Between Modes: Assessing Student New Media Compositions
by Madeleine Sorapure

the problem of assessment

> "If we agree that computers can challenge and thus change not only pedagogies but also writing and reading processes, then it follows that these changes necessitate a transition from assessment practices based in theories about print literacy to assessment practices based in computer-assisted composition theory.
> Pamela Takayoshi, "The shape of electronic writing" (1996)

> "We attribute the gap between the quality of our online assignments and our ability to assess them largely to the mismatch between our assessment criteria and digital environments."
> Meredith Zoetewey & Julie Staggers, "Beyond 'current-traditional' design" (2003)

> "…we seem comfortable with intertextual composing [in which print and digital literacies overlap], even with the composed products. But we seem decidedly discomforted when it comes time to assess such processes and products."
> Kathleen Yancey, "Looking for sources of coherence in a fragmented world"(2004)

In three of the very few articles to focus on the assessment of writing in new media, the authors—Pamela Takayoshi, Meredith Zoetewey and Julie Staggers, and Kathleen Yancey—ask how the strategies and criteria that we use to assess students' print writing apply to our assessment of their digital writing. How do we evaluate the coherence of a hypertextual essay, for example, or the clarity of a visual argument? Or do familiar assessment criteria such as coherence and clarity need to be substantially revised or even rejected when we are evaluating work in new media?

In all three articles, we see something of a balancing act between old and new, as the authors detail suggestions for adapting current approaches and inventing new ones to help us assess writing in new media. For instance, Zoetewey and Staggers (2003) provided a sample rubric with familiar categories (e.g., narrative structure, point of view) containing new questions designed to assess the visual and hypertextual elements of a Web-based personal writing assignment. Yancey (2004) focused on how the specific criterion of coherence shifts as we move from print to digital compositions.

On the one hand, we need to attend to the differences between digital and print compositions in order to be able to see accurately and respond effectively to the kind of work our students create in new media. Yancey warned against using the "frameworks and processes of one medium to assign value and to interpret work in a different medium" (90) because by doing so we lose the chance to see new values emerging in the new medium. On the other hand, we need to work from what we know and to see computers as, in Takayoshi's (1996) words, "new lenses through which to look at the central issues of writing instruction" (247).

My own suggestion in this webtext involves another adaptation of familiar practices to the new situation of student new media production. Rather than assessing individual modes in a multimodal work, I suggest an assessment strategy that focuses on the effectiveness with which modes such as image, text, and sound are brought together or, literally, composed. Moreover, I propose that we draw on our familiarity with rhetorical tropes—and specifically with the tropes of metaphor and metonymy—to provide us with a language with which to talk to our students about the effectiveness of their work.

Athough few publications have focused on the assessment of students' new media compositions, there may be something of a turn toward assessment evident in Yancey's (2004) recent article on this subject in *Computers and Composition* as well as in some of the discussions of assessment at the 2005 Computers and Writing conference. Prior to the conference, Victoria Szabo and Jeremy Sabol of Stanford University conducted a half-day workshop on "Design and Assessment of Digital Media Assignments" (http://cw2005.stanford.edu/workshopshtm.htm).

In presentations at the conference, Marcia Hansen discussed "good, better, and best" assignments and assessment strategies for weblogs; Krista Homicz Millar presented results from an empirical study of how teachers and students assessed the effectiveness of new media arguments; Anthony Ellerston described an eportfolio assessment system in use at Iowa State that allows students to display their work in new media. Even in this small sampling, we can see the lively diversity of approaches that discussions of assessment elicit.

I think that underlying this interest in assessment is the recognition of its importance in connecting new media assignments to broader curricular goals. As with print assignments, when we grade students' work we are assessing their success in achieving goals that we value and that, ideally, are made explicit to our students. How we evaluate and grade student work is—or should be—connected to everything else in the course, from the assignments themselves to the readings, the class activities, and the software we use.

Discussions of new media assessment should therefore help us articulate why new media matters and should help us in establishing, for ourselves and for our students, the key continuities and differences between composing in print and composing in new media.

Examining how student work in new media is currently assessed, it is clear that we are at a transitional stage in the process of incorporating new media into our composition courses. As Yancey (2004) noted, we give multimodal assignments but often draw on what we are far more familiar with—that is, print—to assess student work.

For instance, a common assessment strategy is to ask students to write an essay or a report to accompany a new media project—and to then derive the grade for the project wholly or mostly

from the print part of the assignment. To be sure, pairing a paper with a new media composition is a useful strategy: it gives students a clear comparison between these modes and media, and it gives teachers insight into students' composing processes. However, this practice can also allow us to avoid assessing the new media work on its own, and in general it reflects an uneasiness with assessing something other than a written text.

Another common strategy is to draw on rules and models developed other areas (most notably, graphic design) to determine how to teach and assess specific features of new media production. But as Zoetewey and Staggers (2003) pointed out, "By relying on the rules as indices of successful execution of new media composition, we run the risk of decontextualizing graphic design guidelines from the theory that informs them. Even more problematic, we run the risk of deprivileging rhetoric" (145). While we should certainly consider incorporating guidelines from other disciplines into our assessment of new media, we should not expect these guidelines to function as our only evaluative measures. Indeed, by defining our approaches to assessment, compositionists can articulate our own disciplinary perspectives on new media production.

Complicating discussions of new media assessment is the fact that there are so many different types of projects being assigned: websites, images, image/text combinations, videos, audio projects, Flash projects, and others. With each type, somewhat different considerations come into play.

A broadly rhetorical approach can accommodate these differences—that is, an approach that focuses assessment on how effectively the project addresses a specific audience to achieve a specific purpose. The weakness of a broad rhetorical approach is that it doesn't in itself offer any specific guidance or criteria for handling the multimodal aspects of the composition.

Moreover, assessment is very much about context and needs to take into account the particular circumstances of the course, the students, and the teacher, as well as the possibilities afforded by the assignment, the modes, and the medium. Even if it were possible, then, it would be unwise to apply a set of assessment criteria to all types of assignments at all places.

The approach I suggest in this webtext is, I hope, flexible enough to be useful in a variety of contexts.

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looking between modes

> "We have defined multimodality as the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined."
> Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), *Multimodal discourse*

"In using the term 'new media texts,' I mean to refer to texts created primarily in digital environments, composed in multiple media (e.g., film, video, audio, among others), and designed for presentation and exchange in digital venues."
Cynthia Selfe (2004), "Students who teach us"

"I offer a focused definition of *new media* as texts that juxtapose semiotic modes in new and aesthetically pleasing ways and, in doing so, break away from print traditions so that written text is not the primary rhetorical means."
Cheryl Ball (2004), "Show, not tell"

As the citations from Kress and van Leeuwen, Selfe, and Ball make clear, composing in new media usually involves bringing together multiple modes—text, image, sound, animation, and/or video—in order to convey a meaning or create an effect. The question for assessment is how this bringing together or composing of modes can be described and then evaluated.

Bringing together multiple modes in a single composition is often a difficult task. After all, in writing essays students have to worry only about working with text, and this is challenging enough. In new media compositions, students are being asked not only to use several different individual modes, but also to bring these modes together in space and time. In essence, they are orchestrating or directing these different resources.

This focus on the relations between modes in a multimodal composition fits into Yancey's (2004) broader discussion of coherence in digital texts. She noted that "Digital compositions *weave* words and context and images: They are exercises in *ordered complexity*—and complex in some different ways than print precisely because they include more kinds of *threads*" (95). Though Yancey offered a broad heuristic for assessing digital texts—one that includes the text's multiple arrangements, its reception, and the intent of its author—the narrow question of the relations between modes is, I believe, essential in understanding not only how a multimedia text coheres but also how it creates meaning.

Focusing assessment on the relations of modes might alleviate part of what Yancey described as the "discomfort" of assessment: that part that comes from our sense that we are not the most qualified people on campus to judge the effectiveness of the individual modes of image, audio, or video in a multimodal composition. But I think that we are indeed qualified to look at the relations between modes and to assess how effectively students have combined different resources in their compositions.

Assessing how students design relations between modes appeals to me on practical grounds because it addresses of the two most common problems I've seen in the new media compositions my students have done. First, some students seem inclined to match modes, so that, for instance, a Flash project will have a song playing in the background while on the screen the lyrics to the song appear along with images depicting exactly what the lyrics say. While some repetition across modes may be useful in focusing attention or highlighting key ideas, too much mode

matching diminishes the potential of multimedia composing by, in essence, leveling the modes so that they each express something more or less equivalent. Productive tension between modes here is at a minimum.

The opposite sort of problem occurs when students include an element in a project simply because it looks good or because it is a cool effect, despite the fact that the element adds nothing to the meaning of the project and bears little, if any, relation to the other components of the project. For instance, text may be put in motion in a Flash animation for no reason other than that it is possible to do so; the animation in this instance is a distraction in reading the text rather than an element that enhances or expands its meaning. Here the potential of multimedia composing is diminished because the different modes are brought together more or less arbitrarily.

In talking with my students about their work, I warn against these extremes of pure repetition or pure arbitrariness, of course. But I also search for ways to describe more positively the kinds of relations that can apply between modes. Here the concepts of metaphor and metonymy can be useful.

Metaphor and metonymy, broadly understood, can designate two primary ways in which meaning emerges from the bringing together of modes in a multimodal work.

Metaphor designates a relation based on substitution; in a multimodal work, one mode can metaphorically represent or stand in for another, as when an animation of a word dynamically represents its meaning. It is a relation based on similarity between elements in different modes.

Metonymy designates a relation based on combination; modes can be metonymically related when they are linked by an association, as when lines from a poem are combined with a melody from a song. It is a relation based on contiguity between elements in different modes.

Using metaphor and metonymy in this way gives us a language for talking to students about the relations they are composing between modes and a way of explaining where a multimodal project is effective or weak.

While we typically think of metaphor and metonymy as verbal tropes, a broader understanding of these terms can be derived from Roman Jakobson's (1956) influential essay, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances." Jakobson posited that two basic types of aphasia correspond to impairments either in the faculty for selection and substitution or in the faculty for combination and contexture. Selection is equated with the metaphoric use of language and combination with the metonymic use of language. Further, Jakobson argued that the metaphoric and metonymic processes are not confined to language but occur in other art forms such as painting and film.

Metaphor and metonymy, in the broader sense proposed by Jakobson, name two different forces at work in the production of meaning. Metaphor exploits similarity and substitution, while

metonymy exploits contiguity and association. Because metaphor and metonymy designate relations between two or more entities, they can be used to describe the relations between modes.

between verbal and visual

> "Whoever controls the media—the images—controls the culture."
> Allen Ginsberg

Students in my Winter 2004 "Writing in New Media" course were asked to use Photoshop to create a collage that interpreted the previous quotation by Allen Ginsberg. I present several student projects here in order to demonstrate how the concepts of metaphor and metonymy can be used to describe and assess the relations between verbal and visual modes.

I should note that the assignment lends itself to an assessment strategy focused on the relations between modes since it explicitly asks students to work back and forth across modes by creating an image that interprets a text.

Leading up to the collage assignment were several shorter exercises that invited students to explore relations between text and image. First, students added some text to a digital image of a coastal scene that they had all downloaded. This exercise allowed students to experiment with the color, font, and placement of the text but also with the creation of meaning(s) from juxtaposition of text and image. The second exercise asked students to create an image out of the text of a word; in other words, the word itself functioned as the image, and the visual qualities students gave to the word/image were intended to convey the meaning of the word.

Feedback on these exercises was intended to help students discover areas for exploration between modes. They saw, I hope, that the modes should not simply repeat each other. For example, adding the words "a coastal scene" to the image of a coastal scene is less interesting than, for instance, adding lines from a poem or statistics about ocean pollution. The choices students made in these exercises showed that meaning emerges in part from the interplay of word and image.

Comparing these collages, it is possible to say that one of them is better than the others, and that as a writing teacher I can make that determination. All of the collages are visually pleasing and are well executed in Photoshop, so an assessment of them as purely visual compositions would be quite positive.

But Gabe's is clearly the most effective multimodal composition, and this is because the relation between the written mode and the visual mode is richer and more productive than in the other collages. In particular, as I explain, Gabe's collage activates both metaphor and metonymy to create meaning whereas the other collages are weak in one or both areas.

student work

Gabe Mann

In interpreting the first part of the quotation—"Whoever controls the media"—Gabe's collage points the finger at Bush and the White House. The collage interprets the word "control" with the image of Bush as a puppeteer, and this image elaborates on and refines an understanding of "control" by suggesting that the control in question has certain qualities: for instance, that the entity in control is behind the scenes and is completely manipulative of characters who only seem to be independent and to act on their own.

This is a strong metaphor, in which Bush-as-puppeteer stands in or substitutes for the controlling force to which Ginsberg's words refer.

The reference to the "media" in Ginsberg's quotation elicits a series of metonymic connections. Gabe personifies the "media" in the images of Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Rush Limbaugh—conservative TV and radio hosts who, the collage suggests, are merely puppets of the Bush administration. This is metonymic rather than metaphoric because the three commentators are part of the larger group of conservative media (and perhaps all media) that Bush manipulates.

The fact that Bush is holding crucifixes to join together the puppet strings evokes another metonymic association, bringing the particular manipulations of religion into this dynamic.

Finally, the background images are metonymically related to the "images" mentioned in Ginsberg's quotation; photographs taken from the war in Afghanistan and the collapse of the World Trade Center are among the many images that, the collage suggests, are controlled by Bush and the conservative media.

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By activating both metaphorical and metonymic relations between the visual and verbal modes in this collage, Gabe creates a work rich in meaning and allusion. Through a strong central metaphor, Gabe's collage offers a straightforward interpretation of Ginsberg's quotation, and through the metonymic associations of media and images, the interpretation gains a certain breadth.
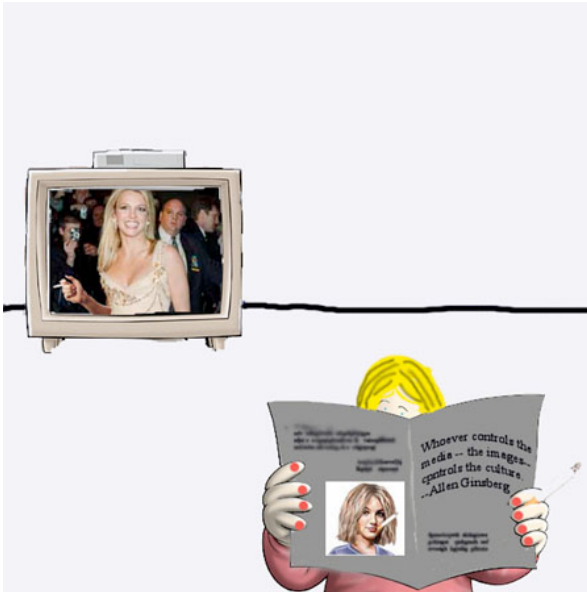
Stacy Johnson

In Stacy's collage, Ginsberg's quotation figures prominently, but there is much less of a connection between the images and the text here than there is in Gabe's collage. Most notably, Stacy's collage doesn't comment on or interpret what "control" means or who is in control. Although several elements in the collage interact, there is no sense that one character or element in the collage controls another. In addition, there is no indication of the repercussions of this control or of the ways in which control of the media effectively controls the culture.

Stacy's collage is highly metonymic; it activates a series of associations between pop culture icons (Madonna, Ben Affleck, Jennifer Lopez), a television, a small child, and a psychedelic 1960's background pattern. These associations are evocative but also quite difficult to interpret, in part because the collage lacks a controlling metaphor. In particular, it is difficult to identify how text and image are related since there seem to be no direct, metaphorical substitutions for any of the key terms in the quotation— "control," "media," "images"—but rather just a series of associations around these terms.

Kelley Kaufmann

Unlike Gabe and Stacy, Kelley focuses her collage almost exclusively on the second part of the quotation: "controls the culture." Kelley's collage shows a TV with an image of Britney Spears smoking, and then a magazine with a model smoking on the back, and finally the girl reading the magazine is smoking. There is a clear cause and effect being suggested here.

We can say that Kelley's collage is highly metaphorical. It offers a series of direct substitutions: Britney smokes, the model smokes, the reader smokes. These three elements are made equivalent, and taken together they provide a visual representation of the word "control." The collage lacks the kind of broader metonymic associations that would establish context or suggest the implications of these metaphoric substitutions.

<u>Behzad Khorsand</u>

Like Kelley's collage, this one by Behzad provides a fairly simplistic interpretation of the quotation. MTV has "caught" the world and holds the world on a fishhook. For the first part of the quotation—"Whoever controls the media"—the collage points to MTV, and perhaps by extension to the kind of media that MTV stands for.

But the characteristics of that control are not explained visually, nor are its consequences. Gabe's puppet show image—with the puppeteer and puppets clearly identified—offers a richer interpretation of the way the word "control" is used in the quotation than does Behzad's more vague world-on-a-fishhook image.

In addition to a vague central metaphor, Behzad's collage offers relatively weak metonymic associations. The background of the image is a black outer space and so it provides no clues as to the context in which MTV operates or the images it controls. Assessment of this collage in terms of metaphor and metonymy, then, would highlight the relatively weak and simplistic relations between the visual and verbal modes.

<u>modes and models</u>

The alternative predominance of one or the other of these two processes [of metaphor and metonymy] is by no means confined to verbal art. The same oscillation occurs in sign systems other than language.
Roman Jakobson (1956), "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances"

In my "Writing in New Media" course, a multimodal project in Flash follows the static verbal/visual assignments discussed in the "between verbal and visual" section of this webtext. Ideally students will have had experience and success in combining text and image, and so will be better prepared to bring additional modes into a composition.

In this section, I discuss a student project—"Starry Night" by Casey Curtis—that adds sound and motion into the mix. I also briefly discuss two "professional" new media projects—both published at Poems That Go (http://www.poemsthatgo.com)--that can serve as models for students as they create their compositions and that establish clear and rich relations between modes.

Casey Curtis, "Starry Night"
(starrynite.swf)

Casey Curtis's project, "Starry Night," brings together word, image, and sound in a way that is mostly metonymic; however, elements from the project, particularly the animation, operate metaphorically and help give the project coherence.

"Starry Night" combines the lyrics from Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, and the jazz piece "In a Sentimental Mood" by Duke Ellington and John Coltrane. These three diverse elements are composed in an evocative way and create associations through their juxtaposition.

It is at first a bit disconcerting to see the lyrics of one song on the screen as another song plays in the background; adding to the oddness is the visual experience of seeing very famous paintings fading in and out on the screen with words superimposed on them. The three basic elements of word, image, and sound all come from very well known sources. Casey's project takes these elements out of their context—for instance, presenting the lyrics of the song without its melody—and puts them in a new context with new associations.

In addition to the metonymic associations generated by the word, image, and sound combinations, other elements of the project use more of a metaphoric relation between modes.

For instance, the title "Starry Night" appears at first on the screen as small yellow dots; the dots converge to form the words of the title, and then they dissolve again into the small yellow dots before disappearing entirely. Against a dark blue background, this animation has the effect of making the title seem composed of twinkling stars; here the animation repeats or visually represents the words of the title.

Other text animations in the project also evoke the meaning of the text being animated. For instance, the words "but still not sleeping" throb, and the words "my weariness amazes me" gradually stretch out across the screen. These animations aren't exact replications of the meanings of the words, since we don't directly associate throbbing with sleepiness or stretching

with weariness. In these cases, the animations expand on the meanings of the words they represent.

There are also metaphoric relations between text and image in some scenes, bringing Dylan's words and Van Gogh's images more closely together. For instance, the words "take me, yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky / silhouetted by the sea" appear against a backdrop of VanGogh's painting "Starry Night Over the Rhone," which shows lights reflecting on the water.

In her report that accompanied this project, Casey wrote that she wanted to "create an experience for the audience": "I wanted the combination [of text, image, and sound] to give the audience the impression of being lonely and in a daze." Placing well known text, images, and sounds together in a new context evokes new connections between these elements, creating something like an environment of associations that the audience can experience.

The associative logic of metonymy is appropriate here. However, without the metaphoric resonances and substitutions that offer connections between elements at various points in the project, the different modes might seem too disconnected and the associations too loose or random.

Mitchell Kimbrough, "Sky"
(http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/summer2002/sky/launch.htm)

"Sky," by Mitchell Kimbrough, brings together the words of a poem he wrote (entitled "Sky") with Norah Jones's song "Don't Know Why." Two animated images make up the visual component of the project: first, a forest scene as evening turns to night, and second, a flower that grows and then dies. In addition, the words of the poem are animated, appearing and disappearing from the screen.

The modes in this project are related to each other mostly in a metaphorical way. That is, the song and the animated images metaphorically represent the poem, substituting for elements of the poem by conveying its meaning in terms and with techniques specific to each mode.

The poem seems to be about an opportunity that the speaker failed to take up. Although it is written in fragments of sentences, the verbs—"didn't," "might have," "could've," "didn't," "won't," "might have"—all express negation and point to the possibility of something that ultimately didn't occur. The repetition of the words "little," "almost," and "next time" suggest that this missed opportunity isn't tragic but is more like something upon which the speaker muses, perhaps with just a bit of longing or regret.

The images and sound point to some of the same meanings as the poem does. Visually, the two animated images of "Sky" convey a mild sense of loss. In the animated images of nightfall and in a flower's growth and death we see the passage of time and the end of something, but in a way that is natural, inevitable, perhaps sad but not tragic. The use of these two images evokes the

cycles of nature, and this represents or stands in for phrases in the poem like "next time" and "always tomorrow though."

The audio component of "Sky" similarly represents some elements of the poem and the images. The lyrics and melody of Norah Jones's song suggest a mild, somewhat bewildered sense of melancholy and regret. There is a sense of longing for something that might have been, but also a certain acceptance conveyed both by the lyrics and by the smooth and calm style of the song.

In "Sky," then, all three modes work toward expressing more or less the same meaning; they substitute or stand-in for each other, though in a way that isn't simple repetition. The text, sound, and images each add their own part to the meaning, drawing of course on the resources of each mode.

Ingrid Ankerson, "Murmuring Insects"
(http://www.poemsthatgo.com/gallery/fall2001/murmuring/launch.htm)

"Murmuring Insects," by Ingrid Ankerson, was published at Poems That Go, shortly after 9/11. The text in the project comes from a poem entitled "Murmuring Insects," written by Otagaki Rengetsu, an 18th century Japanese poet. There are several still images (the twin towers of the World Trade Center after having been hit by airplanes, the exhaust trails of an airplane, a photograph of an eye) and several animated images (geese flying, words forming into a tear which then becomes a crescent moon). Finally, the audio element of the project includes sound clips of crickets chirping and a violin playing, along with sound clips taken from broadcasts on or shortly after 9/11.

As Ankerson (2001) commented in her brief description of the project at Rhizome.org, "This piece uses Rengetsu's language combined with simple imagery in the spirit of her words, but is starkly contrasted with the media sound bytes the American nation would hear for days in a row" following the events of 9/11.

In the terms I've been using here, the text and images metaphorically substitute for each other, whereas the sound (the sound clips related to 9/11, though not the crickets or violin sound clips) introduces a metonymic element.

For the most part, the images and text in "Murmuring Insects" express a similar meaning. For instance, in the "sky" scene, the animation of geese flying repeats a phrase in the poem ("flocks of departing geese"). In the water scene, the words "tears like dew / well up in my eyes" are animated so as to appear to well up and then drop from the eye of the photograph in the background .

But the sounds in "Murmuring Insects" bring a new dimension to the project and interact differently with the images and the text. In fact, audio is the mode that brings the events of 9/11 most clearly into the body of the project and places this reference next to the images and words. This is a metonymic relation because the sounds are not meant to translate or substitute for the words or images, but rather to extend their meaning by association—that is, to bring the words

and images into association with 9/11, and with the particular expressions of 9/11 rendered in each audio clip.

While the images and text of the project provide mostly calming references to nature, the voiceovers that are part of the sound clips introduce the terror and fear and great sorrow of 9/11. This juxtaposition may, as Cheryl Ball (under review) noted in her insightful interpretation of "Murmuring Insects," allow readers to memorialize 9/11 in a "more productive and peaceful way than simply by reacting with fear."

As I have suggested, looking at the relations between modes helps us focus assessment on a unique and challenging element of multimodal composing. Metaphor and metonymy provide a language with which to talk to our students about how the different modes in their projects come together to make meaning.

This approach certainly doesn't offer a quantitative assessment measure, and it doesn't address the technical or aesthetic challenges of new media composition. Rather, the approach I have described here is one element—though I believe an essential element—in our assessment of student work in new media.

CITATIONS

Text
Ankerson, Ingrid. (2001). Introduction to "Murmuring insects." Available: http://www.rhizome.com/object.rhiz?2865.

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Image
Photograph of Stanford's Memorial Court and the "Burghers of Calais" sculptures by Bipin Rajendran. Used with permission.

Audio
Sounds from The Freesound Project: http://freesound.iua.upf.edu/.

Design & Code
Design concept from The ABC: http://www.the-abc.org/. Code help from ActionScript.org: http://actionscript.org.