The Multimodal Turn in Higher Education
On Teaching, Assessing, Valuing Multiliteracies

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres.
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Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres aims to address the critical role of pedagogy and scholarship in shaping the way academia values multimodality across a variety of disciplines. The history, theory, and pedagogy of multimodality are neatly woven together in this collection, making it useful for graduate students training to become teachers and faculty teaching first-year composition, as well as department chairs, deans, and any other administrators involved in determining the future transdisciplinary role of multimodality at their institutions.

The collection is a continuation of the ongoing discourse surrounding multimodal pedagogy that began nearly two decades ago with the findings of the New London Group (1996), which helped to define multimodal composition. They identified a need for recognizing and adapting pedagogical strategies to address “multiliteracies.” The New London Group’s vision for the “social futures” of our students at that time included “using the school as a site for mass media access and learning; reclaiming the public space of school citizenship for diverse communities and discourses; and creating
communities of learners that are diverse and respectful of the autonomy of lifeworlds” (1996: 72–73).

The work of the New London Group, which continued in 2000, also led to an NCTE position statement on multimodal literacies in 2005. In the “Declarations concerning the Broadest Definitions of Multimodal Literacies” section of “Broadest Definitions of Multimodal Literacies,” the National Council of Teachers of English characterized multimodality as “the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to produce” (NCTE Executive Committee 2013 [2005]: 17).

Modern compositionists (Anne Wysocki, Kristin Arola, Cheryl Ball, Cynthia Selfe, Mary Hocks, Jeffrey Grabill, Michelle Simmons, and Jody Shipka) have focused a significant amount of their scholarship on the role of multimodality as a means to more effectively communicate ideas and engage readers. Many of these pioneers of multimodality are cited throughout the articles in Multimodal Literacies, making it a work grounded in both theory and practice. The editors have arranged the collection into three parts: “Multimodal Pedagogies That Inspire Hybrid Genres,” “Multimodal Literacies and Pedagogical Choices,” and “The Changing Structure of Composition Programs.”

The first five chapters of the book focus on hybridity in composition. The contributors all assert that the best approach to incorporating multimodal composition into course design is as an accompaniment to the traditional, paper-based essay, not a replacement. Many echo the sentiment of other pedagogues (Dewey 1916; Friere 2010 [1970]; Deans 2003) who believe in the critical role of reflection as part of meaning making. To reflect is to learn from experience, as “no experience having meaning is possible without some element of thought” (Dewey 1916). In the case of multimodal projects, the abilities to make relevant connections (i.e., learn from experience) and to reflect on a topic with depth and creativity are essential in successful multimodal composition. With traditional, text-based composition, students must compose with the reader in mind. Visual artists and musicians must compose with the audience and the medium in mind. Multimodal composition requires attention to these and a great many more details beyond voice, organization, and audience, although those certainly are still critical considerations. In fact, failure to approach multimodality in such a reflective way leads, too often, to projects that fall flat.

In chapter 1, Cheryl Ball and two of her undergraduate students outline successes and pitfalls of multimodal projects in an upper-division English
course. Ball had her students storyboard a short, student-produced film to illustrate how it naturally fit the five-paragraph essay format. As a result of overly prescribing the assignment—and setting too many expectations—Ball experienced a series of disappointments, including a failed teacher observation and the “wowlessness” (26) in student final projects that results from teaching the formula. The highly stylized, overly formulaic composition is something many teachers of multimodal projects have experienced without really understanding why.

Erik Ellis discusses the risk of disappointing multimodal student projects in the following chapter. Without proper attention to “intellectual exploration” (41), he argues, students will simply apply conventions of the traditional essay to multimedia and produce what Cheryl Ball refers to as the “five-paragraph video” (31). Ellis points out that students who “have the freedom to explore their original ideas” (50) and design multimedia projects around “all, or nearly all, original material” (63) tend to have the greatest success. However, this kind of exploration can be intimidating to some students, particularly considering the difficulty more grade-conscious students might have in understanding how they will be assessed on nontraditional composition. This is an anxiety shared among faculty, as well, many choosing to opt out of multimodal pedagogy because they are unsure how to objectively assess such student work. To address these anxieties, Ellis includes a sample rubric for assessing the multimodal essay. Teachers considering implementing a new multimedia project in their courses will find Ellis’s rubric extremely helpful in designing their own, particularly the tips that are offered in the “Comments and Suggestions” section.

In chapter 3, Jody Shipka challenges the motivations behind teaching multimodal composition as simply a digital exercise to replace print. She likens her goals to those of Anne Wysocki, wanting her students to study process and choice in their construction of any composition and hoping they leave her courses with “a more nuanced awareness” of such choices, the result of which—whether print or digital—can be hailed as a “multimodal accomplishment” (76). Specifically, she gives students tasks that are “largely communication problems that need to be solved” (78) and challenges them to engage in critical and creative problem solving. Using as a guide the “rhetorically sensitive individual,” identified by communications professors Roderick Hart and Don Burks as one who “understands that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways” (qtd. on 78), Shipka argues that the open-ended, flexible “metacommunicative aspects of the framework” (80) foster real-world problem-solving skills that result in an ability to compose with end goals in mind.
Shipka’s chapter also addresses the concept of writing in the world that practitioners of civic engagement and service learning advocate. She argues that “multimodality is not some special feature of certain texts, objects, or performances, but a ‘routine dimension of language in use,’” echoing Paul Prior (qtd. on 74). Many compositionists have come to understand the term “multimodality” as synonymous with “multimedia” or “digital,” an idea Shipka warns against. She writes that “we have allowed ourselves to trade in one bundle of texts and techniques for another: pro-verbal becomes pro-digital” (74) and argues that we should “resist equating multimodality with digitally based or screen-mediated texts” (76).

In fact, in an oft-cited essay “Opening New Media to Writing,” Anne Wysocki (2004) expressly reminds us that “new media texts do not have to be digital,” that “any text that has been designed so that its materiality is not effaced can count as new media” (15). The same can be said for multimodality. A multimodal composition can be a poster board with words and images on it (alphabetical and visual), an oral presentation with signs or handouts on display during the presentation (aural, alphabetical, and visual), or an argument made with song lyrics and images (aural and visual). It can be created and delivered entirely sans digital technology. Or it could be crafted using digital technology exclusively, as a digital video, a website or blog, an interactive video game, or a voice-over PowerPoint. What qualifies a composition as multimodal is simply that it appeals to more than one type of literacy. This distinction is particularly important for the teachers who are reticent to make digital technology such an integral part of their composition courses.

Nathaniel Cordova opens the second part of this collection, “Multimodal Literacies and Pedagogical Choices,” with a reimagining of technology in terms of the Greek concept of “techne” as “creative bringing forth” (49). He also examines ethos, not in the Aristotelian ethical sense but as dwelling place. This paradigm shift perceives technology used in multimodal compositions as having a symbiotic relationship with the words and ideas traditionally housed in alphabetical literacy spaces. This is an important piece, as it addresses how to forge a common ground between the alphabetical literacies and the newer, digital ones.

Also in this section, Donna Reiss and Art Young (“Multimodal Composing, Appropriation, Remediation, and Reflection: Writing, Literature, and Media”) and Penny Kinnear (“Writing, Visualizing, and Research Reports”) acknowledge that English teachers cannot teach print or digital literacy exclusively and expect students to find academic or relevant personal value in it. Faculty “teaching” multimodality consistently link the suc-
cess their students experience to times when traditional topics are left open for multimodal treatment. Like others in the collection, Kinnear requires an academic (traditional, paper-based essay) and alternative (multimedia/multimodal project) deliverable, but she encourages students to decide for themselves how best to present their ideas in the alternative assignment. The open-ended nature of the multimodal portion provides students with a variety of options that drive them to write with purpose and also use material that best mediates information for their intended audience (189), a goal shared by all compositionists.

Ultimately, Kinnear addresses a concern that many of her fellow contributors allude to, and one that becomes a prevailing theme in the collection: the idea that academia clearly privileges plain, alphabetical text. This privileging serves as a significant obstacle to student success, inhibiting their willingness to invest fully in multimodality and “hypermodality” when their grade depends on it (Lemke, qtd. on 200).

Also consistent throughout the pedagogical discussions in part 2 is the acknowledgment that teaching multimodal composition is a time-consuming endeavor with no guarantees of success. In fact, in many ways, the collection exposes how much more scholarship is needed in the development of a multimodal pedagogy. Nevertheless, as all contributors argue, we must teach our students to write in the world, and in the age of social media, social networking, and new media, with students who have fully integrated technology into their daily lives, the responsibility to help them find and create meaning in that digital realm rests with educators. These scholars also seem to adopt the findings of the New London Group (1996: 81), designing lessons and assignments around the idea that “all meaning-making is multimodal. . . . All written text is also visually designed. . . . Texts are designed using the range of historically available choices among different modes of meaning.”

The third section of the book addresses the challenges of incorporating multimodality and hypermodality into the classroom and the curriculum. The four collaboratively written essays effectively tell the tale of the roadblocks and obstacles that academic (not exclusively English) departments are facing. More than just identifying the problems, however, these authors offer solutions.

Mary Leigh Morbey and Carolyn Steele note in their chapter that the research in multimodal literacy is still in its infancy, with very little pertaining to higher education. They highlight the need for not just application of multimodality but mastery of this “epistemological hybrid” (231). Achieving such mastery in higher education will require reductions in the cost of technology,
an increase in university funding for experimental programs (and faculty and students willing to participate), a willingness to provide faculty with new pedagogical materials (rooted in ongoing and innovative scholarship), and a cultural shift that does not privilege alphabetical literacies (242–43). Morbey and Steele argue that through development of “learning environments that cross disciplinary boundaries and develop metamodal mastery, the potential for transformative learning is promising” (241).

But before we can expect our students to find success in this new genre of composing, we must first help them understand elements of successful multimodal writing. Emerging fields such as digital, visual, and sonic rhetoric can help increase multimodal literacy. In fact, many instructors already include some measure of instruction on digital presentation design and layout (that is, the dos and don’ts of PowerPoint and Prezi presentations) in their classes. Still, not nearly enough of us discuss design elements of effective public service announcements, say, or the impact of sound in a commercial. Before we invite—or require—our students to compose multimodally, we must provide them with the concepts and tools of this emerging genre.

Tarez Graban, Colin Charlton, and Jonikka Charlton’s essay, “Multivalent Composition and the Reinvention of Expertise,” addresses mentoring new teachers on the use of digital tools. They recognize that we need new ways of thinking so we don’t just apply old practices to new tools. They also note that our students often choose a mode of delivery for the wrong reasons, “either refusing to do anything other than an essay because of fear, or choosing the ‘alternative’ assignment because, for them, it’s familiar and a way to avoid too much work and thought” (258). The same can be said of teachers who are fearful of helping students navigate their way to success on a new type of project, one they have limited experience assessing.

However, Graban, Charlton, and Charlton work to reassure reluctant participants in teaching multimodality that they should focus on encouraging “rhetorical experimentation” (260) so students will be “full participants in the work” (260) they are doing. When the authors assigned a multimodal project in a first-year composition class at Purdue University that asked students to think beyond a traditional paper-based essay, they discovered a whole host of “how” questions arising, questions that were often challenging for both students and teachers to answer. They also point out that encouraging this sort of experimentation requires that teachers suspend “the notion and reward of being ‘expert’” in order to “expand our range as writing teachers by enacting questions of critical pedagogy and epistemology” (261). Through this suspension of the notion of expertise, students and teachers
The collaborators in the final two essays, “Going Multimodal: Programmatic, Curricular, and Classroom Change” (Adsanatham et al.) and “Rhetoric across Modes, Rhetoric across Campus: Faculty and Students Building a Multimodal Curriculum” (Tracy Fordham and Hillary Oakes) discuss initiatives at their respective universities that aimed to resolve the disconnect between how faculty had been teaching multimodality and the relative support administrators gave those activities. These authors discuss professional development sessions held at Miami University and St. Lawrence University, respectively, that were designed to help faculty more successfully implement multimodal pedagogies. This type of professional development is essential for the future success of multimodality on college campuses and, as argued by Adsanatham et al., should focus on “developing a solid base of self-reflective, multimodal teaching habits” (288).

Multimodal composition, because of its very real-world nature, is an ideal method to critically engage our students in learning. Fordham and Oakes make a case for the role of multimodal accomplishment as “central to citizenship in a plural, global society” (315). Citing other scholars who have argued in favor of teaching multimodal composition, they acknowledge the value in teaching multimodal literacies in order to fulfill our responsibility of preparing students for success in the world.

Faculty who subscribe to experiential learning models—who teach civic engagement, social/political activism, community-based writing, or technical or professional writing—and who want to harness the power of new/digital/social media will be comfortable with the pedagogy of multimodal composition outlined in Multimodal Literacies.

The contributors to this volume frequently reference other essays in the collection, making it read like a collaborative piece of scholarship, instead of a topical collection of articles from a variety of scholars, demonstrating a shared concern for the future of multimodal pedagogy. Multimodal Literacies is the newest contribution to this nascent pedagogy, and its publication is acknowledgment of the challenges facing adopters of multimodality. This body of work is a necessary contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding how to best teach students to put their ideas out into the world. It is as much a discussion of administrative and faculty successes and failures as it is of students’.

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres presents several common themes regarding what works, and what doesn’t, as well as obstacles to our
success in teaching multimodal composition. Practitioners of multimodal pedagogy will find reassurance in the challenges and shortcomings others have experienced teaching this new, mostly digital literacy. Likewise, those currently weighing the role multimodal literacy should have in the classroom will find a strong case for its inherent value and techniques for its successful integration with current pedagogy.

Works Cited


