' perceptions of the project. Afterwards, we focused on the students' interviews. To analyze the qualitative data collected from interviews, a thematic analysis approach was followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis was mainly descriptive and aimed at deriving words from students' responses to create themes that could be grouped together.

RESULTS

Research Question 1: What modes did the students prefer to use?

The unessay prompt asked the students explicitly to choose any tool for their project, which offered numerous opportunities to engage in creative thinking using multiple modes. The overwhelming majority of students created PowerPoint presentations to describe their future technology. One student chose Honda robotics, one student chose future soldiers, one student chose uni-translators, 7 students chose artificial intelligence, 15 students chose holograms, 6 students chose flexible phones, 13 students chose mind uploading, and one student chose internet of behavior.

The presentations were produced using different templates, styles, color, fonts, and size. Some students designed their own templates while others preferred to use the more conventional template provided by the university. They rarely applied animation or sound effects between slides. Yet, they appeared to use font and colors as a way to enhance the presentations' attractiveness and ultimately indicate their creativity.

The PowerPoint tool provided students with the possibility to insert images, word art, hyperlinks, and videos, including their own. Yet, an examination of students' slides shows that they tended to privilege two semiotic modes, mainly text and image to create their presentations. The majority of the presentations had text (either in bullet points or paragraphs) accompanied by an image on the right or left (Figure 1). In this way, the visual mode appeared to be complementary (i.e., used mainly to emphasize what has been written).



Figure 1. Screenshot from a student's PPT showing how they juxtaposed two modes

Some students had images alone, which they supplemented later with verbal explanation, which indicates their understanding of the contribution of image to the text mode (Figure 2).

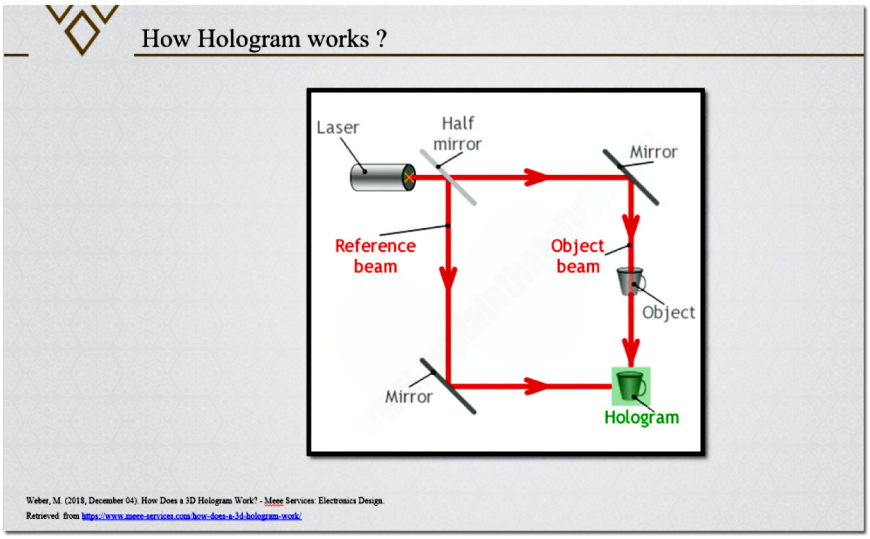


Figure 2. Screenshot from a student's PPT including a diagram

Nevertheless, some students created presentations that were entirely textual resembling a traditional essay (Figure 3).

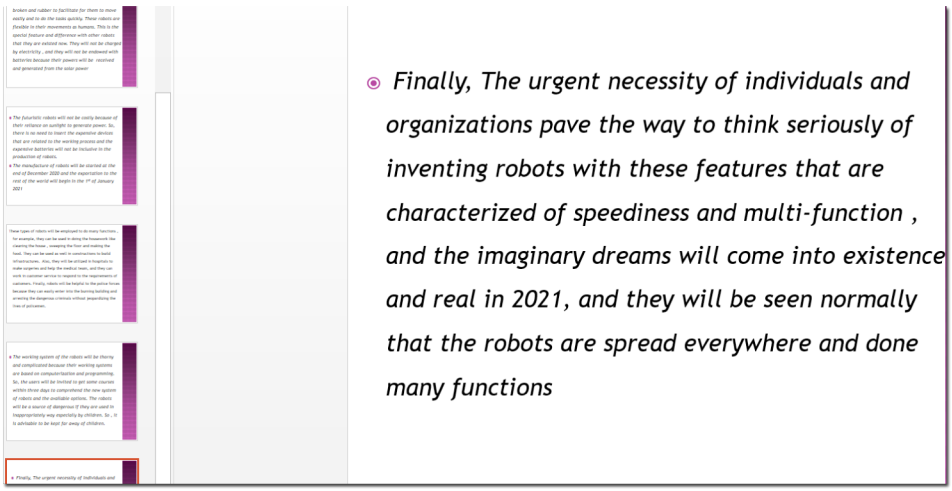


Figure 3. Screenshot from a student's PPT showing the use of one mode throughout the project

These preliminary findings suggest that the students chose tools with which they were familiar and which can be used to present research findings. Nevertheless, they did not take advantage of the affordances of PowerPoint to demonstrate creativity. Instead, they relied solely on text and image to convey meaning and complete the task. It is possible that the concept of creativity was not well-understood. Also, perhaps, they were unfamiliar with basic affordances of PowerPoint, such as incorporating hyperlinks and sound. Furthermore, it could be that the students thought a PowerPoint would be the most appropriate way to accomplish the purpose of the unessay assignment. Since they were required to describe a future technology, it made more sense to them to do some research and then present their research findings through a PowerPoint presentation. While it can

be useful for the students to focus on text to express meaning, it certainly diminished their creativity as evidenced by their resulting products. The PowerPoints seemed effective and yet were not original or different. In the next section, an analysis of students' perceptions as well as performance on both the essays and unessays will be presented. The analysis will take into account the extent to which students demonstrated creativity and met the traditional essay writing requirements of organization, content, and mechanics. In addition, interview data will be presented to further support data from students' survey responses and scores on both assignments.

Research Question 2: How did the students perceive the unessay assignment in comparison with traditional essay writing?

The second research question focuses on comparing students' perceptions of traditional writing to their perceptions of the unessay. Table 1 demonstrates that 51% (n=23) preferred writing an essay and 49% (n = 22) preferred the unessay. Survey data indicated that they seemed to be split between the two types of writing. We also asked students which task was more interesting and relevant to their lives. Survey results supported that most students found the unessay more interesting (n = 28, 62%) while only 38% believed that the essay-writing task was more interesting. Most of the students (62%) also reported that they would rather work a similar assignment in the future. During the interview, we asked the students to provide reasons why they preferred one assignment over the other. The students explained that they enjoyed working on the unessay because they were weak at writing and the project gave them the chance to avoid many academic conventions. Those who did not enjoy the unessay indicated that they preferred writing an essay because it did not involve searching for information and dealing with academic citations. Another student confidently spoke about feeling better and having more experience about writing essays since high school. Nevertheless, while the unessay was generally understood by most of the respondents as more interesting (i.e., more relevant to students' lives) than essay writing, many students (n=28, 63%) still reported that they found the unessay more difficult.

Table 1. Students' attitudes to the essay and unessay assignments

Question	Response	F	%	Asymp. Sig.	Chi-square
Which task did you prefer?	Essay	23	51	0.881	0.022
	Unessay	22	49		
Which task was more interesting?	Essay	17	38	0.101	2.689
	Unessay	28	62		
Which task was more difficult?	Essay	16	36	0.053	3.756
	Unessay	29	64		
Which task would you rather complete in the future?	Essay	17	37	0.101	2.689
	Unessay	28	63		

We compared frequency distributions of students' responses using a chi-square test to check whether the frequencies in each variable were statistically different from each other. By comparing observed frequencies to expected frequencies, we obtained values that were larger than .05. We therefore concluded that our observed frequencies were not significantly different from the expected frequencies. There were no major differences in the students' opinions towards the two types of tasks, which could partly explain their text-heavy unessays.

When rating their overall competence at creating unessays, a little less than half (44%) believed that their ability was good or very good whereas many more students (69%) rated their ability to write essays as good or very good. Similar results were reported when students were asked to assess their comfort level with the two types of writing. In line with the results above, the majority (64%) reported that they feel comfortable writing an essay while a little more than half of them (55%) said they feel comfortable creating a project. These results indicate that there seems to be more disagreement and uncertainty among the students over their attitudes towards multimodal writing than towards conventional essay writing, which might indicate more familiarity with essay writing given their past experience with structured genres.

Despite the apparent tension between essay writing and the unessay assignment, students' opinions about the extent to which the unessay project helped develop their essay-writing skills were favorable. The data in Table 2 indicate that most students had positive opinions about the project.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for how helpful multimodal writing was in developing writing skills

Aspect	Helpful	Neutral	Not helpful	*M*	*SD*
Overall English Proficiency	72%	0%	28%	3.655	1.36
Punctuation	55%	28%	17%	3.379	1.11
Spelling	79%	11%	10%	3.931	0.99
Grammar	72%	17%	11%	3.758	0.95
Vocabulary	72%	17%	11%	3.896	1.04
Organizing information	72%	17%	11%	3.827	1.00
Learning about the topic of writing	69%	21%	10%	3.758	0.98
Citation	66%	31%	3%	3.689	0.80
Paraphrasing	66%	27%	7%	3.655	0.85
Finding information	69%	24%	7%	3.827	0.96
Using technology	73%	24%	3%	3.965	0.94
Learning about the purpose of writing	69%	14%	17%	3.655	1.04
Learning about the audience of writing	72%	11%	17%	3.758	1.09

The most agreed upon benefit was improving their knowledge of technology ($m = 3.96$, $sd = 0.94$) with only a marginal number of students feeling the project was not helpful in this area. Students explained in the interviews that they learnt how to incorporate different elements of multimedia. The students also found the project to be very useful for practicing lexical knowledge, such as

spelling and vocabulary skills. Their positive perceptions of vocabulary and spelling appeared to mirror those related to grammar. Most students reported that their grammar improved after completing the project. Fewer students (55%), however, reported improvement in punctuation.

With regards to major writing aspects, many students found that the project helped them learn about finding information and organizing skills with both statements having similarly positive means. Furthermore, the students rated "learning about audience" and "learning about the purpose of writing" positively indicating that they believed the project prepared them to deal with different audiences and purposes of writing. During the interview, the students noted that the fact that they had to present their work also alerted them to the possibility that an audience other than the teacher might view their work.

The quality of the resulting unessays and essays was compared using an analytical rubric, which contained five criteria: Purpose; Content; Creativity; Organization; and Language and mechanics. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. A comparison of students' performance on the essay and unessay assignments

		M	*SD*	*t*	*sig*	*d*
Overall quality	Essay	9.88	1.88	-7.579	.000	2.261
	Unessay	12.44	1.19			
Purpose	Essay	3.08	0.84	7.034	.000	1.165
	Unessay	1.86	0.72			
Content	Essay	3.11	0.71	-0.184	0.855	0.811
	Unessay	3.13	0.40			
Creativity	Essay	1.13	0.34	-1.431	.160	0.416
	Unessay	1.22	0.42			
Organization	Essay	3.13	0.96	0.696	.490	1.07
	Unessay	3.02	0.54			
Language and Mechanics	Essay	2.37	0.83	-5.361	.000	1.028
	Unessay	3.2	0.54			

The overall score of the unessays was a little higher than the overall score of the essay. The mean for the essay was 9.88 (1.88) whereas the mean for the unessay was 12.44 (1.19). The results of the paired sample t-tests revealed that the differences were statistically significant. Therefore, this preliminary result indicated that the essay and unessay were differentially effective.

Table 3 also shows that the results for the criteria of "*purpose*" and "*language and mechanics*" were significantly different. With regards to purpose, the essay scores were higher than the unessay scores. This means that the students had a better understanding of the purpose and audience of traditional writing since they were more familiar with conventional forms. In the criterion of language and conventions, the students were able to make fewer grammatical and mechanical mistakes in the unessay. This is probably because they had to write less and rely more on pictures to convey meaning. There were no significant differences in the quality of the essays and unessays in terms of content, creativity, and organization. The students were able to demonstrate good under-

standing of the topic and provide accurate and relevant information for each assignment. Similarly, they were able to organize their assignments in a logical way. With regards to creativity, the students obtained low scores in both assignments. Although the open-ended nature of the unessay provided the students with multiple opportunities to blend a variety of modes, they seemed to favor conventional approaches, hence diminishing their creative thinking.

Interview results

The students' interview comments were aligned with the survey results. Most students we interviewed stated that they enjoyed the unessay and wanted to complete a similar assignment in the future. As one student mentioned: "*no teacher has ever given us the unessay. I like choosing my own topic and tool*." The students appreciated the fact that they were given the freedom to choose any mode and reported that they were not normally allowed to choose their own topic or tool. They also felt that the flexibility offered by the unessay assignment helped build their creativity. For these students, creativity was described in terms of the choice of colors, use of pictures, use of customized templates, and animation of slides. As one student put it: "*I like the design of my project. I was trying to be creative. I used dark on light colors. I added animations. My friends used the university's template, but I preferred to create my own. It looked more attractive*." They also indicated that they had more difficulty in the essay assignment than in the unessay. Many students mentioned grammar and spelling as their major concern while writing the essay. Nevertheless, they noted that both assignments shared similar characteristics, which they found challenging, such as searching for information.

Although the students seemed to enjoy the many affordances offered by multimedia tools, they all chose to create PowerPoint presentations to convey their meaning. Their interview responses indicated various reasons for their choices. Most students explained that they decided to create PowerPoint presentations, because they made many presentations in the past. As a student put it in the interview: "*I know how to create a PowerPoint. We do this in all our projects. I am not worried about any problem*." Other students mentioned that they felt a PowerPoint presentation would be more appropriate to their topic. For example, one student made the comment that they chose a PowerPoint presentation because it allowed them to use pictures to show their future technology. Still, some other students explained that they chose to create a PowerPoint presentation because they could obtain higher grades. As one student commented, "*I'll get a higher mark if I do presentation. There is not much writing. We always do presentation in our courses*." For some other students, it was the lack of time and preparation that discouraged them from exploring new modes. One student indicated that they wanted to do a video but had difficulty to manage their time given their numerous other assignments. Another student highlighted their lack of knowledge about using other digital tools: "*I thought about creating a blog and I saw an example which looked good but I do not know how. I was not prepared to create a blog*".

It was evident from students' responses that their creativity was constrained by their desire to obtain high grades, past experience, lack of time, and lack of preparation. They preferred not

to leave their comfort zones and use more familiar modes that can be appreciated by their teachers and that can earn them better grades. Furthermore, students' responses suggested that they had a limited view of creativity, specifically the ability to incorporate pictures and other visual elements.

DISCUSSION

In the current exploratory study, participants were required to write an essay and an unessay on the same topic. Unlike previous studies, which dictated the modes to students, we aimed to examine what modes students utilized when they were given the freedom to choose any mode. We also attempted to understand how students perceived the unessay in comparison with traditional essay writing because perceptions may reflect the application of creativity. Analysis of the final projects shows some resistance to employ unfamiliar modes that was found in previous studies (Chen, 2021; Kim & Belcher, 2020). The participants in this study were given the freedom to use any semiotic resource. Nevertheless, none of the students used any digital tools, which would enable audio or visual recordings. PowerPoint seemed to be the most common way for the students to make meaning in a multimodal assignment. As indicated in their interviews, they seemed to place so much emphasis on writing skills, which represents a crucial factor leading to resistance in using a wider range of modes. Indeed, these students were enrolled in a writing class for which they need to get a minimum of a "C" to remain in the program. They were cognizant that they may lose marks if they did not write correctly. While the students were able to share information about their future technology, the length of text and lack of other semiotic modes, such as sounds and video, kept them from fully engaging with their multimodal writing experience and from developing creativity. These results are in line with previous research, which demonstrated that students resisted new types of writing for various reasons. For example, Chen (2021) reported that most students resisted new modalities and opted for conventional forms of writing, which they found easier and more beneficial. Findings from this study and others thus suggest that creativity is dependent upon students' ideologies and perceptions about writing. It is not automatic in all multimodal assignments and teachers should aim at developing students' metalanguage for multimodal composing in order to nurture an effective writing experience.

Through the quantitative analysis of the survey, we were able to ascertain that students were divided in their attitudes towards essay writing and unessay. The students described creating their projects as more interesting than conventional essay writing. Furthermore, they expressed an interest to undertake similar projects in the future. Nevertheless, the students did report feeling more confident about writing essays than about creating multimodal projects. They also showed agreement that the unessay assignment was more difficult than essay writing. Their interview responses further highlighted that use of software, finding information on the Internet, and having to speak in public pose significant challenges to their multimodal writing process. This result is an indication

of how students negotiate creativity in a multimodal writing assignment. Although they seemed to enjoy composing multimodally, the complexity of weaving together various modes seemed to deter them from taking risks and turning their essays into more creative designs. Previous research also revealed that despite having the potential to be more motivating to students than traditional essay writing, many students still preferred textual modes because of the affordances to develop a clear thesis and give more details about the topic (Alexander, Powell, & Green, 2012; Kim & Belcher 2020; Kim & Kang 2020). In Alexander, Powell, and Green's (2012) study, many participants explained that it was hard to make a clear point using a video and therefore they found the lack of a thesis as a limitation of multimodal essays.

Despite the perceived difficulty with completing the unessay project, students could not ignore a number of affordances. Among these affordances students identified technology as the most significant benefit of creating an unessay. It seems that students view multimodal writing as relying only on digital tools. If we ask students what creativity means in multimodal writing, they would certainly say that using new tools makes their writing more creative. There was also a consensus on the helpfulness of the project in developing writing skills. Although the goal of the assignment was to give the students choices in their mediums in order to enhance creativity, they still believed that the assignment provided them with an opportunity to improve the good aspects of writing such as content, organization, mechanics, audience, purpose, and paraphrasing practices. This finding was reflected in their final productions and in their interviews, where they explained that their main goal in the unessay assignment was to show to their teacher and peers that they can write effectively since they were in a writing class and not in an innovation or arts class. These perceived potential benefits have also been well-documented and demonstrated in the literature dealing with multimodal writing, which suggested that students transferred the literacy practices of print-based writing into multimodal writing (Hellmich, Castek, Smith, Floyd, & Wen, 2021; O'Halloran; 2019; Smith, Pacheco, & Khorosheva, 2020). These findings suggest that students need further support on understanding the concept of creativity and how it relates to multimodal writing. Through understanding creativity in multimodal writing, students may also develop a more complex understanding of multimodal writing.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study has some pedagogical implications for designing and implementing a writing course that incorporates multimodal writing. In this study, participants first wrote an essay and then completed an unessay on the same topic. The sequence of tasks helped students become aware of the coexistence of multimodal writing and essay writing. As it could be seen from the survey and interview results, while students perceived the unessay task as more challenging than the essay task, they could not ignore that just like print-based writing, multimodal writing can be used to make meaning and develop writing skills. When designing a course that includes multimodal writ-

ing, teachers should help students understand this coexistence by highlighting the differences and similarities between traditional essays and multimodal writing and identifying how each mode contributes to meaning. Teachers should also take into account students' perceptions of multimodal and essay writing as these mediate their mode choices.

Another implication relates to providing students with choices in terms of medium and mode. It seemed useful to allow students to use their own modes as this would give them the chance to discover the functions of each mode. Our results suggest that choice provides many benefits, since students reported that they enjoyed the project and were able to choose modes with which they felt most comfortable. Nevertheless, guidance and scaffolding for the unessay assignment are still required. Results have demonstrated that it is not sufficient to provide the students with a topic and ask them to be creative. There is worry that low-level students might misinterpret the assignment, lack creativity, or even fear delving into innovative projects. Instructors who wish to experiment with the unessay project should provide students with clear guidelines and explicit advice on the structure of their multimodal assignment. As stated earlier, it is necessary to equip students with a metalanguage of multimodality to nurture an effective multimodal writing experience (Hafner, 2018; O'Hara & Sternberg, 2001; Van Broekhoven, Belfi, Hocking, & van der Velden, 2020).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The current study makes some contributions to the field, which we believe will trigger some future research. Unlike many previous studies, this study did not dictate the mediums or modes to be used to create multimodal projects. Rather, the students were asked to submit any type of project as long as it was multimodal. We aimed to encourage the students to experiment with new modalities, which could help develop their creativity. Nevertheless, this study is bound by time and space. The study explored perceptions of a relatively limited number of participants, mostly males. This is unfortunate since enrollment in reading and writing classes at the current context is extremely low compared with other universities. More research on a larger and more representative sample is warranted. Additionally, the current study focused on multimodal products and did not capture process data that could provide additional insights on students' decisions. Furthermore, in this study, we used a descriptive topic (describe a future technology) and asked participants to choose any medium to complete their projects. In the future, researchers can change the topic from descriptive to narrative or argumentative and can ask participants to produce two different projects (video and PowerPoint). Finally, this study did not explore teachers' perceptions of multimodal writing. Future research should examine students' as well as teachers' perceptions of multimodal writing.

CONCLUSION

The study has provided an insight into what modes students choose when they are given the freedom to select any mode and what perceptions they have towards a multimodal writing assignment called the unessay. This is an important insight because many multimodal assignments are assumed to automatically facilitate creativity. In our research, we demonstrate that creativity is dependent upon students' preferences, goals, and perceptions. Our main contribution is showing that teachers should give students additional instruction into the metalanguage of multimodality. More attention needs to be paid to ways of preparing teachers to take students' preferences and perceptions into consideration.

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APPENDIX A

Essay and Unessay prompts

Essay prompt

Write a short essay about a technology that you would like to see become real (250). Include an introduction, body, and conclusion. You will be graded on content, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics.

Unessay prompt

Choose your future technology. Present your unessay in any form you please (written word, image, music, video, PowerPoint, poster, poem, website, artefact, etc.). Anything is accepted a long as it is visual! You will be graded on the content and form of your unessay. Be creative and make your unessay attractive!

APPENDIX B

Essay/Unessay Grading Rubric

Purpose	Demonstrates a thorough understanding of the purpose of the assignment. Excellent choice of medium.	Demonstrates some understanding of the purpose of the assignment. Good choice of medium.	Demonstrates a basic understanding of the purpose of the assignment. Adequate choice of medium.	Demonstrates little understanding of the purpose of the assignment. Poor choice of medium.
Content	Demonstrates excellent understanding of the topic though using appropriate, relevant, and accurate information.	Demonstrates good understanding of the topic. Uses some appropriate, relevant, and accurate information.	Demonstrates adequate understanding of the topic Uses little appropriate, relevant, and accurate information.	Demonstrates poor understanding of the topic. Uses no appropriate, relevant, and accurate information.
Creativity	The assignment is exceptionally unique and original; shows great imagination, insight, and style; takes risks in design and content; does not follow rules or conventions	The assignment is creative but not unique; shows effective imagination; may blend familiar with new design or content to create something new	The assignment demonstrates little creativity; shows little imagination and is mainly conventional in content and design.	The assignment is not original and not creative; shows minimal imagination and is exclusively conventional in content and design
Organization	The assignment is organized and well-structured.	The assignment has a clear structure. a few modes and ideas may seem out of place.	The assignment is hard to follow. Modes and ideas are sometimes not clear.	The modes and ideas seem to be randomly arranged.
Language and mechanics	Contains no errors in grammar, spelling, or mechanics.	Contains only minor errors in grammar, spelling, or mechanics.	Contains one or two major errors in grammar, spelling, or mechanics.	Contains several major errors in grammar, spelling, or mechanics.

APPENDIX C

Student Survey

Question 1

Which assignment did you like better?

- ❍ Writing an essay
- ❍ Doing an unessay project

Question 2

Which assignment was more interesting?

- ❍ Writing an essay
- ❍ Doing an unessay project

Question 3

Which assignment did you feel was more difficult?

- ❍ Writing an essay
- ❍ Doing an unessay project

Question 4

In the future, which assignment would you choose to work on?

- ❍ Writing an essay
- ❍ Doing an unessay project

Question 5

How did you feel about writing an essay?

Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable
❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Question 6

How good were you at writing an essay?

Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Question 7

How did you feel about doing an unessay project (a PowerPoint, a video, a poster)?

Very uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	Neutral	Comfortable	Very comfortable
❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Question 8

How good were you at doing an unessay project (PowerPoint, poster, video) for class?

Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

Question 9

Now that you have completed the unessay project, how helpful was the project in improving the following areas?

	Not helpful at all	A little helpful	Neutral	Helpful	Very helpful
Overall English proficiency	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Punctuation	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Spelling	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Grammar	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Vocabulary	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Organizing information	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Learning about the topic of writing	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Citation	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Paraphrasing	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Finding information	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Using technology	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Learning about the purpose of writing	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍
Learning about audience (readers, viewers)	❍	❍	❍	❍	❍

APPENDIX D

Interview Schedule:

1. What did you create? Why?
2. Did you enjoy doing this project? Explain
3. Would you like to complete another unessay in the future? Explain
4. Do you consider the unessay to be more or less difficult than writing an essay? Explain
5. What problems did you encounter while writing the essay? Explain
6. What problems did you encounter while completing the unessay project? Explain
7. What did you learn while creating your project? Explain

APPENDIX E

Template for the chart used to analyze students' unessays

Student unessay	General structure	Different modes	What content each mode provides	Interaction between different resources

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