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## The value of practice-based collaborations across the third space: reflections on supporting multimodal assignments

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### ***Abstract***

Multimodal assignments are becoming a prevalent strategy to enable assessment of student learning (Reid et al., 2016). However, due to their inherent complexity, supporting faculty members and students in adopting and implementing these types of assignments can be challenging (Wysocki et al., 2019). To overcome this, a group of ‘third space’ (Whitchurch, 2013) academic professionals came together to design and implement a support system that considered these assignments holistically. In this opinion piece, we reflect on the creation of a lifecycle approach to supporting multimodal assignments that built awareness and deepened understanding among faculty of our roles in teaching and learning. We also share how our informal, transdisciplinary collaboration can serve as a precursor for similar projects that support students and faculty.

**Keywords:** third space professionals; multimodal assignments; collaboration.

### ***Introduction***

The use of podcasts, videos, infographics, comics, and other audio/visual media to assess student learning is increasingly popular across the disciplinary spectrum in post-secondary institutions (Reid et al., 2016). Faculty members choose these multimodal formats to, among other reasons, develop digital literacy and creative communication skills among

students and connect learning outcomes to communities and audiences beyond their classrooms (Rodrigo and Davis, 2022). However, these assignments tend to be quite complex, requiring faculty members and students to demonstrate a wide range of skills. Some authors suggest that using multimodal assessments implies a re-evaluation of one's pedagogical approaches (Wood, 2019), where instructors are not simply incorporating a technologically rich activity, but taking 'a stance, an orientation, and a privileging of the many ways of making and receiving meaning' (Wysocki et al., 2019, p.21). Given this complexity, it is not surprising that many faculty members and students seek out campus services and experts to assist with the design and implementation of such assignments.

Support for multimodal assignments can take many forms. Faculty developers often help instructors conceptualise multimodal projects (Fodrey and Mikovits, 2020), while librarians, writing tutors, and learning developers help students with visual and digital literacy skills, including finding and using sources, content organisation, visual design, and citation for visual and verbal audiences. Although many libraries and writing centres have a history of partnering to support student research and writing within the shared space of a 'learning commons', support units often work apart from each other (Ferrer, 2012; Murphy, 2017; Deitering and Filar-Williams, 2018), potentially causing inefficiencies and even perpetuating misconceptions that academic skills are disconnected and learned in isolation. Furthermore, there are untapped opportunities for more strategic collaboration between these student-facing professionals (Bickle et al., 2024) as well as with faculty-facing professionals (Webster, 2024). Scholars such as Blackmore et al. (2010) raised concerns about the potential of these siloes in higher education to hinder the teaching and learning culture of the institution. In order to address this issue, Wysocki et al. (2019, p.24) argued for institutions to 'work infrastructurally' by being attuned to their idiosyncrasies when designing supports for multimodal creations.

In this opinion piece, we discuss a collaboration between academic support professionals who broke through siloes to support multimodal assignments on our Canadian campus. Through our grassroots partnership between a librarian, a writing and learning specialist, and a faculty development consultant – three roles that often reside within the 'third space' between academic and professional spheres (Whitchurch, 2008; 2013) – we not only streamlined supports for faculty and students working on multimodal assignments, but also discovered our potential for working effectively together across boundaries. We reflect on

what we learned through this transdisciplinary collaboration and how it offers insights on responding to other campus needs more holistically.

## **Context**

Mount Royal University (MRU) is a teaching-focused undergraduate university located in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. One of the main buildings at MRU is the Riddell Library and Learning Centre (RLLC); in addition to library services and spaces, the RLLC also houses Student Learning Services (SLS) (similar to an academic skills and writing centre), the Academic Development Centre (ADC) (for faculty development), and other units that support the university's learning mission. These units were intentionally co-located when the building was designed in order to create a physical hub for teaching and learning within the institution (Zimmer, 2017). However, from an organisational point of view, these units remain unrelated, with distinct reporting lines, staff composition, and strategic goals. As a result, despite shared interests and good working relationships, we perform our roles with somewhat limited awareness of the initiatives and everyday work taking place in other areas. Professionals working in these various units often rely on existing relationships, ad hoc opportunities, and informal communication channels to grow relationships and stay in touch about each other's work, but the potential for a more intentional implementation of a campus hub for supporting teaching and learning has not yet been fully realised. This disconnection was clearly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, we saw several faculty members incorporate multimodal assignments to their courses as a response to shifting modes of communication and decreased engagement in online classes. However, the support provided by our units was often fragmented, reactive, and limited, which made it difficult to make meaningful contributions to the design and execution of these assignments.

## **Our intervention**

Initially, we shared these experiences and observations in passing, but soon we began to actively discuss strategies to mitigate these challenges, such as co-creating and facilitating faculty workshops on multimodal assignment design. In the early iterations of these workshops, we aimed at showcasing the complexities of these types of assignments and

how each of our areas could individually contribute to strengthening the design and implementation of multimodal assignments. These workshops were a valuable initial opportunity to tie our units' spaces, resources, and expertise directly to specific learning activities and make visible the alignment and interconnection of available supports, rather than the isolated supports we previously offered. Although an encouraging first step, we soon realised that the wrap-around support that we wanted to offer might be overwhelming to faculty and students, and may in fact give the impression that these kinds of assignments always required comprehensive support and resources when they did not. We were also aware of the pragmatic realities of developing and completing assignments, and that both faculty and students likely had limited time, ability, and interest when it came to accessing support from all of our units just to complete one assignment. We all had something to offer, but the risk was that we were making it too complicated, which might result in faculty reaching out less, or choosing not to do these assignments at all because of the perceived extra work involved.

We decided then to regroup and discuss how to address these shortcomings. As we visually mapped out the ways in which each of us might interact with these multimodal assignments (see Figure 1), we realised that our work could not always be neatly compartmentalised within the boundaries of our units or our roles, nor confined to particular faculty or student experiences with specific stages in the assignment. This new awareness of each other's work led us to develop a Multimodal Assignment Design Worksheet (Cross et al., 2023, see Appendix), based on an assignment lifecycle approach, that aims to assist faculty in designing assignments in a more holistic way by considering key aspects of each stage of the lifecycle of an assignment, from conceptualisation through implementation to assessment and reflection.<sup>1</sup> In essence, this approach encourages faculty to ask important questions relevant to significant moments in the process and seek help in the most appropriate places. In an accompanying workshop, we invited instructors to embrace the complexities of multimodal assignments and to share experiences and expertise with each other, allowing participants to directly address their concerns about planning, scheduling, and accessing the support and resources students would need to successfully complete these assignments. In doing so, we highlighted the specific benefits available through collaborating with us to achieve the intended outcomes

<sup>1</sup> This approach is not brand new and is used in various forms in faculty development offices or other teaching and learning centres. See, for example, University of Central Florida Faculty Center (n.d.) and UC Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning (n.d.).

for students, and we raised awareness of our shared role in supporting the institution's teaching and learning mission (Murphy, 2017).

**Figure 1. Mapping intersections in our work.**

## ***Discussion***

### **Benefits for faculty and students**

Taking a lifecycle approach to multimodal assignment support allowed us to better understand how our individual interactions with faculty and students are often part of their larger experience of help seeking. This showed us the value of thinking critically and constructively about the impact of our individual efforts to improve educational outcomes and enhance service provision that goes beyond referrals to other areas. This approach was also an effective way to translate the fluidity of the third space ecosystem into practice, incorporating infrastructural understanding (Wysocki et al., 2019) into our work. We articulated for faculty the value of both our respective expertise and our collaborative approach to teaching and learning support, potentially making the available supports visible but not overwhelming, thus breaking down real and perceived barriers to using multimodal assignments for teaching.

### **Implications for third space professionals**

Our grassroots collaboration produced a practice-based solution to an emerging need, with implications for our work and the faculty and students with whom we work, and it was successful because of our effort to understand and respond to that need holistically. The expertise that resides in the third space overflows the boundaries that may be consciously or unconsciously ascribed to each of our roles, through our reporting lines and job descriptions, or through our assumptions (Smith et al., 2021) about the work that others do. As Webster (2024, p.234) argues, we all need to ‘work sensitively’ with each other to articulate and delineate our expertise in order to collaborate more effectively. We see this as an ongoing grassroots process that is more flexible and agile than ad-hoc collaborations which can begin and end as necessary to a specific purpose. Flexible collaborations rooted in and adapted to practice experiences can make our work visible and illustrate the potential value of third space professionals, not just as service providers but as contributing partners in decisions about curriculum and assessment design, among other issues, at the university (Bickle et al., 2024). They can also anticipate and address both current and future needs and the many thorny problems on the horizon – especially those related to the impacts of digital technologies on higher education – that will need to be addressed through collaboration and transdisciplinary sharing of expertise among many different professionals on campus.

### ***Future directions***

The growth of multimodal projects on our campus provided the impetus that sparked our collaboration and changed our understanding of one another’s work and how we work together. Our collaboration to support this complex topic demonstrated the potential impact of what Murphy (2017, p.748) calls ‘a high-functioning, multi-professional team, working together to develop holistic and integrated learning’ at the institutional level. While Murphy describes working at the programme level to create change, in this case we found success not in a programme-level approach, but from a response to a shared issue experienced across campus. This transdepartmental and transdisciplinary response aligned our supports and streamlined that support for users. It also allowed us to ‘mobilise “hybrid” expertise across structural boundaries’ (McCrary, 2023), and articulate that expertise for the benefit of instructors. Our understanding of each other’s work grew, and we came to recognise that there were opportunities for us to contribute to a more comprehensive



approach to supporting the design, delivery, and assessment of multimodal assignments that would benefit students and faculty, while also enhancing our work.

As new needs arise, emergent collaborations like ours have the potential to mobilise our expertise to cultivate networks of practice (Taylor et al., 2021) and generate more integrated solutions to meet the needs of our campus. This approach to collaboration could be applied to other trending topics of broad interest on many university campuses, including academic integrity, generative artificial intelligence, and media literacy. These collaborations can, of course, expand and shift to include other third space academic support professionals as appropriate (e.g., accessibility specialists, copyright specialists, learning technologists, etc.). They can also raise the visibility of our work by addressing campus-wide teaching and learning concerns in practical ways at a course or programme level, while also highlighting third space practitioners' contributions to achieving institutional strategic commitments to developing 'transversal skills' (UNESCO, n.d.) in our students and 'enhanc[ing] university cross-border collaborative capital' (Veles et al., 2019, p.76). As we continue to see the impacts of new technologies, interest in new literacies, and the need for new ways of sharing knowledge, we anticipate future opportunities for academic support units to build on the physical, administrative, and social affordances on their campuses that have the potential to connect and enhance the work of third space professionals in supporting teaching and learning.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

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## Appendix

### [Multimodal Assignment Design Worksheet](#)



## Multimodal Assignment Design Worksheet

*Goals of the activity:* This exercise will help you apply the main principles of assessment design into a multimodal/multimedia assignment.

*Instructions:* Using your course outline as a starting point, identify one assignment that you would like to work on during this session (it can either be an existing or new assignment). Then, follow the prompts for each part of the activity. Try to be as specific as you can, since this can help you decide on assignment attributes that are aligned with your students' learning needs.

### Part 1: Planning stage

1. What are your learning outcomes?
2. How would a multimodal assignment align with course outcomes, content, and other activities?
3. Does the medium matter for students to reach learning outcomes? Will you give the students a choice of medium?
4. What do students have to do, and how will they do it?
5. Will the work be completed individually or in groups? Why?
6. What other questions would you ask at this stage?

### Part 2: Implementation stage

1. Do students understand the purpose and intended audience?
2. How will students show their work?
3. What are the academic requirements? What are the technical requirements?
4. How long will students have to complete? What support will be offered, and how? Will you have to drop some content to make room for this assignment?
5. What other questions would you ask at this stage?

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### Part 3: Assessment and Reflection

1. How will you assess the work? (Are you assessing the technical quality, the content, both?)
2. Will you use a rubric?
3. How will you grade different products/formats equitably?
4. Where will the work be shared? What do students know about ethical use of information: reusing, modifying, citing and attributing sources?
5. How can you help students reflect on their own performance in completing this assignment?

### Resources and contacts:

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