

Book Reviews

Multimodality in Composition, Rhetoric, and English Studies: Praxis and Practicalities

Cultivating Ecologies for Digital Media Work, by Catherine C. Braun. Carbondale: SIUP, 2014. 224 pp.

Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook, edited by Claire Lutkewitte. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014. 548 pp.

Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy, by Jason Palmeri. Carbondale: SIUP, 2014. 194 pp.

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As the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) at my institution, I found Jason Palmeri's *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*, Catherine C. Braun's *Cultivating Ecologies for Digital Media Work*, and Claire Lutkewitte's edited collection *Multimodal Composition* extremely useful. These authors make visible the long history of composition scholars using multimedia technologies (even prior to the "digital turn"), provoke broad pedagogical questions including assignment design and assessment practices, and explore technological ecologies and sustainable environments. Lutkewitte, in particular, serves as a useful primer for instructors unfamiliar with multimodal composition. Building on the work of Victor Villanueva and Geoffrey Sirc, who are not normally cited by multimodal scholars, Lutkewitte points to the argument that "multimodal composition allows for many voices—even those new, marginalized, or unpopular voices—to be heard" (5). She argues that this is evidenced not only in traditional scholarship but also in the kinds of texts and examples shared by the authors in her collection.

We live in a digital age, one that provides access to a multiplicity of voices. How then can we best cultivate supports for working with, teaching with, and researching digital media, digital scholarship, and multimodal composition that create access to potentially unheard voices at department, college, and university levels? Though these authors do a convincing job arguing that issues of multimodal composition and digital media work are relevant and pressing for composition scholars, and for English studies as a whole, WAC scholars will also benefit from reading these books because they touch on deeply relevant issues to cross-curricular and university-wide writing and reading practices.

Braun, Lutkewitte, and Palmeri write at an opportune moment in digital and multimodal literacy studies, which, while still a relatively young area of research, calls on a well-rooted intellectual tradition. The list of scholars engaging in pedagogical questions about the possibilities of the digital is extensive and growing (Folk; McKee and DeVoss; Szabady, Fodrey, and Del Russo), and yet as Braun and Palmeri each convincingly argue, digital content is still undervalued, feared, and ignored by more traditional, or “print-centric” departments.

Catherine Braun’s *Cultivating Ecologies* is a book that should be on the shelves of every department chair in English studies because of the ways that it cogently examines how the digital influences department life. She gives an in depth study of three departments: the “print-centric department,” the “parallel cultures department,” and the “integrated literacies department” (22). In profiling each department, Braun provides a series of tables based on her research that could lead a department struggling with the place of digital media through a series of heuristic activities focused on digital media and teaching, digital media and departmental culture, and the potential value of digital media research and digital scholarship. Her heuristic tables are comprehensive, and the questions grow, shift, and become more complex as the discussion of each department profile points to a series of issues surrounding digital media scholarship in the humanities. As she argues, “[d]igital media work often emerges as a solution to the problem or as an efficiency that is problematic, when it can better be conceived as a site to reconceptualize the work of scholarship and teaching” (5). In order to launch her reconceptualization, she outlines three “big questions” about the definition of text and how we read and write (9), which she argues lay the groundwork for digital media teaching and scholarship. Braun introduces a matrix that plots these questions against the different contexts in which digital media work can occur and uses the profiles of the three departments to explore the technological ecologies for digital media. Her use of “ecology” comes from the introduction to *Technological Ecologies and Sustainability* edited by Dànielle DeVoss, Heidi McKee, and Dickie Selfe. They use the concepts of ecology and sustainability to argue that “richly textured technological environments” enhance teaching and learning (1). However, instead of focusing just on composition programs or writing studies departments, Braun extends her analysis to English studies as a discipline. Her focus on the larger discipline is particularly useful for those of us who may work in comp/rhet programs that are part of an English department offering multiple undergraduate and/or graduate degrees.

Braun cites the work of Meredith Graupner, Lee Nickoson-Massey, and Kristine Blair, who conclude in “Remediating Knowledge-Making Spaces in Graduate Curriculum: Developing and Sustaining Multimodal Teaching and Research” that “reciprocal mentoring, particularly involving both graduate

students and faculty” (147) can foster developing technological ecologies and further professional development in digital media teaching and research. Braun argues that reciprocal mentoring and “rough spaces” for experimentation and learning-by-doing activities can promote a safe space for those faculty members who may feel ill equipped to mentor students in digital media work (147). The rough spaces not only promote a community culture, but also allow for professionalization activities that can be hugely beneficial for graduate students and faculty members. Braun’s book provides an entry point for faculty who assert that, because they were not trained in multimodal and digital practices, they do not feel comfortable engaging in them. The ability to work in a rough space, to foster ecologies and promote reciprocal mentoring, is key to her argument and compelling for departments that do not have faculty trained in digital media. A rough space can do what I would argue is the work of the academy: create conditions for continual learning through reflexive praxis.

For those faculty members and graduate students looking for more than learning-by-doing activities, however, Claire Lutkewitte’s *Multimodal Composition* sourcebook proves an invaluable tool. Learning-by-doing activities such as those outlined in the sourcebook are of particular use to faculty teaching in WAC programs because they emphasize tools through which a variety of content can be taught. Learning-by-doing allows instructors who may not be writing experts to begin incorporating writing activities to promote content learning. Although Lutkewitte’s collection is focused on the composition classroom, and populated with authors who do cutting edge scholarship in multimodal and digital media scholarship, I believe that it is a useful text for departments that house a variety of diverse subdisciplines including literature, rhetoric and composition, linguistics, and creative writing. The first chapter of the collection, the National Council of Teachers of English position statement on multimodal literacies, includes a section on building a sustainable environment for multimodal composition that intersects new media pedagogies with diverse institutional environments. It is an excellent starting place for anyone who wants to learn more about the practicalities of design, assignment activities for the classroom, assessment models for evaluating multimodal writing, and the dynamics of multilingual and multimodal frameworks. It is clear, however, that like Braun, Lutkewitte feels pressed to justify why multimodalities in composition matter. She includes a chapter from Claire Lauer who contends with the terms “multimodal” and “multimedia” in both the academic and public spheres (22), and a chapter on the value of new media scholarship by Cheryl E. Ball (163). Lutkewitte argues that her sourcebook attempts to address questions and interrogate answers such as what we should call multimodal composition, exploring the integration of projects in courses, and the implications of multimodal scholarship (1). These basic questions seem, after reading Braun and

Palmeri, to have obvious answers. However, for the broader interdisciplinary community, and for scholars unfamiliar with Braun and Palmeri's work, the questions remain significant because of the entrenched resistance to multimodal scholarship that each author confronts. In Lutkewitte's introduction she summarizes resistance to engaging in such work, making her collection important for scholars who may resist incorporating multimodal pedagogies in their classrooms or as they train TAs. She draws on Jody Shipka's *Toward a Composition Made Whole* to argue that "recognizing the multimodal practices and behaviors that take place throughout the entire composing process" can encourage students to experiment in a way that "broadens their understanding of what effective communication entails" (Lutkewitte 3). Lutkewitte ends her introduction to the sourcebook by arguing that the selected chapters represent a diversity of theories and pedagogies because depending on a singular "Theory or a Pedagogy can be dangerous" (8).

Instructors in multidisciplinary WAC programs are, frequently, new faculty who are assigned writing intensive courses, some without experience teaching writing. If composition scholars, as Lutkewitte suggests, find the prospect of building a unitary multimodal theory or pedagogy dangerous, it may well seem impossible to newcomers from different fields. However, Lutkewitte's selections, and the multiple entry points the theories and pedagogies provide, complement the work done by WAC scholars. In other words, instructors in other fields who already teach with technology will likely find common ground with multimodal composition pedagogies. In addition to emphasizing the multiple possible approaches to multimodal composition, Lutkewitte also briefly foregrounds what Palmeri does a masterful job of arguing: that there is a long history of multimodal writing pedagogy in composition.

Palmeri's *Remixing Composition* draws attention not only to this evolution, but also to the classic texts of composition theory from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in order to examine how compositionists respond to new mediums. Palmeri traces the use of multimedia technologies in teaching composition before the personal computer and the graphic Web. For those interested in contending with Braun's print-centric departments that claim technology and multimodality as something new, Palmeri's work provides a rejoinder. Palmeri's argument is powerful and evocative because he revisits the core theories of process pedagogy in order to examine what is arguably the foundational (and often taken for granted) pedagogy of our field. He looks at what he calls three core tracks and how they engage the forgotten multimodal aspects of the process movement.

Palmeri uses what he refers to as an associative remix, drawing on Joseph Harris's *A Teaching Subject* and Lisa Ede's *Situating Composition* to create a useable past that productively acknowledges but also expands the use of ac-

cepted teaching paradigms in relation to multimodal texts. In revisiting the work of such foundational scholars as Janet Emig, Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, Nancy Sommers, and Ann Berthoff, Palmeri provides a series of three “macrotheoretical principles—that can potentially help us reimagine what it means to study and teach composing in the contemporary digital moment” (44). From the first page of the introduction he re-sees and retells the history of composition, challenging recent announcements of a “multimodal turn” in the midst of “tectonic change” (Yancey 298). Palmeri explains that though the multimodal progress narrative can be useful, it can also conceal a dynamic multimodal past in our field (5). So as to avoid the progress tale, and craft a richer and historically informed text, Palmeri sets up his book as a reclamation project of sorts, hoping to show that compositionists in the ‘60s, ‘70s, and ‘80s “studied and taught alphabetic writing as an embodied multimodal process that shares affinities with other forms of composing (visual, aural, spatial, gestural)” (5). It is the invisibility of the past that Palmeri seeks to make seen—and in some cases heard, as there is a rich set of resources from multimedia textbooks in the early 1970s.

His purpose and aims for the book are threefold: (1) to demonstrate compositionists’ unique expertise in multimodality, (2) to discuss the ways in which students can benefit from multimodal composing, and (3) to critique the fear that accompanies new technologies in the field (6). Palmeri accomplishes these ambitious goals. The first and third goals seem to speak in the most explicit terms to the calls for action in Braun and Lutkewitte’s books. Palmeri does a convincing job of demonstrating the ways in which compositionists (and therefore, in some ways, scholars in English studies) are qualified to work in multiple modes and across digital media. He also outlines the reciprocal nature of our relationship to new technologies: that they are always met with both trepidation that they will expand and hope that they will fix our problems.

One of the underlying goals of this book, I believe, is to engage university educators across the curriculum in multimodal pedagogies. In his epilogue, Palmeri’s first of three goals calls explicitly for the involvement of WAC directors in two ways. The first is to “actively resist the common tendency to present alphabetic writing as inherently the best tool for promoting active learning in disciplinary courses,” instead calling for a vision of “‘composing to learn’ that emphasizes how the integration of informal writing, speaking, and visual-production activities can enhance students’ understanding and application of concepts” (150). Instead of writing to learn, composing to learn gives space for multimodalities and engagements in the composing process that could support content engagement across disciplines. As far as the second goal, Palmeri calls for WAC directors to

[D]evelop workshops or institutes that bring together instructors from “allied art” fields—providing opportunities for teachers of writing, theater, visual arts, film, music, graphic design, and architecture to collaboratively develop and share multimodal strategies for promoting creative invention in their disciplines. In so doing, we will work to expand beyond the consideration of multimodality as course or seminar specific—specialized—skill set, and instead integrate informal and formal composing practices into classes that do not necessarily focus on technology. (151)

Palmeri also notes the possibility for administration to work with a group of teachers to design and engage low and high stakes multimodal assignments and activities in order to incorporate the engagement of technology across classroom spaces (153).

Because I work regularly with WAC faculty and scholars, I read all three of these texts through a terministic screen that is predisposed to see the possibilities for applying multimodality to WAC programming. I see a direct line of intervention between multimodal composing, digital media, and cross-curricular and interdisciplinary pedagogical practices. One of the significant commonalities between Braun, Lutkewitte, and Palmeri’s books is a focus not just on the composition classroom, but also on the discipline as a whole, and on the praxis of being an academic in the midst of the ever-evolving contemporary digital turn, one in which all scholars, regardless of discipline, are implicated. These books, particularly Braun’s, take on a significant project: How do we see ourselves? How do we best engage with the available resources? What does this kind of engagement mean? I think for the WAC community we could easily add: How might these available resources affect interdisciplinary writing pedagogies?

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