

# Present Tense

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*Multimodal Composing in  
Classrooms*

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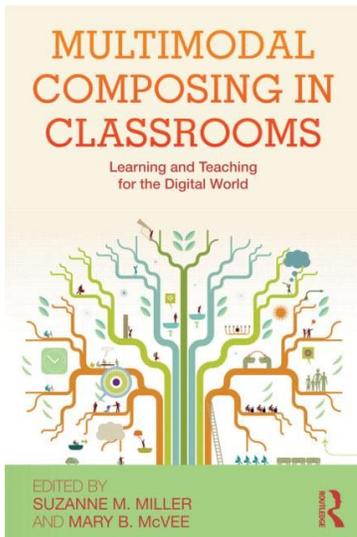
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# Book Review: Miller and McVee's *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms*

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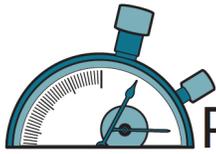
*Miller, Suzanne M. and Mary B. McVee, editors. Multimodal Composing in Classrooms: Learning and Teaching for the Digital World. Routledge, 2012.*



Edited by Suzanne M. Miller and Mary B. McVee, *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms: Learning and Teaching for the Digital World* presents nine chapters that deal with students' and teachers' active and intense engagement in multimodal composing in various contexts to "mak(e) sense of the world" (1). These chapters address issues pertaining to shifting notions of literacies: multimodal composing as an essential new literacy, *performance knowledge* as an indispensable new literacy, video grammar as an effective tool, integration of multimodal literacies with the

curriculum as a tool for the powerful expansion of teaching, learning and teacher-student agency, and critical reframing leading to transformative teaching and learning. "The focus of the book," according to the editors, "is particularly on using multimodal composing in classrooms as a literacy learning tool" (6). As the following review of each chapter shows, the editors are to a great extent able to meet the envisaged objectives.

Chapter 1, entitled "Multimodal Composing: The Essential 21st Century Literacy," by Miller and McVee, illustrates how multimodal composing has become an indispensable new literacy in schools in the twenty-first century. The authors demonstrate how human activities including pedagogical practices are inextricably intertwined with technological developments such as "computers, the Internet, mobile phones and other ubiquitous computing devices for communicating, taking pictures and video, playing music and games, searching for and storing digital material" (2). These advancements have greatly expanded the very concept of literacy as reading and writing print text into multimodal literacies. The literacies encompass reading and writing multiple forms of non-print texts like movies, web pages and images, and social literacy practices through Internet Web pages with images, voices, and music mixed with print. Drawing on the idea of Gunther Kress, the editors argue that students have to develop competence or facility with design in order to combine two modes of representation:



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language and images that are “time-based, sequentially organized” and “space-based and simultaneously organized,” respectively (2). They also point out how *performance knowledge* has become essential—knowing how to find, gather, use, communicate, and imagine new ways of envisioning assemblages of knowledge. The chapter goal envisioned by the editors is “to provide visions of classrooms where . . . new literacies become new tools for understanding and learning in school” (1). In my opinion, they have achieved their goal as they clearly envisage the classrooms in which students have to be equipped with new literacies (i.e., knowledge of multiple forms of non-print texts and *performance knowledge*).

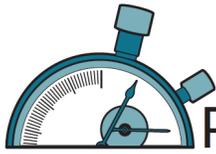
As the title of their chapter, “The (Artful) Deception of Technology Integration,” posits, Mary B. McVee, Nancy M. Bailey, and Lynn E. Shanahan look at technology with critical and skeptical eyes, and they suggest that employment of technology to improve human lives and change schools through access to information is itself deceptive. Through the responses from teachers and teacher educators, the authors show how technology can be overwhelming for beginners. They further argue that all teachers may have used technology as a motivational tool to trick students into real learning but that motivation alone is not sufficient. Lastly, they argue that teachers should use technology to take the students beyond the motivational edge into a world where they are passionately engaged in the creation of knowledge and making meaning.

David L. Bruce, in “Learning Video Grammar: A Multimodal Approach to Reading and Writing Video Texts,” introduces video grammar as “a structural form that can be considered from a reading and composition perspective” (33). Video grammar comprises three types of shots:

establishing (giving the viewer a perspective of surroundings and settings of a scene), reaction (seeing how the viewer responds to a situation), and perspective (seeing through the eyes of a character) shots. Although the term “grammar” connotes a negative meaning in disciplines like English Language Teaching, explicit training in the video grammar, contends Bruce, enables students to use cameras more purposefully and effectively. He further argues that “in teaching that same grammar as a composition activity, student compositions improved exponentially” (32).

In Chapter 4, “The Importance of a New Literacies Stance in Teaching English Language Arts,” Nancy M. Bailey contends that a new literacies stance is indispensable for devising “literacies curricula and classrooms where students learn to use literacy in meaningful ways as they construct identities as confident, literate beings” (45). Built upon theories of pedagogies, multimodality and multiliteracies, Bailey argues that an effective literacies stance must be grounded in pedagogical strategies, which encompass inquiry-based learning, collaborative construction of knowledge, and an “insider mindset” (45). The writer chronicles the pedagogical experiences of Carol Olsen to make a point that the use of technology can turn serious subjects like literature into fun. Using the song lyric project in which she draws on students’ local knowledge and authentic inquiry, Olsen illustrates that literacy is both “social” and “cultural practice” (60).

James Cercone in Chapter 5, “Being Great for Something’: Composing Music Videos in a High School English Class,” transports readers to an English language arts classroom to observe an English teacher, Joel Malley, and his students engaged in a collaborative work at Apple Central High School. In particular, Cercone



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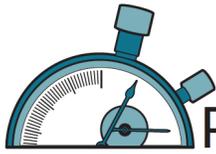
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discusses workshop students, as well as the teacher, while they work through a music video composing project. The writer considers digital video composing to be an opportunity for students to “engage in meaning making using multiple modes, including image, print and sound—the different “texts” that make up a digital video” (65). Though the project that took more than 30 days to accomplish, the writer argues that students undergo the same process of composition in the English language arts: prewriting; writing; revising; sharing; providing constructive feedback; and playing the roles of readers, writers, and filmmakers. In a nutshell, music video composition is a social process for making sense and meaning.

Set against the backdrop of inconsistent educational policies, Monica Blondell and Suzanne M. Miller’s “Engaging Literature through Digital Video Composing: A Teacher’s Journey to ‘Meaning That Matters’” shows how integrating multimodal literacies with the curriculum enhances “the powerful expansion of teaching, learning[,] and teacher-student agency possible in schools” (81). Specifically, the authors portray Ms. Gorki, an English teacher, willing to integrate digital video composing into her classroom activities. A lover of literature, the teacher is driven by inquiry-based questions such as “Are the students engaged in learning? What are they doing that is meaningful to them? How can they get something out of school that they will take with them?” that help her to employ digital video composing as a methodological tool to explore literary texts. Although students’ difficulty expressing their ideas in writing hinders the beginning of their composition to some extent, the teacher continues a series of video compositions in order to give voice to her students.

“What happens when a motivated fifth-grade teacher who uses a traditional print-based focus on literacy uses digital technologies for students to compose multimodal texts?” “In what ways does the teacher’s perspective on literacy shape how her students communicate with various sign systems?” (98). In Chapter 7, Lynn E. Shanahan answers the aforementioned questions by observing a class of a science teacher, Mrs. Bowie, who believed in a learner-centered environment. Students’ engagement in adding animation to their HyperStudio projects bespeaks her valuing of collaborative problem solving. She succeeds in engaging her students in the digital project through which they are able to mingle drawing, symbols, and writing in an adept way to convey information.

The penultimate chapter, “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, illustrates how critical reframing leads to transformative teaching and learning. The authors achieve this by discussing two history students, Nicole and Paige, who were provided with an opportunity by their creative teacher, Keith Hughes, to compose a digital video movie trailer as a methodological tool for understanding the Jim Crow era in the States. They argue that critical reframing requires changing the landscape of twenty-first century pedagogy. According to the authors, “such change” encompasses “the process of reflecting on and redesigning pedagogy so that it . . . creates a supportive social space for mediation, consistently constructs felt purpose for embodied teaching and learning, draws upon the identity and lifeworlds of both students and teachers, and provides explicit attention to and instruction in multimodal design” (125).



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Beginning and ending with their essays, Miller and McVee provide effective bookends to the collection. In the last chapter, “Changing the Game: Teaching for Embodied Learning through Multimodal Composing,” the editors, in fact, provide the readers with a “cross-case analysis of the chapters” discussed earlier (131). Despite many changes taking place in the pedagogical world, the editors argue that the age-old educational philosophy—transmission of knowledge from one vessel to another—still looms over schools. Then they show how teachers, students, and practices dispel four myths surrounding teachers, students, multimodal composing, and multimodal literacies. The first myth holds that teachers are major impediments to integrating new and multimodal literacies in classrooms, and the second one considers all students to be “digital natives” and teachers to be “digital immigrants” living by a different mindset (132). The third and fourth myths consider multimodal composing and multimodal literacies to be extraneous and the opposite of print literacies. Finally, they elaborate on the concept of the model of multiple literacy practices that they discussed in the earlier chapter to advocate an embodied learning for all students.

The editors and authors of the chapters included in *Multimodal Composing in Classrooms: Learning and Teaching for the Digital World* show how multimodal composing has become an indispensable new literacy. The book is invaluable for compositionists, rhetoricians, linguists, educational researchers, teachers, and those who want to learn the changing notion of literacies. Moreover, the book has the potential to transform teachers’ pedagogical practices with regard to multiliteracies and multimodal composing.



Shuv Raj Rana Bhat is a second year doctoral student in the English Department at the University of Texas at El Paso. His works include three co-authored series of books: *Rainbow English Reader* (with Tara Datta Bhatta, Maheshor Paudel and Rishi Neupane), *Learning to Read and Write* (with Hari Prasad Sapkota), and *Grammar for Communication* (with Puskar Joshi and Kumar Bahadur Rai). In addition, he has co-edited an English teachers’ training manual, *Education of Lower Secondary English Teachers* (with Krishna Raj Hamal, Puskar Joshi and Kumar Bahadur Rai), and has published several journal articles. His research interest includes pedagogy and ideology, critical stylistics, critical discourse analysis, critical race theory, rhetoric of empire, translingulism, teacher training, second language learning, postmodern and postcolonial rhetorics and pedagogical and cultural dimensions of classroom discourse.