

Toward a Composition Made Whole, by Jody Shipka. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2011. 179 pp.

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Multimodality as a buzzword is in vogue in the field of Composition Studies. The predominance of “multimodal texts” seems to only spread from writing program to writing program, yet the assessment, pedagogy, and theoretical framework governing multimodality in Composition Studies is stunted. Referring to the production of texts, broadly defined, one either engages in multimodal discourse or one does not. The middle way seems lost, and this dichotomy, false as it may be, still permeates composition curriculum at various levels.

Jody Shipka’s *Toward a Composition Made Whole* offers the field of Composition Studies an opportunity to appreciate and critically reflect on the uses and governance of multimodality in assessment, pedagogy, and theory. This practice becomes important when we realize how little we know about the inherent multimodality of composition. Shipka begins her book with an introduction focused on basic but important thoughts about multimodality and communicative practice. The discussion presented is brilliant in its simplicity. Offering her readers the chance to understand her anecdotal perspective, Shipka regales us with a tale of a particular workshop experience. As is often the case, those outside of Composition Studies, and even some inside, often have a difficult time understanding the value of multimodality or, as a course, composition. She even suggests, “Whether implicitly, as was the case here, or explicitly stated, some of the questions lurking behind the reaction seem to be, ‘How is *that* college-level academic writing?’ ‘How can *that* possibly be rigorous?’ or ‘How can allowing students to do *that* possibly prepare them for the writing they will do in their other courses?’” (2).

These questions are important, yet they seem to implicitly argue there isn’t value in multimodality. Further complicating the notions of multimodality, we begin to see there is more at play than just curriculum. The nature of the multimodal outside the university environment and the nature of the multimodal inside the university environment are at odds inasmuch the former and latter hardly seem to meet. Why is this? The relevancy of primary labeling of multimodal texts is of great concern, and it seems those inside the university and those outside the university have different understandings of the multimodal. Like so many arguments in Composition Studies over the past five decades, the conceptions of what constitutes a “text” seem to be of supreme concern of those *inside* the university, despite the promulgation of multimodality *outside* of the university. Text certainly is not dead, but it isn’t what it once was either.

Moving through the text, Shipka provides a candid argument about what exactly Composition is and how composition scholars must rethink their assumptions. Too often, Composition is seen as a discipline stuck in the past

and holding to conservative views of what constitutes text; the author aims to, and rightly so, destroy those long held and ill-formed assumptions by showing that the multimodality of text should hold primacy in the composition classroom. Held within ideas of the past and present, compositionists must take hold of their scholarship, research, and pedagogy in order to critically examine the dynamic presence of the multimodal text. The field of Composition Studies has too long held onto the notion of textually dominant composing practices without understanding said practices in relation to the mediated processes through which text is created.

Providing us a detailed discussion of the fragile union of the fields of Composition Studies and Communication Studies, Shipka shows that while this union was ultimately unstable, it underscored an important aspect of both fields: neither seems to have a clue about how to define “writing.” Indeed, the discussion of these fragile unions should be read with bemusement as the discussion elucidates the seemingly pigheadedness and sheer uncompromising behavior of some scholars in both fields. This discussion provides both fields with a moment through which a new approach may be proposed, and the author does just that.

The sociocultural approach to communication often eludes those in composition courses, mostly because said approach is a stalwart pillar of the field of Communication Studies. However, Shipka suggests this approach to communication is necessary to the field of Composition Studies because it provides avenues to contend with the social and individual aspects of composing without throwing away the technologies often employed in the creation of texts. The author is deliberate and coherent in her argument, granting us an ability to understand how the multimodality of text can be employed in the composition classroom. Providing us with a discussion of past theory and then a discussion of her new approach, she shows while not completely inadequate, past theories of composition have often failed to recognize the technologies that have mediated text. Through the application of this new approach, the field of Composition Studies can rectify those past transgressions and begin to understand composition holistically, instead of just examining one particular act.

The author understands the need to consider what this approach might look like, and she delivers by highlighting data collected during two process studies. In perhaps the most interesting part of her book, Shipka shows us the majesty and simplicity of the ever-flowing composing process, as understood and enacted by students. The elements of a course show students becoming engaged with the material presented in ways that must seem unorthodox by the still dominant current traditionalist ethos in the field of Composition Studies. Performances of dance, illustration, mixed media composing, and others show the act of composition is far removed from the static nature of the page. In reading Shipka’s description, one can’t help but want to jump for joy and wish they had participated with and been witness of her students’ telling experiences. How lovely it is to read of students enjoying the act of

composition through embracing the multimodality of artifacts traversing university boundaries.

Taking this experience, Shipka moves to debates of curricula within institutions of learning and exactly what we can do to make things fit. She comes off as perhaps her most idealistic in this part of her book, and it should be applauded. We are provided with a framework on how to incorporate multimodal composing into our courses in ways that will engage students, both critically and reflectively. The framework the author proposes focuses on activity-based learning incorporating multimodal and mediate aspects of text. Fascinating and useful, the framework and examples highlight a great deal of negotiation with students as to the work that will be completed. Since the focus is on activity and ideas of text beyond the university, students are able to engage with artifacts foreign to them as compositional acts.

It seems evaluations and assessments are things we cannot escape. They dominate discourse in higher education, and Shipka does deliver and contribute to this dominant discourse by laying out a framework for assessing multimodal projects. Perhaps complicating the notion of multimodality, projects carried out through multimodal discourse cannot be subject to the same evaluation criteria to which a standard and, sometimes, boring traditional student essay is subject. It would not work because there are different issues at hand when experiencing a multimodal project versus reading a traditional essay. This framework, perhaps one of the best detailed and clear in the field of Composition Studies, should be the model for multimodal projects. Most importantly, the spirit of experimentation underscores the entirety of the evaluation framework, which provides students permission to do something they often are not encouraged to do in college-level coursework: fail. Much could be made for the usefulness of failure in composing, and while this spirit isn't exactly encouraged in fields outside Composition Studies, it should always be available to those who wish to give their students authority to be writers.

Earlier compositionists, from Berlin to Faigley to Elbow, gave birth to parts of Shipka's argument in one way or another; however, they were unable to put the pieces together because of their place and time within the field of Composition Studies. Fortunately, like many scholars before her, she has seized upon a vogue topic of critical importance to the entire field of Composition Studies. Riding the kairos-wave she has gathered, the author has offered us a chance to integrate the spirit and essence of multimodality into our courses and into our field. Indeed, we are provided a text worthy of any doctoral reading list, and one that should be a centerpiece of any composition scholar's bookshelf. Shipka has given us a treatise for an important element of 21st-century composition and provided us with a solid and clear framework for a composition truly made whole. We would do well to embrace it.

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