

***Multimodal Composing in Classrooms***  
***Learning and Teaching for the Digital World.***  
**Edited by Suzanne M. Miller and Mary B. McVee (2012)**

New York and London, Routledge. pp. 161

ISBN: 978-415-89747-1

*Reviewed by Kate Cowan*

Miller and McVee's edited volume seeks to expand traditional notions of literacy by considering composing multimodally. This starts from the position that learning and teaching, like all social interaction, is constituted in a variety of forms, of which speech and writing are just a part. *Composing* is therefore used to encompass not only writing on the page, but texts more broadly, which might consist of image, sound and movement as well as linguistic modes. In this way, the collection aligns itself with an existing body of work bringing together the perspectives of multimodality and New Literacy Studies (see Street, Pahl, and Rowsell, 2009). The authors turn attention from reading and comprehension of multimodal texts to the process of their composition and creation. Based around a series of case studies, the voices of teachers and students in changing classrooms are combined with theory to present a new literacies pedagogy in practice.

The authors consider a multimodal approach particularly timely given the "changing landscape of communication" (Kress, 1997, p. 162). They stress that digital technologies such as computers, the Internet, and mobile phones, are changing literacy practices by significantly shaping the way people make messages and meanings. Miller and McVee suggest that this is of particular importance given the millennial generation of students in classrooms today, growing up immersed in digital technology.

---

**Affiliation**

Institute of Education, University of London  
email: k.cowan@ioe.ac.uk

This perspective is discussed in Chapter 1 (“Multimodal Composing: The Essential 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy”).

The chapters that follow offer glimpses into classrooms transforming their practice through multimodal composing and adopting a new literacies stance, including the challenges and dilemmas of such an approach. The case studies span American classroom grades 5–12 (students aged 10 to 18 years) as well as examples from teacher education, offering contextualized examples to elaborate key issues. They are then cross-analyzed in Miller and McVee’s final chapter and used as evidence for debunking myths and proposing a series of action principles manifesting a theory of teaching for embodied learning through multimodal composing.

Locating discussion of multimodal composing firmly in the “digital world,” the edited volume presents a series of case studies in which digital technologies are used in composing multimodal texts. Chapter 2 (“The (Artful) Deception of Technology Integration and the Move toward a New Literacies Mindset”), by Mary B. McVee, Nancy M. Bailey, and Lynn E. Shanahan, encourages consideration of what is meant by *technology* and its role in learning. The authors incorporate responses of preservice and inservice teachers participating in a “Literacy and Technology” teacher education course, sensitively outlining the trepidation felt by many of the participants. They suggest that for both the teachers and teacher educators, a shift occurred from being fundamentally concerned with developing technical competence, using technology as a new means of transmitting the same old knowledge, or as a motivational tool for “duping students into real learning” (p. 29), towards an understanding of new technology and new literacies as transactional.

In Chapter 3 (“Learning Video Grammar: A Multimodal Approach to Reading and Writing Video Texts”), David L. Bruce reflects upon his experience of teaching English classes and media studies. He suggests that although his students were surrounded by video in their everyday lives, the skills and techniques used in their own video production were initially limited. Bruce discusses the process of making implicit knowledge of media texts explicit through articulating a “video grammar” to develop a metalanguage of the medium. He presents storyboarding as a tool for deconstruction, encouraging students and teachers to attend to techniques such as camera angle, type of shot, number of edits, sound effects and musical score, to better understand how modes might be orchestrated to make meaning.

Perceptions towards digital technology continue as a theme in Chapter 4 (“The Importance of a New Literacies Stance in Teaching English Language Arts”), as Nancy M. Bailey looks at how changing views become manifested in teachers’ changing classroom practice. She narrates the experience of

a teacher who had participated in the new literacies course discussed in chapter 2, and the gradual adoption of a “new literacies stance” in her ninth grade English classroom. The chapter shares the teacher’s reflections as she comes to see literacy and technology as integrated rather than separate entities. This change is illustrated and explored further through descriptions of the resulting classroom projects, including a creative writing task using embedded hyperlinks, the use of PowerPoint as a medium for presenting analysis of poetry, and a project based on song lyrics.

The strong personal connections students made with music and lyrics in Chapter 4 is extended by James Cercone in Chapter 5 (“Being Great for Something’: Composing Music Videos in a High School English Class”), which focuses on a teacher’s digital video workshops in a twelfth grade English course. The students are positioned as video producers, with the teacher on hand as an “executive producer” to oversee and provide advice and support as needed. Discussion of the teacher’s role is particularly insightful, illustrating the importance of student-teacher talk and possibilities for a “new kind of classroom” (p. 65). As the author states, “The digital revolution has occurred, and the students in our classrooms have been shaped by it” (p. 78), and the chapter honors the skills and commitment students brought to their composing when it offered relevance and an engaging, authentic purpose.

Monica Blondell and Suzanne M. Miller also address digital media composing in Chapter 6 (“Engaging Literature through Digital Video Composing: A Teacher’s Journey to ‘Meaning That Matters’”), outlining a project where tenth and eleventh grade students from an urban classroom composed video in response to an English class set text. They open the chapter with the important observation that current curriculum and policy are often at odds with research and theory demonstrating the potential of multimodal literacies. This case study follows an experienced teacher as she grapples with this conflict in her own practice, balancing her school’s traditional emphasis on “teaching for the test” with her appreciation of digital video as a tool for coming to know literature in greater depth. The chapter follows a series of digital video composing projects, reflecting upon the teacher adapting her practice in order to incorporate the experiences and identities of her students.

The insight of the case study in Chapter 7 (“Lessons in Multimodal Composition from a Fifth-Grade Classroom”) by Lynn E. Shanahan is distinctive in that it discusses a teacher’s difficulty in presenting multimodal composition projects to her class, and in understanding the affordance of modes. The teacher in question initiates a HyperStudio project, enabling print, image and audio to be combined into multimodal ensembles. In presenting the task, she foregrounds writing as the mode with which to

convey information, and positions image as supplementary decoration. These directions shaped the texts created by the majority of students, which did not make full use of the range and possibilities of modes available with the digital software. However, one exception acts as a tribute to the sophisticated meaning-making potentials of her students, who combined drawing, writing, symbols and layout skillfully in their fifth grade science composition to represent and communicate information to great effect. Rather than being critical of the teacher's attempts at introducing multimodal composing, Shanahan suggests that this example illustrates the necessity of providing teachers with professional development opportunities on multimodality.

Chapter 8 (“A Literacy Pedagogy for Multimodal Composing: Transforming Learning and Teaching”) by Suzanne M. Miller, Mary K. Thompson, Ann Marie Lauricella, and Fenice B. Boyd with Mary B. McVee, returns to digital video technology, describing a project in which the conventions of the movie trailer are used as a basis for composing inquiry in a history class. With parallels to Chapter 5, there is a discussion of the social spaces and transformative classrooms that support the composing of multimodal texts. The authors use this vignette to propose a literacy pedagogy for multimodal composing, inviting teachers and teacher educators to draw upon this suggested framework and “re-envision our schools to be exemplary spaces for authentic learning” (p. 127).

In Chapter 9 (“Changing the Game: Teaching for Embodied Learning through Multimodal Composing”), Suzanne M. Miller and Mary B. McVee provide a synthesis of the case studies in the preceding chapters, using the reflections to debunk four myths emerging around multimodal composing. They also provide a cross-case analysis which draws out six action principles to suggest “a theory of teaching for embodied learning through multimodal composing” (p. 136). These points include developing a new literacies stance, initiating a social space for collaborative work, co-constructing a felt purpose, drawing on student identities and lifeworlds, turning attention to embodied learning, and making design knowledge explicit.

The idea of *design* is discussed by the authors at points, although the term *composing* is favored throughout the majority of the book. This distinction might have been elaborated further, as it has been proposed that we are moving *from* composition, with its notions of competence and conventions, and *towards* design, which is necessarily innovative and transformative, arising from specific rhetorical interest (Kress and Bezemer, 2009). While the choice of metaphor may seem a small matter, it has subtle implications in an emerging field such as multimodality, which is still debating and developing a shared terminology across disciplines. Further work in this area might therefore elaborate the connotations and

consequences of positioning such literacy activity as multimodal *design* as opposed to multimodal *composing*, and what this implies for innovation, interest, and agency in student text-making.

Miller and McVee's edited volume is a useful contribution to the field of multimodality, new literacies and multiliteracies, and is particularly distinctive in its use of classroom case studies, using teacher and student perspectives to illustrate key principles in practice. Refreshingly, the examples of teaching are not all exemplary, nor are the authors critical of teachers who are still developing their practice. This book is not, therefore, a collection of lesson plans for multimodal composing, nor a how-to guide for teachers, but is all the better for it. Instead, the authors invite readers to engage with individual cases, reflect on theoretical underpinnings, and relate these principles to their own practice. Visual examples of the students' multimodal material, such as PowerPoint slides and video screen grabs, illustrate many of the chapters, and URL addresses are included for viewing selected student video compositions online. The resulting collection is a useful companion to existing work in the field, responding to a pressing need to discuss and develop a multimodal literacy pedagogy, and will be of particular interest to educators or researchers interested in exploring the possibilities presented by digital technology and expanding notions of literacy.

### About the Author

Kate Cowan is a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, University of London, and has previously worked as a Nursery teacher in the United Kingdom. Her current research is part of MODE (Multimodal Methodologies for Researching Digital Data and Environments), and explores the multimodal transcription of video data gathered in Early Years classrooms.

### References

- Kress, G. (1997) *Before Writing – Rethinking the Paths to Literacy*. London: Routledge.
- Kress, G. and Bezemer, J. (2009) Writing in a multimodal world of representation. In R. Beard, D. Myhill, M. Nystrand and J. Riley (eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Writing Development* 167–181. London: Sage.
- Street, B., Pahl, K. and Rowsell, J. (2009) Multimodality and New Literacy Studies. In C. Jewitt (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* 191–200. London: Routledge.