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Seeing Academically Marginalized Students' Multimodal Designs from a Position of Strength

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Abstract

This article examines multimodal texts created by a cohort of academically marginalized secondary school students in Singapore as part of a language arts unit on persuasive composition. Using an interpretivist qualitative approach, we examine students' multimodal designs to highlight opportunities presented for expanding literacy practices traditionally not often available to lower-tracked students. Findings highlight the authorial stances and rhetorical force that this cohort of students employed in their multimodal designs, despite lack of regular opportunities to author texts and a schooling history of low expectations. We echo arguments for the importance of providing all students with opportunities to take positions as designers and creators while acknowledging systematic barriers to such opportunities for academically marginalized students. This study thus aims to counter deficit views of academically marginalized students' in-school literacy practices and to examine openings for equity through authoritative stance-taking, multivoicedness, and multiple paths to authoring that multimodal composition affords.

Keywords: multimodality, social semiotics, multiliteracies, authorial stance, rhetorical force, lower-tracked students, Singapore

Introduction

For decades, scholars of writing studies have discussed how multimodal design (i.e., creating texts using more than one communicative mode, such as writing combined with image and sound) can offer creative expression beyond what is afforded in traditional literacy practices that center around print-dominated practices (e.g., New London Group, 1996). Scholars have similarly long argued for the broadening of classroom literacy practices to include multiple modes and literacies (e.g., spatial, embodied, digital, visual), citing the possibility for increased access, equity, and opportunities to learn (e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Some of these arguments point to the usefulness of engaging in multimodal design, which can position learners agentively as they draw on different communicative modes to achieve specific goals, rather than simply display core competencies or engage as consumers of existing texts (Ajayi, 2008; Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Halverson, 2009; Mills, 2010). Engaging students in authoring multimodal texts (MTs) is thus one well-documented avenue for potentially broadening classroom literacy practices to include equitable opportunities for students to explore interests, create multivocal compositions, and explore layered positionalities with regards to classroom literacy practices (Hull & Schultz, 2002; Mills, 2009; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010).

Heeding these calls, K-12 curricula have evolved to include more expansive expectations for multimodal meaning making, most notably in the U.K (Lankshear, 1998; Street, 2008), Australia (Mills & Exley, 2014; Unsworth, 2002), and South Africa (e.g., Stein & Newfield, 2006). Singapore, the context of the present study, similarly revised their national English Language (arts) syllabus (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2010) to include a guiding principle of ‘opportunities for pupils to be exposed to and engage in producing a variety of multimodal texts to represent ideas effectively and with impact’ (p. 9), and a guiding strategy for teachers to ‘help

pupils grow creatively and gain expertise as writers by encouraging them to experience the process of producing a variety of written and multimodal texts for creative, personal, academic, and functional purposes' (p. 58). Singapore's new and expansive standards, however, do not pertain to the lowest-track secondary school curriculum—Normal Technical (NT), which includes the lowest ranked 15% of secondary students in each year's cohort (MOE, 2014). In this article, we analyze the MT designs of a cohort of students in this NT track. Exclusion of lower-tracked and other academically marginalized students from expansive literacy practices is widely documented, with remedial and basic skills predominating curricula and pedagogy in Singapore (Albright & Kramer-Dahl, 2009; Author, 2015; Ismail & Tan, 2005; Kwek, Albright, & Kramer-Dahl, 2007) and elsewhere (e.g., Gee, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). We thus aim to describe one attempt at broadening literacy and writing practices with implications for curricula and pedagogy in Singapore and beyond.

Context of the Study

The Normal Technical (NT) track in Singapore secondary schools. This article considers one cohort of academically marginalized students' MT designs in a Singapore classroom. Using *design* indexes our focus on the purposeful, situated, and creative use of multiple modes to make meaning from a social semiotic perspective (Jewitt; 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). We use the term *academically marginalized* to generally refer to students in lower-tracks, special education, or who are pulled out of mainstream instructional time for remediation, as well as students in racial, cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic (SES) groups positioned outside the 'norm' in a given society. In Singapore, students' performance on a high-stakes exam taken in their final year of primary school (10-11 years old) is the principal basis for

their ranking into three tracks in secondary school.¹ The lowest of these tracks, NT, presents limited future opportunities for students therein to move between tracks (MOE, 2014). In fact, fewer than 6% of students in the NT track moved out of it annually between 2002-2012 (MOE, 2012). The NT track includes a remedial curriculum intended to prepare the ‘least academically inclined’ students (Ng, 2012, paragraph 1) for vocational or trade paths after their 10 years of compulsory schooling (Ho, 2012). NT students take all of their coursework within their track (and ranked cohorts of 20-30 students each therein; see Author [2015] for a detailed discussion of ideologies surrounding meritocracy and their influence on tracking in Singapore).

NT students are not eligible to take the exams that grant direct entry into tertiary institutions with pathways to university, and only 15% of NT students eventually continue on to a two-year college (MOE, 2012). Furthermore, researchers have documented the disproportionate number of students in NT from lower-SES, non-English-speaking, and ethnic minority (Malay, Indian) homes (Albright, 2006; Rahim, 1998; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015). We thus characterize students in the NT track as academically marginalized due to the nature of their structural and ideological positioning in the local context as unlikely to continue on to tertiary education beyond vocational certificate-granting institutions.

The research project and school partnership. The overarching three-year research project supporting this study included the development of language arts units for NT students at one partner school, as well as partnerships with various community centers, with aims to expand opportunities for adolescents’ creative and agentive engagement with texts (Author, 2008). [The first author’s] role in this study, along with other Singapore research team members, involved

¹ Schooling and business in Singapore take place in English, one of four National Languages. However, less than 35% of citizens and permanent residents speak English at home, and those that do not are largely ethnic minority and lower-SES (Stroud & Wee, 2012).

meeting with educational stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, community center staff/leaders), designing curricula and out-of-school workshops, creating materials for class units/out-of-school workshops, and collecting data and acting as participant observer.²

A cohort of 18 Secondary 3 NT students (14-15 year olds) individually created the set of MTs that we analyze here in a 14-session unit on persuasive composition, which [the first author] and the Singapore-based research team designed in consultation with our partner teacher, Mr. H (all names are pseudonyms). One year prior to this unit, we began discussions with Mr. H and his school principal based on mutual interests in bringing arts-based and digital media practices into NT classrooms. Mr. H primarily taught NT students a range of subjects, and unlike many other teachers, he chose to work with NT students despite his Master teacher status that afforded him the option to teach accelerated track students (personal communication). Before the unit analyzed here, we worked with Mr. H during the same academic year on two earlier units that involved another cohort of NT students—a drama unit and a personal storytelling unit that also incorporated individually authored MTs. Unlike the prior two units, however, the unit we consider here was the first that Mr. H led, rather than research team members. This was also the first unit the cohort we discuss here participated in with us. At the time of the present study [the first author] had been regularly observing Mr. H's class for nine months.

Typical writing practices in Mr. H's classroom. Mr. H described typical writing and literacy practices in his NT language arts classes outside of the units in which our team was involved during interviews with the research team, sometimes sharing assessments or lesson plans. He characterized these typical practices as heavily structured and scaffolded by prompts

² For this three-year project the research team included [first author]—a foreign faculty member who had been living in Singapore for two years at the time of the present study—as well as another foreign faculty colleague and four full-time Singaporean research assistants.

and direct instruction around thematic units (e.g., the opening of Singapore's first casino, racial harmony, government spending). Most activities for which students were formally assessed focused on comprehension rather than writing (e.g., answering true/false questions, fill-in-the-blanks), and most student writing was brief and guided by prompts (e.g., using a set of provided points to write a letter to the editor). Mr. H cited many of his students' limited comfort and academic proficiency in English as well as the history of systemic, low expectations placed upon them both as reasons for his usual way of conducting class as well as interest in trying something new. Mr. H clearly articulated his care and believed in his students in words and actions.

This language arts unit, with its relatively open prompt and student-directed authoring paths, differed drastically in form and context from students' usual classroom practices described above. In addition, all students completed their MTs, which was noteworthy according to Mr. H. For example, he commented on a number of occasions that, prior to the units for which we partnered with him, some students in his NT classes rarely composed entire paragraphs. One illuminative anecdote that he shared detailed an assignment in which he asked students to write about their dream job for which he provided ten scaffolding prompts. Many students simply answered 'yes' or 'no' to each prompt instead of writing a short narrative about their dream job.

The language arts unit in question: Persuasive multimodal texts. This unit took place over 14 class sessions (spanning 9 weeks, totaling 150 hours of instructional time). Students were asked to create a MT in the form of a persuasive argument on something about which they felt strongly using the programs Windows Movie Maker (WMM) and, in some cases, Audacity to mix multiple audio tracks.³ During the unit, students each planned, designed, and created their own MT, choosing a topic, sourcing images and music from the internet, writing storyboards and

³ In 2009 when the study took place, WMM was the best free option available for such work.

scripts, and recording a voiceover (all in an order of their own choosing). They constructed their MTs in WMM, with which this cohort had no prior in-class training.

Mr. H led the unit, giving lectures on the genre of argument, using WMM, netiquette (students were to be given the option to post their MTs on a project-site), and audience (some MTs would be showcased for the school and public). Mr. H created his own personal MT, which he showed in class. An example of activities in this unit included power-point lectures and discussions about different types of argument as well as viewing existing student-created MTs and discussing the type of audience for which they were written. Students also had sessions to practice using WMM in groups for which they were given a sample argument and a digital image bank and asked to write text and pair images to make a case for both sides of the argument. A member of the research team also gave an in-class workshop on using Audacity to record, mix, and add extra audio tracks to their WMM project, which was optional. Lastly, students provided written peer feedback on storyboards and final MTs (see Figure 1 for an example of student planning work).

illustrate possibilities for creative and expansive digital media practices. By focusing on successes, we acknowledge students' demonstrated faculty with multimodal design, despite the lack of regular opportunities to do so across their secondary school careers. To those ends, we draw on the concepts of *rhetorical force* and *authorial stance* in order to examine the ways that students' designs shaped their final MTs. The following research questions guided our analysis: (a) In what ways did students extend the affordances of traditional literacy practices in their design of MTs, and (b) how did authorial stance feature in their multimodal designs and to what rhetorical effects? In order to further situate our study, we next review literature on academically marginalized students and research on multimodal design in digital media and literacy studies before turning to the presentation of analysis and findings.

Academically Marginalized Students and Multimodal Design

Dominant groups and the institutions that benefit them often provide taken-for-granted categorizations of marginalized groups (Omi & Winant, 2015). One such widely institutionalized form of categorization is academic tracking, which often disproportionately sorts students from linguistic, cultural, and economically marginalized groups into the lowest levels of the education system (Oakes, 1995). Scholars have consistently asserted that there are great disparities between the measured performances of systemically marginalized students and those of their more privileged peers in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rampton, 1995). Furthermore, families' home literacy practices and their congruence with normative school practices and expectations have long been shown to greatly affect students' abilities to assimilate to school discourses and succeed in ways recognized by formal assessment systems (e.g., Dyson, 2008, 2013; Heath, 1983). Many others have similarly noted the numerous ways that schooling is a normative institution that strongly encourages assimilation to practices representative of

privileged, white, and middle class groups (e.g., Kirkland, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1995).

Studies have long discussed the benefits of multimodal composition and design for marginalized students' development of literacy and media practices (e.g., Luke, 2003; Unsworth, 2001). Some scholars have examined students' expanded possibilities for authoring and self-expression (Archer, 2014) and increased opportunities to see themselves as successful (Hull & Katz, 2006; Vasudevan, 2009). Many have considered how various forms of multimodal design such as video production, web design, use of physical space, or dramatic play can positively transform literacy practices and social relations, including opportunities for self-expression and engaging in complex literacy practices. This, despite having often been subjected to erroneous labels such as 'illiterate' or 'low ability' according to narrow and deficit views at worst, or excluded and marginalized from such opportunities at best (e.g., Halverson, 2009; Kirkland, 2013; Mills, 2009; Vasudevan, 2007, 2009). The expanded forms of social and material practices associated with multimodal design can thus provide a platform for marginalized students to create complex texts, a practice from which they are often alienated due to remedial, skill-and-drill practices associated with the curricula offered them below.

Multimodality, Texts, and Design

For readers familiar with concepts related to multimodality, the following may be a review. Modes are abstract resources for meaning making (e.g., image, sound, printed words) that have their own grammars, or patterns, which develop in specific contexts of use (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Together, modes and media (concrete realization of modes, such as a figure, film, or book) shape meaning making, both in texts' creation and interpretation in culturally situated ways that develop over time (Jewitt, 2008). Modes and their respective

grammars—e.g. vectors, positioning, salience—are culturally situated in that these norms have developed in a sociocultural context influenced by top-down, left-right scripts and textual practices (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Readers from other cultural or linguistic contexts may have different associations.

Multimodality is a family of approaches with varied theoretical and methodological tenets (Jewitt, 2013). The social semiotic perspective cuts across many approaches taken by scholars interested in the affordances of MTs and digital media authoring practices (Author, 2013; Domingo, 2012; Jewitt, 2013; Rowsell, Kress, Pahl, & Street, 2013). Studies of multimodal design from a social semiotic perspective acknowledge the equal importance of text and social context for interpreting meaning (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, 2000; New London Group, 1996). Accordingly, meaning is understood as perspectival—i.e. it depends on who is doing the looking, in which sociohistorical context, and with which experiences and interests.

Because multimodal design requires students to work across modes and the different meaning making potentials their various combinations afford in a given context, it thus affords opportunities to create, interpret, analyze, and evaluate texts in ways that differ from traditional school literacy expectations (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Mills, 2010; Unsworth, 2002). Despite widespread change in views on literacies over the last three decades, however, proponents of restrictive views and practices as well as some overgeneralization surrounding the incorporation of multimodal practices still persist (see Bazalgette & Buckingham, 2013; Mills, 2009 for discussion). For that reason, documenting the ways that multimodal design and composition provides opportunities for inclusive, critical, and diverse classroom literacy practices that can benefit a wide range of students (including those often excluded from such practices) remains crucial.

Theoretical framework.

We analyze students' multimodal designs for evidence of expanded ways of engaging with texts, including a range of possible authorial positions and paths as a result of such expanded practices. To inform that analysis, we draw on the lenses of *rhetorical force* and *authorial voice* to better understand the affordances and effects of students' multimodal designs. Rhetorical force is the perceived effect of an act of meaning making (in this case, based on students' MTs), which often relies on ideology, emotion, or other non-literal and non-denotative aspects to contribute to its overarching meaning when taken in context of the text's viewpoint (Leitão, 2003). This effect sits at the intersection of design and reception but cannot be predetermined or predicted as it is context-dependent on multiple levels. For example, the denotative content of a short skit might lie in contrast to its rhetorical force if it is satirical or relies heavily on sarcasm or absurdism—something that relevant cultural knowledge and context are needed to parse. Such multilayered meanings can be subtle and multivocal as well as more readily accomplished through multimodal compositions than in traditional print-dominant texts, especially for students who have not established academic writing practices with which they are comfortable. Furthermore, the social semiotic perspective we take, in which the focus is on the modal ensemble rather than isolated modal components, aligns well with a focus on rhetorical force, which we use to index the gestalt effect or meaning a viewer might glean from a MT.

We also rely on the concept of *authorial stance*, which Vasudevan et al. (2010) define as 'claiming a presence as an author and narrator of one's own experiences' (p. 461). In their study, Vasudevan and colleagues illuminated intersections between students' multimodal composing practices in the classroom and intersections with newly afforded identities, participation structures, and social relations spanning home and school contexts. Aspects of MTs that we

consider here as contributing to students' authorial stance tie in with the notion of rhetorical force to illuminate aspects of Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) interactional and ideational metafunctions—e.g. markers of the author's relationship both to the audience and the content of composition (knowledgeable, tongue-in-cheek, commanding). We thus consider the affordances of multimodal design in terms of opportunities to negotiate complex positioning as author, knower, performer, and student.

To those ends, we also draw from Hull and Katz's (2006) focus on the dialectic between performance and sociocultural context when considering the repertoires of tools, resources, relationships, and cultural artifacts that students use to reposition themselves as authors in relation to typical classroom practices when composing multimodally. The lens of authorial stance highlights how students achieved authoritative rhetorical force in excess of what was possible in other classroom practices in which they typically engaged (e.g., filling in blanks, using a set of prompts to write a letter, answering true/false questions). As Hull and Katz (2006) discuss (citing Bauman & Briggs, 1990), multimodal design can thus lend textual authority, in part, because authors can 'control movement and use of texts...[to] ground the authoritative voice of the performer/author (p. 71). In this way, students have access to a broadened and multilayered range of rhetorical resources when engaging in multimodal design, which can afford opportunities to manage cultural affiliation in ways unavailable in traditional in-school practices (e.g., Domingo, 2012; Vasudevan et al., 2010).

Methods

Data sources. Our analysis is based on the 18 MTs that a cohort of NT Secondary 3 students individually designed as part of a 9-week unit on persuasive multimodal composition. While data from the overarching project included video recordings of class sessions, researcher

field notes, student-generated artifacts, curricular design materials, and interviews, here we focus primarily on students' MTs to identify features of their multimodal design as signs of success in the context of their usual classroom practices and systemic opportunities generally afforded academically marginalized students in Singapore.

Analytic process. Our analysis was guided by an interpretivist, abductive approach (Green, Skukauskaite, & Baker, 2012; Lillis, 2008) entailing iterative stages of first and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2015) as well as more holistic interpretation of students' MTs' content, multimodal design, and how the authorial stances and rhetorical force shaped the MTs' effect on us as viewers. We began by watching each MT, making observational and theoretical notes in a preliminary table that included story topic, multimodal features (both alone and in concert), and authorial stance (e.g., appeal of argument, genre, positioning of author in relation to audience). Our analytic interest evolved during these initial stages to centrally focus on what we came to call 'signs of success' in each MT, such as notable design features (e.g., coherence, unique authorial stance, strong rhetorical force, carrying salient meaning through non-linguistic modes). This focus grew out of the analytic process in which we intentionally avoided a deficit view (as well as tendencies to view student texts in terms of formative, constructive feedback for improvement) to instead examine how students' multimodal designs expanded the affordances of the print-based media that dominated their usual classroom practices.

We next each wrote, discussed, and analyzed interpretive narratives about students' MTs, which described aspects of multimodal design that would not have been possible with traditional print media and highlighted expanded opportunities for students to create, and not just respond to, texts. We used Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) principles of visual grammar to organize and refine the intermediate stage analysis. This decision grew out of reflection on our different ways

of organizing interpretations across the iterative transformations of data, which coalesced around what can be interpreted from the content, modal ensemble, and author-viewer relations evoked by the text.

In the final stage of analysis, we chose three students' MTs to represent the range and types of sophisticated multimodal designs and to exemplify different aspects of how these MTs afforded authorial stances and resulting rhetorical force in excess of students' typical language arts classroom practices. Drawing from Hull and Katz (2006), we analyzed these MTs through visual representations of individual slides and their affordances (see Figures 2 through 4 below). This allowed us to analyze each slide of the MT individually and in relation to the others. As objects of analysis, these MTs highlight different forms of students' authorial stance and resulting authoritative rhetorical force in their persuasive MTs.

Findings

Overall, this cohort of 18 students conveyed messages and authorial positions in their MTs through a unique mix of visual grammars and modal ensembles—most often a combination of text, font/color/layout, and image (e.g., text overlaid onto images, text followed sequentially by images), along with music, visual and textual effects, and voice-over. By examining their MT designs, we arrived at interpretations of the multimodal affordances on which students capitalized, including the ways that they used available rhetorical resources differently to affect a range of authorial stances.

We organize this discussion around three different ways that students crafted authorial stances and attendant rhetorical force through their multimodal design—(a) building cohesion and clarity, featuring non-linguistic modes, and humorous sedition. We present a case exemplar in each section to illustrate how students' multimodal designs lent a textual authority in each of

these three ways. Each case also includes a visual depiction from the MT (Figures 2-4) that takes a form we felt was best suited to highlight that particular MT's affordances and uniqueness (thus each of these figures purposefully differs from the others to best highlight the multimodal affordances of each design).

Building cohesion and clarity through holistic multimodal ensemble. The use of rich, multimodal ensembles allowed many students in this cohort to achieve a holistic level of meaning that printed text alone would likely not have allowed. For example, in her MT, Anna appropriates a public service announcement (PSA) genre to argue that cigarettes should be banned in Singapore due to related health risks (see Figure 2)⁴. She cites cancer, premature birth, regret, and death as warrants for her argument. Her MT features an expository style, with rhetorical questions throughout to set up her warrants, which she presents visually (images paired with captions) and elaborates through voiceover.

Although her title and initial slides focus on smuggling cigarettes (from Malaysia into Singapore, a common practice to avoid a steep Singaporean 'sin' tax), the rhetorical force of this trope taken in the whole of the MT is to set up Anna's core argument for banning cigarettes. The ominous music (repetitive droning synthesizer arpeggios in a minor key), dark color scheme (black background with red drop shadow text for most slides), as well as minimalist style and stark, sometimes upsetting images (cancerous lungs, aborted fetus, skull x-ray, figure crouched in abject regret) contribute to a style of health-related public service announcement that appeals to shock and revulsion to deter viewers from negative behavior. Aspects of Anna's MT also

⁴ We maintain students' spellings and grammar so as not to suggest their writing needs correction to an idealized academic norm.

stylistically resemble the mandated warnings on packs of cigarettes sold in Singapore depicting cancerous mouths and lungs along with warnings in stark font.

50 seconds, 10 slides + black at end (with just VO and then music) Modes: written text, voiceover, image, font/color/layout, effects/transitions, music				
	Slide 3 (0:12)	Slide 4 (0:16)	Slide 8 (0:30)	Slide 9 (0:35)
Image				
VO	Hello, Anna here. I would like to talk about smuggling cigarette.	Smoke can damage our lung, brain...	Underage is not allowed to smoke. If they could not stop,	they must pay a fine.
Music	synthesizer arpeggio, repetitive, lurking in background, dark and foreboding (VO louder)	Music continues	Vocals come in (female, simple, repetitive melody on 3 minor key notes, lyrics: "do what you will...everything you see is already ending")	Music with vocals continue
Font/color/layout	Centered yellow on black background (Style 1a)	Centered yellow text with white drop shadow on black background (Style 1b)	Centered black-outlined white text over red rectangle background at top of slide, image below (and behind) (Style 2)	(Style 2)
Effects	Typing effect (text incrementally appears, quickly, letter by letter, so text moves left as new words appear)	Text flies in as one block from top left then flies out as one block to bottom right	Text box drops down, then slides up as it fades	Text box drops down, then slides up as it fades
Rhetorical Force	Setting the stage: orienting viewer	Rhetorical question sets up forthcoming answer	Claims, with simple, stark imagery and minimal presentation	Claims, with simple, stark imagery and minimal presentation

Figure 2. Highlights from Anna’s MT: Building Cohesion and Clarity across Multimodal Ensemble.

Figure 2 depicts four slides from Anna’s MT, representing the two main styles she employs throughout—positioning of argument (slides 3-4) and warrants for claims (slides 8-9). The salient aspects of cohesion in Anna’s MT include: using the same font throughout, incorporating only two main slide layouts, complementary written text and voiceover, and images that mostly add to the voiceover (timing becomes slightly skewed toward the end). Thus, Anna’s design effectively set the tone—one of foreboding and stark warning—through layout,

music/image choice, and a content focus on negative health repercussions across written and spoken text.

Rhetorically, Anna takes a position (slide 3 – Singapore should ban cigarettes) and echoes it with rhetorical questions that index what is to come (slide 4 – What is the effect? [of smoking cigarettes]), which she answers with a list of health effects, some accurate (cancer) and some not (aborted babies). She appeals to emotion (fear, revulsion) and warns viewers not to take up smoking, reasserting the argument that Singapore should ban cigarettes. Thus, the overarching rhetorical force of Anna's MT is to warn and persuade via her argument surrounding a public health concern. She offers warrants that appeal to emotion and that evoke a detached, slightly didactic PSA genre (which quite a few students in this cohort adapted). Within this rhetorical positioning of herself as author and the audience as the beneficiary of the PSA, Anna enacts an authoritative, omniscient tone similar to many PSAs.

Featuring non-linguistic modes for rhetorical force. In her MT, Rebecca argues against the country-wide policy in Singapore that all students (primary and secondary) must wear school uniforms. She initially states her position in written text ("Students should not be made to wear uniforms") and then lists common warrants for the use of uniforms in schools, which she subsequently debunks one-by-one. Rebecca's MT features only text, layout, music, and digital effects, rather than the combination of text, image, and voiceover common amongst her peers. She instead relies on the modes of color, music, and motion to create a sense of coherence and punctuated rhetorical force. Figure 3 depicts nine moments from Rebecca's MT in groups of three to illustrate the role of color, music, and motion in her modal ensemble.

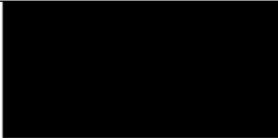
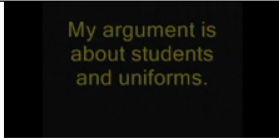
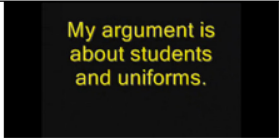
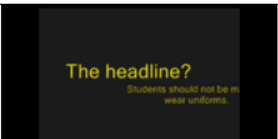
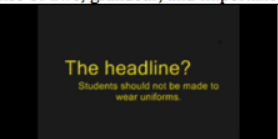
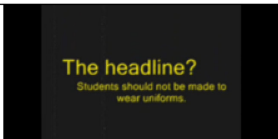
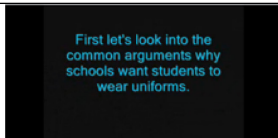
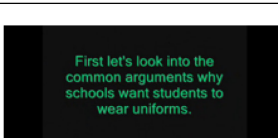
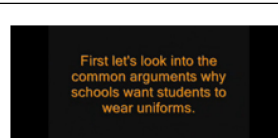
Moments 1-3			
	Time: 0:00:00.0	0:00:00.5	0:00:07.0
	Transition: -	Text Fade In	-
	Music: New age choir	Becomes louder and more pronounced.	-
	Affordances: The sequence opens with a black screen which is a convention of film, sets up possible expectation of other film conventions to follow.	A text fade-in (film convention) sets up expectation of linearity. The music begins quietly and increases in volume along with the written text's fade-in, creating emphasis across modes. The choir-like music adds to a sense of awe, grandeur, and importance.	Placing the text at the center and at the top highlights its relative importance. Yellow text on black background add contrast, drawing attention and further signaling its salience.
Moments 4-6			
	Time: 0:00:10.5	0:00:11.0	0:00:13.0
	Motion: Text crosses from right to left. Jitter continues.	Text halts in the middle of the screen. Jitter continues.	The camera zooms in slowly on the text.
	Effect: Grainy Film Effect	Grainy Film Effect	Grainy Film Effect
	Music: Drum beat Affordances: Placement of newly introduced text on the right positions this portion of the argument as "new" or "unknown", indexing that new information is forthcoming.	Drum beat Continued use of same color/font/layout/jitter creates cohesion by visually linking the previous ideas to current ones.	Drum beat The slowly zooming camera movement adds emphasis to the text as it become more prominent in the frame and lends a sense of inevitability) as opposed to a quick zoom, which would promote a sense of anxiety, fear, or horror genre).
Moments 7-9			
	Time: 0:00:16.0	0:00:17.0	0:00:19.0
	Image: None	None	None
	Color: Black background with strobing text (blue-green-yellow-orange-red-pink)	Black background strobing text (blue to green to yellow to orange to red to pink)	Black background strobing text (blue to green to yellow to orange to red to pink)
	Effect: Strobing Color	Strobing Color	Strobing Color
	Music: Rock style music with lyrics	Rock style music with lyrics	Rock style music with lyrics
	Affordances: The centered text highlights its important. The music lyrics begin as the slide transitions to this second style, adding emphasis and distinguishing it from previous slide.	The strobing color change draws attention to the text, emphasizing it.	The strobing color goes through five colors, each of which reappears later—one color for each warrant presented. The strobing color anchors the text of the warrants and creates a sense of cohesion throughout.

Figure 3. Highlights from Rebecca's MT: Featuring Non-Linguistic Modes.

Rebecca draws on several common filmic conventions to present her argument against mandatory school uniforms, including timed editing to a music track and digital effects. For example, she uses music rather than voiceover to provide the force of her argument, consistently cutting to each new slide on a strong down beat of the backing rock track, punctuating each of

her points and lending coherence to the flow of her argument. Rebecca also uses visual effects, including a 16mm film jitter (Moments 4-6, Figure 3), strobing color (Moments 7-9), and slide transitions featuring a drop shadow of the focal text for each slide, which appears to slowly move toward the viewer. This judicious use of a few effects makes each stand out, adding salience to the corresponding written text.

The strobing text color effect Rebecca employs strongly contributes to the cohesion and resulting rhetorical force of her MT. She first presents typical warrants that adults often cite for having school uniforms ('First let's look into the common arguments why schools want students to wear uniforms'). each featuring a different color—safety, pride, equality, training ease of choice. She then debunks each of these in turn, offering corresponding counterpoints with the same colors as the initial corresponding warrants. For instance, the warrant 'ease of choice' features the color red, as did its counter argument a few slides later. This continuity of color ties each pair of countering positions together and creates a sense of unity and coherence. Furthermore, although the color of the text changes, the background remains an aged, unbroken black reminiscent of silent film stock, which adds to the MT's coherence by maintaining a simplistic color scheme.

Aside from the careful editing and visual and auditory ensemble that lends Rebecca's MT coherence, her authorial stance is notably authoritative and somewhat rebellious. She does not introduce herself or address the audience in her MT, but rather uses her counterpoints to undermine the logic to each 'school-based' warrant for requiring school uniforms. For example, to debunk the claim that uniforms provide training for students' adult life, Rebecca offers the following counterpoint: 'What are the odds that we will wear uniforms when we grow up? Usually people who have to wear uniforms are the lower paid jobs, nothing to look forward to,

really.’ Her authoritative and slightly dismissive stance persist as she offers counterpoints in the form of rhetorical questions (‘Seriously, what does equality and making us look alike have to do with each other?’), and speaking on behalf of teenagers (‘Choosing their own clothes helps students develop a sense of individuality which is very important to teenagers in this era’). Rhetorical moves like these position Rebecca’s relationship to the audience as contentious and her authorial stance in alignment with a disaffected ‘we’ of teenagers that she constructs. Enhanced by the music, motion, and color that drive her argument, the resulting feel is convincing because of its clean rhetorical organization of points and scathing counterpoints.

Rebecca also relies on the use of an introductory fade, or Fade-In, to begin her MT (Moments 1-3). This is a convention common to film, which signals the beginning of a sequence. By repurposing elements of filmic conventions, Rebecca’s argument gains greater sensory impact through color, spatiality, timing, music, and motion. Thus, we argue that she affected a stronger rhetorical force than would have been possible with print alone due to the multimodal affordances as well as nature of the assignment (open prompt and authoring path). The resulting vibrant, dynamic, sleek, and somewhat hip style lends an air of self-possession and an overarching authorial stance that is stylized but authoritative.

Sedition and humor through multimodal ensemble. Students also capitalized on multimodal ensembles to express humor through sedition. Aaron’s MT stood out for its overtly seditious stance toward the assignment, which, like Rebecca’s, has a critical rhetorical force but which is affected in quite a different manner. In his MT, Aaron (a) promotes a tongue-in-cheek, almost absurd, argument for a school assignment (underage sex is good), (b) plays with conventions about ‘knowing your audience’ by directly addressing the audience in an

exaggerated way, and (c) steps outside of the authorial stance of mock public service announcer at the end to explicitly acknowledge in an ‘aside’ that his argument is meant in jest.⁵

Two lines of humor weave throughout Aaron’s MT. First is the presentation of underage sex as a topic for a class assignment. By outlining the advantages of having children at a young age (e.g., teenagers can start their parenting careers young, parents will be close in age to their children, babies will supposedly be healthier and smarter), he demonstrates that he can formulate an argument with warrants (albeit spurious ones) and illustrations thereof, even if for an inappropriate cause. As a result, Aaron also makes light of the assignment by creating a coherent presentation around such an absurd subject (which in Singapore is certainly a taboo topic). The second is the abrupt shift in style and tone in the final slide, through which Aaron repositions his authorial stance as letting the audience in on the joke. Aaron thus meets the requirements of the assignment while also expressing his sense of humor by standing outside the typical constraints of an earnest pitch or ‘safe’ topic.

⁵ Aaron was born in Singapore but had recently returned from living in North America for years at the time of the study (where sedition has a more acceptable place in classroom projects than in Singapore). Mr. H appreciated Aaron’s humor, although he seemed a bit bemused by the idea of the principal viewing Aaron’s MT (interview).

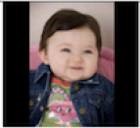
2 minutes and 22 seconds, 15 slides + black at end (with just music for 26 seconds) Modes: written text, voiceover, image, font/color/layout, effects/transitions, music						
	Title Slide 0:00-0:09	Slide 2 0:10-0:20	Slide 3 0:21-0:27	Slide 13 1:39-1:46	Slide 14 1:47-1:52	Slide 15 1:53-1:56
Image	It's okay to have underage sex ! [It's better than mature sex !]	Underage sex brings alot of pleasure plus a gift from heaven.		I would like to end this with a chance to say thank you and....	SAY YES TO UNDERAGE SEX!	For your information I'm just doing this for fun so please do not take it seriously . :]
VO	Hey there stranger! Today I would like to tell you that underage sex is better than mature sex.	It's ok to have underage sex; it's better than mature sex. Let me explain.	N/A (image illustrates previous slide's "gift from heaven")	I would like to end this with a chance to say, thank you (long, pregnant pause before slide changes)	And, say yes to <u>underage sex</u> (last 2 words emphasized).	For your information I'm just doing this for fun, so please do not take it seriously.
Music	None until 2:00 (after visuals fade); organ music with deep-voiced men singing hymns					
Rhetor-ical Force	Direct (and tongue in cheek) appeal to audience ("Hey there stranger") in VO contrasts with formal register in written text, adds humor and lends seditious metacommentary on audience-awareness/netiquette aspect to assignment.	Provides initial warrant for claim, through a mix of appeals to emotion (gift from heaven), pseudo-logic (better than mature sex), and obvious seditiousness (brings pleasure), resulting in an overall sense of non-seriousness.	Illustrating one warrant from previous slide, enhances appeal to emotion.	Direct appeal to audience, tongue-in-cheek nod to genre of earnest public service announcement from noted personality.	Call to action (sarcastic) in simple closing appeal	Acknowledging multiple layers of authorial voice through aside to audience that explicitly acknowledges entire MT is in jest (heightened by blue background-different from other slides) and use of emoticon (indicates humor and light-heartedness).

Figure 4. Highlights from Aaron's MT: Sedition and Humor.

In Aaron's initial title slide (see Figure 4), he addresses the audience in his voiceover, 'Hey there stranger!', seemingly and cheekily alluding to an earlier lesson on audience awareness. During that lesson, Mr. H prepared students to create their MT for a wider audience beyond the classroom and discussed the dangers of privacy and encountering strangers online. In terms of coherence, Aaron's slides incorporate a basic fade-in and fade-out as the only effect, resulting in a simple, clean design. Figure 4 depicts six representative slides from Aaron's MT, showcasing the general red and white theme that he used throughout the presentation (slides 1-14) as well as the blue background seen on his 'aside' slide (slide 15). Despite the change in color, Aaron's MT gains cohesion through the use of the same font and layout throughout. Aaron compartmentalizes both image and music by using them in succession with images illustrating the content of previous slides. For example, slide 3 depicts a baby that references the content of

the previous slide—‘Underage sex brings alot [sic] of pleas[ure] plus a gift from heaven’—with a corresponding voiceover: ‘It’s okay to have underage sex because it’s better than mature sex. Let me explain.’ This connection provides inter-modal coherence across slide transitions.

Aaron steps outside the MT’s general authorial voice in his final slide, which reads, ‘For your information I’m just doing this for fun so please do not take it seriously. :.]’ This final slide also has a different design than preceding ones (blue background), and music only comes in during this final slide (somber church-like Gregorian chant), which further contributes to the sense of humor and sedition through its stark contrast with the genre, tone, and mock-serious stance in the MT otherwise. Aaron thus uses humorous sedition as a rhetorical strategy to position his own voice beneath more authoritative ones by juxtaposing voiceover, text, and images that, on the surface, appear conflicting in order to convey humor.

Discussion

We have now illustrated some of the ways that creating MTs afforded this cohort of academically marginalized students opportunities not only to design, complete, and present MTs, but also to explore multivocal forms of discursive practice and to reflect on and position themselves with regard to sociocultural experiences (Domingo, 2012; Valdivia, 2016). Returning to our aforementioned research questions, we consider how, both as a cohort and through selected exemplars, these students (a) extended the affordances of traditional literacy practices in their design of MTs as well as how (b) authorial stance featured in their multimodal designs and to what rhetorical effects. In answering these questions, we conclude that many of the signs of success we interpreted were results of unique affordances of MTs themselves as well as the nature of the unit, both of which allowed students to renegotiate their place in usually narrow and restrictive literacy practices—ones in which their participation was often limited to responding

rather than designing. We argue that both print-dominant authoring and the expectations and practices associated with their usual classroom practices arguably would not have afforded these opportunities. An anecdote from an interview with the head of the English department at the school further grounds this point:

When Mr. H came with the suggestion for [the MT units], he was explaining to me the tasks involved, and I thought that would help [NT students] in terms of directed writing and enable them to be able to write something about themselves, which I'm surprised that you guys actually teased out of them very well. Including [mentions two students]—they are doing very well. Their ability to express themselves is better. So I feel that {MTs are] going to help them in directed writing, which is one of the key life skills we hope for them to take away—especially opinions, reflection, and its IT [Interactive Technology] component. [English Head of Department, Interview]

In considering the rhetorical resources associated with students' design of persuasive MTs in a unit that Mr. H acknowledged usually skipping each year because he felt it was too difficult for NT students (Mr. H, interview), we highlight here how students enacted a range of authorial stances that far exceeded those typically possible in their classroom. This range suggests that the practice of multimodal composition afforded a wide range of possibilities for designing to express ideas and positions on their topics and toward their audience(s). By nature of the length of this unit and the depth of students' productions (as opposed to their usual worksheet-based, fill-in-the-blank, and tightly scaffolded classroom practices), students were able to work toward a finished product of their own design that they then showcased. The

performative, iterative, and public nature of the context of these MTs' production thus created a starkly different context for knowing, being, and doing in this classroom.

These findings echo those of others who have engaged similar discussions and who have attested to the affordances of multimodal design to allow learners to juxtapose common, personal perceptions of the world than with more traditional forms of expository written text (e.g., Domingo 2012; Mills & Exley, 2014; Vasudevan et al., 2010). This article thus illustrates how authoring MTs afforded this cohort of students a different point of entry and incrementally more ways from which they could understand, interpret, analyze, and evaluate texts using an expanded set of tools and practices, as compared to their typical classroom practices. In doing so, they showed that, regardless of any marginalized status, they were capable of complex, discursive sophistication when authoring MTs.

Conclusions and Implications

The unit we described here, its process, and its outcomes were not without limitations, however. A persistent constraint on academically marginalized students' opportunities to learn in Singapore and elsewhere arises from sociohistorical patterns of low expectations and reductionist practices (Compton-Lilly, 2014; Ho, 2012; Kirkland, 2013). In many ways, this unit and the overarching three-year project of which it was a part were similar to many global educational contexts in which opportunities are shaped by structural and ideological impasses in policy and curricula, such as high stakes testing (Author, 2015; Dyson, 2013; Mills & Exley, 2014). Recall, that as a result of their track in school, graduating NT students are not eligible to sit for exams that grant entry to tertiary education beyond vocational certificates. As Valdivia (2016) noted in her study on multimodal composition with adolescents in Chile, neoliberal discourses permeate national and local pushes for inclusion of digital media in schools, often in instrumental and

tech-fetishist ways. Similarly, in Mills and Exley's (2014) design-based study of academically marginalized elementary students' multimodal composition practices in Australia, an ideological struggle ensued between multimodal composition and related multiliteracies perspectives on the one hand, and discourses and curricular practices that prioritized written texts and regulative discourses on the other.

Singapore's significant push for Integrative Computer Technologies' (ICT) ubiquity began in the late 1990s and was in full-swing during the time of our project (2007-11). As was evidenced in the Head of English's quote above, educators and policymakers often see the use of digital media with low-tracked students in Singapore, in part, as an opportunity to develop 'life skills' or 'IT skills'. Such discourses of reform and global competition associated with the inclusion of digital media practices arguably recruit digital technology and associated writing practices in the service of meritocratic measures of ability and performance (Talib & Fitzgerald, 2015), as Mills and Exley (2014) similarly noted of the Australian context and Valdivia (2016) of Chile.

Even though Singaporean curricular standards include expectations for authoring possibilities associated with MT design for the higher tracks, they remain absent from the NT curricula. Rather, it is at the discretion of individual teachers and schools to augment opportunities for the inclusion of multimodal composition and other broadened writing and literacy practices for NT students, as our partner school chose to do. However, the problematic and widespread nature of diminished expectations and opportunities for academically marginalized students, can transform the possibility for expanded practices into another symptom of efforts that come too little, too late. As Compton-Lilly (2014) pointed out in her 10-year longitudinal ethnographic study of one academically marginalized student's development of a

writerly habitus, the opportunities to develop identities as writers and the related dispositions and practices that accompany that (e.g., being a “good student”), cannot happen in short bursts or in absence of layers of support over time. This cohort of lower-tracked students in Singapore, offers an example of what can occur when opportunities to author are expanded but should also be mitigated by the reality that they have been historically, and outside of this unit, will likely continue to be excluded from systemic opportunities to be “good students” or “writers” by nature of the features of the schooling system in which they are positioned (Author, 2015; Ho, 2012).

Despite claims to the short-term transformative nature of this unit for these 18 students’ writing and literacy practices, we thus acknowledge the limited scope of such transformation, echoing prior critiques that suggest expansive opportunities to write and design cannot, on their own, change decades of deficit discourses and normative and often reductionist assessment practices (Dyson, 2013; Mills & Exley, 2014; Valdivia, 2016). A project like ours, in which we entered classrooms and engaged relationships with students and teachers for months, cannot undo the years that students have borne the discursive brunt of being told they are not being good enough (Ho, 2012). We thus heed the call to temper the sometimes zealous fervor with which we can approach adolescents’ digital compositions and design as a panacea or quick fix, especially in ways promoted by neoliberal discourses of 21st century skills and competing in the global economy that do not also acknowledge the non-equitable playing field such calls obscure. However, in examining the rhetorical resources students drew upon in taking on authorial stances in their design of MTs, Anna, Rebecca, Aaron, and many of their peers, stepped outside of the usual ways to be in the classroom, here as knowers and doers with authority and style.

A suggested implication of this article is the need for further studies that provide counter-narratives to deficit discourses, as we have done here, that focus on successes rather than

surprising exceptions or failures. We thus hope to contribute to ongoing discussions for increased possibilities of providing grounds for future research to support the argument for richer standards and higher expectations of academically marginalized students' language arts and general education as well as increased opportunities for multimodal composition and design in an out of school, at the local and policy level. As we have demonstrated, seeing academically marginalized students' design of MTs in terms of their strengths allows for a focus on their sophisticated understandings of design and stance and openings where revised standards and curricula can build on and augment these strengths, rather than working from the constraints of limited expectations.

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