Taking Play Seriously: Using the Multimodal Gutter for Writing Center Reflection

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It's October 2023, and we stand at the front of a conference room at the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) Conference, smiling a little sheepishly as voices from our former writing center consultants echo from a Bluetooth speaker.

"If you can articulate an idea … then you can write, you *are* a writer," muses the consultant. At the same time, a vintage clip of Wile E. Coyote appears on the screen. Wile E. attempts to fire a bow and arrow but instead tumbles backward off the cliff.

For the next minute, the voices of consultants continue to fade in and out, confidently describing their thoughts about writing as Wile E. experiences his signature slapstick misfortunes. Some workshop participants laugh audibly; others smile, looking up occasionally as they continue cutting images out of magazines. Wile E.'s struggles are decidedly at odds with the speakers' tone, and our group finds it funny.

As the workshop leaders–and creators of the video–we were relieved by the positive reaction; we had felt a little silly sharing this odd composition, the product of an assignment we'd completed nearly ten years ago as graduate students. The assignment had asked us to create a video using juxtaposition and nonlinearity as guiding concepts for composing, resisting a thesis-driven structure. As grad students in composition studies, we'd found it equally uncomfortable and liberating to eschew the rhetorically purposeful writing conventions we'd been so carefully studying, practicing, and passing on to our students. Our final video featured audio clips we had collected while interviewing writing center tutors, which we paired randomly with video assets collected from YouTube: clips not only of *Roadrunner*, but of a storm, whale sharks, line dancing, and more. We collaged these audio and video clips to form something quite strange–at times funny, at times even meaningful–sparking an unexpectedly rich conversation among our classmates about writing anxiety, affect, and writing center work.

Figure 1: Workshop participants collage materials to accompany their writing center questions.

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The surprising meaning-making that emerged from turning our composing processes on their head showed us the rich possibilities for multimodal play in composition.

Figure 2: Excerpt from our graduate school video project: https://youtu.be/cjXeIAVPltc

Years later, we found that Amy Anderson's theory of the *multimodal gutter* helped to explain why this activity had been so memorable. Therefore, it was Anderson's concept we shared with the writing center practitioners (WCPs) who attended our IWCA workshop. In her 2017 *Enculturation* piece, Anderson uses comic theorist Scott McCloud's concept of the gutter–the space between two panels of a graphic narrative–where, he argues, the reader makes meaning through a process called *closure*. Like all meaning-making, this process is highly context dependent and socially situated, relying on the audience's past experiences and expectations. In our example in Figure 3, we suspect that most readers who grew up with Disney's *Cinderella* would fill in the narrative by assuming the mouse made the dress.

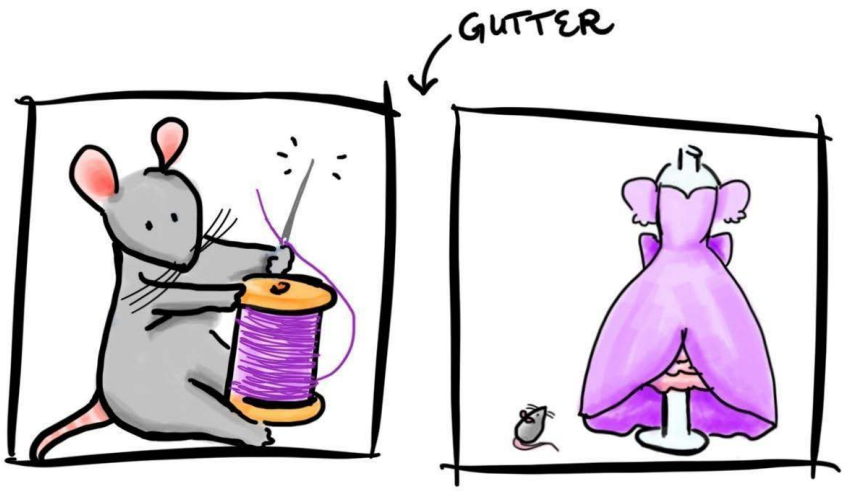

Figure 3: Readers make meaning by imposing a narrative that closes the gap between panels.

Anderson extends the concept of the gutter to show how audiences create closure not only between two panels of a comic, but also between two modes of communication. In the case of Figure 3, if we wanted to generate a multimodal gutter, we might add another element from a different mode, like sound. What meanings emerge if we pair these images with the sound of applause, or the screech of a hawk? What if we layered in someone's voice saying, "But I'm not a real writer"? In the context of our IWCA workshop, the multimodal gutter is what made the Wile E. Coyote joke funny to an audience of WCPs. They brought their own experiences to resolve the juxtaposition between sound and image, imagining Wile E. pummeled by the ups and downs of the writing process.

At the conference, we used our video to set the stage for a collage workshop, one in which we also asked participants to juxtapose visual material with writing center reflections and see what meanings might emerge. In this essay, we'll reflect upon the collage workshop's use of the

multimodal gutter to argue for the value of creating deliberate time for generative, multimodal play in writing center work.

MULTIMODAL PLAY IN THE WRITING CENTER

Our invitation to play in and with the multimodal gutter extends the work of a number of scholars who call for more play in the writing center. Most recently, Holly Ryan and Stephanie Vie's 2022 collection *Unlimited Players* encourages WCPs to explore the intersections of writing center and game studies, reviving earlier conversations about play in writing center studies. In their 2007 book *The Everyday Writing Center*, Anne Ellen Geller et al. describe using a range of creative practices–knitting, earring-making, origami–to invite tutors to cultivate a "speculative, exploratory mindset" (57), a mindset we might also call playful. Kevin Dvorak and Shanti Bruce's 2008 collection *Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work* invites WCPs to consider how creativity and play both "enhance and complicate" (xiii) writing center work, including approaches to staff education and responses to campus demands.

Much of this scholarship on play in the writing center makes a point of de-emphasizing purposeful, audience-centered composing. For example, in *Creative Approaches to Writing Center Work*, both Scott L. Miller and Julie Reid's contributions encourage readers to design activities that don't necessarily have a persuasive purpose; rather, the purpose is the act of play itself. As Miller writes, when tutors play, "they create cool stuff like funny poems and new friends and also create new selves and new ways of using words"; and they do so in freedom from the expectation that their poems or wordplay need to be rhetorically effective (42). This playful approach can offer a generative, restorative set of practices to add to our existing, rhetorically focused approaches to multimodal composition. For Miller, and for us, play–especially the kind of play that invites us to take a break from our professional, rhetorically purposeful selves–offers opportunities for learning, reflection, and community that make the writing center a rich, vibrant, and engaging space.

In this essay, we amplify past calls for play in the writing center, suggesting the multimodal gutter as one way to engage in creative play and meaning-making. In the next section, we offer our workshop as one example of how to use this concept for playful reflection. Finally, we'll put forth considerations for WCPs to develop their own multimodal gutter activities.

THE WORKSHOP: GENERATING MULTIMODAL GUTTERS

To introduce our workshop participants to the multimodal gutter, we had to consider the time, space, and audience afforded by the conference setting. We brainstormed hands-on, lower-threshold activities (collaging with paper and glue rather than video editing software) and ultimately decided to walk our participants through the five-step collage assignment outlined in Figure 4. In brief, the activity asked them to spend some time cutting pictures out of magazines and then to randomly pair those images with questions they had written about their writing center work.

We were careful to design this activity in a way that would discourage participants from "coming to closure too quickly" (Garrett et al.). For example, we de-emphasized any association between

the disparate visual and textual activities (cutting out images and writing about writing center work, respectively), and we later stressed that the text/image pairings were meant to be random. Resisting closure was important to us because, as digital media scholars Bre Garrett et al. remind us, "Composing is a process of making connections, rearranging materials (words, images, concepts) in unexpected ways.". We knew from experience how tempting it would be to try to select the image that seemed to best fit the text, but we were eager to explore the multimodal gutters that would emerge from embracing unexpected juxtapositions.

WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

In our large-group discussion at the end of the workshop, our participants reflected on the experience of playing with collage materials to generate multimodal gutters. They responded positively to the activity, noting two distinct outcomes: (1) generating new perspectives on their writing center questions; and (2) generating opportunities for both rest and low-stakes networking.

Generating New Perspectives

First, participants shared how the exercise invited them to pursue unexpected metaphors and motifs, offering them new perspectives on their questions. Looking more closely at details from their images, or putting them in conversation with one another, seemed to help reframe preexisting ideas. For example, one participant reframed her questions about tutor learning alongside an image of a plant; while it was easy to make the initial metaphor about growth, she looked more closely at the image's context to consider her own institutional constraints, noticing walls that trained the plant in particular directions. Another participant reframed her concerns about AI pedagogy by imagining her questions through the eyes of the "characters" that appeared in her collage.

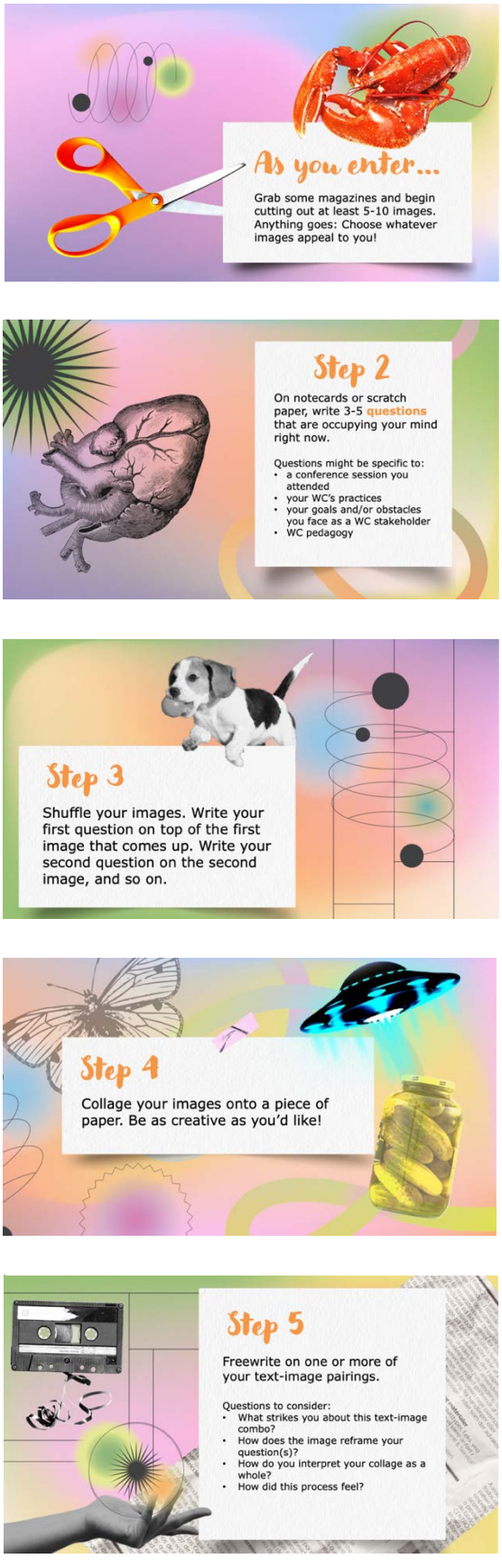

Figure 4.5: Collage activity prompt slides

Generating Rest and Relationships

Second, participants told us that after attending IWCA's morning sessions, they appreciated a "brain break" from typical conference activities. One said, "more sessions should involve crafting," and another said that she appreciated having permission to "pay partial attention," as we had encouraged them to continue flipping through magazines and cutting out images while we delivered our introductory slides and screened our video. We also noticed that participants spent time chatting with each other as they completed the activity. We knew conference networking can feel overwhelming, and it seemed the crafting experience made participants feel comfortable opting in or out of socializing at their leisure.

These outcomes are particularly well-supported by scholarship outside of composition and writing center studies. For example, education research has highlighted art-making and crafting as activities through which researchers can play with ideas, build relationships, and access flow states that make our bodies and minds feel well (Lemon). And although the activities we discuss in this article are not art therapy activities, research from art therapy can help us understand how working with craft materials not only invites new ideas or perspectives, but can actually lower stress, anxiety, and cortisol levels, and contribute to our overall well-being. In an interview with NPR, art therapy researcher Girija Kaimal summarized, "Anything that engages your creative mind — the ability to make connections between unrelated things and imagine new ways to communicate — is good for you" (qtd. in Gharib). Kaimal further explains that the process of "engaging in any sort of visual expression" activates our brains' reward pathways–despite the common concern that the product won't be good enough. Kaimal's explanation describes why engaging with crafting materials can feel like a relief, even when abandoning academic conventions may initially be a bit discomfiting.

WHAT WE LEARNED AND WHAT WE CARRY WITH US

Although creative play can help us relax, explore ideas from new perspectives, and even build relationships, we don't always prioritize this kind of exploratory making. In writing center circles, we all know about prioritizing process over product, but we do generally hope to reach a product eventually. Playing in the multimodal gutter–both in our video production and our workshop–invited us to let go of the expectation of a product, instead demonstrating how valuable such play can be in and of itself. We want to amplify, then, the value of generative, multimodal play, taking up Scott Miller's "call for playful noise from the writing center, for divine shenanigans that can teach us how to be better actors as well as better people" (44).

However, we know how easy it is to ignore this call when life gets busy. We have found that, in the writing center, as in conference spaces or classrooms, we need more than space and materials; we need dedicated time with other people when we're not expected to accomplish anything else. For example, Sara introduced a zine project in her writing center during a pre-semester training where tutors were invited to collage, draw, and write individual contributions that could then be photocopied and compiled into a zine. Following the training, Sara encouraged tutors to use free hours to continue the practice throughout the semester. Most tutors indicated that they liked the activity, saw value in it, and planned to make zine pages. However, two months later, the project had fallen by the wayside. Without dedicated time, this creative play won't take priority over other kinds of work. Recognizing this truth–particularly after reflecting on our workshop–Sara offered her tutors additional staff meeting time to create collages but let go of the expectation of compiling and distributing a writing center zine. Grouped around a table, sifting through magazines and markers, tutors reflected on their ongoing practice in the writing center. The best outcome of this recent activity was that, like our workshop, it seemed to

encourage some of her quieter tutors to speak more freely as they cut and pasted images together. This generative play seemed to nurture community.

Considerations for Designing Multimodal Gutter Activities

In this section, we put forth some considerations for designing a "multimodal gutter activity" tailored to your own writing center community. The context in which you facilitate your activity–whether a staff meeting, tutor training course, dissertation bootcamp, or perhaps in individual sessions–will present different opportunities and challenges with respect to accessibility, audience, and material constraints.

We hope you'll design your activity with accessibility in mind, doing your best to offer all participants ways to engage in the activity fully. While drafting our workshop plan, we considered a number of potential media (music, playdough, conference programs, polaroids, and more) and how WCPs might engage with these vastly different sensory materials. We ultimately decided on a workshop that relied heavily on visuals, hoping that the large, high-contrast images often found in magazines would be accessible to our anticipated audience, including those with low vision. We also knew that these were low-threshold materials that we would be able to provide for everyone, thanks in large part to the generosity of our neighbors who donated old magazines. Additionally, we provided print accessibility copies of what we planned to say and instructions for the activity. We also invited participants to engage with us and one another as worked best for them, a choice that worked well for the restful, restorative space we were trying to create. We want to encourage you, then, to consider how design choices for multimodal gutter activities can increase accessibility for you and your participants in your particular context.

As a final reminder, when designing a multimodal gutter activity, choose practices that encourage your participants to resist closure. Remember: participants will not be crafting a purpose-driven piece. This process can be uncomfortable for many of us (participants and facilitators alike), as fully embracing play requires us to let go of our expectations for an outcome. Some participants might also feel a little resistant to working with new materials, thinking or voicing things like "I'm not an artist," or "I'm too old for this." That's ok, and it's worth prompting reflection on how that discomfort may be similar to that of students who come to the writing center saying, "I'm not a writer." In fact, scholars note this kind of reflection on discomfort is one way to nurture a learning culture in writing center communities of practice (Geller et al.). The activity you design might bring exciting new perspectives for some. For others, it might just be a break from the humdrum of academic life. There is no imperative here to make something meaningful; in fact, we trust that the act of play without imperative is what makes it valuable.

Overall, we hope this piece invites you to consider how you might create time for yourselves, your colleagues, and your students to engage in multimodal play and reflection. We end on this challenge: Go make something, or give someone else the time and resources to make something. Let go of any expectations for a cohesive rhetorical product, and instead see how it feels to upend your own ingrained composing habits, allow yourself to get into the flow of making, and spend time with others. Who knows what will happen? Maybe it will help you think of something you haven't thought of before. Maybe it will be a welcome relief from day-to-day stressors. And just maybe, taking play seriously will strengthen community in your writing center.

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