

**Palmeri, Jason. *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012.**

Reviewed by Jennifer A. Swartz

Multimodal approaches in the composition classroom have been a growing focus of pedagogical discussion in writing programs across the country for much of the last decade. The use of electronic media to teach writing can be directly linked to the rise of social media, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Students compose differently in these mediums for a variety of reasons, both theoretical and practical. They are aware that some forms of writing are a socially mediated act, ones that will be seen and commented upon (or “liked”) by their peers. They also recognize the value of conciseness, since the space to express themselves is limited to the small text box of a Facebook status update or the 140 characters allowed in the micro-blog of Twitter. Students also live in a world where the use of iPhones, iPods, and Skype are commonplace; they have the ability to make movies from programs on their laptops. In fact, as a recent example of this phenomenon, Dell Computers has a back-to-school commercial on the air titled, “Annie: The Girl Who Could Fly.” Annie makes a movie for a school project, and we are told: “for her, it took a mighty machine and plain old ingenuity to go where no fifth grader had gone before” (“Annie”). We also are reminded by colleagues and administrators at the beginning of each school year that our incoming crop of students belong to the generation of “digital natives,” or students who have never existed without an ATM, let alone functioned without personal computers, portable music devices, cell phones, and the ability to text. The annual Beloit College Mindset List indicates that students who are freshmen this year have never known life without widespread internet access (“The Mindset List”), and it won’t be many more years before the list will tell us that incoming freshmen have always had a Facebook account.

It is, then, toward these students that we are often adjured to approach teaching in innovative ways in order to keep their attention. As a consequence, multimodal composition strategies have taken on a larger role in the college writing classroom. To a certain degree, this makes sense: meet students where they are in order to engage them in the act and the art of writing, and use the means with which they are familiar to teach them skills that date back to Aristotle's lectures on *Rhetoric*.

It is into this particular matrix that Jason Palmeri's interesting and accessible *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* enters the wider discussion about effective pedagogical techniques in the writing classroom. Palmeri makes a distinction between "alphabetic writing" (8) and multimodal instruction, and throughout the text returns to an often engaging and thought-provoking debate about why we tend to privilege print-based approaches over other means of communicating. As part of the introductory groundwork to this larger conversation, Palmeri questions whether multimodal strategies are really as new as we assume. He contends that multimodal instruction has its roots as far back as Janet Emig's *Composing Process of Twelfth Graders*, which was published in 1971 (26). Because Emig urged writing teachers to consider a variety of artistic forms of expression, Palmeri argues, she was endorsing a type of multimodal instruction (27). Palmeri then traces multimodal approaches through a number of focusing lenses, including forms of electronic media and reproducing devices, such as movies, television, and copy machines (88); eventually, he devotes a section to the use of cameras—as both a means of teaching composition and a manner of how the writer might view him/herself when engaged in the writing process (116-148). Palmeri draws distinctions between the basic elements of transmitting text that we frequently take for granted (such as the copy machine) and how those methods often shape the ways in which a student understands and responds to the written word. According to Palmeri, printed text has taken on a different form, thereby becoming part of the multimodal landscape.

The author also notes that auditory communication is a fundamental part of composition instruction, one that is often ignored—to the detriment of the field. Palmeri writes, “When we privilege print forms of knowing above all else, we tend to delete from consciousness the myriad ways we draw upon auditory modalities of communication in our work as composition teachers and scholars” (52). By neglecting this component, Palmeri implies that students whose learning styles lend themselves to something other than the visual are often underserved by professors who don’t account for different methods of processing and absorbing knowledge.

To that end, Palmeri engages in a fascinating investigation of the evolution of several composition texts and changing composition strategies that have been employed over the last several decades. Of note, he writes of Ann Berthoff’s *Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination* (1982), in which students are encouraged to plan their papers by using an artistic approach instead of just creating a written list or outline (41). Later, he points to William Sparke and Clark McKowen’s *Montage* (1970), which he notes “pushed the boundaries of conventional textbook design, seeking to create an interactive, nonlinear experience that could enable students to invent ideas through creating juxtaposition” (100). Palmeri makes it clear that *Montage* was a profound shift in the way we think about teaching writing in that it contained no “table of contents, no chapters or unit divisions, and no conventional headnotes explaining the sections” (100). In many ways, *Montage* made users question the fundamental underpinnings of composition and how we approach writing—both as an art form and as a subject to be taught. *Montage* was quickly followed by an even more destabilized “text,” the 1972 *Comp Box: A Writing Workshop Approach to Composition*. Palmeri writes that *Comp Box* was simply “a box of *unbound* photocopied materials as well as an author’s guide that explains ways that students might draw upon the materials (cutting, pasting, rearranging, adding, deleting) to make their own texts” (103). The nature of this approach truly lent itself to early kinds of

multimodal instruction in that students were able to seek out and incorporate any media that would fit into the essays included in the box and then redistribute and rearrange the readings in any way they chose. The student-driven nature of this text was a significant shift in pedagogical studies in the early 1970s and, as we are now in an age where internet and social media reign supreme, served as a precursor to the conversations we currently have in composition classrooms. What is text? Are we as writing instructors privileging the print on the page over other forms of communication? And how do we use various forms of social media to teach writing?

In addition to reconsidering classic pedagogical works in composition studies, Palmeri organizes his book in an intriguing way. Building on the idea of “Remixing” as a musical concept, each chapter of the book is broken down into primary “Tracks” and the subset points as “Refrains.” This method makes the information Palmeri is discussing easily accessible. His writing style is thoroughly engaging and it is clear that he has meticulously researched the material and is well grounded in many of the theorists of the composition field, from groundbreakers like Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, and Lester Faigley, to lesser-known practitioners of the art. Palmeri’s study is sweeping: he articulates trends that have occurred in composition studies and makes projections for how the advent of social media will influence the way we teach students how to write in the future. Most particularly, he keeps in mind one of the primary issues affecting all of us who use some form of multimodal instruction in the classroom when he writes:

In our contemporary digital classrooms . . . the lines between writing and acting are increasingly blurring. For example, in composing a digital audio essay or video essay, students often write and then perform a script; the success of the final video or audio product hinges as much on the delivery of the words (the voice and the gesture) as it does on the words themselves. When we consider assessing these

newer digital audio and video forms of composition, we often worry about what it is we are judging: the writing or the acting? Are we being seduced by an essay that is not very well written because it is well-performed? Are we being overly critical of an essay that is well-written because it is not well-delivered? (63)

This is a central and especially pertinent point: if we use multimodal techniques in the classroom simply because we can, we run the risk of utilizing technological bells-and-whistles without grounding the activities in sound pedagogical practice. Given that writing as a skill set now has more components to it than simply putting words on a page, the way we evaluate students must have a multimodal aspect to it as well. We are no longer simply examining how well they construct an argument and put it on paper, but rather how well that argument is deployed across a range of technologies. How do we assess their abilities to communicate in various media? And do we count that as writing? There is an uncomfortable tension in multimodal instruction as professors often walk the line between assessing the act of writing versus evaluating the successful use of other technologies that shape the work that the student produces. Palmeri cogently points out this thorny ground as he examines the ways in which those who teach writing must negotiate among and between numerous modes of instruction in the classroom and judge which one (or ones) best indicate the student's growing mastery of the requirements of the course.

Some areas where it might have been profitable for Palmeri to investigate more fully include a deeper exploration of how multimodal techniques are used in a practical way in the classroom. While that might have been considered beyond the bounds of this study (since it is specifically framed as an examination of the history of multimodal pedagogy), a discussion of particular assignment sequences or results from the employment of these approaches would have been informative. Palmeri does discuss certain times when he used or observed a

particular multimodal application (65, 80-82), but an expansion of such discussion would have added a layer of depth to the text had this been one of the strands he chose to interweave in the book as a whole. A larger “how to” element with specific suggestions for composition instructors to incorporate into their own teaching strategies would have added a valuable practical dimension to the text. Moreover, a section discussing how multimodal instruction techniques translate to other situations where students find themselves called upon to write—such as in the campus Writing Center, or for education majors who are preparing to teach writing at the high school level—would have provided another facet to the larger discussion. While the danger exists that doing so would significantly increase the length of the text, a brief overview of how writing center tutors and English education majors might be able to include certain approaches to multimodal instruction in other venues would have been helpful.

Still, overall, Jason Palmeri’s *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy* is a thoughtful, well-written, and informative exploration of the varied history of multimodal writing instruction. This text is a solid, thoroughly researched, and wide-ranging contribution to the field. Palmeri asks the reader to consider the ways in which multimodal instruction can benefit students enrolled in our writing classes in ways that traditional paper-and-pencil approaches do not.

#### Works Cited

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