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Where is the Support? Learning Support for Multimodal Digital Writing Assignments by Writing Centres in Canadian Higher Education

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Where is the Support? Learning Support for Multimodal Digital Writing Assignments by Writing Centres in Canadian Higher Education

Abstract
Writing centres play a vital role in supporting all forms of student academic writing in higher education (HE) institutions, including digital writing projects (DWPs)—multiliterate and multimodal, often video-and-audio-based projects, produced using digital technologies. The importance of writing support for multimodal composing is evident in emerging research on both the multi-skilled practices of writer-designers and the conceptual shifts involved in their adoption. Currently, no research exists regarding the Canadian context of writing centre support for DWPs. To address this, we conducted two surveys: one of 22 Canadian writing centres asking about DWPs prevalence, technology and skills readiness, and DWP awareness; and one of faculty at a large Canadian university, asking about DWPs prevalence and frequency and types of DWP assignments. We find a significant disconnect between the number of DWPs being assigned by faculty and the number being supported in writing centres. We also find a significant lack of writing centre preparedness for supporting DWPs. This paper calls, with some urgency, for writing centres to invest in the reality of student writing in Canadian HE, to begin developing instructional materials, equipment, and skilled staff to support DWPs.

Les centres d'écriture jouent un rôle essentiel pour soutenir toutes les formes d'écriture des étudiants et des étudiantes universitaires dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur, y compris pour les projets de rédaction numérique - multilittéraires et multimodaux - projets qui sont souvent basés sur la vidéo et l'audio et produits à l'aide de technologies numériques. L'importance du support d'écriture pour les compositions multimodales est évident dans le cas des recherches qui portent sur les pratiques polyvalentes des rédacteurs-concepteurs et des rédactrices-conceptrices et sur les changements conceptuels liés à leur adoption. À l'heure actuelle, il n'existe aucune recherche sur le contexte canadien de soutien offert par les centres d'écriture pour les projets de rédaction numérique. Afin de redresser cette situation, nous avons mené deux sondages : le premier auprès de 22 centres d'écriture canadiens, à qui nous avons posé des questions sur la prévalence des projets de rédaction numérique, sur la technologie et la préparation aux compétences, et sur la prise de conscience des projets de rédaction numérique; le second auprès de professeurs et de professeures qui enseignent dans des universités canadiennes, à qui nous avons posé des questions sur la prévalence, la fréquence et les types de projets de rédaction numérique assignés aux étudiants et aux étudiantes. Nous avons trouvé qu'il existait un décalage important entre le nombre de projets de rédaction numérique assignés par les professeurs et les professeures et le nombre de ces projets soutenus par les centres d'écriture. Nous avons également trouvé qu'il existait un manque important de préparation pour soutenir les projets de rédaction numérique. Dans cet article, nous demandons aux centres d'écriture, avec une certaine urgence, d'investir dans la réalité de l'écriture des étudiants et des étudiantes dans les universités canadiennes, afin de commencer à développer du matériel d'instruction, de l'équipement et du personnel compétent pour soutenir les projets de rédaction numérique.

Keywords
writing centres, digital writing projects, semiotic opportunism, multiliteracies, design thinking, teaching and learning, multimodality, rhetorical savvy; centres d'écriture, projets de rédaction numérique, opportunisme sémiotique, multilittéracies, réflexion sur la conception, enseignement et apprentissage, multimodalité, sens de la rhétorique

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Across Canadian institutions of higher education (HE), writing centres—learning support units that provide and facilitate academic writing mentorship and instruction—are responsive to the academic assignments of student writers. Since the digital turn of the 1990s (Deuze, 2011), these assignments have included multimodal composing and production in digital writing projects (DWPs). Many DWPs, such as slideshows and blogs, are now well-established academic assignments, though the availability of free plug-and-play production and publication applications are making it increasingly possible for faculty to assign DWPs more often and to design them to suit specific teaching and learning outcomes of their courses. We have found little research in Canada on either the prevalence of DWPs in undergraduate learning or the extent to which writing centres have responded to the increasing prevalence of DWPs across disciplines (Bell & Hotson, 2020b). As a community of writing centres, it is necessary to examine this situation because academic writing in all forms is an important context in which students engage with, internalize, and construct content as well as their identities as students and developing scholars and professionals.

Digital transformations of writing in HE have resulted in both wide-ranging writing centre scholarship and writing scholarship in general, including: technology in the writing centre (Goldberg et al., 2003; Grouling & Grutsch McKinney, 2016; Grutsch McKinney, 2009; Kellner, 2000; Nobles & Paganucci, 2015); multiliteracies (Balester et al., 2012; Ballingall, 2013; Carpenter & Lee, 2016; Cooper, Lockyer, & Brown, 2013; Grabill & Hicks, 2005; The New London Group, 1996; Trimbur, 2010); and socially mediated co-writing/co-authoring (Arroyo, 2013; Goldberg, et al., 2003; Kellner, 2000; Merchant, 2007; Trimbur, 2010; Wargo, 2018). In addition, there is a growing body of scholarship on the fetishization and dismissal of intellectual rigour in multimodal composing by students and faculty alike (Horner et al., 2015; Silver, 2019) despite the complexities of and vulnerabilities involved in composing as a writer-designer (Arola et al., 2014; Ehret & Hollett, 2014; Horner et al., 2011; Silver, 2019). In the American context, these scholarly conversations occur in relation to the development of writing centre programs offering rich support for DWPs, including comprehensive studio-model units (see our list here).

Conversely, we have not found similar writing support programs or units for the support of multimodal composing in Canada. In a survey of 22 writing centre websites across English-speaking Canadian universities in 2019 (listed in the QS World University Rankings, 2019), only one showed a discrete program for tutoring DWPs (Ryerson University) and only two included discrete mentions of digital or multimodal writing (Ryerson University and the University of Waterloo). The majority of websites described support for alphabetic essay-type assignments. We also found that nine websites asked that students arrive for tutoring sessions with a hard copy of their assignment in hand, which would seem to work against multimodal compositions with audio and/or visual components. Notably, the University of Waterloo's tutors are referred to as multimodal specialists and their website invites students to bring multimodal, digital assignments to their broadly named Writing and Communication Centre. Ryerson's Writing Support advertises a program of Multiliteracy Support Appointments. Upon investigation, we discovered that these appointments are passed along to the Student Affairs Storytelling unit where the former Writing Support coordinator conducts them as a side-of-desk project (Bell & Hotson, 2020a).

The apparent absence of DWP support programming at Canadian writing centres is also evident in the conference programs of the *Canadian Writing Centres Association / L'Association canadienne des centres de rédaction* (CWCA/ACCR). From 2013 (CWCA/ACCR's first independent conference) through to 2019 (the 2020 conference was postponed), there have been just three sessions addressing digital writing in conference programs, not including discussions

about online tutoring for print-based or traditional academic writing (see CWCA/ACCR, n.d.). There appears to be some consistency between the apparent dearth of programming and the limited prevalence of scholarly discussion about digital writing.

In light of our inability to find conversations about digital writing or many examples of explicit programs of support for DWPs at Canadian writing centres, we conducted a national survey of writing centres to identify support and preparedness for DWPs. To get a sense of the scope of the need for support, we also conducted a survey of faculty at a large Canadian university (approximately 53,000 students), asking primarily about the number, frequency, and types of DWPs being assigned across disciplines. These surveys reveal a basic lack of both preparedness and support for DWPs by Canadian writing centres, which is concerning in light of the prevalence of DWPs across disciplines as reported by faculty. There is a clear need for Canadian writing centres, with some urgency, to invest in the reality of student writing in Canadian HE, to begin developing instructional materials, equipment, and skilled staff to support DWPs. Additional impetus for these developments across Canadian HE arises from scholarship that reveals the complex and multi-skilled nature of expert multimodal composing practices.

A Case for Learning Support

The Complexity of Deep Multimodal Writing Development

The frequency of DWPs within/across undergraduate curriculum underscores the growing need to foster media and digital literacies for multimodal composing among students. Such literacies are important for supporting student development as knowledgeable, safe, and effective readers, writers, and producers of content. These literacies are a lens through which students can "analyze, evaluate, create and act using all forms of communication" (Kahne & Bowyer, 2019, p. 212). In her recent doctoral work, Hutchison (2019) notes the general agreement that multiliteracy communication development is "logically connected" to the mission of writing centres, especially given the ways that "rhetorical knowledges of modalities, technical and technological knowledges, and socio-cultural knowledges and understandings [impact] 21st-century communication" (Carpenter & Lee, 2016, p. v). Arola et al. (2014) put the argument this way: "research-based writing typical of academic essays is important, but it's only one part of learning how to write" (p. 6).

Moreover, writing centres have the potential to play a key role in understanding the development of the literacies involved in multimodal composing among students in their 1:1 work with tutors and instructors. This is important as Ehret and Hollett (2014) and Silver (2019) emphasize how little we understand about how these literacy practices are developed, taught, and learned. Silver theorizes that the process of "deep multimodal writing development" involves a significant "conceptual shift" during which writers come to understand the ways that digital tools, formats, and modalities are meaningful to knowledge production (p. 245). By describing this conceptual shift, Silver invites writing scholars to use the scholarship of threshold concepts to understand why "there appears to be no going back" once students gain "expanded senses of writing and of themselves" as multimodal composers (p. 245). This conceptual shift leads to a deep recognition of the complexities of multimodal integration, which helps students engage in a multi-skilled practice of multimodal composing.

Rhetorical Savvy, Semiotic Opportunism, and Design Thinking

The multi-skilled practice of multimodal composing calls upon composers to engage in rhetorical savvy, semiotic opportunism, and design thinking, simultaneously, as they orchestrate the integration of multiple modalities in a text. Each of these practices are highly skilled in their own right. Rhetorical savvy is required for students to play the "hermeneutic guessing game" (Kent, 1993, p. 15) at the heart of composing tasks, which requires that they develop deep understandings of multifaceted social situations. These situations include individual goals and purposes for utterance as well as audience, context, and setting, and for expectation, conventions, politics, power relations. The guessing game involves a developed sense and position of genre agency given that rhetorical performance is "more than just knowing genre conventions...[It is] knowledge of strategic genre performances in space and time, within asymmetrical relations of power" (Bawarshi, 2016, pp. 245-246). In the case of multimodal production, the game also involves "dexterity" (Gonzales, 2015, p. 4) and "attunement" (Fraiberg, 2017, p. 89) to technological-rhetorical choices. As Sheppard (2009) notes, "[e]ach technical production decision is also rhetorical and has consequences for how a text will be received and used by its intended audience" (p. 128).

In addition to possessing rhetorical savvy, successful producers of multimodal DWPs must have a disposition toward semiotic opportunism. This disposition involves a value for and tendency to capitalize on the affordances of useful, appropriate, and available semiotic resources (what culture offers us for meaning making). This opportunism is marked by use of semiotic resources to create "richer, fuller" meanings (Kress, 2012) than is possible with a single mode. Kress (2012) insists that "these are not just repetitions, not parallel, not just the same thing done differently" (06:05-06:11). Using semiotic resources to produce richer, layered meaning involves "knotworking," the "the tying and untying of an array of texts, tools, signs, and symbols" (Engeström et al., 1999, as cited in Prior & Shipka, 2003, p. 207). Shipka (2016), Horner et al. (2011), and Fraiberg (2017) build on this concept to capture the complex task using this wide rhetorical repertoire to interact "in and across different genres, languages, media, and contexts" (Fraiberg, 2017, p. 88), while being responsive "to the diverse range of readers' social positions and ideological perspectives" (Horner et al., 2011, p. 308).

Rhetorical savvy and semiotic opportunism must be activated by design thinking by producers of effective multimodal DWPs. Design thinking requires that students engage in an "art of experimental thinking" (Buchanan, 1992, p. 8), which involves creative problem-solving using action-oriented multimodal design processes. Design thinking can be described as a process or workflow (analyze design problem, brainstorm, prototype, test, revise, reinvent) and a mindset (resourceful, creative, collaborative, social), but even taken together, these elements of design thinking are a simplification. In fact, design thinking has been identified as the heart of a new liberal art (Buchanan, 1992; Burdick & Willis, 2011), involving much "more than attention to visual and textual elements during the composing process" (Marback, 2009, p. 405) or following of a procedural design method. In addition, design thinking involves a pivot away from critical thinking, which designers question on the basis that critical distance is impossible: we are all "immersed in a world of artifacts" (p. 405). In lieu of a critical thinking approach to meaning making, design thinking offers user-testing, which places rhetorical responsiveness at the heart of design decisions.

The emphasis here is that DWP producers face a difficult task because they have little control over how it will be received, taken up, or circulated, especially for those DWPs that are

online and public-facing. In this way, digital multimodal composing is a "wicked problem"[1] over which the author has responsibility and an ethic of creating change or positive action, but with little control over the outcomes. In contrast to "tame" or "linear" design problems, wicked problems are not procedural, but rather are "problems of responsiveness and dilemmas of judgment" (Marback, 2009, p. 400). Tackling wicked problems using design thinking requires students to be creative, open to trial and error, and be immersed in their own and others' responses to their prototypes. They must be thinking about their compositions as affective, embodied experiences for their users/audiences because multimodal communication is viscerally rhetorical, "enlisting our affective sensitivity to engage the persuasive interconnections of signs, things, actions, and thoughts" (Marback, 2009, p. 407). Encouraging students to take risks, experiment creatively, work for goals beyond course credit, and carefully consider reader responses within the context of institutionalized undergraduate education is challenging.

Fetishization of Technology and Multimodal Composing

What becomes clear is that multimodal digital composing is highly skilled and ripe with potential for producing texts with rich layers of meaning. Writing centres can play an important role in supporting students as they develop the skills, dispositions, and cultures of designing and writing, especially since knowledge of their complexity does not appear to be particularly widespread among students or faculty. Horner et al. (2015) describe a fetishization of both technology and high-tech, tooled-up writing, whereby both students and faculty dismiss the intellectual rigour of these projects. This is evident in the frequency with which DWPs are classified as fun alternatives to traditional essays or research papers. In another example of fetishization, Silver (2019) reports of faculty describing "digital media [as] merely 'technical' know-how" (p. 221) and has observed students belittling design "as merely 'an art project'" (p. 220). Through our own experience teaching with learner-created podcasts (see Bell, 2019), we have found a range of similar responses often together with a prevalence of anxiety.

Method

Our formal investigation of whether and to what extent Canadian writing centres are equipped to provide support for students producing DWPs involved a national survey of writing centre staff as well as a compendium survey of an institution-specific teaching faculty. As mentioned above, we pursued these formal surveys after a search for evidence of DWPs within research conversations and promotional materials produced by the Canadian writing centre community. As part of this search, we found limited reference to digital and multimodal writing, genres, production, or communication in an examination of both Canadian public-facing writing centre websites as well as CWCA/CWCR conference programs (from 2013 through to 2018). These findings provided guidance for us in shaping our formal survey research.

With this in mind, we conducted two Institutional Research Board Approval certified surveys: (a) a national survey of postsecondary writing centre staff in Canada, and (b) a campus-wide survey of full- and part-time faculty at a large, Canadian research university with over 50,000

[1] The interdisciplinary concept of *wicked problems* was brought into the realm of rhetoric from Karl Popper by Rittel and Webber (1973) and expanded upon by Buchanan (1992) and Marback (2009) in relation to multimodal "documents" (see Marback, 2009).

undergraduate students. We define writing centre as any learning-support centre involved in the provision of non-course-based programs of writing mentorship.

Data Collection

Survey of Canadian Writing Centre Professionals

Our survey of Canadian writing centre professionals was delivered using Google Forms. It consisted of 19 questions covering: institutional context, location, institutional role(s), DWP policies and programming, DWP training and resources, current and future plans for supporting DWPs, limitations for tutoring DWPs, and other comments. Informed consent was required to participate in the survey.

We recruited participants using publicly available social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), professional listservs (e.g., CWCAlist, CASSL-L, and IDO-Ontario), and direct email using contact information from publicly available sources. We attempted to be inclusive of post-secondary writing centres in Canada, as well as staff in all writing centre roles.

We had 113 respondents; of these respondents, 99 indicated that they worked at Canadian institutions, spanning eight provinces and one territory (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Yukon). Of these, 86 were affiliated with a university, 12 with colleges, one with a high school, and one undisclosed. Participants were asked to identify all of their current roles and specializations (see Table 1).

Data Analysis. Responses to questions were counted and totaled. These totals were then compared using the filtering tool in Google Sheets. Using filters, data was cross-referenced by role, specifically "directing" and "multimodal specialist" and some centre descriptors such as budget stability.

Limitations. We were only able to determine an approximate response rate for the number of university institutions represented in the data, as there is no complete and up-to-date list of Canadian writing centres or total size of the writing centre community. Further, because of the small size of the writing centre community in Canada, it was important that we protected the anonymity of respondents by refraining from asking them to disclose the names of their centre and institution. Since it is highly atypical for writing centres to have more than one director, we used 27 directors' responses from university writing centres (three others were from college writing centres) to approximate that 36% of the 74 universities in the ten provinces represented in the data. Another limitation comes from the unique characteristics of writing centres as spaces of support. While there are characteristics that all writing centres possess, writing centres are often individualized by their institutional culture, student demographics, academic planning, and funding. As a result, we found fairly dramatic outliers within the data, which we expected. We decided not to exclude these because they are a product of our diverse landscape.

Table 1
Survey of Writing Centre Staff: Profile of Respondents

Role	Total	Profile of Overlap									
		1:1	DLIB	DIR	DAS	EAL	FS	GRAD	GROUP	MMS	OA
1:1 Tutor (1:1)	**85**	85	1	25	5	24	28	41	60	19	27
Digital Librarian (DLIB)	**1**	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1
Directing (DIR)	**30**	25	1	30	3	9	18	18	24	7	18
Disabilities Specialist (DAS)	**6**	5	1	3	6	4	4	4	5	3	3
EAL/EAP Specialist (EAL)	**29**	24	1	9	4	29	12	16	23	9	12
Faculty Support Specialist (FS)	**33**	28	1	18	4	12	33	23	25	11	13
Graduate Writing Specialist (GRAD)	**45**	41	1	18	4	16	23	45	40	16	16
Group Instructor (GROUP)	**65**	60	1	24	5	23	25	40	65	18	22
Multimodal Specialist (MMS)	**21**	19	0	7	3	9	11	16	18	21	7
Office Administration (OA)	**29**	27	1	18	3	12	13	16	22	7	29

Survey of Faculty

We also conducted a survey of full- and part-time faculty at a large Canadian research university (approximately 53,000 students). The survey was comprised of six questions: teaching subjects, frequency of assigning DWPs, types of DWP assigned, reduction in traditional writing assignments due to DWPs, limitations of teaching with DWPs, and further comments. We recruited participants by compiling a mailing list of 1812 publicly available faculty email addresses. The survey was emailed to the mailing list in February 2020 three times. The response was 11.5% (208 respondents (11.5%), though only 202 were usable) (see Table 2). No personally identifying information was requested and any voluntarily disclosed information (such as course codes) were anonymized ahead of data analysis. Our survey was of only one university, situated in a large urban setting. Additional surveys of universities of other student populations and in other geographic settings may have provided richer findings.

Table 2
Survey of Faculty: Profile of Respondents

Discipline	Represented Subject Areas	Number of Respondents
Humanities	language, writing, literacy, religious studies, English, anthropology, history, philosophy, film studies	40
Social Sciences	communication studies, linguistics, education, cultural studies, psychology, political science, economics, social work, environmental studies, geography, sociology, equity studies, gender studies, criminology, nursing	98
Fine Arts	theatre acting, film production, media arts, design, theatre and performance production,	21
Business & Accounting	Human resources, accounting, business, negotiations, management, entrepreneurship, management	12
Science	biology, natural science, kinesiology (anatomy), health science, human anatomy, organic chemistry, physics, astronomy,	22
Engineering, Technology, Math (ETM)	technology studies, computer science, information technology, math and statistics, software engineering, programming, engineering, computer engineering	20

Data Analysis. Here we grouped teaching subjects into disciplines: humanities, social sciences, fine arts, science, and engineering, technology, math (ETM) (see Table 2). Responses were then counted and totaled. These totals were then compared using the filtering tool in Google Sheets. Using filters, data was cross-referenced by discipline.

Limitations. We assumed that those faculty with actual experience working with DWPs in their teaching might be more inclined to respond to the survey. In an effort to offset this selection bias, we included a prominent invitation to all faculty to respond regardless of their experience with DWPs and sent the survey out in three mailings, eliminating previous respondents from the mailing list each time. Further, we needed to eliminate several responses by respondents who were confused about the difference between teaching online courses with all assignments submitted via LMS dropboxes and teaching with DWPs as we defined in the survey: "Digital projects take many forms: blogs, wikis, podcasts, videos, memes, soundscapes, comics, infographics, slide presentations, playlists, and collages. They tend to be multimodal and interactive in ways that make them distinct from traditional writing assignments."

Results and Discussion

Survey of Faculty

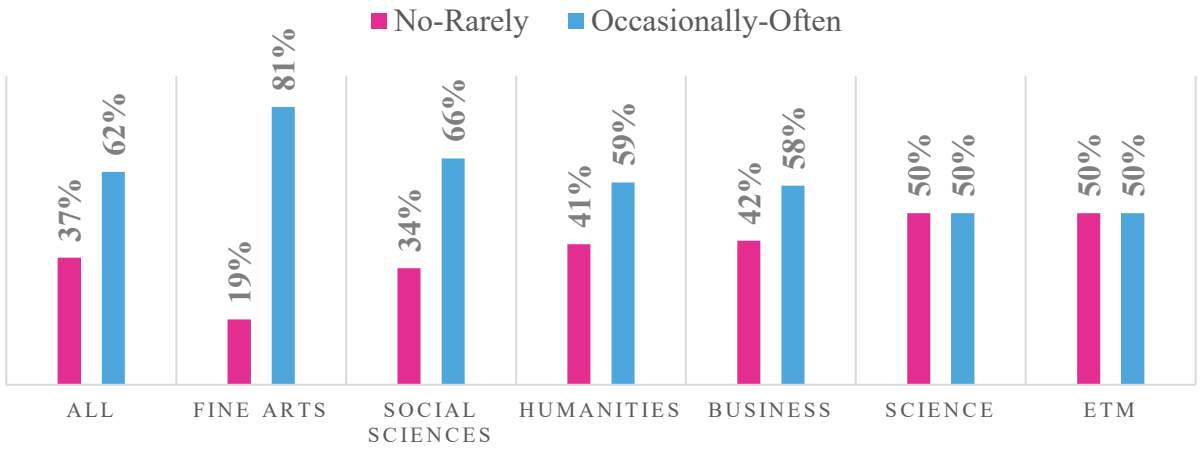
We found that DWPs are commonly assigned by faculty respondents, 33% of whom reported that they assign DWPs "frequently, in many or most of the courses I teach," and another 29% reported that they assign them "occasionally, in at least one of the courses I teach in a given year." Taken together, 62% of faculty respondents reported that they assign DWPs with some regularity, compared to 37% of faculty respondents who reported that they never or rarely assign DWPs. These general trends are more or less consistent across disciplines, with Fine Arts as an outlier (see Figure 1). We also noted that 16 (8%) faculty comments—13 of which from respondents who reported never or rarely assigning DWPs—indicated an interest in experimenting with DWPs and a desire to learn more about teaching with them. Respondents who reported never assigning DWPs commented:

> "I teach a large number of students and my expertise in this area is limited. I would welcome something like this, but grading it fairly might be an issue." (Business & Accounting Science, management & business history)
>
> "In my department (Math), it is still a big step to give 'traditional' writing assignments in a course! We thought about asking them to do something digital in Integrated Science, but we had no good ideas of what would be suitable." (ETM, math)
>
> "no other than I would be interested." (Social Sciences, politics)
>
> "I would love to learn more about digital assignments and how to incorporate them in teaching." (Social Sciences, urban studies)
>
> "Clearly we need more training" (Social Sciences, sociology)

> "I'm open to assigning them where appropriate to the learning objectives of the course, but I have little to no experience working with these kinds of assignments. I also have reservations about using group projects in my courses unless they can be closely supervised." (Humanities, English literature)

Figure 1

Frequency of Using DWPs in Teaching, by Discipline



Note. These results combine survey data for "never" and "rarely, few to no courses I teach" as well as "occasionally, in at least one course/year" and "frequently, in many or most of the courses I teach."

Those respondents who teach with DWPs reported assigning a variety of genres and modalities, all of which involve an orchestration of multiple modalities for what we know is a highly skilled composing process. Responses show a continuing prevalence of slide presentations in business especially, but also in ETM and science, and reveal a predominance of expectations for video production across humanities, social sciences, and fine arts (see Table 3).

Table 3

Commonly Assigned DWP Types across Disciplines at over 15%

Faculty	DWPs (%)							
Business	 58	 17						
Science	 27	 23	 15					
Social Science	 32	 27	 19	 17				
ETM	 45	 30	 20	 15	 15			
Humanities	 30	 25	 25	 23	 23	 20		
Fine Arts	 52	 38	 29	 29	 24	 24	 24	 19

We found a fairly even split between respondents who reported assigning DWPs in place of minor or major writing assignments and those who reported assigning them alongside or with academic papers (see Table 4). Only ETM faculty reported replacing papers with DWPs more often (at a rate of 15%). This data suggests that DWPs are potentially reducing the total number of traditional genres of academic essays, reports, and other papers across disciplines, where they are now constituting major and minor components of student outcomes.

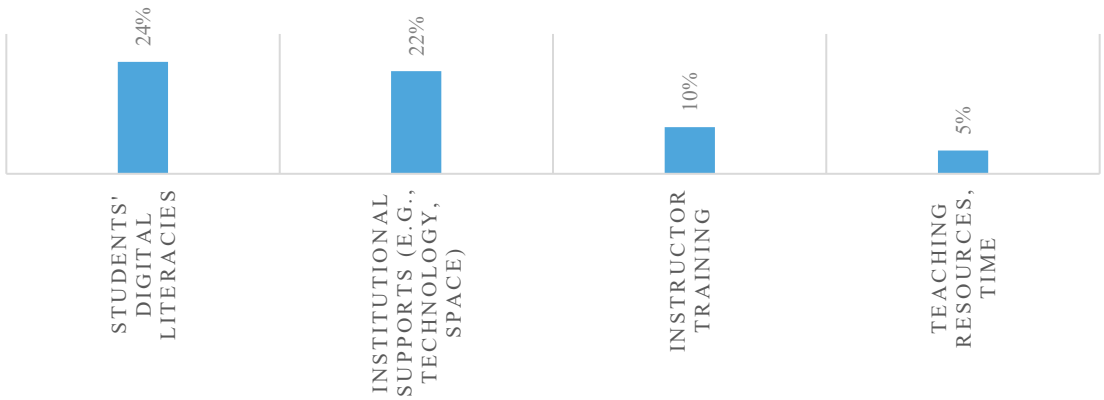
Table 4

Replacement Rate, Digital Projects vs Academic Papers

	Considerably, in place of major or summative writing assignments.		Modestly, in place of minor writing assignments.		Not at all, in addition to academic papers.		Not at all; I don't tend to assign academic papers.	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
All	34	17	37	18	69	34	10	5
Fine Arts	2	10	4	19	8	38	3	14
Humanities	6	15	8	20	13	33	0	0
Social Sciences	21	21	19	19	37	38	1	1
Business	1	8	2	17	3	25	0	0
Science	3	14	3	14	6	27	3	14
ETM	4	20	4	20	5	25	2	10

Many of the top limitations to teaching with DWPs that faculty identified fall under the purview of teaching and learning support units (see Figure 2). Our survey question was open-ended, and responses coalesced around two top concerns: (a) unevenness of digital literacies among students, including production knowledge and experience as well as attitudes of resistance (24%); and (b) a lack of institutional support equalizing student and faculty access to reliable technology, resources, and production space (22%). These concerns around teaching and learning support go beyond calls for the availability of hardware and software. As we know, multimodal composing is a multi-skilled practice involving a complex of literacies and learning dispositions, and that recognition of its intellectual rigour involves a conceptual shift in the way individuals perceive digital writing (Silver, 2019). Without adequate teaching and learning supports in place or ignorance of what teaching and learning units offer, faculty teaching with DWPs may not access or fully understand these literacies, potentially contributing to their fetishization and dismissal as "fun" assignments. We see this cropping up in the survey of faculty with comments about DWPs such as "...to some degree it sounds like doing an illustrative skit instead of an analytical report. Lots of bells and whistles, very little actual content." As a result, students are often left to their own devices, without the resources needed to take advantage of the rigorous learning opportunities presented by DWPs. We see this concern articulated by one faculty respondent: "the lack of digital literacy of the students makes this seem like [DWPs] would not produce the same kind of deep thinking and elevated analysis as formal essays. Once their digital literacy is higher than I think this would be more viable for me."

Figure 2
Limitations on Teaching with DWPs, According to Faculty



Summary

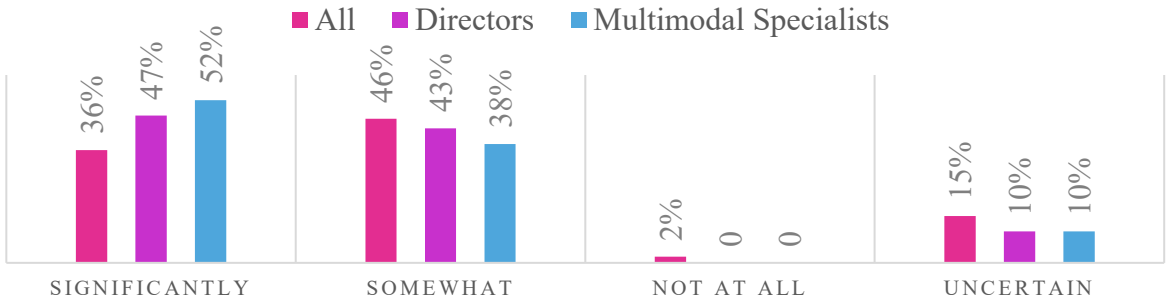
It is evident that DWPs are being assigned across disciplines with some regularity. Students are expected to engage in multimodal composing in addition to writing the papers they are most familiar with in academic contexts and, in some cases, in lieu of final major papers. This is happening despite a variety of limitations to teaching and learning using DWPs, significant among them being student experience with production, grasp of digital literacies, and willingness to engage in multimodal composing.

Survey of Writing Centre Professionals

From our survey of writing centre staff, our findings indicate that there is modest awareness of this landscape of multimodal composing and the need for learning support units to play a role. The majority of respondents (82%) agree with the literature on the need for DWP support. These respondents agreed that DWPs figure in the future of writing centre work, with 36% who reported that DWPs figure "significantly" in that future. Both directors (47%) and multimodal specialists (52%) reported "significantly" in even greater numbers (see Figure 3). It is evident that writing centre staff are not resistant to providing support for DWPs.

Figure 3

Does Digital Writing Figure in the Future of Writing Centre Work?



Additional research might focus on the belief that the future of writing centre work is grounded in an awareness of the rise of digitally produced and networked communication. Within this focus should be an understanding of the literature regarding the complexities of deep multimodal writing development, marked by advanced rhetorical savvy and disposition towards semiotic opportunism informing design-thinking approaches. Our dual surveys show that this belief in the future of writing centre work does not appear to be based on an accurate sense of the frequency with which DWPs are being assigned across disciplines. When we compare the results from our survey of faculty with that of writing centre staff perceptions, we find that writing centre respondents underestimated the frequency of DWPs across disciplines; they underestimated (by an average of 14%) the extent to which faculty reported assigning them frequently (see Figure 4) and overestimated the extent to which they reported occasionally, never or rarely assigning them (by an average of 11%) (see Figure 5). Respondents reported that they "don't know" 18% of the time in these questions about the prevalence of DWPs being assigned. This uncertainty suggests a general lack of awareness about the frequency of these assignments.

Figure 4

Writing Centre Staff Underestimation of Faculty Often Assigning DWPs

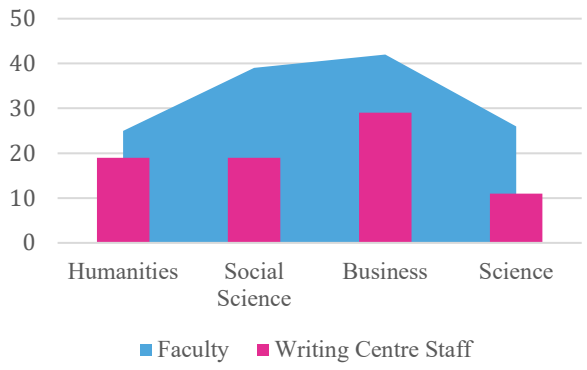
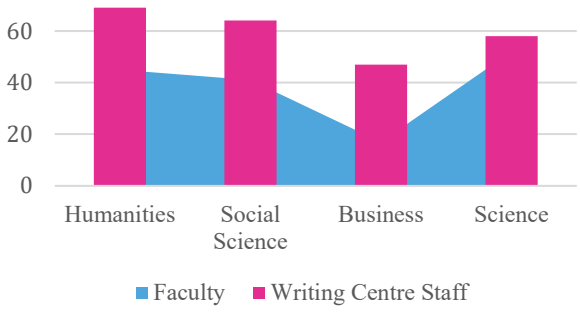


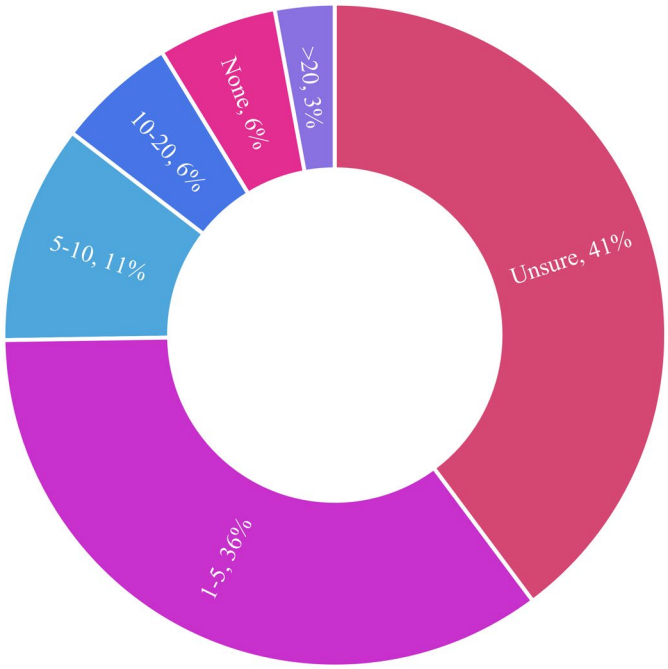
Figure 5

Writing Centre Staff Overestimation of Faculty Occasionally, Rarely, & Never Assigning DWPs



The lack of awareness of DWPs among writing centre staff might be explained by the infrequency with which they come into contact with them in their programming. Forty-two percent of respondents see between zero and five digital projects at their centre each semester, just 20%

Figure 6
Writing Centre Staff Estimation of Student Demand for DWP Support



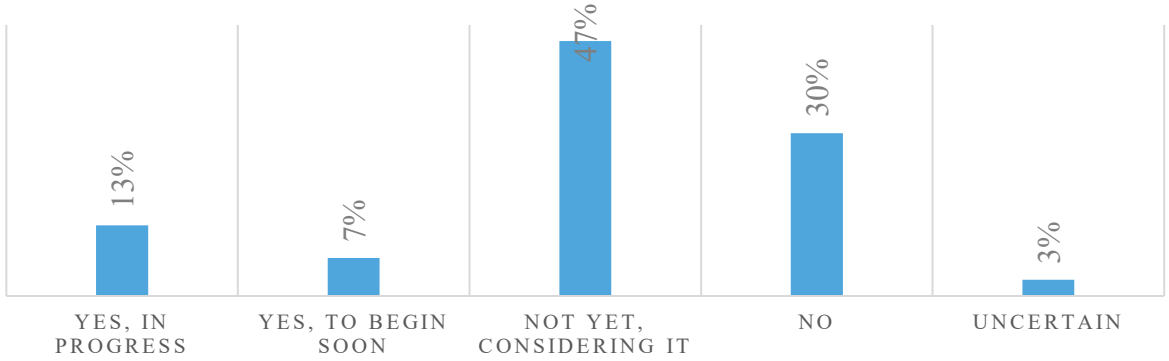
reported that they see more than five of DWPs, and 41% responded that they do not know how many of these assignments are supported at their writing centre (see Figure 6).

Data from our survey of faculty suggests that this low demand for writing centre support is not due to an infrequency of DWP assignments. We might look to the research on multimodal development to understand student support-seeking behaviour. Multimodal development involves a conceptual shift (e.g., Silver, 2019) that overcomes the fetishization of digital writing (e.g., Horner et al., 2015) to recognize the complexity of the writer-designer's rhetorical savvy, semiotic opportunism, and design thinking practices. It is prudent to consider the fetishization of DWPs as a factor. Of course, the extent to which writing centres are not advertising themselves as a resource for multimodal composers is also at play. The majority (75%) of writing centre directors reported that their centre's messaging (e.g., website, promotional materials) does not invite students to bring digital assignments. However, there is some evidence that rebranding writing centres as multiliteracy/multimodal/digital communication centres is not in itself a big driver of student demand (Balester et al., 2012). This might suggest that the conceptual shift required for students to perceive DWPs as highly skilled and intellectually rigorous is a greater influencer of support-seeking behaviour.

The impact of this modest awareness and suppressed demand appears to have resulted in a lack of urgency in developing writing support for multimodal composing. We see this in the low number (20%) of directors who reported having current or near-future plans for doing so (see Figure 7). It is encouraging that nearly half of directors (47%) reported that they are considering making plans.

Figure 7

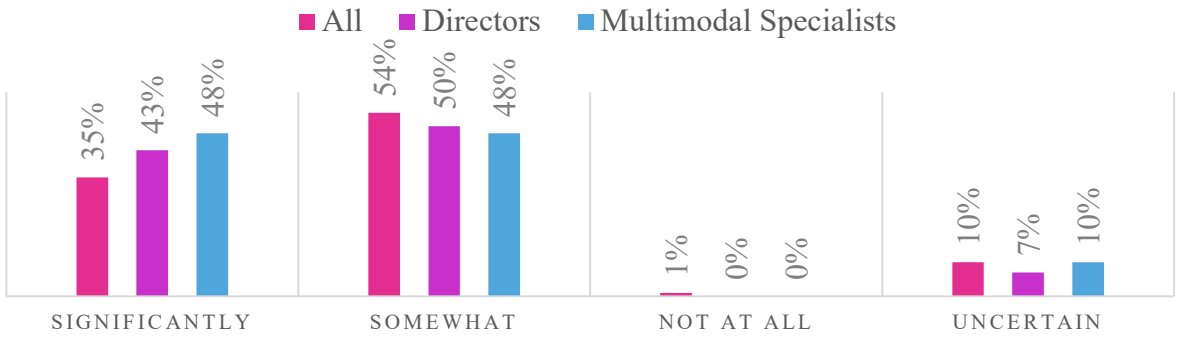
Director Reports of Plans to Develop Additional Support for DWPs



This relative dearth of current or near-future plans does not reflect an abundance of current resources. Half of survey respondents (51%) reported having no current in-house resources for DWPs. The most common in-house resources for DWPs appear to be asynchronous and static resources (handouts and videos) (48%), followed by specialist writing tutors staffing instructional programming (34%), and media-rich teaching spaces (15%). An absence of current resources is also suggested by the reported need to develop additional resources. Forty-three percent of directors and 48% of multimodal specialists indicated a "significant" need for additional resources (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Need to Develop Additional Supports for DWPs



Respondents indicated that their writing centres are most equipped to support slide presentations and blogs when compared to other genres of DWPs. This finding is expected, as these assignments have been well established in HE for over a decade and are well known to writing centres. Moreover, the equipment and software required to support these are often part of standard computer software packages. For images, audio, video, and animation, and to a certain extent websites, respondents reported that their centres are as less equipped. This may be because these require both specific hardware and software, as well as specialized training to support DWPs (Table 5). Notably, respondents reported being under-equipped to support video, which appeared as a prominent aspect of DWPs in our survey of faculty (see Table 3).

Table 5
Level of Equippedness to Support DWP Types/Formats

						
	%	%	%	%	%	%
About right	66	55	26	16	10	9
Less than I'd like	18	19	36	42	58	20
Ill equipped	12	19	26	28	58	54
N/A	4	7	11	13	17	17

The survey results also reveal a significant need for additional training for staff and multimodal specialists. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported having no training (see Table 6), which we defined broadly as anything from experience with multimodal production to academic research given that Canada currently has no avenues for formal instructional training in this area. Notably, 80% of directors and 62% of multimodal specialists reported having no training for the support of multimodal DWPs. This finding suggests that expertise in the development of multimodal writing skill, involving progress as a rhetorically savvy writer-designer, is not a likely explanation for the widespread belief that DWPs are figure in the future of writing centre work (see Figure 3). It is promising that 47% of directors reported that staff training to support DWPs is one of their current or future plans. Hiring staff specific to DWP support, however, does not feature prominently in directors' plans (3%). Once again, these measures—training and hiring—are essential, as these are key to developing robust multimodal composing supports and teaching.

Table 6
Training and/or Experience for Tutoring DWPs

	Yes	No
	%	%
All (99)	27	72
Directors (30)	20	80
Multimodal specialists (21)	38	62
Subset: Multimodal specialists/non-directors (14)	43	57
Subset: Multimodal specialists/directors (7)	29	71

Summary

In summary, writing centre staff reported that their units are ill-equipped to support DWPs. They are hindered by a lack of experience with DWPs, other than slide presentations and blogs, as well as a lack of training and equipment. A reported lack of student demand is one probable driver of this under-preparedness, while we know that DWPs are being assigned in great numbers. As a result, this lack of student support-seeking may be an indication of a need for writing centres to:

- work with and promote DWP support to faculty;

- promote DWP support to students;
- instruct and support student development as multimodal writers who recognize the value of DWPs;
- provide digital literacies information to faculty; and
- become resource and instruction centres for multimodal, multiliteracies, and DWPs.

Conclusion

The dual surveys in this study reveal that faculty are assigning DWPs with regularity and have an appetite to integrate these into their teaching pending the availability of DWP-specific teaching and learning supports, including digital literacies. Faculty concerns about students' digital literacies and their ability to recognize and take advantage of the learning opportunities presented by the DWPs they assign represent demand for the development of DWP-specific writing centre programming. Writing centre staff, however, reported in great numbers that DWP programming is not part of their current or near-future plans in any robust measure—this despite reporting that DWPs figure in writing centres' future work.

The discrepancy between the prevalence of DWPs in the curriculum and the availability of DWP writing centre support programming appears to be related to a low student demand as reported by writing centre staff, which has likely failed to drive a prioritization of training or equipping media-rich spaces for multimodal composing and writing mentorship and instruction. Writing centres typically rely on data showing usage and demand to garner funds for program expansion, including equipment, training, and space. The evidence of faculty demand revealed in this survey will be helpful, though increasing student demand will also likely factor in any effort to redress the disparity between writing centre DWP-support programming and the increasing role that DWP composing/production is playing in the curriculum.

Research on the conceptual shift involved in multimodal composers' development suggests that students' support-seeking behaviours are unlikely to change without writing mentorship that enables them to recognize the intellectual rigour of multimodal composing. To the extent that this is the case, writing centres may find themselves caught in a catch-22 where their capacity to develop support programming is hindered by the very need for writerly development. Moving forward, the scholarship of teaching and learning can play a role in advocating for the development of learning support programming for DWPs with scholars contributing additional research on the roles DWPs are playing across Canadian higher education as well as on the nature of writerly development for effective multimodal composing. The quality of teaching and learning with DWPs will benefit from scholarship that advocates for the multi-skilled practice of multimodal production involving rhetorical savvy and a disposition toward semiotic opportunism that is activated by design thinking and executed by facility with technology.

Arguments regarding whether a meme, infographic, podcast are academic writing no longer stand under the volume of DWPs assigned and produced with academic rigour and for academic assessment. What is not completely entrenched in Canada is that writing centres are the de facto support for DWPs. If writing centres are not the centre for all writing, then writing support for DWPs will shift to others. In the US context, this was pointed out by Grutsch McKinney (2009): if writing centres fail to recognize and develop supports for DWPs, "we allow new media composition to be lost to the technology" (p. 35). This is not merely a matter of staking out territory; any administrative separation of technology and writing development will perpetuate the

fetishization of multimodal composing and result in lost opportunities for students who need to become savvy writer-designers prepared for the multimodal writing contexts of their work, democratic, and social lives. Institutions must recognize that "creating digital texts involves more than mastering a software program" (p. 35). In fact, software programs are necessarily part of the writing process; like all writing tools, they enable and constrain writers in ways that shape the content they produce. Multimodal production is writing, and multimodal writers will benefit from the rhetorical feedback provided by trained writing tutors. Coming back to Grutsch McKinney (2009), "the evolved writing center secures a spot for humans to meet other humans over texts, digital or not. Working with students on their new media texts asserts our stake as composing professionals in the new media age" (p. 36).

As we conducted this survey before the COVID-19 pandemic forced campus closures, budget cuts, and the migration of HE to remote/virtual contexts, we assume that shifts around digital writing and DWPs have taken place on a broad scale in the HE sector. It is becoming apparent that many of the resulting changes to HE institutions are not surface-level or temporary and will result in fundamental changes to higher education. The effects of this change on the prevalence of DWPs and writing support for multimodal composing are difficult to anticipate. We could see writing centres coping by scaling back their support programming or adapting by creating new programming with a broader definition of writing in mind, providing a hybrid face-to-face and online support, for example. Certainly, early responses to the COVID-19 disruption are not promising, with budget cuts and staff reductions (Hatherly, 2020). While there are currently no predictable outcomes, writing centres in Canada have responded by moving most of their supports and teaching online. As a community of HE professional progress this new era, this situation may well help writing centres move to support and instruct DWPs more quickly and rigorously by default.

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