

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres, edited by Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013. 356 pp.

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As demands for technological literacy heighten, multimodality and genre have become some of the most fruitful—and fraught—concepts in composition studies. Seminal works by Gunther Kress, Anne Frances Wysocki, and the New London Group have helped teacher-scholars reconceptualize how composition is done, but much remains for both theory and practice. In terms of theory, technologies have opened new communicative possibilities, enabling and constraining new, hybridized genres that can challenge the literacy traditions of the academy. As a result, practical questions of how to implement theories of genre and multimodality, various as they are, can be tricky for students, teachers, and writing program administrators alike.

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres, a collection edited by Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus, responds to this urgency, mapping how thirty composition teacher-scholars and students have responded to evolving literacies. To that end, part one (chapters one through five) emphasizes students' experiences, part two (chapters six through nine) turns to pedagogy, and part three (chapters ten through thirteen) discusses implications for writing programs. Although each of these chapters, in isolation, provides helpful insights, the book is especially useful when considered as a whole.

In the introduction, Bowen and Whithaus devote particular attention to genre, an arguably more contested site than multimodality. Specifically, they theorize genre in composition studies as falling between two poles. One views genre as relatively fixed and context invariant, as in Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics. The other, exemplified by Bakhtin's theories of semiotics, emphasizes generic fluidity and contextual variability. Except for perhaps Nathaniel Córdova, the book's contributors all stake genre in the rich middle ground between the two poles, which allows for a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives.

Within those perspectives, the contributors detail an impressive range of multimodal composition assignments, including ethnographies of various kinds, audio projects, PowerPoint presentations, constructions in virtual worlds, analyses of digital discourse communities, original paintings, posters, and T-shirts. This diversity in assignments, added to the book's diversity in theory, helps illuminate the benefits and challenges of multimodal, emerging genre pedagogies on several instructional levels. As a composition instructor, former student, and, briefly, program administrator, I thought this illumination across

authorial voices was one of the book's most significant features. The book's internal referencing seems to encourage this kind of cross-chapter reading.

One possible benefit of teaching multimodality and emerging genres is student creativity and imagination. Erik Ellis, for instance, taught an assignment sequence in an upper-division writing course that leads to a multimedia essay. Like other composition assignments, especially those with a technological component, the multimedia essay requires careful scaffolding; so Ellis asked students to first complete the following exercises: a vivid description of a place, a summary and dramatic scene, a letter to a friend, and an account of evidence. These exercises guide students to develop a traditional essay in which they explore an original idea through an interesting viewpoint. Students then adapt their traditional essay for a DVD lasting no more than five minutes, creating the multimedia essay. One student, Katya, produced a DVD about her breakdancing passion, showing "a deeper, more visceral understanding of her experience and ideas" (58). Her essay is structured "so that it cleverly mirrors, in both image and sound, her cultural metamorphosis from a powerless and insecure insider for whom breakdancing was initially 'beautiful, intimidating, and extremely foreign' to a conflicted yet confident insider" (59–60). Another student, Merced, designed strategic blackouts, camera close-ups, and an emotional voiceover in his multimedia essay about walking for hours during a West Point training session. The multimodal assignment, Ellis notes, had allowed students to exercise their creativity and imagination while, at the same time, deepening their rhetorical savvy and increasing the relevance of the writing course.

Book contributors besides Ellis report similar benefits. Collectively, they argue that multimodal assignments can enhance student abilities to argue visually, synthesize multiple positions, and use information ethically; compose for diverse, even global audiences; peer review and revise; and collaborate across national borders. For teacher-scholars and writing program administrators, multimodality and emerging genres can foster a reimagining of the rhetorical canons, partially fulfill the disciplinary obligation to accurately describe human communication, and maintain the applicability of composition curricula.

Since multimodality and emerging genres typically involve communication technologies, such assignments require some degree of technical know-how. Students and instructors, consequently, may face anxiety, doubts, and other frustrations as they learn new devices, plug-ins, platforms, and productions. In fact, during a focus group discussing a multimodal assignment they completed in the virtual world *Second Life*, students were asked to write their reactions on notecards. Among those reactions were "HELP," "Grrr," "HELL," "BLEH," "Anger," "NIGHTMARE," "stress," and "HOW DO I DO IT??" (130). Likewise, fifty-three percent of the students reported not "really" enjoying the *Second*

Life assignment, owing, perhaps, to the steep learning curve and maintenance problems (129–30). The contributors show that even if students do enjoy a multimodal assignment, they might question its value, struggle to transfer the skills they acquired, or avoid creative risks, especially in introductory courses.

Complicating matters further, composition assignments that involve multimodality and emerging genres can be challenging to evaluate or lack institutional capital. Institutional capital is key for developing multimodal writing programs, which must prepare and support instructors, develop curricula, secure administrative resources, and conduct regular, program-wide assessments. Chapter twelve describes these considerable tasks in depth, discussing how the composition program at Miami University instituted classroom, curricular, and programmatic changes, resulting in the ongoing Digital Writing Collaborative. Chapter thirteen offers another programmatic perspective, describing the efforts of St. Lawrence University faculty members to update rhetorical pedagogies there, culminating in the Rhetoric and Communication Institute for faculty development. Both chapters illustrate the necessity of adequate funding and administrative support, as well as “a critical conceptual shift regarding teaching and learning” (324). None of these tasks are easily accomplished, and writing program administrators seeking to establish multimodal, emerging genre pedagogies can potentially glean much from the detailed experiences of St. Lawrence and Miami.

Such benefits and challenges, cutting across chapters, illustrate the variety, candor, and high relief of *Multiliteracies and Emerging Genres*, which helpfully blends theory with practice on multiple levels. For these reasons alone, the book makes an important contribution to composition studies. Of course, the editors did not intend to be comprehensive, and readers might be left with numerous questions that merit additional inquiry. One question might be the responsibility of composition instructors in teaching technological literacies. In the introduction, Bowen and Whithaus claim that “[o]ur job is neither to lead [students] into this changing world of multimodality nor to hold them back from it” (5), suggesting that teacher-scholars can occupy a position of neutrality. The succeeding chapters, however, do not always support this claim, even implying that such neutrality is impossible. Thus, the book is best read as an open-ended dialogue, not as a single, cohesive treatise.

A second question might be how multimodality and emerging genres have been theorized and applied in graduate courses, courses outside the U.S., and other second-language composition courses. Chapter seven does hint in these directions, explaining a collaboration between a Swedish PhD course entitled “Fiction for Engineers,” a U.S. master’s course in Victorian poetry, and a U.S. sophomore survey course of American literature. Yet, given the expanding interest in translingual writing, the needs of composition students

from diverse heritages, and the cultural values embedded in communications technologies, a wider range of composition courses might have strengthened the book. So, too, might have more sustained discussions of surveillance, privacy, access, mediation, agency, and other pressing issues that attend the uses of digital technologies. These, however, might fall beyond the book's scope, and despite its few shortcomings, I think Bowen and Whithaus have created an approachable, well-conceived resource on some of the most generative concepts in composition studies.

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