

Genres, Multimodal Composition, and Access: Stories of Personal and Embodied Experience

Emad Hakim and Ahmed Hamdy

Emad Hakim interviews his friend, scholar and activist Ahmed Hamdy, about his literate activities. The authors discuss the interconnectedness of multimodal genres and accessibility by examining their lived experiences within different contexts and ideologies.

“Those who want to make changes in the world need to make those changes against and especially through genres” (Devitt, 2021, p. 18).

Emad’s Introduction

Let me start this article by asking you a question: What forms of writing do you expect to work with or produce after graduation? For example, professionally, I expect that I will produce many different texts, such as syllabi for my students, articles like this one, and research papers that I will try to publish. I expect to engage with (and sometimes learn from scratch) different learning management systems like Blackboard, Canvas, Moodle, and so on. I also expect to continue engaging with many of the texts I use now, such as texting, Facebook posts, tweets, Instagram posts, and so on. Actually, I engage with these texts on a daily basis. What about you? Unfortunately, this article’s modality is not interactive enough for me to hear or see your answers, but I urge you to take two minutes and jot down some ideas in the margins of this article. Write down one or two genres you expect to produce or engage with

as a professional and maybe another two that you may engage with in your daily life. I will come back to what you wrote in the margins at the end of the article.

In this article, I will be interviewing my friend Ahmed Hamdy about the literate activities he engages in as a scholar and activist with visual impairment. There are many reasons I want to do this interview with Ahmed. First, I feel compelled to educate myself about his use of distinct modes of communication, especially when I recognize that I have lived for a long time with stereotypical ideas about persons with visual impairments. My knowledge about people with visual impairments was almost entirely based on oversimplified depictions in movies and on TV, which often represented those communities through stereotypes as well as ideologies and cultures of ableism. Indeed, meeting Ahmed was a turning point in my life because he helped me reexamine my ideas about what it might be like to live with a visual impairment.

A Few Important Concepts

Before I proceed with the content of the interview, I want to spend some time exploring a few concepts that will help us along the way. I want you to buckle up because this part might sound dense at first glance, but I promise you that the rest of the article will build on these concepts with examples.

First, I mentioned above that I want to explore the literate activities that Ahmed is involved in. So, what is literate activity? According to the ISU Writing Program, “**Literate activity** is a way to describe the complex activity involved in people producing and using texts across spaces and times, in ways that are shaped by our histories, tools, social interactions, resources, bodies, emotions, and relationships with the world. When we talk about literate activity, we include reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and feeling—all social practices that influence how we make meaning and communicate” (Literate activity terms, n.d.). In this definition, reading and writing are seen through the lens of a complex activity system that is intertwined with elements of time, place, human interaction, and artifacts. So, a literate activity involves more than just a person engaging with a particular kind of textual production or communication at a particular time and place. Rather, it involves a combination of elements (tools, people, modalities, genres), plus the meanings and uses associated with the activity that have been developing culturally and historically over time. These historical and cultural meanings impact how people understand their literate activities, and even what they might believe is possible to do or make in a

particular situation. If my expansion on this definition has not been as simple as you want it to be, I hope the embodied examples in this article will help get the concept across.

Another concept I want to introduce here is genre. What is a genre? In fact, there are many definitions of genre, and it is my opinion that all the definitions complement one another in some way. Among the different definitions, I will focus here on the three definitions that I drew from the ISU Writing Program website (Key terms & concepts, n.d.):

- Definition 1: **Genre** refers to a kind of production that is possible to identify by understanding the conventions or features that make that production recognizable.
- Definition 2: A **genre** is a typified response to a recurring situation.
- Definition 3: A **genre** is a kind of text that makes a particular action possible (or impossible).

While these definitions may look totally different, they are actually strongly connected to each other. The first definition of genre focuses on its recognizability and identification through its features. In fact, the recognizability of a genre is one of the most powerful factors in successful communication. Let me give you an example. How much time does a driver have to recognize a stop sign (Figure 1) on the road? Technically, seconds or less. Without those features that can be identified at a glance—the octagonal shape, red background, and white letters—the activity system of driving would be hindered. This is just one example. How many other examples can you think of in which you need to identify or recognize the features of a text quickly for successful communication?



Figure 1: A stop sign (Dickelbers, 2013).

However, Amy Devitt (2004), a prominent scholar in rhetoric and composition, argues that this first definition does not capture the essence of genre because it focuses on form while actually ignoring function. Let me give you another example here. How many times have you looked in your mailbox and picked up an envelope that looked like a personal letter only to find out that it was a sales letter or offer from a company? The authors of those sales letters deceived you by using the typical, identifiable features of a personal letter. The same thing happens with hackers and phishing emails whose authors try to imitate certain features of professional or personal

emails in order to take advantage of the reader. Therefore, the second definition—a typified response to a recurring situation—focuses on the rhetorical action that a genre performs. So, when genres respond to recurring situations, they perform the rhetorical actions that the situation needs. And since the situation always changes (even when recurring), so, too, do genres.

The third definition of genre—a kind of text that makes a particular action possible or impossible—connects all the definitions together. For example, the stop sign that we mentioned earlier makes the action of stopping the car for pedestrians and oncoming traffic possible. Without this genre, cars can run into people or collide. What other actions do genres make possible? Think of tax forms, receipts, medical records, or the ingredients label on your cornflakes box. These genres make the actions of collecting taxes, recording a purchase, documenting medical history, and informing consumers about what their breakfast cereal is made of possible. Another very important question to ask about genre is this: Do they make actions possible for everyone? Are all people able to read stop signs, receipts, or medical records? Can anything be done to enhance the quality of how these genres respond to their situations?

The final concept that I want to discuss here is multimodal composition. According to the ISU Writing Program, **multimodal composing** specifically refers to “ALL of the modes that humans can use to communicate, which would include alphabetic (stuff we write using the alphabet), visual (pictures), aural (sound), oral (spoken), and symbolic (using symbols that aren’t alphabetic, like emoticons or emojis). Practicing multimodal composing means being aware that a lot of our work as writers includes much more than just a single mode” (Key terms & concepts, n.d.). This is critically significant when we try to connect composition with accessibility. If you remember my question above about access to certain genres, some genres are historically and culturally designed based on ableist ideologies that assume all people are the same. But, if we agree on the diversity of human beings, and the diversity of our audience in almost every context, how can we use and develop modes of communication to be inclusive of that diversity? Those are questions to ask as you proceed through the rest of the article.

As a writing researcher, I am so interested in knowing more about the literate activities that Ahmed engages in. But before the interview, let me tell you some of what I already know about Ahmed’s literate activity, and I hope the interview will give both me and you a deeper and more informed perspective than what I already mentioned in this introduction. First, Ahmed is actively engaged with various platforms of social media. His interest in different topics ranging from world politics to sports manifests in his

presence on social media as well as in different forms of formal and informal communication. He is also a big fan of the Premier League, and he competes against other fans on a platform called Fantasy, which I tried to learn from him but didn't find interesting actually (sorry, buddy!). As a linguist, Ahmed is fluent in three languages—Arabic, English, and Deutsch—and he has published a number of research articles in reputable journals. He also got his Master's degree in political science at the American University in Cairo.

This is what I already know about Ahmed, but there's much more information and details about his literate practices that I am eager to learn through this interview. So, without further ado, let's get into the interview!

Emad: Let me start with a kind of survey question: On a scale of one to ten, how important are reading and writing to your daily life?

Ahmed: Definitely, I would say ten. Reading and writing are crucial parts of my day, and thanks to technological breakthroughs, there are currently many distinct modes of reading and writing that I use, from my phone to my laptop to my other assistive technology devices. I use reading and writing for a variety of reasons, personally, socially, and academically.

Emad: Focusing on your social activity, how do you use reading and writing in your social interactions?

Ahmed: Well, that's a crucial question because I believe many people are eager to ask people with visual impairments about this. As I told you before, I use different tools for reading and writing: my phone, my laptop, and other devices too. But in my social interactions—my digital social interactions in particular, like using social media, texting, calling, or reading messages—I mainly use my phone. Again, thanks to technology, there is now software available called a screen reader. I have this software on my devices, but it's available on all devices, not just mine. It helps me read whatever is shown on the screen, and it helps me write too.

So, for example, platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook (Meta), and Twitter (X) are now more developed and can be used with screen reader apps. My devices then can help me use the different modes available on these platforms, including the use of emojis in reading and writing.

Emad: Screen reader technology seems really helpful as an alternative modality. I'm interested in learning more about this. Would you like to expand on the process of using this with a particular social media platform as an example?

Ahmed: So, let's say it's Facebook. I open my Facebook app, like any other user, and the more I scroll down the timeline, the more it tells me that this person or that person is writing a post and comments and so on. It also tells me all the options available, such as reacting, commenting, sharing, and everything else. For sure, there are more technical details I could get into about how to give commands. Screen reading is considered an oral mode of communication as I get a lot of information through text-to-speech software.

There's a similar process for writing a post, a tweet, or an email. I go to the text field, I touch the screen for the letters, and I get auditory feedback about what letters I pressed. The same for sure goes for using my laptop and any other gadget with screen reader software.

Emad: OK. I can see that your literate activity is rich with different modes of communication. Would you like to tell me more about multimodal writing and its value in your literate activities in different contexts?

Ahmed: First of all, I would like to talk about modes of writing in general. Different modes of writing are inherently important because they give more choices and meet the needs of many different people, not just me. These modes include alphabetic, symbolic, visual, oral, aural, and tactile, among others. For me, if I am stuck with one or two modes of writing, I will not be able to write what I want to write. For instance, one common mode of writing that people use is alphabetic. Now, modes of writing are rapidly developing due to technological advancement. For me, this is very important. If I went back thirty years, it would be a lot harder for me because assistive technology was not that advanced. As I mentioned before, I use devices with special programs, called screen readers, to express my thoughts, to write my articles, or to write whatever I want. Other important modes of writing for me are things like braille. For those who do not know, braille is a system of writing for the blind that uses characters made up of raised dots (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Braille, in this case, is considered a tactile mode of communication. If this did not exist, I would be losing a lot because I would not be able to read or write. This is why different modes of writing are important for everyone because they meet different needs, preferences, or sometimes personal situations.

Emad: Alright, I'm glad you mentioned this point about what could happen if these modes of writing were not there. Would you like to tell me about some of your experiences when you found these modes unavailable?

Ahmed: Actually, I usually find myself in situations where there's only one mode of writing available to me. When I'm stuck in such a situation, especially when the mode of writing being used is not accessible to me, all my activities are hindered. On the other hand, when I'm in a situation where different modes of writing are being used, this absolutely helps me. Let me give you an example. At one of the many conferences I have attended, there were presentations, and the plan was that presenters would receive questions from the audience. The organizers moved around the audience, and they gave everyone a pen and paper to write down their questions, but they didn't give me anything because they knew I would not be able to use these tools. So, I was not able to ask questions. It was very frustrating. Even if they had given me a pen and paper, I wouldn't have been able to use them unless someone had helped me write the questions I wanted to ask. So, the absence of different modes of writing here limited my experience at the conference and put me in kind of a passive role. In this situation, an alternative mode could have been, for instance, an email to send these questions to, or some other method that I could use.

I also think that my experience is not only restricted to persons with visual impairments. For instance, if you are at a conference where there's only one way to ask questions, say, by sending text messages, and you don't have a phone, you won't be able to send in your questions.

Another example was when I was applying for a travel visa for a certain country. The website of the embassy used high-security methods that required me to enter a CAPTCHA, a tool used to prevent robots from using websites and services. The screen reader technology on all my devices could not help me go through this security test. When I wanted to log in to my application, I had to video call you so that you could read the CAPTCHA and help me solve it and log in.

Furthermore, some services such as online banking, travel planning, hotel booking, and visa appointments may be hindered for persons with visual impairments because they are not able to use CAPTCHA. While some websites and apps provide audio alternatives (which are not as efficient), other vital sites and services ignore that option even though screen readers, in many cases, do not read CAPTCHAs, unfortunately.

Emad: Wow! I sometimes fail to recognize all the communication challenges that can occur until I hear stories of them really happening. And yes, I remember that time when I was helping you access the embassy website. This just reminds me that this is not only about technology but also about a human's willingness to consider the

reception of their genres and the access it gives or denies to different individuals.

Ahmed: This is very true. By the way, I just noticed that you refer to texts as genres. Why do you use this term in this context?

Emad: Very important question. Like many people, I used to know genres as categories of music or movies.

Ahmed: Yes, that is how people generally define the word. Has this meaning changed? 😊

Emad: No, it hasn't. But the meaning of genre has expanded for me.

Ahmed: How is that?

Emad: Well, I started to learn that genres are not mere categories of things, but rather socially constructed kinds of texts that are meant to respond or react to specific situations. In other words, I started to understand how genres came to be in the first place and to study the influences that made particular genres into particular shapes.

Ahmed: OK, do you mean that genres are responses to any kind of situation?

Emad: They could be, I think. However, I studied genres in the context of writing studies. So, I understand the definition as genres responding to rhetorical situations.

Ahmed: OK, now you are making things more confusing for me by adding another term that I don't know. What do you mean by rhetorical situations?

Emad: This is also a good question, which I think will be the key to how I can explain genres to you. So, Lloyd Bitzer (1968), a prominent scholar in the field of rhetoric and composition, defines **rhetorical situations** as situations that can be modified by introducing discourse. Now don't get confused. Discourse here means communication. Let me give you an example. If a driver has a flat tire on the road, he has a situation, but I don't think I can consider this a rhetorical situation, at least in my opinion. No matter how much he tries to communicate with the tire, it is flat, and it won't turn back. He needs to do something physical like opening the trunk of the car, getting out the spare tire, and replacing the flat one with it. This is why communication here might not make a big difference, especially if the driver is planning to do that by himself. On the other hand, if there is a crooked part of the road that has caused

a couple of accidents, I think we have a situation, and I think this is a rhetorical situation because communication can make a difference in this case. For example, a stop sign or a slowdown sign can be put on this part of the road. Or one can communicate that there is a hazard there through Google Maps. So, the stop sign is a genre because it responds to that rhetorical situation, and same thing with Google Maps—both of these can bring communication and change to the situation.

Ahmed: This is a very interesting way to think about writing, but I have something to say about your first example: I think it can be a rhetorical situation. If the driver doesn't know how to replace the tire, communication can have its place there. He can look at the car's manual, check out a video tutorial on YouTube, or call a mechanic, right?

Emad: I think this makes a lot of sense. So, the point is that if communication can make a difference in the situation, then the situation is rhetorical. The genres we study are the means through which we respond to these situations, like the examples we mentioned above.

Ahmed: Is this all about your new understanding of genres?

Emad: Actually, no. There are two important features of genres that I never thought about before. First, genres are rapidly changing, and this is due to the changes in the situations surrounding those genres. For example, technology breakthroughs have allowed many books to become YouTube videos, turned blogs into vlogs, and so on. These rapid changes make it almost impossible to think of any established rules of a genre that we can learn and always follow. Hence the call for writing research becomes necessary in writing studies.

Another important feature of genres is that they not only respond to situations, but they also shape and are shaped by the values and cultures surrounding those situations.

Ahmed: I think I need some examples to understand this second point better.

Emad: Door signs are an obvious example that we experience in many organizations and campuses. You will find some door and elevator signs written only in alphabetic text, while in other places, these signs are written in alphabetic text as well as braille (Figure 2).

Ahmed: True!



Figure 2: A door sign from a room in Stevenson Hall at Illinois State University.

Emad: These genres reflect the values and considerations of each organization. While one organization might think of people as diverse and provide different forms of communication, another organization might think of people as homogenous and only depend on one mode.

Ahmed: Alright. Now I understand how genres can respond to specific situations, and since these situations are changing constantly, genres do too in order to respond to these changes. Based on this, can we consider assistive technology, including assistive braille devices and screen readers, as genres?

Emad: I think these examples of assistive technology are the tools or modes that help you to create a genre that “makes a particular action possible” (Key terms & concepts, n.d.). So, if you think about any of those devices, they produce multimodal texts that make many activities possible for you, and without them, some of these activities may be hindered. They also respond to situations where there’s a need for communication through different modes.

I am curious to hear about the different options and modes of communication that current assistive technology provides for you.

Ahmed: Sure! Currently, thanks to technology, I have many options that make numerous activities available to me. For instance, most smartphones provide more modes of writing than just using the screen to write letters. Other devices provide something called a virtual braille screen (Figure 3). This device enables me to take notes on the screen, and it helps me read and write electronic documents through the braille entry method. Those pads below the touch screen produce the same sensation as braille letters and they change according to what the document provides. I can also connect this device to my phone or my laptop and use the same features through it. As a person who already knows how to read and write in braille, this feature provides a lot of help for me. This is easy because I can write faster and with more accuracy on the touch screen than with other modes of writing.

Emad: I had never even heard about these features. Thank you for educating me about it! This is very interesting and helpful. I could only imagine braille in a tangible form, like on a paper that we can touch. But it is just magical how technological devices can produce the



Figure 3: Braille notetaker device with touch screen (Assistive Technology Service, n.d.).

same sensations to help us read electronic documents using braille. I love it! I think that is a great example of the tactile mode of communication.

I have another question that you reminded me of. I now understand that your devices can read the text on your screens. But I was chatting with you once, and I sent you a picture of one of our friends, and your phone was able to recognize the person. How could this happen? I thought it would only be able to read words on a picture.

Ahmed: That's a good question. One of the new services offered to help persons with visual impairments is alt text or alternative text. This means that when uploading a picture to any platform, you can write alt text to describe the picture and mention any details about people in the picture. Facebook, for instance, in some cases, compares people in a picture with their profiles and then may tell you who is in the picture. There are also other programs that rely on optical character recognition (OCR) which allows the software engine to read what's in a picture and determine whether there are people in this picture.

Emad: Let me ask you about your childhood. Do you want to tell me something about your literacy practices and modes of communication when you were young?

Ahmed: Yes. I remember when I was young, I liked to play cards with my friends. So, I would buy the cards and play with my friends, but it was a challenge since I can't see the cards; I didn't know which numbers, shapes, or colors were on the cards. I used the braille writing that I was learning at the time to write the numbers, colors, and shapes on the cards, so I could use them on my own. That was before I knew that a braille card deck was going to be available on the market. So, I tried to find a solution to the problem by using distinct modes that would allow me to play the game with my friends more easily and without having to ask anyone about the cards during the game. I think this was a creative idea that helped me a lot in those social activities.

Emad: Thank you for all this information, but I still have some questions. I know you play an advocacy role for the rights of persons with disabilities. So, I have two questions in this regard. First, do you consider multimodal writing to be an individual or systemic responsibility? Or both?

Ahmed: I would consider it to be both for sure. It is an individual responsibility in the sense that there is a human drive for expression, but it is also systemic in the sense that how societies and communities value the right of expression for all people, including persons with disabilities,

determines the amount of accessible multimodal communication options available. Highly valuing this right would result in inventing, creating, and allowing more multimodal writing.

Emad: OK, I'm curious to ask you, have you been in a position to resist the systemic struggle of having unfit or inconvenient modes of communication?

Ahmed: In fact, yes. I have a story of resistance from when I was an undergrad student. I thought the activity system that was available to me created many obstacles for my academic success. To remove these obstacles, I had to go through a series of discussions with school officials.

The traditional practice there was that the department would provide staff members as scribes to write for me, and others with visual impairments, in the final exams. I had to orally dictate my exam responses to them, and they would write what I said in the exam papers. Since the beginning of my first year, I did not feel comfortable with this method. I used to feel lost and unable to express my thoughts this way. In my third year, I took the initiative and talked to the department administration and some professors about it. I proposed a change to the system, one in which persons with visual impairments could type on a computer instead of dictating their answers. I had to deal with a lot of resistance and bureaucratic challenges in the beginning. I think many of the university officials thought it would be too difficult to make this alternative happen, and they were not courageous enough to try. Even for me, it was a new experience—I thought, I can type well, so why not try it in an exam? It was a little bit risky for me, honestly, but I took that risk so that I could try something that felt more comfortable for me. After a lot of bureaucratic stuff and talks with officials, I successfully managed to get permission to use my proposed alternative method (only for me, though). After trying it, it proved to be a great enhancement to the system, and the university endorsed it by providing special training for newcomers so they could effectively use this mode of writing and the tools associated with it.

Emad: OK, my final question: What do you think about the future of multimodal communication and literacy? Is there more access for persons with disabilities that you expect to come or that you think people should strive for?

Ahmed: Definitely. The more time passes, the more technological breakthroughs and inventions we will have in the world. In the end, it is not about the service or device that's invented for a certain purpose, it

is all about human creativity and imagination working in inclusive and diverse ways. The more user-centric we make our approach, the more creative and innovative ideas we will be able to produce, and hence, the more inventions we will have. To cut it short, in the near future, I expect more enhancement to the already available services and devices for persons with disabilities regarding usability, ease of use, portability, and accuracy. Again, it is all about inclusive thinking and creativity rather than inventing new devices. This is clearly related to the two features of genres that you previously mentioned: rapid change and being shaped by values and cultures. Thus, the more humans consider diversity and inclusion in their genres, the more advanced and diverse our modes of communication will be.

Ahmed: But before we reach the end, let me ask you a question. We have been friends for almost five years now. Did your interactions with me influence your literacy practices?

Emad: Absolutely! And in many different ways. To a large extent, it depends on what I know about you and the modes available for communication between us. For example, when I first met you, I literally didn't know any means of communication that you were using, and I was ignorant about all of what you mentioned. At that time, I used to only call you on the phone when we would talk. After I learned about the screen reader, I started texting you. However, I never knew about alt text technology. So, I was too hesitant to send you a picture or a meme. Now, I send you almost anything I want in our texts, and sometimes I will accompany a meme with an audio voice note that describes the visual part of the meme. So, I always make sure to translate the parts that I assume might be missing due to a lack of modes of communication. And I think I am always growing in my literate activities and my consciousness about using different modes of communication and the reception of what I write.

Additionally, I think my writing and communication skills have naturally acquired a higher level of sensitivity to the diversity of my audience and the modes of communication I need to incorporate. For example, professionally, I produce many documents ranging from syllabi, assignment sheets, and course plans. My production of these genres has been largely influenced by my sensitivity to multimodal communication and the desire to be as inclusive as I can.

Thank you so much for this interview, Ahmed.

Ahmed: Thank you for interviewing me.

Emad's Conclusion

Now, let me take you back to the question that I asked at the beginning of this article. Looking back at the genres you wrote in the margins before you read this interview, do you think you would approach those genres any differently after reading this? How do you think multimodality can play a role in your future writing and the bodies you want to give access to? I understand that this is not an easy question to answer, but the answer to this question has the power to transform the world. In Devitt's words, "Those who want to make changes in the world need to make those changes against and especially through genres" (2021, p. 18). So, please use the margins of this page to think about how you can make changes in the world through the genres you produce.

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Ahmed Hamdy is a graduate researcher at the American University in Cairo where he got his Master's in political science. He is also interested in international development, policy analysis, and disability accommodation and inclusion. Ahmed has also written several policy and research papers concerned with diversity and inclusion of persons with disabilities.



Emad Hakim is a third-year PhD student and teaching assistant at Illinois State University and an instructor of English at Millikin University. He is interested in learning about and researching critical and transformative pedagogies in TESOL and writing studies. He likes nature, walking in green areas, and drinking tea while chatting with his friends and family. He also likes grilling so much!



Notes

