

**Multimodal Composition and Basic Writing**Barbara Gleason, Special Issue Editor, *BWe*

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This special issue of *Basic Writing Electronic Journal* grows out of the Council on Basic Writing (CBW) Pre-conference Workshop ("Social Justice, Multi-modalities and Basic Writers") at the 2010 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Chaired by Shannon Carter and Hannah Ashley, the full-day workshop allowed guest speakers, discussion leaders, and participants to focus on connections between multimodal composing in basic writing classrooms and social justice. Among the guest speakers was Valerie Kinloch, who showed us how young adults living in Harlem use multimodal communication practices to document gentrification in their neighborhoods. Also on the program was Peter Adams, who presented promising program evaluation data on student success in an innovative basic writing course offering at Community College of Baltimore County, the Accelerated Learning Program. Rebecca Mlynarczyk and Deborah Mutnick reported on an ongoing national survey of basic writing programs sponsored by CBW. Social justice was a common thread among presentations by Steve Lamos, William Lalicker, Shannon Carter, and Susan Bernstein. After these guest speakers made oral presentations, Hannah Ashley demonstrated multimodality by showing us a Prezi titled "Social Justice and Multi-modal Writing for Basic Composition, Really? A Post-Process Framework." Two direct outcomes of that CBW workshop are this special issue of *BWe* and our publication of Hannah Ashley's multimodal presentation.

Although in 2010 leading scholars had already called attention to fast-evolving new literacies arising from technological innovations, the use of social media, and global communications (Self and Hawisher; Yancey), a focused discussion of multimodal composition

had yet to make headway in basic writing classrooms and publications. This special thematic *BWe* issue aims to bring issues in teaching and learning multimodal composing to the attention of basic writing teachers and scholars.

### **Multimodal Composition and Multilingual Writers**

In 2010, the same year that CBW sponsored a special workshop on multimodal composing, Steven Fraiberg published "Composition 2.0: Toward a Multilingual and Multimodal Framework" in *College Composition and Communication*. By connecting multimodal composing to multilingualism and participation in global communication networks, Fraiberg calls attention to a composition remix already underway and propelling us forward to an "expanded definition of writing" that will allow us to "conceptualize multilingual-multimodal writers as rearticulating, reassembling, and redesigning complex genre and cultural ecologies" (118). Fraiberg's portrayal of multilingual writers expands on a theme articulated by Bruce Horner and John Trimbur, who critique English-only US writing curricula, and by Kimberley K. Gunter, who promotes teaching students to use hybrid discourses in their writing in order to avoid "forcing many students to choose between academic success and home or chosen alternative cultures" (71). These authors share a common concern for moving beyond restricted literacy models that limit and disempower students by failing to acknowledge the full spectrum of their identities, linguistic expertise, and everyday communication practices.

### **Transforming Definitions: Literacy, Literacies, and Multiliteracies**

As digital natives, many (though not all) young adults have communicated, learned, and played games in digital forums throughout their entire lives and "live much of their lives online, without distinguishing between the online and the offline" (Palfrey and Gasser 4). And though

they aren't "digital natives," many working age adults are communicating by email, Twitter, and Facebook almost daily. In addition, at least three times as many immigrants are living in the United States today than in 1970, and many of these immigrants are, or are becoming, literate in two or more languages (Rivera and Huerto-Macías 3-5). Yet most basic writing programs continue to focus exclusively on English-only curricula, print-based materials and an autonomous model of literacy, perpetuating the view that literacy comprises neutral skills existing inside individuals (Street 417). A much broader view of literacy is articulated in a recent NCTE position statement, which states that literacy is "a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups" who, in the 21st century, are fluent in multiple literacies, proficient in use of technology, and able to

- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others . . . to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze and evaluate multimedia texts; [and]
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

(“The NCTE Definition of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacies”)

A similarly comprehensive view of literacy has been proposed by Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher, whose study of twenty individuals' communication practices draws connections among technology, family environments, and public forums to establish "complex web[s] of social forces, historical events, economic patterns, material conditions, and cultural expectations

within which both humans and computer technologies co-exist" (31). Urging us to heighten our awareness of digital literacies and of the global contexts in which these literacies function, Selfe and Hawisher argue for "expand[ing] our national understanding of literacy beyond the narrow bounds of print and beyond the alphabetic" (232). Cynthia Self fleshes out this thesis in *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, an edited collection of essays linking multimodal composing to pedagogical practices. The texts and webtexts published in this *BWe* issue build on Selfe's teacher resource project by situating multimodal composition in basic writing curricula.

### **Multiliteracies and Basic Writing**

The view that one person can possess multiple literacies has special significance for us as basic writing educators. Just as inclusion of multilingualism, multiliteracies, and hybrid language forms in curricula expands student opportunity and our understanding of students' capabilities, including new media texts and multimodal composition in basic writing curricula allows us to acknowledge our students' existing communicative identities while capitalizing on their preferred communication practices. Moreover, by relinquishing our collective reliance on a traditionally defined, print-based view of academic literacy, we can move beyond the powerful and often oppressive relationship between mainstream culture and officially sanctioned communication styles, a relationship that too nimbly classifies people as literate or illiterate, prepared or unprepared, talented or untalented, intelligent or unintelligent, and, ultimately, worthy or not worthy of access to higher education.

### **Multimodal Composing: Opportunities and Challenges in Basic Writing Contexts**

In the call for papers distributed for this issue, I invited potential authors to consider the

“challenges that can obstruct curricular change or dampen enthusiasm of both instructors and students” and the opportunities for creating “more compelling and inclusive learning environments for students of diverse races and cultures, language backgrounds, ages, and communication interests.” Our authors have all addressed these topics, both by describing innovative curricula and by posing provocative questions about how inexperienced writers learn to compose multimodal texts and about how instructors might go about teaching multimodal composition.

While illustrating multimodality as a presentational form in “Social Justice and multimodal writing for Basic Composition, really?,” Hannah Ashley encourages facilitating student learning of rhetorical strategies and multiple discourses rather than emphasizing mastery of writing conventions in basic writing curricula. In “Remembering Basic Composition,” Thomas Henry, Joshua Hilst, and Regina Clemens Fox propose shifting from “basic writing” to “multimodal basic composition”—a move that entails folding oral/aural and visual dimensions of communication into college writing curricula and emphasizing composing meaning rather than inscription and textual products. Claire Lutkewitte explores future writing instructors’ digital and multimodal teaching and research experiences in “The First Digital Native Writing Instructors.” Kara Poe Alexander, Beth Powell, and Sonya C. Green analyze the potentials, limitations, and pedagogical implications of integrating multimodal composition into basic writing courses.

The remaining texts and webtexts provide examples of innovate curricula and instructional approaches. A curriculum based on producing and interpreting photo essays appears in “Teaching Style in Basic Writing” by Ben Lauren and Rich Rice, while the benefits of video production are explored by Lilian Spina-Caza and Paul Booth in “Video Unbound” and

also by Dan Wuebben in "Synesthetic White Noise." Christopher Leary calls our attention to the potential advantages of learning to read and compile other authors' work into both digital and print anthologies (a literacy strategy he terms *macrocomposition*) in "Meshing Digital and Academic Identities in Basic Writing Classrooms." And in "Welcome e-Burdens," Ethna Dempsey Lay examines the learning experiences of students engaged in producing and reflecting on new media projects. Finally, in a visually compelling example of multimodal composition, Rachel Shapiro describes a curriculum she developed for both an Upward Bound program and a basic writing course. Our two book reviewers, Justin March and Kuhio Walters, offer insightful commentaries on Bronwym Williams' *Shimmering Literacies* and an online student resource, *ix. visualizing composition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. by Cheryl E. Ball and Kristin L. Arola.

### Moving Forward

By participating in the 2010 Council of Basic Writing all-day workshop on multimodal composing and then editing this journal issue, I have so immersed myself in innovative new ways of conceptualizing teaching and learning that I have completely transformed my understanding of the impact of 21st century new literacy practices on college writing curricula. No longer can I endorse an entirely text-based writing curriculum focused exclusively on "academic discourse" as desirable or even minimally sufficient for students' needs both in college and in the wider culture of home, work, community and travel. I also grasp more fully the argument that different communication modalities affect the ways we learn, process information, and persuade, and that by offering basic writing students more options, we expand their opportunities for successful learning. Finally, I have overcome some of my own reservations about teaching inexperienced writers to use multimedia presentations that include

images, sound bytes, video and graphics alongside text, despite the challenges these modalities may present to both teachers and students alike. It has become increasingly apparent that students arrive in class so well equipped with smart phones, tablets, and laptop computers that with wi-fi access in classrooms, we no longer need depend on our institutions for wired computer classrooms to assign new media projects in writing courses. No matter where you stand on some of the teaching and learning issues discussed in this journal, I hope that while reading the texts and webtexts, you will feel motivated to reflect on your own definition(s) of literacy and to experiment with approaches to course design that include multimodal composition.

### **In Memorium**

I dedicate this *BWe* issue to my late husband, Edward Quinn (1932-2012), whose generous spirit, sharp intellect, and unwavering support encouraged me to remain professionally focused while working on this editing project and actively engaged in learning and teaching for nearly all of the years I have worked at City College. As Chair of English in the 1970s, Ed strongly advocated for the newly admitted open admissions students and for the Basic Writing Program headed by Mina Shaughnessy. Shortly thereafter, he co-founded the City College Center for Worker Education, an innovative program for working adult undergraduates that has evolved into the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies.

### ***BWe* Moves to City College of New York**

This thematic *BWe* issue inaugurates a new web site hosted at the City College of New York. By bringing *BWe* to CCNY, we situate the journal in a college whose historic mission to "open the doors to all" was renewed during the first decade of CUNY's Open Admissions era, the 1970s, when, thanks to the leadership of Mina Shaughnessy and many of her colleagues, basic writing emerged as a professional forum for addressing relationships among cultural identity, social class, access to higher education, and equity.

### **Upcoming Issues**

Tom Peele is guest-editing a *BWe* special issue on Basic Writing and Community Engagement. His Call for Papers is posted on our Submission Guidelines page. Prospective authors may also submit work on any topic related to basic writing. See Submission Guidelines for further information.

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