The Social Practice of Digital Literacy in the Internet Age: Multimodal Composition, Information, and Collaboration

Multimodal Composition Video Transcript

Many scholars argue that college writing courses should go beyond teaching text-based essays and also require students to create what they call "multimodal compositions." In these assignments, students determine what combination of modes—meaning written, visual, or oral methods of communicating—are most appropriate given the students' rhetorical goals.

That last part about rhetorical goals is especially important because rhetoric is at the heart of composition instruction. As Cynthia Selfe has explained, this means composition instructors need to introduce their students to "rhetorically based strategies for taking advantage of all available means of communicating effectively and productively as literate citizens" (644). If an instructor insists on students only using one tool in one specific way, then she is not teaching her students to "think critically about a range of communication tools, and multiple ways of reaching their audience" (645), which, at the end of the day, is what teaching writing is all about.

With that being said, there are some very real concerns about multimodal composition that should be considered. Kip Strasma, for example, points out that multimodal compositions are not always successful as immersive and interactive artifacts. Strasma studied students engaging in hyperfiction in 1997 and he found that their main reactions to the hypertexts were frustration and confusion. Then, over a decade later, he observed two people interacting with new media texts and he found very similar results. Strasma concludes that readers experience frustration because they aren't able to construct themselves as "readers" in the face of these texts—they're not sure what to do with them.

Part of the problem may be that these readers are trying to read the hypertexts in the same way they read a book or an article. David Buckingham points to this issue when he argues that analogies between print and audio/visual media "[fall] down when we look more closely" (75). His point is that trying to evaluate multimodal compositions with the same criteria for evaluating text-only compositions is ill advised.

We need to be conscious of (and careful about) our integration of video and audio communication into our definition of literacy. We must make sure that we fully understand the complicated nature of multimodal composition, which, as Gunther Kress explains, calls upon multiple logics that are not the same as linear, text-based communication.

Another way to think about this in terms of what Thomas Rickert and Michael Salvo call "worldling." They argue that, while educators and scholars commonly acknowledge the ways in which digital tools influence our literacy practices, "we are

still only beginning to appreciate how the advent and cross-pollination of multiple media transform our world and our sense of world" (298). They call this transformation 'worlding,' which is "the aesthetic realm that a visual-musical work invites us to both enter and immerse ourselves in, and it is the constellation of production pathways," uh, the "people, communities, technologies, and networks—that are simultaneously evoked with each aesthetic world" (313). Rickert & Salvo show how musicians like The Beatles, Yes, and The Flaming Lips exemplify worldling because they collaborate within their bands and with other non-musical artists to fuse sound, visuals, and performance; the result is an experience that transforms the listener's "aesthetic sense of what music is and what it means to participate in music's unfolding" (306).

A more recent example of this worlding might be Björk's 2011 "interactive album," Biophilia, which works like a video game—the way you play the game actually changes the music that you're hearing.

The salient point here is that defining digital literacy as something that incorporates the multimodal consumption and production of new media is a fundamental shift from print literacy—Rickert & Salvo recommend that we look to the avant grade musicians who have already acknowledged this shift for models of composing with new media.

And when we're thinking about this in terms of teaching college writing, multimodal composition should be far more than adding an image or a soundtrack to a written composition—it should push our students to see the world in a new way.