

# MULTIMODAL COMPOSING: PERSPECTIVES FROM ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

Robin Snead, University of North Carolina at Pembroke  
Brent Simoneaux, North Carolina State University  
Keon Pettway, North Carolina State University

2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication

In recent years, scholars in the field of Composition Studies have increasingly advocated for a broadened approach to literacy that encompasses a multiplicity of communication channels—alphabetic text, audio, still and moving images, color. Writing in 2004, Cynthia Selfe argued “if our profession continues to focus solely on teaching only alphabetic composition—either online or in print—we run the risk of making composition studies increasingly irrelevant to students engaging in contemporary practices of communication” (72). This increasing emphasis on multiliteracy in Composition Studies has, at least in part, decentered alphabetic text as the dominant mode of communication and calls for the inclusion of multimodal texts in Composition curricula have become more emphatic (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Kress, 2010; Sheppard, 2010; Tayakoshi & Selfe, 2007; Wysocki, et al., 2004; Yancey, 2004). Importantly, however, many scholars (Anderson, 2003; Shipka, 2011; Wysocki, 2004, 2005) have argued that it is not enough for students to analyze existing multimodal compositions; they must also produce them, making informed and rhetorical design decisions.

We know that preparing students to participate functionally, critically, and rhetorically in society (Selber, 2004) is a distributed activity that occurs over time within multiple contexts and across multiple disciplines. In other words, the composition classroom is not the only location that students compose multimodal texts. Instructors across the disciplines are increasingly incorporating a variety of multimodal composition projects into their courses, asking

students to critically engage with the mixed logics of text, audio, and images as they compose video projects, audio essays, and websites, to name only a few. This work, however, is often invisible to composition instructors due, at least in part, to disciplinary definitions of composing.

Definitions are critical to how knowledge is produced, practiced, and presented as reality (Schiappa, 2003). As Schiappa notes, “definitions constitute rhetorically induced social knowledge” among people with a “shared understanding about themselves, the objects of their world, and how they ought to use language” (3). Lauer (2009) illustrates Schiappa’s argument by examining the differences in how the terms multimedia and multimodal are deployed. Most importantly, Lauer concludes that composition scholars use terms interchangeably to describe different modes of composing, such as digital and new media communications technologies, multimedia texts, multimodal experiences, and multiple forms of new media (229). Multimodality in Composition Studies may relate to other disciplinary definitions of composing, but other disciplines may not share the same theoretical frameworks (Lauer, 2009).

In this panel, we explore the distribution of multimodal composing beyond the composition classroom. Through video and audio interviews with instructors from across the disciplines at a large state university in the southeastern United States, we examine various definitions of multimodality and the various types of multimodal projects that student are asked to engage in. We argue that conversation across the disciplines about multimodality can help us better understand how our own first-year writing courses and pedagogies articulate with others across the disciplines. To this end, we open spaces for cross-contextual perspectives on multimodal composition that often remain invisible. In short, we hope to develop intellectual partnerships across the disciplines, valuing the differences in our perspectives while acknowledging the need to better communicate and collaborate on similar pedagogical goals.

Speaker 1. Examining the social knowledge of multimodality in other disciplines is critical to understanding the theoretical, conceptual, and practical application of teaching and composing

across the disciplines. Through the use video and audio taken from interviews with participants, Speaker 1 shows that multimodality is defined by participants in ways that support their own disciplinary needs and perspectives. Speaker 1 provides analysis of the underlying premises of each definition, offering insight into how instructors speak with and across other disciplines in their definitions of multimodality.

Speaker 2. Anderson, et al. (2006) argue for the importance of having a clear snapshot of how multimodality is instantiated at the curricular and programmatic level in composition programs; however, a broader snapshot is needed in order to examine the types of multimodal projects that students are engaging in across the disciplines. Mapping the landscape of multimodal composition through video and audio interviews with instructors across the disciplines, Speaker 2 makes explicit the distributed activity of multimodal composing by examining the various types of multimodal projects that students are composing. Additionally, Speaker 2 examines the various ways that multimodality is instantiated within the classroom by examining the pedagogical practices of instructors across the disciplines.

Speaker 3. In this section, Speaker 3 discusses the possibilities and challenges of interdisciplinary approaches to teaching multimodality across the disciplines. Broadening composition studies' view of multimodality can potentially offer unique perspectives and opportunities for collaboration within and across the disciplines. To this end, Speaker 3 calls for pedagogical and curricular collaborations to address the often unseen multimodal work in which students engage in beyond and within first-year composition.