INTRODUCTION

"What Else Is Possible": Multimodal Composing and Genre in the Teaching of Writing

Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus

In *Releasing the Imagination*, Maxine Greene (2000) maintains that educators are responsible for asking students to reflect on what they do, what they think, and what they produce. But she also argues that faculty and students need to consider "what else is possible" in educational spaces. Greene's work is hopeful and forward looking. When combined with emerging understandings of genre in writing classrooms, Greene's "what else is possible" sketches an outline for pedagogies of hope, difference, and challenge to the status quo. Within college writing courses, the emergence of a wide array of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the past twenty years has opened up new possibilities for the types of compositions that students can create.

The chapters in *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* demonstrate how faculty and students are already exploring "what else is possible" in these new media writing spaces. When students are given access to pedagogical spaces and learning opportunities for experimenting with different ways to make meaning, they are drawing on the stuff of

1

everyday social interaction to rethink the shape of written academic knowledge. But this process of rethinking what is possible in academic writing is not without its challenges and failures. The developing forms of student writing, pedagogy, and writing program organization explored in *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* acknowledge that new media and new genres are not some achieved utopia for perfect learning but rather are sites where conflict and agreement, success and failure, coexist. The aim of this edited collection is to report on a range of classroom and programmatic practices where multimodal forms of writing are reshaping what is possible in college and university writing courses.

UNDERSTANDING GENRE IN THE CLASSROOM

Taken together, the chapters in *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* argue that as educators, we need to help students become more aware of these ways of working across multiple modes of communication. One way of engaging students not only in the process of making multimodal compositions but also in building their knowledge about how these compositions work within social spaces is to make explicit how readers experience multimodal compositions and how those experiences are shaped by expectations from other genres and other media. Whether one subscribes to a theory of genre that sees text forms as relatively stable social constructs or a theory of genre that defines text forms as fluid enactments influenced by a variety of social contexts, naming a text as belonging to a particular genre helps situate that text within an interpretative framework. Influenced by Michael Halliday's functional linguistics (1977), scholars Gunther Kress (2003, 2010), Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2000), and Kalantzis, Cope, and Andrew Harvey (2003) have pushed forward the concept of genres as relatively stable social constructs. In contrast, David Russell (1999) and Thomas Kent (1999) have drawn on Mikhail Bakhtin's (1986) semiotic theory of genre to argue for a more fluid view of how genres are shaped by social activities.

In the space between Halliday's systemic functional linguistics and a Bakhtian approach to genre, Paul Prior (2005, 2009) and Anne Wysocki (2005) have carved out a space where genre and multimodality can be understood as cross-fertilizing influences that shape the development of written documents. The contributions in *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* are informed by systemic functional linguistics and Bakhtin's semiotics, but they are most closely aligned with the praxis

found in Prior's and Wysocki's writing. *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* asks what students are doing when they compose multimodal works in postsecondary writing environments and how those practical compositions reinforce or challenge existing genre theories.

Understanding how readers' and users' experiences with works in other media shape their responses to multimodal student compositions helps students imagine and predict some of the dynamics that will shape the interpretative framework in which their multimodal pieces will be read and evaluated. Readers' and users' experiences with works in other media can vary widely. Readers' prior experiences could include thinking about longer, featured news articles published in print magazines or shorter journalistic news stories delivered via paper. When interacting with *Second Life*, these experiences with other genres could be a user's experiences with a first-person shooter video game or multiuser dungeon (MUD). The variety is nearly endless. But within *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*, the contributing authors take up the questions raised by Halliday (1977), Bakhtin (1986), Kress (2003, 2010), Prior (2005, 2009), and Wysocki (2005). The contributors consider how understandings of genre and media can be used in classrooms to help facilitate students' development as writers able to work across modes and across genres.

It is important to note that throughout this edited volume, genre is considered distinctive from the text-tool used to create a work and from the medium in which it is created and received. That is, the authors are careful not to conflate genre and medium or genre and text-tool. When a text form is still emerging, the act of naming a genre has often confused genre with the text-tool or the medium. For instance, at the beginning of *A Better Pencil*, Dennis Baron (2010, xvi) promises to "examine the new genres that the computer has enabled: email, the instant message, the web page, the blog, social networking pages such as MySpace and Facebook, and communally generated wikis like Wikipedia and the Urban Dictionary." Baron equates text-tools such as e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, and wikis with genres. But each of these text-tools can be used to generate a number of different genres. Take wikis, for example. They can be used to create encyclopedia-like entries, dictionary-like entries, or a variety of other communally written and edited texts. Wikis are text-tools that use the medium of the Web to distribute texts that remediate existing print genres into something new. This act of remediation puts into play text-tools, media, and genres. Keeping these terms distinctive within *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres* allows authors to talk about how students are creating new hybrid genres.

The chapters in this edited volume explore the possibilities that exist as both students and teachers experiment with the malleability of these new forms of communication during the early stages of integration into academic practices. Questions arise regarding the shifts that occur when new media forms evolve as genres that further splinter through social and institutional practices. Social media sites, for instance, began as portals for connecting "friends" within particular social circles. Only a few years later, they have spawned new ways of writing (140 characters or fewer) and reconsidered social practices that extend beyond the content on a website.

BEING LITERATE IN THE WORLD TODAY

The contributors in this collection document the changing landscape of writing in college. They show that what it means to be literate in the world today is changing and that the shapes and forms of academic knowledge within undergraduate writing are undergoing transformations opened up by the revolution in ICTs. In developing an understanding of literacy practices in today's college classrooms, these chapters attend to the social aspects of the increasing use of multimodal texts in college writing programs. They also advocate for pedagogical techniques that incorporate approaches where social contexts are considered in the evaluation of a work's effectiveness (Inoue 2005; Warnock 2009; Whithaus 2005). Multimodal student writing is doing something new—it's reshaping genre boundaries and changing what counts as academic knowledge. Faculty, students, and writing program administrators are responding to these new forms of literacy by creating in them, by writing in them, by pushing concepts and practices of what is possible to accomplish and create in a college writing course.

At first glance, this process of increasing students' awareness of the relationships among text-tools (that is, pieces of software and their interfaces), readerly and "userly" expectations, and authorial composing techniques seems to promise an almost endless sense of empowerment for students as creators of entirely new forms of texts. However, the literacy practices described in the following chapters develop within classroom spaces where the promises of multimodal pedagogies are not always achieved. Composing digital videos for YouTube, creating avatars and structures within *Second Life*, or using PowerPoint slides to present an interpretation of a *Marge Piercy poem* do open the new modes of

understanding that Maxine Greene encourages teachers to move toward. Yet, including these activities in college writing courses is difficult and not always as successful as faculty would like. There are risks in trying to incorporate multimodal composing techniques in a writing class; these risks are magnified when writing program administrators (WPAs) try to integrate multimodal composing into a university-wide program. It is this tension between what is possible with multimodal composing and what actually happens in classrooms when faculty and students try to innovate that we explore in this edited volume. Some techniques work, others do not. Many have promising moments but also instances of failure amid their successes.

Our way of understanding this tension is to think about how genre expectations—and here we mean "genre" as associated with film, video games, speeches, photographs, and visual graphics as well as with written works—can both constrain and enable students and teachers. At the time of writing this introduction, new forms of writing are emerging all around us: students are writing on the Internet, in our classrooms, on cell phones, and continuously within some form of digital environment. They are seeing what else is possible. Our job is neither to lead them into this changing world of multimodality nor to hold them back from it. Rather, we are in the midst of a shift that is affecting how we write, why we write, and where we write . . . or don't. The chapters in this collection ask us to think about how writing programs—the students who take the courses, the faculty and graduate students who teach writing courses, and the faculty administrators who run the programs—are responding to shifts and how our various purposes for writing converge with our writing curricula.

The impact of multimodal composing upon writing practices has been documented in Moje 2004; Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Kalantzis, Cope, and Harvey 2003; Kress 2003, 2010; Kress and Leeuwen 2006; Herrington, Hodgson, and Moran 2009; Reiss, Young, and Selfe 1998; Selfe and Hawisher 2004; Wysocki 2005; Wysocki et al. 2004; and Yancey 2004. Alphabetic literacy has privileged words, their sequencing, and rules of usage as the primary organizing system for articulating experiences as texts. Alphabetic literacy has historically been at the core of what Western cultures have perceived as the act of writing and composing. However, as Kress (2003, 7) has suggested, the structure of using words on a page to be read as text is now affected by a "reorganization" of what we perceive the page to be. Kress describes this shift in relation to the screen

that affords a diverse range of graphic representations beyond words in which case, conventions, and rules of usage applied to words are no longer plausible. This shift also affects genre. Traditionally, genres have organized the ways in which we explain experiences through sets of recognizable rules and conventions that frame the production of the texts we are creating and reading. Genres are ways for students to organize their experiences and, through identified conventions, relate those experiences to others within a particular social context. Thinking through genres can both constrain and open up student compositions.

A reciprocal relationship between multimodal composing and the creation of hybrid genres exists as new media forms afford continuous experimentation. Anne Herrington and Charles Moran's (2005) work on genre theory recognized that the conventions which guide student writing practices often need to be challenged, shifted, or morphed to accommodate emerging practices. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, it became clear that learning the rules, learning how to break the rules, and then developing new rules was part of the experimentation process inherent in multimodal composing as well as the development of individual students' writing skills (Kahn and Kellner 2005; Kress 2010; Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Shipka 2011; Sirc 2002; Wardle 2009; Watkins 2008). In a similar way, as the contributors in this collection asked students to redefine their composing practices, the students were rewriting the rules, redefining the constraints, and testing the boundaries. Encouraging multimodal compositions in writing courses was itself creating spaces within which new genres were emerging and helping to define "what else is possible" through student learning.

THE CHAPTERS IN THIS COLLECTION

Some of the chapters in this edited volume speak to breaking with conventions in both pedagogy and production by using multimodalities as liberating vehicles. However, other chapters caution that many of these new modes of composing create their own set of conventions that shape or even limit students' composing processes. The point is to grapple with how the emerging genres of early twenty-first-century cyberspace are influencing, and being influenced by, writing practices found in postsecondary classrooms. The collection is divided into three parts:

- PART I, "Multimodal Pedagogies That Inspire Hybrid Genres," examines how students are themselves shaping and reshaping the genres of writing when they compose multimodal texts as part of college courses.

- PART II, "Multimodal Literacies and Pedagogical Choices," considers the challenges teachers are facing as they include multimodal composing in their writing courses. The chapters in part II move back and forth from practice to theory and discuss multimodal literacy and genre on a classroom level.

- PART III, "The Changing Structures of Composition Programs," explores how writing program administrators are reshaping their programs to accommodate new media literacy practices.

Underlying all of these chapters is the problem of defining multimodal composing. The term "multimodality" has been appropriated by composition studies as well as new media and communications. It is now becoming more common within many curricula as technological innovations are incorporated into writing classes. Educators are striving to complement in-class learning with out-of class communications and networking practices. Our definition of "multimodal composing" within the context of these chapters, however, is that it involves the conscious manipulation of the interaction among various sensory experiences—visual, textual, verbal, tactile, and aural—used in the processes of producing and reading texts. (Jody Shipka's contribution in part I, "Including, but Not Limited to, the Digital," and the opening chapter of part II, Nathaniel Córdova's "Invention, Ethos, and New Media in the Rhetoric Classroom," both have extended discussions about how we define multimodal composing based on practice and theory.) Although our definition may seem broad to many academics and practitioners, it is our belief that we cannot restrict how individuals might interpret and employ multimodality as a way of thinking about designing and composing beyond written words. It is a dynamic way of thinking about expressing ideas; on its best days "multimodal composing" can become an embodiment of Paulo Freire's (1970 and 1991) notion of praxis. Understanding the interactions and relationships between different expressive modes is integral to understanding the composing processes and enabling students to develop their own writing techniques fully.

Through the chapters in this collection, we see that students who are composing within hybrid genres and developing new spatializing practices have always known multiple spaces of living, playing, and learning. Many of today's students do not know a world without the Internet. They move naturally between physical and virtual worlds—they push and publish as much content as they retrieve and collect. However, they must

learn to see their communication acts through writing, visual representations, image and sound production as ethical acts that are affected by the spaces in which they are produced and further affect the spaces in which they are received (Cooper 2005). We cannot talk about multimodal composing and production without understanding the ethical considerations of this production as creating particular spaces for meaning making. The tools and technologies we use to communicate cannot be separated from their social and historical practices across time and space (Wysocki 2005). As we see multimodal practices becoming natural curriculum considerations for some undergraduate programs, we must also be aware of the contracted history of multimodal communications practices (at least those that are digitally based) and new ethical questions that arise from issues of access.

Anne Frances Wysocki (2005) has maintained that we use communicative tools in particular ways because of past practices that hold particular conventions and constraints. We learn and adopt these practices and spatial understandings (i.e., the spacing of words on a page or screen or the use of black Times Roman text on white paper without questioning the origins or diversities of those practices). These conventions are tied to other dominant social practices within our lived world (ibid., 57). Building on Cooper's and Wysocki's critiques, the chapters in this collection show us that the ways in which we privilege text create dichotomies between words and images rather than fostering approaches to multimodal composing, which include analysis, critique, and production. In fact, the contributions in this edited volume not only extend Cooper's and Wysocki's concepts but also outline pedagogical practices that show concrete alternatives to writing instruction as merely alphabetic composing. We believe the authors address multimodal pedagogy as an essential lens for thinking about program development, curriculum design, teaching, learning, and preparing students for the new global economy. Throughout the collection, the authors wrestle with Greene's (2000) immensely important pedagogical question for students and teachers: What else is possible?

CLOSING AND NOT CLOSED

The chapters in this collection show that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, students were not just being asked to write in genres that they knew or that were well established. Because of the speed with

which information and communication technologies were emerging, the genres of the multimodal assignments were themselves unstable. Bakhtin's (1986), Kent's (1999), and Russell's (1999) notions of genres as always undergoing transformations because they are located within social activity systems seemed to be multiplying by a power of ten. Genres were not just transforming, they were fundamentally unstable—being made and remade within months rather than within years. With Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites, students represent themselves textually in a myriad of contexts simultaneously like never before.

These contexts, however, do not require a conscious awareness of older text-based literacies. Rather, they require an understanding of the social conventions at that moment and what is acceptable to the receiving community. So how do we teach students to identify, investigate, and interrogate genre within this "new normal" of instability? We begin to answer this question by examining how the environments into which our students will send their texts are elastic, expanding and contracting in relation to context with mutable genres that respond to the moment. Exploring these new compositional spaces, we examine how students, faculty, and writing programs are responding to, and incorporating, new multimodal forms of discourse into college writing courses. In the end we can see the fissures in the compositional landscape—writing is not what it was in 1990, nor is it now what it will be in 2020—but this collection reminds us that we still return to our classrooms and the daily realities of teaching, learning, and grading. Each of these actions is about writing, and about how a piece of writing—no matter what its new forms are—works.

Multiliteracies and multimodal composing present a set of questions that reach from the structure of departments within postsecondary education toward global economic systems, but multimodal composing is also an intimate experience—it is the student writer working on a composing task. It is the student having to make choices about what visual elements to add to her work or about how to prepare a speech in tandem with a PowerPoint or Prezi presentation. Multimodal composing is the teacher trying to decide how to organize a new assignment sequence that will include forms of composing not previously seen as serious, academic modes of inquiry. For writing program administrators, multimodal literacies bring new challenges—faculty and students need to explore the potentials of multimodal composing without losing the programmatic structures that facilitate the development of discrete writing skills. This

collection employs multimodal pedagogy as a way of carving out spaces where different modes of composing and creating are used to explore the lived world and make meaning from experience.

Changes to composition programs, however, only happen as individuals begin to avail themselves of the opportunities to present and create knowledge in new formats. The chapters in this collection take us inside the programs and classrooms where writing curricula are being transformed. Students and faculty discuss their work and begin to describe how particular assignments requiring multimodal compositions are using information and communication technologies to create the spaces where new genres can emerge. Students are using rich and varied ICTs and while they do so, they draw on equally rich and varied concepts of genre to help them organize their new forms of writing. Ultimately, students will continue to make and remake what writing looks like within emerging multimodal discourse environments; however, faculty and administrators can help shape student experiences, so that the learning that occurs in college writing courses prepares writers for the challenges they will face later in life.

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