CHAPTER 4

MAKING THINGS FIT IN (ANY NUMBER OF) NEW WAYS

> *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. . . . 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.*
>
> —MIHALYI CSIKSZENTMIHALYI

> *There is little or nothing [in new media scholarship] . . . 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.*
>
> —ANNE WYSOCKI

Advocates of curricula that privilege rhetorical and material awareness have underscored the limitations of courses that focus on the acquisition of discrete skill sets, skill sets that are often and erroneously treated as static and therefore universally applicable across time and diverse communicative contexts (see, for example, Bawarshi 2003; Devitt 2004; Downs and Wardle 2007; Petraglia 1995; and Russell 1995). Instead of perpetuating the myth that writing is a generalizable skill that, once successfully acquired, will serve students equally well irrespective of what they are attempting to accomplish, many scholars have stressed the importance of flexibility, adaptation, variation, and metacommunicative awareness. If we acknowledge that composing is "a way of being and acting in the world at a particular time, in a particular situation, for the achievement of particular desires," we gain more, Anis Bawarshi (2003) persuasively argues, by teaching students how to adapt "socially and rhetorically, from one genred site of action to the next" (156). Although they are writing years and fields apart, I begin this chapter with Mihalyi

Csikszentmihalyi's (1981) attempt to underscore play's rigorous potential and Anne Wysocki's (2004) critique of new media scholarship because of the emphasis each places on the importance of purposeful choosing, adaptation, and material flexibility. These activities are crucial in that they 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 as well as the potentials one is able to imagine. Like Csikszentmihalyi's, Wysocki's work is invested in creating "more room for play" (15), and exploring the "possibilities of other choices" (13). Her work makes a compelling case for the importance of examining the material aspects of texts, insisting that students ought to be composing texts "using a wide and alertly chosen range of materials" and attending to how those texts are produced and consumed (20).

If we are committed to creating courses that provide students with opportunities to forge new connections, to work in highly flexible ways, and to become increasingly cognizant of the ways texts provide shape for and take shape from the contexts in which they are produced, circulated, valued, and responded to, it is crucial, as I argue throughout this book, that we not limit the range of materials or technologies students might take up and alter in compelling ways. As Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch (1982) caution readers, it may be that our "Ideal Texts" (our ideal technologies?) are "simply irrelevant" in terms of what a student is attempting to do: "When we pay more attention to our Ideal Texts than to the writer's purposes and choices, we compromise both our ability to help students say effectively what they truly want to say and our ability to recognize legitimately diverse ways of saying it" (159). Further, composition and rhetoric scholars must resist equating multimodality with digitally based or screen-mediated texts and create instead opportunities for students to examine the highly distributed and fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice. We must, as this chapter title suggests, not only provide them with opportunities to "make things fit in new ways" (Zoetewey and Staggers 2003, 135), but to make things fit *in any number of new ways*. Following Wysocki (2004), I suggest that what matters is not simply that students learn to produce specific kinds of texts—whether linear, print-based, digital, object- or performance-

based texts, or some combination thereof. Rather, what is crucial is that students leave their courses exhibiting a more nuanced awareness of the various choices they make, or even fail to make, throughout the process of producing a text and to carefully consider the effect those choices might have on others. In maintaining that courses support purposeful choosing while fostering communicative flexibility and critical reflection, I argue for the importance of curricula that treat all modes, materials, methods, and technologies (both old and new) "as equally significant for meaning and communication, potentially so at least" (Jewitt and Kress 2003, 4).

In this chapter, I describe and illustrate a framework for composing informed by the sociocultural framework described in chapter 2—one that rejects the highly decontextualized skills and drills, linear, single-mode approach to writing instruction and offers participants instead a richer and more intricately textured understanding of how communicative practices are socially, historically, and technologically mediated. Here, theories of communicative practice and mediated activity not only inform the design of the framework but also represent much of the content that students read, discuss, use, and transform in their coursework.

In keeping with those who, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, advocated a communications approach to the first-year composition course, the course treats composition as its subject matter *and* as an act or process. Throughout the semester, for example, students are asked to explore the complex relationship between speech, writing, and the other rich communicative resources they routinely employ while making and negotiating meaning in the world. They are asked to consider, for instance, how images, movements, gestures, objects, colors, sounds, scents, and so on impact their interactions with (and their understanding of the potentials of) talk and text. Informed by James Wertsch's (1991) toolbox approach and discussions of privileging, students are asked to rigorously reflect on "the array of mediational means to which people have access and the patterns of choice they manifest in selecting a particular means for a particular occasion," *especially when others are imaginable* (94). Following Wysocki's (2004) definition of new media texts, the complex work students produce need not be digital but might be comprised of a range of different technologies and media. Instead of "taking talk and

writing as [its] starting point" (Jewitt and Kress 2003, 4), as composition courses have historically tended to do, the framework I offer resists attempts to bracket off individual senses and the deployment of select semiotic resources, treating communicative practice as a dynamic, multimodal whole. Finally, in asking students to carefully consider the array of mediational means to which they have access, and to account for the choices they make while combining/recombining these means in purposeful (and sometimes in highly imaginative) ways, the framework supports the reflective, rigorous-productive play that Csikszentmihalyi and Wysocki both advocate.

Facilitating Metacommunicative Awareness

Before describing what a mediated activity-based multimodal framework requires of students, I want to underscore that the framework is not alone in stressing the importance of providing students with a greater awareness of communicative options and alternatives. In 1965 Robert Gorrell argued that a "teaching rhetoric" should *not* be limited to providing students with a collection of hard-and-fast "rules or warnings" about writerly practice, but should, instead, "attempt to describe the choices available to the writer, to explain the results of effects of different choices, and thereby give the writer a basis for choosing" (142). In 1972 Gorrell again insisted on the value of courses that emphasized selection, assisted students in making choices, and equipped them to better predict the consequences of what they had written. In 1976, Wilson Currin Snipes, following Gorrell's lead, stressed the importance of facilitating students' abilities to recognize alternatives and to make the most fitting choices given the context at hand, suggesting that the "business" of a rhetoric course should be concerned with providing students a "broad framework of choices, or options a writer may take or not take in the process of composing" (149; see also Halloran 1978). In 2002, the Council of Writing Program Administrators' "Outcomes Statement" also underscored the importance of rhetorical flexibility and metacommunicative awareness. It recommended that students attend to the ways writing is taken up differently depending on what one intends to do, why, how, and with or for whom. More specifically, the statement recommends that students learn to respond appropriately to different kinds

of rhetorical situations and use conventions of genre, format, and structure appropriate to those situations (520–22). Although their attention focuses primarily on the written texts circulating within and between what Anis Bawarshi (2003) calls "genred sites of action" (156), Amy Devitt's (2004) and Bawarshi's work also underscores the importance of helping students to "understand the intricate connections between contexts and forms, to perceive potential ideological effects of genres, and to discern both constraints and choices that genres make possible" (Devitt, 198). Similarly, the 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 and writing instructors are most familiar assigning and responding to (see, for example, Bishop 2002; Bridwell-Bowles 1992, 1995; Davis and Shadle 2000, 2007; George 2002; Selfe 2007; Sirc 2002; Wysocki et al. 2004; and Yancey 2004b).

What makes this framework for composing unique is the responsibility it places on students to determine the purposes of their work and how best to achieve them. While Devitt's work emphasizes the importance of asking students to consider alternative ways of serving similar rhetorical purposes, the instructor ultimately assumes sole responsibility for determining the genres students will employ in their work. "To keep genres from being part of the hidden curriculum," Devitt (2004) writes, "we need to choose deliberately the genres we have students write and need to help students succeed at performing within those genres" (203). As for the WPA's outcome statement, it is a bit fuzzy when it specifies who will be responsible for determining the purposes, genres, and audiences students will engage with throughout the semester. A mediated activity-based multimodal framework for composing provides an alternative to pedagogical approaches that facilitates flexibility and metacommunicative awareness *without* predetermining for students the specific genres, media, and audiences with which they will work. In contrast to frameworks that focus primarily on the production of screen-mediated or visual-verbal texts or, conversely, on the production of linear print-based texts, an activity-based multimodal framework requires students to spend the semester attending to how language, *combined with*

still other representational systems, mediates communicative practice (see appendix B for a list of questions students are asked to consider when producing and analyzing texts).

Instead of providing students with opportunities to explore the communicative potentials of new (or older) media in a context where the instructor decides what the final product will be—what it will look like, which modalities or technologies it will foreground, who it will be directed toward, how it will be delivered, circulated, responded to, and so on—the framework requires students to assume responsibility for determining the purposes, potentials, and contexts of their work. Based in part on Walter Doyle's definition of academic tasks, the framework requires that students determine:

- the *product(s)* they will formulate in response to a given task and the *purposes* it is intended to serve. A final product might take the form of a printed text, Web text, live performance, a handmade or repurposed object, or should students choose to engineer a multipart rhetorical event, any combination thereof. In terms of determining the purpose(s) of their work, students are asked to consider if their goal is, among other possibilities, to persuade, entertain, frighten, convince, or humor their readers. In keeping with the properties of mediated action outlined earlier, students' work is often motivated by the desire to achieve multiple purposes or goals (for example, to fulfill the task requirements, to earn a passing grade, to learn to make a Web page, to hone their skills in creating a certain kind of text, to humor and inform readers, and so on).
- the *operations, processes,* or *methodologies* that will be (or could be) employed in generating that product. Depending on what students aim to achieve, this might involve collecting data from texts, sewing, searching online, wood-working, filming, recording, shopping, staging rehearsals, conducting surveys, interviews, or experiments, and the like.
- the *resources, materials,* and *technologies* that will be (or could be) employed in the generation of that product. Again, depending on what they aim to achieve, this could involve, paper, wood, libraries,

computers, needle and thread, stores, food, music, glue, tape, and so on.

- the specific *conditions* in, under, or with which the final product will be experienced. Students are asked to determine and to work toward structuring the delivery, reception, and circulation of their work. In the case of the dance performance discussed in chapter 3, it was crucial that the work not be experienced on video and on screen but live and in class. (Adapted from Doyle 1983, 161)

Importantly, asking students to take responsibility for the purposes, potentials, and contexts 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 Davis and Shadle's (2000, 2007) multigenre research writing projects, this approach to composing is not intended as an alternative to, or a break from "essay writing as usual" (Bishop 2002, 206). Rather, throughout the whole of the semester, the tasks students are given require that they play a role in determining the most fitting way of conveying, communicating, or re-presenting the work they mean to do in response to those tasks. In some cases, students may decide that a series of e-mails 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.

In recommending that courses privilege innovative, purposeful choosing and require that students reflect on the meaning potentials of a wide variety of genres, methodologies, and technologies (both old and new), I am arguing for the importance of curricula that facilitate what communication professors Roderick Hart and Don Burks, in 1972, termed *rhetorical sensitivity*. According to Hart and Burks, the rhetorically sensitive individual (1) accepts role-playing as part of the human condition; (2) attempts to avoid stylized (rigid, routinized) behavior; (3) recognizes that "situational changes" require modifications in communicative strategies, and thus, is willing to "undergo the strain of adaptation"; (4) learns to distinguish between all information and information that is most acceptable in, or fitting for, a given situation; and, finally,

(5) understands that ideas or information can be represented in "multiform ways" (76). Because they were most concerned with face-to-face verbal interactions, Hart and Burks do little to address the way people work with (or, as is often the case, *work against*) the agency of nonhumans, of things. Rather, the environment, the "stuff" of the material world, is, quite literally, backgrounded as they focus instead on the ways individuals employ spoken language while interacting with, resisting, or persuading "the [human] Other" (83). Yet given the emphasis it places on flexibility, variation, and adaptation, Hart and Burks's "rhetoric-in-action" is still useful for thinking about what other representational systems require of users—writing in relation to writers, as one example. Hart and Burks's rhetoric-in-action proves to be *even more useful* when issues of materiality are factored in.

Using Wertsch's (1998) terms, the framework is far more useful when one considers how sign systems, such as spoken or written language, as well as technical tools mediate interactions. To understand that "an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways" (76) is not only to recognize (to use an example by Hart and Burks) the constraints and affordances associated with saying one thing versus saying another versus opting to remain silent. With materiality added to the mix, students might *also* be asked to consider what difference it might make to "render" an idea through the production of a Web page, a live in-class performance, a series of memos, a speech, a travel guide, and so on.

I am not suggesting that assignments that ask students to make a personal Web page or to compose a six- to eight-page research-based argumentative essay cannot be set up in ways that facilitate rhetorical sensitivity. Students creating Web pages might be encouraged to select the aspect(s) of their identity on which they want to focus for the assignment, and to consider how foregrounding still other aspects of their identity might extend or even complicate the version of self each student plans to represent. In terms of coming up with alternatives for designing their pages, they might be encouraged to study the way other personal Web pages have been designed and persuaded to try out some of those design strategies. Students creating research essays will likely choose what they will research, and they might be asked to look at other

essays, attending closely to the way the authors structure their arguments and then experiment with different ways of structuring their own work.

By contrast, consider how a task like "Lost and Found" (LF) facilitates rhetorical and material sensitivity (see appendix C for the full task description). Inspired by course readings that examine the production, reception, distribution, and valuation of found or authorless texts, LF requires students to collect and analyze an assortment of found texts and create a context in which, and audience for which, the texts assume meaning when viewed in relation to one another. Like the personal Web page and research assignments, LF provides students with a "decision-making situation" (Onore 1989, 232) that requires they consider various ways of accomplishing the task and anticipate how the choices they make might impact, positively or otherwise, the look, sound, and overall meaning-potential of their final products. Students must decide, for instance, when, where, and how they will begin amassing their collection of found or authorless texts. Will they spend a day collecting texts? A week? Will they collect only certain types of texts to start, say those they encounter at home, on campus, or in the workplace, or will they begin by collecting whatever texts they happen to come across in the course of a day or a week? Will they decide instead to solicit authorless texts from friends or family members? Students must also determine the kind and quality of work they want their texts to do before, during, or after collecting their texts. Importantly, as the work students *might want to do* with their texts will be impacted by the texts they have on hand, students must attend to the kinds of work these mediational means *will actually allow them to do*. A student might want to create a final product that demonstrates poor eating habits on campus, but if she has not found texts that allow her to make that argument, she must find new texts or come up with ways of transforming or altering the texts she has already collected so that they can help her do the work she wants to do.

Because the task *does not* determine for students, as the personal Web page or research essay assignments do, the type of final product they are expected to produce, students must also determine how and by what means they will re-present, for an audience of their choosing, their

work. A student interested in creating a Website as her final product might begin by collecting texts that she could photograph, scan, videotape, and feature on a mock eBay Website. The decisions she makes while pricing each item, coupled with the way she describes and analyzes her texts, might be geared toward critiquing a propensity for attributing value to meaningless things, things that others have decided to throw away or give away. To put a more positive spin on things, the choices she makes while collecting, selecting, pricing, describing, and analyzing her texts might suggest, instead, that artifacts that seem to have little value in and of themselves can assume a great deal of value, depending on where they were found, who came in contact with them, and so on. Another student, interested in forging connections between the task and a sociology course he is taking, might create a context that presupposes his texts were found at the scene of a crime. His final product might consist of a collection of evidence bags (each containing a different text from his collection), a police report, and a newspaper article. In producing this multipart text, the student is able to explore how members of two different professions, working with different genre systems, might describe, analyze, foreground, and attribute different meaning to the same collection of texts.

To ensure that students are thinking about communicative contexts in highly flexible ways, they are required to come up with *at least* two ways of addressing or solving the problem associated with the task. Although they are only expected to develop and follow through with one of their plans, asking them to come up with more than one way of approaching the task ensures that students will consider how the adoption of alternate goal structures and mediational means might impact the work they are hoping to accomplish. Coming up with alternative ways of approaching the task initiates discussions of privileging as students are asked to consider how the particular combination of mediational means (or suite of tools) they are considering using helps them to achieve goals that other combinations might not. They are also asked to consider what makes a particular plan of action seem more or less appropriate for the contexts they are trying to achieve with their work. The act of coming up with alternative plans of action highlights a point made by Hart and Burks, namely that being rhetorically sensitive is not a matter of "saying or not

saying, of telling it like it is or not telling at all," but requires that one attend to the various ways a communicative objective might be met (89).

A Mediated Activity-Based Multimodal Framework

To provide a better sense of how the mediated activity-based multimodal framework has been enacted in the classroom, I will examine the way two students enrolled in my spring 2004 section of Rhetoric 105, a first-year composition course, negotiated a task referred to as the *OED* (see appendix D for a full task description). Assigned during the fourth week of the semester, it requires students to use the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* a source that many students find boring and frustrating, to research the etymology of any word they choose. Designed, in part, to prepare students for the extensive research project assigned later in the semester, this task requires that the data students find in the *OED* comprise at least three-fourths of their response. Geared also toward increasing students' rhetorical and material flexibility, the task requires that students generate at least three tentative (paragraph-long) plans for re-presenting the data they have collected prior to attending the in-class workshop held a week and a half after the task is assigned. For example, a student who researched the word "find" came to the workshop with one plan for creating a scavenger hunt, another for an online game, and yet another for an article in a magazine aimed at people devoted to the *OED*. During the workshop sessions, students addressed what they considered to be the specific affordances associated with each of their plans while soliciting feedback from their peers.

The student work featured here both is, and is not, representative of the work students typically produce. In focusing specifically on Karen's and Mike's work, I do not mean to imply that students routinely gravitate toward choices that involve creating complex tests or producing videos. What *is* representative about these pieces has to do with the flexibility and metacommunicative awareness their producers demonstrated throughout the process of accomplishing them, the sophisticated ways they were able to attend to the twinned questions of *what* they sought to do and *why,* and how, in the process of negotiating a mediated activity-based multimodal approach to composing, they began forging important connections between the classroom and other lived spaces.

The Mirror IQ Test

Before the semester began, Karen assumed, as did many of her peers, that the course was going to be "the typical English class" where students would be expected to read assigned texts and produce responses to those texts "presented in the typical five-paragraph essay format." While her experience in this class was in keeping with her idea of *typical* since students were expected to read and respond to a series of assigned texts, Karen had not been expecting that the course would "force [her] to build upon [her] past skills and former approaches to writing." Admitting that she was extremely frustrated for the first part of the semester, Karen, an architecture major, saw her *OED* project, the "Mirror IQ Test," as her opportunity to articulate that frustration through a piece that was intentionally designed to make the test-taker "feel the same way I did in finding an idea to fulfill the assignments I was given." Here, Karen provides a strikingly rich set of goals for how her complex treatment of the word "mirror" should affect its recipient:

> The point behind the creation of the mirror IQ test is that I wanted to inform the participant of the definitions and uses of the word mirror along with demonstrating my frustration during the research for [the task] itself. It took me almost two and a half weeks before I could even figure out what to do for the assignment and I was becoming extremely frustrated in the process. I wanted the participant to feel the pressure of completing the test in a given amount of time much like how I felt pressure trying to complete the assignment in the amount of time I had.

The "Mirror IQ Test" came inside a 9 x 12" manila envelope. Karen's university address appeared in the top left corner. A plastic bag containing nine mirrors was stapled to the front of the envelope. Inside the envelope was a typed sheet of paper entitled "Setting Description and Instructions," a stapled four-page, single-spaced copy of the test printed entirely in reverse (a technique often referred to as "mirror-writing"), a duplicate copy of the test that was printed normally, and an answer key for the test.

Although the instructions and setting description did little in terms

of showcasing her *OED* data, Karen said that both were crucial in helping her to situate the piece by simulating a high-stakes, timed testing atmosphere similar to what she had experienced while taking tests like the SAT and ACT. Karen hoped the setting description, in particular, would exacerbate whatever anxiety the recipient might experience at the prospect of having to complete the test in the thirty minutes allotted:

> Imagine you are sitting in a empty classroom with just one desk in the center and a ticking clock in the background. The room is drafty and cold with very dim light. It is eight o'clock [and] the score from this test will determine your future by deciding which school you will be accepted to. You tried to study for the test but your friends, your parents, and your annoying siblings continually distracted you. You ended up only studying for an hour before you fell asleep, and now you are only half awake to take the exam. When you dig out your pencil the tip is broken. You search for a pencil sharpener but there isn't one in the room so you have to ask the proctor for another one. They hand you a stubby pencil with no eraser and tell you to sit down because the exam is starting.

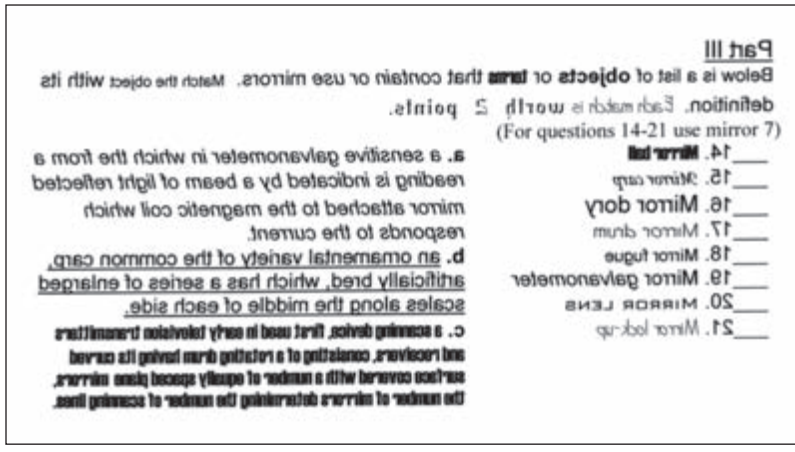
The setting description also provided Karen with the opportunity to write herself into the piece by cataloging some of the "distractions and annoyances" she encountered while working on this task. Here Karen alludes to the distractions of dorm life, fatigue, and feelings of being ill-prepared and alone, feelings that may have stemmed from the in-class workshop, which left Karen concerned that many of her classmates had devised more solid plans for the *OED* than she had been able to. Yet instead of explicitly stating that the problems were ones *she* experienced while composing this test, her use of the second person allowed her to distance herself from those experiences. Frustration, stress, anxiety, and ill-preparedness were no longer associated with the position Karen was able to assume here as the creator and administrator of this test. Rather, in the context she creates with the setting description, they belonged to whoever was unfortunate enough to have to take the test.

The test itself was comprised of *OED* data that Karen had arranged in four sections: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, matching, and a section that involved identifying correct spellings of "mirror." Cognizant

that any other attempts to explicitly foreground the anxiety, frustration, or intellectual impotence that she experienced while composing the piece might compromise the authority of the test as well as her authority as student-turned-expert-test-creator, every choice Karen made while engineering the test needed to leave the recipient with little doubt that she had not only been able to successfully *take on* the specific challenges associated with the task, but that she had been able *to take them over* as well.

After creating a master copy of the test in Word, Karen began adjusting that copy, alternating the types and sizes of fonts that appeared throughout the test. Following this, she began the process of reversing the entire document in Photoshop (see fig. 14). In addition to "increasing the difficulty and confusion" one would experience while taking the test, Karen said the manipulation of the Word document provided her with a very specific way of "reflecting" the difficulty she experienced deciphering some of the older (less-familiar) portions of the *OED* entry with which she had been working. For someone invested in doing everything possible to ensure that the test-taker would fail to complete the test in the time she had been allotted, Karen's decision to provide the test-taker with a packet of mirrors was not indicative of a slip-up on her part or her willingness to level the playing field by providing the test-taker with resources for navigating a difficult task. Karen said that the majority of the mirrors included in the kit had been specifically chosen for having features that would make it almost impossible for anyone to see or read much of anything with them. Some were concave, some convex, and almost all of them were made of a substance that precluded them from reflecting anything at all. One mirror in particular, while it had been large enough and of a decent-enough quality to have provided an adequate reflection of the test, was covered in black tape so that only a small portion of the middle of the mirror was left to reflect anything at all. Karen underscored that she chose to tape the mirror to "briefly hit a point" that she wanted to make with the piece, namely, "that when we look into mirrors we only look at a small part of the whole. We tend to focus on our nose or our lips instead of stepping back and looking at all of it together."

By creating an environment that required the test-taker to employ mediational means (the mirrors) not typically associated with test-


Part III

Below is a list of **objects** or **terms** that contain or use mirrors. Match the object with its definition. Each match is worth 2 points.

(For questions 14-21 use mirror 7)

___14. **Mirror bat**
___15. Mirror carp
___16. Mirror dory
___17. Mirror drum
___18. Mirror tuba
___19. Mirror galvanometer
___20. MIRROR LENS
___21. Mirror lock-up

a. a sensitive galvanometer in which the from a reading is indicated by a beam of light reflected mirror attached to the magnetic coil which responds to the current.

b. an ornamental variety of the common carp, artificially bred, which has a series of enlarged scales along the middle of each side.

c. a scanning device, first used in early television transmitters and receivers, consisting of a rotating drum having its curved surface covered with a number of equally spaced plane mirrors, the number of mirrors determining the number of scanning lines.

Fig. 14. A portion of the "Mirror IQ Test"

taking, Karen seems to be suggesting that *just because* one is given permission to take up a variety of mediational means does not necessarily make a task any easier. In fact, in addition to altering one's perspective on what composing practices might potentially require and afford (much as Karen's collection of mirrors works to suggest), the increase in mediational means often makes the business of composing (or in Karen's case, of test-making and taking) that much more challenging since there is often, quite literally, infinitely more stuff for students to handle.

Interpretations of Power

Mike, a business major, also admitted that the tasks had been a source of frustration for him, stressing that it often took a good deal of time, effort, and thought to come up with ideas for responding to each new task. Upon receiving the *OED* task description, however, Mike felt he had "lucked out" since he knew exactly what he hoped to do:

> I chose the word "power" because it has a great deal of meaning to me. I love war movies that talk about military and political power and I love to weight lift which is about muscular power . . . it is also an older word and I was confident that I could find a lot of research on it in the *OED*. . . . I wanted to do a fun movie. I felt that a lot of the work that I had done in the class was time consuming and I felt that a movie

> would be an easy and fun change of pace. I thought that I could make power seem fun and interesting.

While deciding on a word, purpose, and method of re-presentation before looking through several sets of *OED* data is fairly unusual—more often than not, students will have to switch words a few times before settling on one they can use—accomplishing the task would not prove especially easy for Mike. As he recalled, "After thinking more about how I might actually accomplish my goal and after spending countless hours staring at the *OED,* I realized that there was nothing amusing or fun about it. I couldn't think of a single way to portray the information as funny." Mike's treatment of the word *power* ultimately took the form of a "public access type" show that attempted to parody a program Mike recalled seeing years before. As Mike explained, "The [gardening] show was very boring and it upset me that the host could be so passionate about such a boring subject. I decided to use this genre to bore my watcher." In choosing to burn "Interpretations of the *OED*" on CD, Mike was also able to structure viewers' reception of his work in ways that aligned with the specific forms of physical and intellectual "punishment" he felt he had had to endure while sitting in front of the computer looking for usable *OED* data online.

"Interpretations" was shot in black and white, Mike's way of ensuring that the episode would "bore the socks off" the viewer. At the start of the episode, we meet "Russ," the host of the show and someone not enrolled in the course. Russ has shoulder-length hair; he is dressed in a tweed sports coat and seated in a chair positioned against a very plain background. On Russ's lap was a copy of Mike's class reading course packet that Mike had repurposed in the hopes of making it appear that Russ was actually reading from a volume of the *OED*. Inside the spiral-bound packet was a script containing various spellings and uses of the word *power*. The script required that Russ speak in a British accent, and after welcoming viewers to the show and promising them an "intimate evening" spent "delving into the word *power* and all it has to offer," Russ makes a reference to Mister Rogers, removes his shoes, and settles into his chair. Following this, Russ begins holding up what Mike's script calls "signs." These were pieces of paper that contained different spellings

of the word *power*. Russ displays and spells aloud twelve "signs" in all, including: poer, poeir, pouwer, pouwere, pouoir, pouer, pouere, poweer, pouar, powar, pover, and finally, the one Russ refers to as "our good old trusty stand-by companion, p-o-w-e-r." For Mike, the decision to have Russ read each spelling aloud *and with ever-increasing enthusiasm* was intended as a way of "really getting his message across" by making the episode "drag on and on with unnecessary long [and boring] parts." Interestingly enough, this two minutes plus portion of the piece seems to have had a reverse effect on audiences since the four-hundred-plus viewers who have watched it have suggested that the spelling segment is quite funny.

If Russ's portions of the video allowed Mike to both *purposefully* and *playfully* re-present the data he collected from the *OED* and to illustrate the powerfully numbing experience of sitting alone in his dorm room searching the *OED* database, the three commercials interspersed throughout the video are suggestive of the other forms of power Mike had to negotiate while composing his piece—the power of friendship, video games, good movies, and food. Put otherwise, the power of extracurricular diversions. Mike explained that the colorful, loud, and cluttered space that served as backdrop for the commercials was offered as a contrast to the "horribly furnished room with little visual stimulation" in which Russ and the *OED* were positioned. As a way of providing a tighter link between Russ's portion of the piece and the commercials, Mike made the problem of trying to find the time and desire to complete his *OED* the central focus of the commercials. Two of the "visually stimulating" commercials began with roughly the same shot, one that featured Mike sitting alone in his dorm room in front of the computer with his copy of the course reading packet in his lap. Within minutes, friends began entering the room offering him "fun and interesting distractions." As Russ's appearances as the obedient and passionate student-scholar of the *OED* in the black-and-white segments of the video were meant to suggest, the student Mike portrays in the commercials ultimately gives in to the power of these other distractions and places his *OED* project to the side. Despite making promises to the contrary at the end of each commercial, Mike continues to procrastinate, and so fails to complete the task himself.

Or does he? It may be important to note here that "Interpretations" gave Mike the opportunity to revisit an issue he had addressed in work produced earlier in the semester, namely that of trying to reconcile the distractions posed by extracurricular interests and practices with those posed by curricular ones. On the one hand, "Interpretations" suggests that Mike, as the colorful commercial persona, found a way to reconcile this problem by having Russ tend to his curricular distractions, thereby freeing commercial Mike to tend to the extracurricular ones. At the same time, the processes that Mike, as a Rhetoric 105 student, employed while producing the video suggest that he did, after all, find ways to both productively and *simultaneously* manage both forms of distraction. Explaining that he had "some really great people at his dorm" who had previously volunteered to assist him with work he had been producing for the course, Mike said he approached the *OED* task with the thought of taking people up on their offers. By "subcontracting" various parts of the project to other people (while Mike would conduct the research, compose the script, and take on most of the directing, he put his friends in charge of filming and editing the video, designing the two sets, and deciding who would play the various supporting roles in the piece), Mike said he was able to approach the task feeling less like its sole author or creator and more like a project manager whose primary concern was with organizing and overseeing the various resources and talents each member of the team brought to the project. In this way, Mike felt that his way of approaching the task resonated with his long-term career goals—to work in business/management—in ways that working alone on the piece would not have afforded.

A mediated activity-based multimodal framework not only requires that students work hard but also *differently,* and it does so by foregrounding the complex processes associated with goal formation and attainment. Because inquiry-based approaches to composing were increasingly offered as a way of bridging the gap between personal and academic discourse aims, practitioners were also cautioned about the ways that overly prescriptive assignments might actually militate against intellectual "mystery" (Davis and Shadle 2000, 441) and perpetuate instead a mechanical, fill-in-the-blanks, or "cookbook" (Bridwell-Bowles 1995, 56) approach to composing. In other words, by providing students with what

the cognitive anthropologist Edwin Hutchins (1995) would call solution procedure "strips"—relatively stable and seemingly linear sequences of steps that are offered as a means of leading people through the successful accomplishment of a given task (294), overly prescriptive assignments afforded students potentials for bypassing the inquiry phase as they searched for the "implicit clues that reveal what really counts and what can be ignored in completing a particular assignment" (Nelson 1995, 413). By refusing to hand students a list of nonnegotiable steps that must be accomplished in order to satisfy a specific course objective, the framework described here asks students to consider how communicative objectives might be accomplished in any number of ways, depending on how they decide to contextualize, frame, or situate their response to those objectives.

Again, while there is nothing to say that students who are asked to make personal Web pages, or to compose print-based, linear, research-based essays, cannot be encouraged to consider the various other ways they might have approached those tasks, I suggest that students who are provided with tasks that do not specify what their final products must be and that ask them to imagine alternative contexts for their work come away from the course with a more expansive, richer repertoire of meaning-making and problem-solving strategies. Further, questions associated with materiality and the delivery, reception, and circulation of texts, objects, and events are less likely to be viewed as separate from or incidental to the means and methods of production, but more likely as integral parts of the invention and production process. For Mike, the desire to bore the viewer informed many of the choices he made, from filming Russ's segments of the piece in black and white, to having him dress and speak in certain ways and locating him in an empty, nondescript setting. The loud, fast-paced, colorful commercials were offered as a point of contrast, Mike's way of reminding viewers of what they were missing while watching Russ read entries from the dictionary. In Karen's case, the desire to articulate for test-takers something of the frustration and anxiety she experienced while attempting to complete the *OED* task in the time the class was allotted informed many of the choices she made, from creating the setting description, to reverse-imaging the test, to providing test-takers with mirrors that did not make the task any easier to

complete. In sum, the majority of the choices that Karen and Mike made while engineering their responses to the task were predicated upon the understanding, if not the *hope,* that their work would be experienced by specific, not to mention *multiple* audiences—the instructor, peers, future readers, and so on—in very specific ways.

A mediated activity-based multimodal framework requires that students produce a substantial amount of writing throughout the semester, but the fact that they are drawing on multiple genres and representational systems as they compose work for the course suggests that students are doing something that is, at once, *more and other than* writing (that is, placing and arranging words on a page or screen). Students who are called upon to choose between, and later to order, align, and transform the various resources they chose to employ tend to work in ways that more closely resemble how choreographers or engineers work. In fact, following Gunther Kress (2000), I would maintain that "in the context of multimodal, multimedia modes of textual production . . . the task of text-makers is that of complex orchestration" (160). In Mike's case, for instance, "Interpretations" not only involved the production of a script based on his *OED* data, but also the complex orchestration of those people—and their energy, time, talent, and access to and experience with technology—who had earlier volunteered to assist Mike in the production of work for the course.

Cognizant that the work featured here might not resemble the student work many have grown accustomed to assigning and responding to, I want to briefly underscore some of the ways I see this framework working to achieve more familiar goals. First, the framework still requires students to write, conduct research, and respond to complex social texts, including ones they have created, ones created by their peers, as well as the wide variety of texts they encounter in curricular and extracurricular domains. Second, in keeping with the WPA "Outcomes Statement" (2002), the tasks and activities associated with the framework ensure that students are extensively and deeply involved in the following:

- Focusing on a purpose
- Responding to the needs of different audiences
- Responding appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations

- Using conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation
- Adopting appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality
- Understanding how genres shape reading and writing
- Writing in several genres
- Integrating their own ideas with those of others
- Understanding the relationships among language, knowledge, and power
- Understanding the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Using a variety of technologies to address a range of audiences
- Learning common formats for different kinds of texts
- Controlling such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling (520–22)

Finally, students are still engaging in process and learning about revision. However, what students come to understand about potentials for processes, processing, and revision is far richer and more complex when practiced within this framework. When students understand process and revision as concepts that both shape, and take shape from, the specific goals, objectives, and tools *with which,* as well as the specific environments *in which* they interact while composing, they stand a far better chance of appreciating how processes, processing, and revision also play integral roles in the continual (re)development of genres, practices, belief systems, institutions, subjectivities, and histories. And, of course, in the ongoing (re)development of lives.

Thus far I have argued that when called upon to set their own goals and to structure the production, delivery, and reception of the work they accomplish in the course, students can: (1) demonstrate an enhanced awareness of the affordances provided by the variety of mediational means they employ in service of those goals; (2) successfully engineer ways of contextualizing, structuring, and realizing the production, representation, distribution, delivery, and reception of their work; and

(3) become better equipped to negotiate the range of communicative contexts they find themselves encountering both in and outside of school. I would be remiss, however, if I were to conclude this chapter without addressing some of the challenges and misconceptions associated with the adoption of such a framework.

First, students who have grown accustomed to instructors telling them exactly what they need to do and how they need to do it may find this way of working to be time-consuming and frustrating, especially at the start. This is especially true for students who enter the course expecting general writing skills instruction (GWSI) and therefore are hoping, if not expecting, that the course will provide them with the magic formula for writing "right" for all time and every occasion. Students who are accustomed to taking courses where writing is treated as separate from other representational systems—where, for instance, the visual design of the page, font choice, and spacing are not discussed or where little attention is paid to how systems of delivery and reception impact matters of production—may also find the framework unfamiliar, suggesting that it feels somewhat counterintuitive. Indeed, making the shift from highly prescriptive assignments to those that require students to assume responsibility for the purposes and contexts of their work can prove challenging for students unaccustomed to thinking about and accounting for the work they are trying to accomplish in curricular and extracurricular spaces. Even those eager to assume more responsibility for their work and to explore various materials, methodologies, and technologies in their work often find the tasks more challenging than they first anticipated—something that the inclusion of the mirrors in Karen's testing packet underscores. Still, I would argue that making the shift to these more open-ended, complexly mediated tasks is both worthwhile and necessary, especially at a time when many have underscored the importance of establishing an atmosphere where students are able to prove that, beyond being critically minded consumers of existing knowledge, they are also extremely capable, critically minded producers of new knowledge (see, for example, Chiseri-Strater 1991; Geisler 1995; George 2002; Hocks 2003; Sirc 2002; and Welch 1999).

Another source of misunderstanding and potential for resistance has to do to with the appearance of student work—that is to say, with

the look, sound, or feel of their final products. Given that some of the texts students will produce in response to a task may little resemble the kinds of texts that they and/or their peers have produced in their other courses—I think now of the ballet shoes featured in the introduction or the "Conformity" shirt featured in chapter 3—there is the potential that these less familiar looking texts will be misinterpreted, ridiculed, or simply written off as being "creative," "childlike," or "artistic," and so considered to be less rigorous or less scholarly than other, more familiar looking texts. One of the women I interviewed for the second process study recalled her discomfort during the first few weeks of class, explaining that the only times (in high school) she had been permitted to use colors, visuals, textures, and handwritten text were for year-end "creative" group projects—when students were given tasks that involved making murals or posters for the hallway. Her understanding was that these creative projects—offered to students as a break from or reward for working so hard the rest of the year—had little connection to the "real work" of schooling. As such, she began the semester doubting whether the production of what she termed "creative projects" could allow her to accomplish the kind of serious academic work that her high school experience suggested that only written, research-based essays afforded.

Indeed, as Patricia Dunn (2001) and others argue, multimodal strategies and products are often "easily ridiculed" (151), viewed as fun, playful, kooky, gimmicky, expressivist, childlike, simplistic, and arhetorical, while print-linear alphabetic texts continue to be associated "with high art, seriousness, intellectual understanding and rigorous exploration" (Selfe 2010, 608–9). As long as there remains a tendency to associate nonlettered forms of representation with the *expression* of personal feelings, desires, and emotions, rather than with motivated, purposeful, and other-directed attempts at *communication* (Fortune 1989; Kress 1997; Selfe 2009; Simons and Murphy 1986), one runs the risk that students and colleagues alike may underestimate or, worse yet, *miss entirely* the rigorous and, I would add, highly sociorhetorical aspects of the framework.

For instance, students who have not had much experience choosing the representational systems best suited to the work they mean to accomplish may assume that just because they are not being told exactly

what to do and how to do it, that the tasks indicate a kind of free-for-all, "anything goes" approach to instruction. One way of guarding against this either/or way of thinking, while simultaneously highlighting for students the rigorous and sociorhetorical aspects of the framework, is to familiarize them with what Gunther Kress (1997) calls "the two aspects of a message" (15). As Kress explains, the "representational" aspect of the message focuses largely on the maker—on what he or she wants to "say, show or mean"—while the "communicational" aspect of the message takes into account audience expectations, resources available, as well as matters associated with delivery and reception (14). Far from being a matter of pleasing the teacher by doing exactly what he or she wants, *or* pleasing the self by doing whatever one feels like doing, students learn to view tasks as problems, the solutions to which must be carefully negotiated. Students learn to consider the various ways one might go about satisfying the requirements of a task—whether that task has been given or assigned to them by a teacher, parent, employer, or friend or whether it is self-generated—while remaining mindful of the potential outcomes or consequences associated with following a particular course of action over another (or others) they also may have considered pursuing.

As I indicated earlier, and as the discussion of the ballet shoes' reception in the introduction illustrates, it is not only students who may be tempted to dismiss multimodal frameworks as being merely fun, kooky, new age, expressivist, or creative, thereby underestimating or missing entirely the frameworks' rigorous-rhetorical potentials. Where skeptical or resistant colleagues are concerned, Dunn (2001) underscores the importance of asking questions, urging others to articulate the value, use, and purpose of their pedagogical choices. Dunn writes, "Before critics or colleagues find fault with our use of multiple-channel approaches, we should ask them why they're still supporting conventional term papers. . . . Let others explain their choices" (156). For my part, where skeptical, resistant, or even enthusiastic colleagues are concerned, it has proven especially helpful to shift the focus away from students' products and toward the processes students engage in while producing texts for a class. I am not suggesting that one attend only to process and ignore the final product; rather, I am underscoring the importance of examining final products *in relation to* the complex and varied processes involved with

the production of those texts. I think now of colleagues who, after admitting that the courses I teach seem "fun" insofar as they provide students opportunities to be "creative" and to "express their true selves," wonder what, if anything, students are learning or how that knowledge informs work they do in their other courses. Again, in these instances I have found it helpful to highlight for colleagues the complex decision-making processes students report engaging in while producing work for the course, reminding them that while the students' final products may not resemble more familiar or traditional-looking academic texts, the framework still requires that students conduct research, compose various kinds of written texts, and respond both purposefully and appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations. Further, many of the students with whom I've worked have conducted research, produced written texts, and responded to a variety of texts and contexts while exploring the meaning-making potentials of a much wider range of semiotic resources than they would likely have encountered in other writing/composition classrooms.

Like others who advocate multimodal frameworks or "multiple-channel approaches" (Dunn 2001, 156) to instruction, I firmly believe that students who are encouraged to make informed, rhetorically based uses of sounds, video, still images, animation, textures, scents, and so on are well positioned to better understand and respond to the ways written language works with and against the affordances associated with other representational systems (Takayoshi and Selfe 2007). I also believe that frameworks that provide students with opportunities to move between—while reflecting upon—the affordances and constraints associated with different representational systems and ways of knowing may better prepare students for the variety of intellectual and interpersonal tasks and activities they will likely encounter in other classes, in extracurricular spaces, as well as in their future professions.

The final challenge or misconception I will address in this chapter has to do with the idea that multimodal frameworks *necessarily* require new pedagogical approaches. Mike Markel (1999) challenges the notion that shifting from face-to-face, lecture-based courses to online, hybrid, or distance instruction requires radically new pedagogical approaches. He provides readers with a list of six shared teaching objectives, maintain-

ing that whether one teaches a course that meets face-to-face, online, or offers students a blend of online and face-to-face instruction, the goals shared by many writing instructors have to do with helping students learn: (1) how to learn; (2) how to think rhetorically; (3) how to work cooperatively with others; (4) how to find and evaluate information; (5) how to think creatively and analytically; and (6) how to present information clearly and persuasively to various audiences (216–17). Markel's point is that just because the method of instruction may change, it does not mean that everything one has become accustomed to doing necessarily needs to change. In keeping with a point made by Takayoshi and Selfe (2007), we must remain mindful that "whether instructors teach written composition solely or multimodal composition, their job remains essentially the same: to teach students effective, rhetorically based strategies for taking advantage of all available means of communicating effectively and productively, to multiple audiences, for different purposes, and using a range of genres" (9).

This is not, of course, to say that teaching courses online (in Markel's case) or providing students with opportunities to produce multimodal texts makes no difference, or has little impact on pedagogical practices. Even while recognizing that "when it comes to rhetoric the expertise of teachers is undeniably crucial" (20), Selber (2004) acknowledges that instructors may well lag behind students when it comes to specific technical skills. Selber stresses the importance of teachers being willing to embrace (or at the very least not shy away from) opportunities to learn *with* as well as *from* students. Here Selber refers specifically to technical (that is, computer) skills, but the same argument can be made with a mind toward the production of other kinds of texts, objects, and performances.

Returning again to the example of the ballet shoes, I had little experience with calligraphy or transcribing text onto shoes to offer the student. While I could offer the student my opinion or best guess on the following matters, I could not say absolutely that a such-and-such brand and style of marker would work best given the texture and weight of the cloth she was attempting to work with. Nor could I say with any measure of certainty where the best place was for her to begin transcribing her text on the shoes, thereby ensuring that the text would remain legible

and easy for readers to navigate. I had no idea of how big each handwritten character should be in order to ensure that the entire draft of her word-processed text translated successfully to the shoes. Further, given the complex and multiple surfaces she had to work with (four laces or ribbons plus the soles, sides, and tops of both shoes), I could not say that it necessarily made more sense to start with the toe of the right shoe and continue up one lace and down the other, and so on. I could, however, provide her with a repertoire of strategies and questions, guiding her through a set of basic rhetorical processes that helped to underscore the importance of thinking both carefully and critically about the contexts, goals, and purposes of one's work and to consider the various ways one might go about achieving those goals. I could, in other words, impress upon her the importance of learning to manage her "communicative efforts in ways that are rhetorically effective, critically aware, morally responsible, and personally satisfying" (Selfe 2009, 644). And it helped, of course, that I was both eager and willing to learn *from* and *with* her. Having had a number of students who were willing to share with me the processes they employed while creating similar kinds of texts (such as those that involved transcribing drafts of word-processed alphabetic texts onto shirts, shoes, and other cloth surfaces), I am far better positioned now to share with students advice on which tools, strategies, and techniques to pursue, or conversely, to avoid.

Thus far, I have done little to address what some may consider to be the greatest challenge associated with the adoption of a multimodal framework like the one detailed in this chapter, namely, how one might go about assessing and responding to texts that little resemble the kinds of texts one has grown most accustomed to assigning, receiving, and responding to. In the next chapter I describe and illustrate a way of evaluating multimodal designs that, in keeping with the framework offered in this chapter, does not focus exclusively on the production and evaluation of digital texts but attends to a much broader range of texts—those informing the production and reception of print-based, linear essays, objects-as-texts, live performances, as well as digital texts.