Tracing Multimodal Uptake:
A Conversation with Emily Capan and Brittany Larsen

In this *Grassroots Interview*, writing researchers Emily Capan and Brittany Larsen discuss the different modalities and tools involved in uptake, focusing on both Emily's zine project as well as uptake accompanying student projects.

Brittany: Hi everyone and welcome to our instructor uptake podcast. My name is Brittany Larsen, and I'm a second year PhD student in rhetoric and composition, as well as the data and research coordinator for the writing program. With me today is Emily Capan, and I will let her introduce herself.

Emily: Hi! My name is Emily Capan. I am a third year PhD student in rhetoric and composition and I teach primarily. English 145, but I've also taught English 101 and English 101.10.

Brittany: So this project is for us to get a chance to just talk about what instructors are doing for uptake in the classroom and also getting a chance to do a little uptake ourselves and talk about that process. To start, Emily, can you describe the project that you decided to do and just a little bit more about what your goals were for the project?

Emily: Yeah, so, for the project that I'm working on for the *Grassroots Journal* I decided to make a zine, which is a genre that I had worked with before in the past in Barbi Smyser-Fauble's visual rhetoric class, so I had a little practice doing it. I wanted to make another zine that kind of described one

P-CHAT: Our take on pedagogical cultural-historical activity theory is developed from the work of Paul Prior. In our program, we use P-CHAT to help us think about and study the complex genres that we encounter in the world.

aspect of P-CHAT, **ecology**, because I find that when I'm teaching, that that's one of the seven terms of P-CHAT that students don't always get a good grasp on right away, so I wanted to give a short, sweet introduction to that term that might help students in some way. And then, along with that, I also did an uptake document, which I call in my own classes an "Uptake Submission Note." So that's like a 1,000–1,500 word document that describes the hows and whys behind the decisions that were made in the project, and also gives that behind-the-scenes look at how the project came into being. But the uptake also discusses the **antecedent knowledge** about writing and composition that the students have going into the project, as well as their uptake from the project and the unit itself: what they learn during that unit that they applied to their project, or, what they learn about writing or communicating within that project. And then we focus on **transfer**; how students see themselves transferring the writing and communication skills they practiced during that project or during that unit to either the next unit in the class, another class, or to their future academic discipline or professional career. Anything like that.

Brittany: Yeah, so it sounds like it covers kind of a wide swath of what learning is in their projects, so that's really neat. To go along with that, what do you really value when you're reading your student's uptakes? You talked a little bit about the concepts, but once they've done what you've asked them to do, what do you look at and say, "Oh, this is really interesting or a valuable way of doing uptake in the project." What catches your eye?

Emily: Something that I write even in the prompt to my students about the uptake submission notes *is yes, it's great if you're able to make a really cool Instagram post, but do you understand the work that went behind it as far as the **multimodal composing** of that Instagram post? Do you understand how the visuals and the alphabetic text are coming together to promote a cohesive message, that more in depth look at that genre?* I also really value when students are able to give examples of things that they've learned, not just saying, "I learned about multimodality." Like, that's great, I love that you learned about multimodality, but how? Was it a certain reading or a certain discussion, or a certain activity that we did during the class that helped you understand this Writing Program term a little better for you? So that's something I really look

Multimodal Composing*:* *Multimodal Composing* specifically refers to ALL of the modes that humans can use to communicate that 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).

for. And then I guess just going in depth with things and doing more of a showing versus telling approach. Not just telling me that you learned a lot during this project, but how did you learn those things, why does it matter, how will it help you in your own writing identity and the projects you might work on in the future, and things like that.

Brittany: Yeah, and with multimodality, zines definitely fulfill that. I know you said you had some experience with making zines, but did you have any previous experience with writing the kind of uptake document you asking students to create?

Emily: No, and that was probably the most interesting part of doing this project because I've assigned uptake submission notes for a couple semesters now, and have read them from students, but I've never done that myself. And sitting down to do that was definitely a different experience for me because it is difficult to articulate what you learn from doing this project. I had to really think back for my antecedent knowledge section of my uptake notes I was like, "Alright, I knew about zines from this class", and it's like, "Alright then, well what exactly from that class do I remember from this class that I used then to make this," and so I had to think really deeply about that. I went back and I looked at what readings we did for that project in Barbi's class and I was like "Oh, that helps me a little bit." And then I was thinking, "Oh, how do I explain my learning process? That is hard to do." I'm always telling my students "Oh, be more in depth about things," and it is a difficult task, especially when you aren't used to articulating your learning process. And so, that was a very different experience for me just thinking about how I would articulate that for someone that isn't in my brain. I always say to students, "I'm not part of your learning process, I'm not a part of your writing process throughout these weeks, so you have to really clue me in to what happened and not just tell me step by step, *I did this, and then I did that and then I did that.*" And so I had to do the same thing where I really needed to show in my uptake notes and not just tell people, "Oh, this is how I did it, easy-peasy!" But I had to really explain that, so that was definitely different.

Brittany: Yeah, I agree, I think a lot of us assign these uptake genres and are just like, "Oh, just tell me everything, I want to know!" But I like when you said, "I'm not in your brain," because we're learning that we might not be in our own brains the same way, or at least the brain that made the project has progressed, and maybe that recall might not be as instantaneous as we expect it to be for students.

Emily: Yes, and with that I feel like while I was creating my zine there were a lot of subconscious things that were happening during project creation that I didn't really think about. Like when I was thinking about what color

pens to use for each page or things like that, when I was doing it I just moved on we'll say *intuition*. But then I went back and thought about it and I'm like, "Oh, well I used these colors, and every time I talked about ecology I used green because I wanted it to be a thematic link throughout the whole thing" and I was like "Oh, that's interesting; I didn't even think about that when I was doing it." But going back and actually studying what I'd done and bringing those subconscious activities to light—and being able to articulate them—I thought was really important, and interesting as well. Or even just the incubation process. I had the last panel of my zine and thought, "Oh, I don't know how to end this, like I don't know how to wrap this up." So I walked away, I did something else for a while and came back to it and was like "Oh, got it!" and I was able to finish the panel. But then talking about my incubation process and talking about how I was able to let those things sit in my head while I did other tasks, and then I was able to come back to it—taking that time is part of the writing process and we don't always think about it. The times that we're not actually working on a project and we're doing something else is part of the writing process, or at least it can be.

Brittany: Yeah, and you bring up in your answer a couple things that I've been thinking about wanting to ask students to get at more, which is the down time between actively working on the project, and also, the idea of tools. So we're thinking about pen color and why you're choosing those, or other tasks we don't always actively ask about, and a multimodal project like this is a good way of thinking about the project and making connections we might not instantly think of. This is especially true if we're used to working in more text-based modes. I think that's really interesting.

Emily: That's something else I was thinking about that I briefly touched on in my uptake notes, that the tools I used were the tools I already had around me, so I didn't necessarily go out and get something new. I had a lot of glitter gel pens, just from liking glitter gel pens and using them in my planner, and so that's what I decided to use for this zine. The tools and materials were things that I already had access to, which might be different from someone else who is making a zine who doesn't have glitter gel pens sitting next to them, so they might use different tools just based off of what they have around them at the time, so I thought that was interesting as well.

Brittany: Yes, that's extremely interesting. So, what were some of the things that were easy about doing the uptake memo, and what were some of the things that were more challenging about doing the uptake memo?

Emily: I think the easiest part was just talking about some of the hows and whys behind decisions that I made. Like "Oh, well I decided to use

the glitter pens because they were next to me and that's why I decided to use that tool," that was kind of an easy thing to do. But the hardest part for me, actually, was transfer. I always ask students, "How are you going to transfer these writing and communication skills to some other setting?" That was probably the hardest part because I was thinking maybe it's different if you're a younger student who's just getting into writing, but since I do a lot of writing day-to-day in my work and in my studenting, I was like "How am I going to use these multimodal skills somewhere else?" and so I really had to think about that. I always tell my students they can state how they'll use these skills in another class or even in their personal life. During this time I was thinking, "Would I ever make a zine again, and where would I make a zine?" Or if it was just about the multimodal aspects of thinking about panels, could I transfer the same skills about zines into a comic if I was going to write a comic about something? So that was the part where I really had to sit back and think, "How will I transfer these writing and communication skills somewhere else?" Because you don't always think about that while you're making one text, "What's the next thing you're going to do with this skill or this knowledge?"

Brittany: As someone else who asks students a lot about transfer and uptake and just expects them to do it without thinking through that, I think that's especially relevant for multimodal projects. Because I think all of us in academic spaces, and this goes for students as well, know "I will write another academic paper in my life," or rather that's something expected. But for multimodal projects, they might be thinking, "When will I make another zine?" or "When will I make another YouTube video?"—and they might not. And so, it's a different kind of abstract situation that I think we need to take into account when talking about multimodal uptake, especially.

Emily: Yeah, I agree. Because even if I don't ever make a zine again, I might put together panels or spatial rhetorics and visual rhetorics, and the visuals and the pictures and the alphabetic text work together to create a message. It might not be in the same genre, but I might use that same multimodal skill again.

Brittany: So when those ideas were harder to access, what kinds of questions did you ask yourself, or what kinds of things helped you make it easier to articulate or capture your uptake? What did you turn to in those moments when it was challenging?

Emily: Well, we'll stick with the idea of transfer. I was thinking, "OK, well what are some of the things I do in my everyday life that involve some kind of communication, whether that's in my teaching, in my studenting, or in my personal life?" Therefore, what kinds of genres am I creating; what kinds of

audiences am I talking to? So I tried to think about it in that way, "How can I apply this to different aspects of my life?" And then as far as the uptake, like what did I learn from doing this project, I tried to think about—it's harder to articulate this in speaking than in writing—the hows and whys of my decisions. I tried to think, "Did I learn anything from making these certain decisions?" Like, when I realized I used the green pen as a thematic tool, did I learn anything from recognizing that? And maybe in my next project I'll ask, "What kinds of thematic tools can I use to make my reader think about what I'm talking about?"

Brittany: I think that makes sense. I like the point you brought up about articulating in writing versus speaking, because I think that's another thing we're thinking about with uptake: how can we give students different options to articulate their uptake, and how does their uptake change using those different modes? So we're not only doing uptake on multimodal projects, but also, I think what we're trying to demonstrate through the podcast is, "What is it like to do uptake—multimodally?" So, I like that you brought that up.

Emily: Because it is very different, and I always give students the option with their uptake notes to do an audio version or a video version, and I always thought, "Oh, it's going to be the same thing." Even just from doing this right now, I'm like "Oh, it's definitely not the same thing," that's definitely a different kind of experience to talk about your uptake versus to write about your uptake, so even now I'm learning through this podcast.

Brittany: So, tied, to that, thinking about students and what you ask them to do, now that you've both done it yourself and even further, are talking about your uptake of your uptake, how do you think what you've done aligns with what you ask students to do? And if you were teaching yourself, how do you think you'd look at your uptake for this project?

Emily: My big takeaway from doing all of this is that in my prompt when I give students the "Here's what you should be doing" or "Here's what I'm looking for in the uptake submission notes," I think I need to be clearer about what I am looking for and that it is difficult. Also, maybe even some tips to start thinking through, not just, "And how would you transfer these skills to some other venue or situation?" but here's how to do that. Here's how to sit and think about how you would transfer these skills, and give, maybe not examples, but more elaboration about how you could even do that thing in the uptake submission notes.

Brittany: Yeah, that idea of how to frame things, prime students to do what we're asking them to do in uptake. Maybe sometimes we need to do it ourselves to even be able to articulate what we're looking for. I think that's

another thing we're thinking about; how do we even begin to explicitly say what we value and what we want for students because uptake can be this really nebulous thing.

Emily: And not acting like it's this easy thing to write, either, and acknowledging that if you've never articulated *how* and *why* you've learned things before, this is probably going to be difficult for you. We can be saying "Here are some things I learned from this experience" and I think that would be valuable in a prompt as well. Just to say, "Hey, I did this too, and here's what I learned from it," and I think that would be an interesting thing to add to the instructions and the prompt.

Brittany: Yeah, because what I'm thinking about with my own uptake assignments dovetails a lot with what you're doing in terms of thinking I was taking pressure off students by saying, "Oh, just write whatever you're doing, I'm not looking for a right answer." But you're right, that that can take time away from the writing, and students might not know where to start or even what that starting looks like, so some additional grounding could be important. To end things, we already talked a little bit about your takeaways in general about uptake and what questions you're asking. Do you have any specific takeaways for what this means for how to approach uptake specifically for multimodal projects, or do you notice a difference?

Emily: A difference between what?

Brittany: A difference between the kind of uptake you are expecting from more text-based projects and what you're asking for in multimodal projects. Or, were there any specific things you think instructors should look out for if they are assigning uptake for multimodal projects that they might not think of if they're assigning largely text-based projects?

Emily: So I think within any sort of a multimodal genre, understanding all of the different modes that are going into the text is important, as well as how the modes are all working together. Because sometimes you might be able to explain how you created a zine or an Instagram post, or a podcast or something like that, but when you're creating that Instagram post, are you able to articulate how the modes are different and how they've all come together? Rather than just seeing the post as one multimodal genre. What is the visual part of this project doing? What is the alphabetic text doing? How are the modes coming together to promote a certain kind of a message? So, I think that's a little different. If you're just creating something text-based, then you are just looking at one mode, such as looking at the alphabetic text and what you learned from doing that—and that's great. But thinking about multimodality, you're thinking about all the multiple modes and how they're
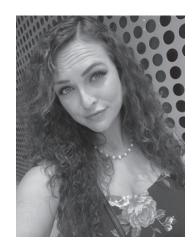
all coming together and working separately to create some sort of a message or purpose.

Brittany: Yeah, that sounds great! Well, thank you for being here today and talking to us about multimodal uptake. I think this is a really good start to a hopefully ongoing conversation about how we do the kinds of things we're asking students and teachers to do in our Writing Program, so thank you for all of your contributions and your time.

Emily: Yeah, and thank you for having me today!

Brittany: Of course! Have a great day everybody, and thanks for listening!

Emily Capan is a PhD student studying rhetoric and composition. Her research interests include multimodality, writing program administration and pedagogy, and risk and crisis communication. She loves all things pop cultural and fantastical, from *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* to witchcraft and astrology. You can usually find her hanging out with her dog, Clover, reading a book, and listening to dance music or Machine Gun Kelly.

Brittany Larsen is a PhD student studying rhetoric and composition. Her focus is on digital rhetoric, civic literacy, and writing program administration. When not working on academic things, she enjoys watching *Schitt's Creek*, *The Witcher*, and *Shadow and Bone.* She also enjoys listening to an inadvisable amount of Taylor Swift, hanging out with her cat, Oliver and playing Mario Kart.