

Review Essay: Multimodality in Local and Disciplinary Praxes

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Bowen, Tracey, and Carl Whithaus. *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013. Print. 356 pages.

Miller, Suzanne M., and Mary B. McVee. *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms: Learning and Teaching in the Digital World*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print. 161 pages.

Rowell, Jennifer. *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in a Digital Age*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Print. 173 pages.

The argument for multimodality's inclusion within composition studies, and to a more specific extent, the writing classroom, should at this point be settled. The conversation has, at the disciplinary level and in local practice, moved away from arguing for the inclusion of multimodal discourses within its curricula; composition, most now agree, should empower students to analyze and write with emergent technology, modes, and media. Writing Program Administrators now find themselves surrounded by suggestions and best practices for teaching, assessing, and sustaining this multimodal work. By turning the focus away from definition and to pedagogy, curriculum design, and assessment, local writing programs, including individual instructors, are able to develop their own contextually-based multimodal projects. For WPAs, it is a good moment to take stock of the current ways that key terms surrounding this concept are being defined and used in real contexts. The three books under review in this essay provide insights as to how multimodality is addressed in different contexts and at different points in the curriculum design process. While each book approaches the topic from a slightly different position, all are useful for WPAs and instructors looking to introduce and develop multimodal pedagogies.

A detailed study expanding the range of what multimodality can mean, Jennifer Rowsell's *Working with Multimodality: Rethinking Literacy in a Digital Age* is written for "policy-makers and educators to adopt these very same old and new traditions of practice to teach literacy and communication" (2). Each chapter focuses on a single mode, discussed through a set of interviews with professional writers, designers, and performers. Interviewees' stories reveal unique traits embedded within the composition process of the respective mode, and Rowsell situates these findings within the context of composition instruction, opening the discussion of how using these various modes helps students become better writers. This narrative thread, that reminds us of the interdisciplinary research of Ann E. Berthoff, provides the foundation on which to effectively build multimodal instruction, pedagogy, and curricula.

In the composition course, word, sound, visual, and even film modes are often combined in the creation of multimodal pastiche, but according to Rowsell, students need to learn the rhetorical strengths and limitations of each, an objective that can be more effectively met through isolated study. For instance, discrete studies of film and space help learners understand how lighting "impacts characterization and setting" (19). Similarly, learning to compose a videogame causes students to consider how players will "strategize, communicate, interpret context, solve problems, analyze characters, possess hand/eye coordination, have patience, understand semiotic tools, use their spatial sense" when engaged in the virtual environments (79). Modes of communication that predate contemporary composition instruction (or, for that matter, the written word), include movement, space, and textile, and according to Rowsell, employing these modes can have the added benefit of creating an entry point for discussions of access and multiple rhetorics.

Despite its brevity, *Working with Multimodality* is expansive and ambitious. Rowsell approaches the concept of multimodality by first taking the concept apart and then examining each component individually. This not only allows for fair and equal assessment across modes, it creates a space for the interviewed experts to discuss their work from their own disciplinary perspectives. The reader, in turn, becomes an active participant in the multimodal composing process, remixing the content of the book itself to fit the audience's context. While at times it does not read like a traditional academic text, *Working with Modality*, particularly with its suggestions for incorporating modality into the classroom, is very much a book for WPAs, instructors, and students.

Geared towards a primary audience of elementary and secondary educators, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms*, edited by Suzanne M. Miller

and Mary B. McVee, expands the extra-disciplinary conversation of multimodality to include multiple literacies. To that point, David L. Bruce reminds us that access to certain modes should not be mistaken for expertise of use, and as such, students need to be taught how to manipulate particular media in order to achieve desired rhetorical effects. To help mediate this concern, Nancy M. Bailey challenges reluctant and late-adapting teachers to “familiarize themselves with the kinds of new literacies that their students regularly utilize” (45). Further aligning student success with teacher preparedness, Mary B. McVee, Nancy M. Bailey, and Lynn E. Shanahan assert that increasingly, teachers of writing at all levels do so coming from this digital native generation, and like their students, “need a supportive and transformative learning environment within which to experiment and explore” (16).

The varied chapters reinforce the notion that creating an environment that allows students to draw on their lived experiences and knowledge, both technical and (pop)cultural, provides those students with real opportunities to “connect traditional forms of writing with their lived experiences” (77). Occasionally, sections are focused on how multimodality can be applied in K-12 contexts, but with modification these examples could also be valuable at post-secondary levels. In a move that is shared across the focuses of particular chapters, Miller and McVee’s advocacy of “[r]eading across school contexts, subject-matter, grade-level, and varied means of multimodal composing” in order to develop more refined understandings of the ways new literacies are taught and developed at elementary and secondary levels is evident (9). Without directly addressing the pedagogical concerns of post-secondary composition classrooms, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms* manages to provide serious insights into the ways meaning is made in pre-college writing contexts, information that remains valuable for WPAs.

While the first two books offer adaptable resources for WPAs, *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, edited by Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus, presents multimodal pedagogies and theories actively used in postsecondary writing programs. In Part I (Chapters 1–5), the complex expectations of multimodality have changed the roles of WPAs and instructors. Making the case for increased student autonomy, Cheryl Ball, Tina Scoffield Bowen, and Tyrell Brent Fenn discuss how self-directed multimodal assignments allow students to demonstrate technological literacies through transfer, while Erik Ellis notes that when students freely to compose across modes, they become emboldened to create “compelling multimedia essays that challenge and transcend conventional academic discourses” appropriate for their individualized rhetorical situations (38). Challenging the overreliance on emergent (and often expensive) technol-

ogy, Jody Shipka aligns with Rowsell to critique the problematic trend of characterizing multimodality as exclusively digitized. Susan Katz and Lee O'Dell discuss how the oral presentation—a staple assignment across disciplines at the postsecondary level—functions as a profoundly rhetorical event. Jemore Bump moves even further outside the composition classroom to interrogate the ethical and legal concerns that emerge as students compose across networked, digital environments.

Part II (Chapters 6–9) oscillates between practice and theory to discuss the unique challenges faced by instructors developing multimodal pedagogies. Nathaniel I. Cordova encourages teachers to craft assignments that allow students to embrace literacy as a function of democratic performance, while Julia Romberger argues that the recent revaluing of socially constructed knowledge is in fact an updated variation of the ancient canon of memory. Taken together, these perspectives provide opportunities for open discussion of and inquiry into what counts as usable knowledge, while also affording students the intellectual freedom to make decisions based on their own defined rhetorical situations. Penny Kinnear explains that multimodality allows students to invoke a particular type of audience awareness that cannot easily be developed without a firm understanding of the rhetorical situation and how it is manifest through multimodality. Similarly, Donna Reiss and Art Young show how intellectual autonomy helps foster an environment that “increases [students’] motivation to learn and to communicate” (165–166). These moves fortify the idea that multimodal pedagogy should support students’ development as rhetorical agents.

Part III (Chapters 10–13) sees the discussion expand to consider how WPAs use multimodality to reshape entire programs. Providing a strong philosophical foundation, Tarez Samra Graban, Colin Charlton, and Jonikka Charlton present mutivalence as a way “to theorize writing and teaching in terms of the multiple charges we face instead of in terms of an expertise we hope to achieve” (250). Mary Leigh Morbey and Carolyn Steele establish multimodality as the frame through which students (and increasingly, instructors) interpret the world, while Chanon Adsanatham, et al. explore larger, institutional changes that would make the adoption of multimodal curricula more viable and effective. Finally, serving as an unofficial coda to the entire collection, Traci Fordham and Hillory Oakes define multimodality as inextricable from the study of rhetoric. With its usable assignment frameworks based on accessible theories, WPAs will be able to approach the many concepts presented in *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* the same way the chapters’ authors expect their students to approach multimodal assignments: not as products to be consumed and

analyzed, but as tools for repurposing and applying to their own specific contexts.

A unifying thread running across *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms*, *Working with Multimodality and Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* is the emphasis on autonomy of the student, instructor, and administrator. In the multimodal classroom, the instructor's role becomes one of a facilitator and enabler, introducing students to different discursive genres, inviting them to bring in their own discourses into the classroom, and then pushing them to distribute their products in public realms.

Multimodality's student-centeredness emphasizes the transfer of skills, a concept that rests on the assumption that skills developed in one situation will lead to the awareness of similar expertise when applied in other contexts. However, there remains an absence of convincing evidence demonstrating exactly *if*, *how*, and *why* this transfer takes place. Subsequent scholarship into the areas of transfer will need to include verifiable evidence culled from reproducible experiments in order to effectively and convincingly demonstrate the viability of transfer for students working across multimodal genres.

With local contexts and individual assignments presented as accessible and transferable, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms*, *Working with Multimodality and Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, have much to offer writing program administrators and instructors. Rather than positioning these books as narrative collections or as summations of completed sets of work, a more useful approach would be to envision the current generation of multimodal scholarship as pedagogical resources. This modified way of seeing multimodality appropriates the theoretical foundations that contemporary praxis is built on, while also honoring the actual experiences of the students and instructors doing these new kinds of composition work.

