Review Essay

Considering What It Means to Teach “Composition” in the Twenty-First Century

**Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres**
*Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus, eds.*

**Redesigning Composition for Multilingual Realities**
*Jay Jordan*

**First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground**
*Jessica Restaino*

A newcomer, upon reading these three books as a first introduction to our discipline, would likely walk away asking at least four questions:

1. What exactly is *composing* or *writing*?
2. What should people teach and learn in *composition classes*?
3. *Who* is being taught in composition classes?
4. Who is doing the teaching in composition classes, and what is their expertise?

A newcomer isn’t the only reader who would find these questions difficult. These are questions that many within the field have also been asking for a long time. We have amassed a variety of research- and theory-based answers over the past decades, but the ground continues to shift under our feet, as the volumes by Tracey Bowen and Carl Whithaus and by Jay Jordan demonstrate. In other cases, as Jessica Restaino's volume illustrates, material conditions and historical practices seem immune to our research-based findings about best practice, leading us to continue asking questions that should, perhaps, be resolved by now.

The four questions are, of course, interrelated. If we can’t clearly define what writing and composing are, then it seems an impossible task to agree on what we should be teaching in a writing or composition class. The literate learners sitting in such classrooms have an impact on what can be taught (and how), what resources are available, and how the teaching and learning in the classrooms is afforded or constrained. Then there is the question that never seems to go away, the question of what one should know before one is able to teach a composition course. What we think qualifies a person to teach composition depends, quite clearly, on what we think composing is. And so we are back to the beginning. What is composing?

Given its centrality to all of our work, “What is composing?” is as good a question to start with as any. This is one of the many questions taken up by Bowen and Whithaus’s edited collection Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres. The thirteen chapters are grouped into three sections, “Part I: Multimodal Pedagogies That Inspire Hybrid Genres,” “Part II: Multimodal Literacies and Pedagogical Choices,” and “Part III: The Changing Structures of Composition Programs.” The chapters are written by a varied group of scholars and former or current graduate teaching assistants. Some of the chapters are broader and more reflective in scope than others and thus are perhaps more useful to our question here regarding what composing actually means. Jody Shipka, for example, in “Including, but Not Limited to, the Digital: Composing Multimodal Texts,” exhorts us to resist our “tendency to equate ‘multimodal’ or ‘multimodality’ with digitized, screen-mediated . . . texts” (74). Following Paul Prior’s lead, she argues, “multimodality is not some special feature of certain texts, objects, or performances, but a ‘routine dimension of language in use’” (74). Shipka pushes us to recognize that writing is always already multimodal,
and that writing is not the static text; even a student working on “a linear, print-based argumentative essay” is likely to “consult as well as construct other kinds of texts . . . draw on prior memories or experiences . . . discuss the assignment . . . consult models . . . reread . . . or share with others . . . experiment with different ways of layering or structuring her argument” (75). In other words, even the most traditional, print-based text entails multimodality in all its rich forms; we don’t have to try to include multimodality in composing but instead recognize that composing is already multimodal. Thus our task, as Shipka presents it, is to help students “leave our courses exhibiting a more nuanced awareness of the various choices they make throughout the process of accomplishing that work and the effect those choices might have on others” (76). To this end, we need to “begin creating opportunities for students to attend to the highly distributed and fundamentally multimodal aspects of all communicative practice, to treat . . . communicative practice—whether the end result is a digital text, a print-based essay, an object-as-argument, or a performance—as multimodal accomplishment” (76).

Tarez Samra Graban, Colin Charlton, and Jonikka Charlton take a view similar to Shipka’s in their chapter, “Multivalent Composition and the Reinvention of Expertise.” They open by noting that faculty and teaching assistants’ ability to “deliver a curriculum that embraces multimodality and [leads] to a more complex definition of what counts as ‘writing’ . . . has everything to do with what we think the purpose of the composition class is, how we see the roles and identities of ‘teachers,’ and what counts as appropriate ‘end products’” (249). This point takes us back to our opening list of questions and reaffirms that our sense of what writing or composing is will impact what a composition class or a composition teacher is. Like Shipka, Graban et al. suggest a view of multimodality as already a part of composing: “What our curriculum aims for is that students come to understand multimodal composition as a normal kind of intellectual engagement, where they have to choose more selectively and reflectively” (258). Our task as teachers is to create a “perceptual change on the part of ourselves . . . and our students as people trying to become better at writing and meaning making in any genre” (260).

Both Shipka and Graban et al. urge composition faculty to “keep it [our penchant for innovation] rhetorical” (Graban et al. 252). Both essays provide specific examples of rhetorically based, multimodal writing assignments with clear instructions for reflection regarding rhetorical choices.

But many of the chapters in this collection do not take up this exhortation to “keep it rhetorical,” and thus lead readers (not only the newcomer from my
opening paragraph, but also me) to wonder what discipline’s views and subject of study are being represented here. If our field’s task, and the task of composition courses, are understood as broadening our sense of writing, seeing writing as flexible and not static, and recognizing the many ways that writing is already multimodal, then connections between traditional “print” compositions and “multimodal composing” are clear. In this view, we are not innovating or using technology or employing innovative genres simply for the sake of doing so, but instead we are acknowledging the already-existing complexities of writing in the twenty-first century and encouraging our students to gain the rhetorical dexterity championed by Shannon Carter. Whatever we need to consider and communicate, and with whomever we need to communicate our ideas, we should be able to do so with the widest variety of rhetorically appropriate tools and media, drawing on an array of rhetorical strategies. Classrooms should prepare students for this, and teachers must be flexible enough to accommodate this necessary learning. Composing is a rhetorical act.

However, some of the authors in this collection seem to take a much less rhetorical view of “multimodal literacy” in a “composition” class. For example, Julia Romberger describes asking her students to conduct a discourse community analysis of an online community. She encourages her students to “use a variety of evidence for their projects in a multimodal fashion” (218) and models how they might do this by creating a mock-up of a threaded discussion board where she communicates findings about the website icanhascheezburger.com and a video of a “person watching a video posted on the site . . . with a voice-over explaining how it is a common genre and the way it is used” (216–17). She notes that students are not particularly responsive to her invitation to use the data they’ve collected in multimodal ways: “The pages they produce very closely replicate the type of report they would produce in another class. They are also highly conditioned to rely upon textual evidence to demonstrate their claims” (218). This type of assignment, while obviously multimodal, does not seem to “keep it rhetorical.” What need is there for students to convey the results of their discourse community analysis in the form of a threaded discussion—even when that threaded discussion is written by one person, as a real threaded discussion would never be? What audience would need (or read) research results in that form? Does the threaded discussion share ideas in a more effective way than a traditional report? Are threaded discussions genres that first-year students are either not already familiar with or are in need of being taught within in a composition course? What is the rhetorical reason for choosing a threaded discussion instead of a report to share research ideas?
While Romberger’s example seems to describe a well-intentioned multimodal writing research project gone slightly awry (which is a stated goal of many of the chapters in this collection, most notably Cheryl E. Ball, Tia Scofield Bowen, and Tyrell Brent Fenn’s self-reflective opening chapter), other chapters seem to leave writing and rhetorical approaches behind altogether, in favor of a much broader set of technological literacies. Several of the chapters, for example, outline experiments with the virtual world Second Life. Jerome Bump describes asking his students to create and participate in a “virtual campus of our university” (121) in Second Life, and then “write’ their ‘road maps’ in this world” (122); the greatest challenge of this assignment “was to put the road map in SL somehow” (122). Options for doing so included converting PowerPoint presentations into websites and then linking the websites to a location in Second Life, embedding a “webloader’ script in an object” in Second Life, or embedding texts in 3-D objects in Second Life (122). Bump notes that all of these efforts to put texts into Second Life could be complicated and time-consuming, and that students were aggravated by the “steep learning curve and maintenance and security problems” (129). Outcomes of the course included increased awareness of campus architecture and a “sense of place” (127). But what about writing? Bump notes that “only 24 percent [of the students] agreed that their ‘writing skills have improved because of SL’” (131). If architectural awareness, a sense of place, and the ability to code in Second Life are goals of composition, then this course was a success. But if the goals are for students to practice writing, gain increased rhetorical dexterity, and acquire the ability to compose competently drawing on multiple modes as needed, then the class not only seems to have failed but doesn’t seem to have been designed to include activities that teach toward these goals in the first place.

Mary Leigh Morbey and Carolyn Steele also discuss Second Life and then spend extended time describing efforts to use Croquet, “a freely downloadable, open-source, 3-D environment that operates peer-to-peer” in which “artifacts of all modes . . . can be imported . . . to be shared and manipulated among users in real time” (236). The Croquet Consortium developed a “component-based architecture that extends the accessibility of Croquet to lay people,” and that initiative evolved into Open Cobalt (237). While Open Cobalt has been used to show ancient sites and buildings for architecture students to explore, its use for writing classrooms is less clear. Morbey and Steele note its application at the University of Minnesota, “where the online Writing Center experimented with using a 3-D environment to explore collaborative writing strategies by embedding writing prompts in a 3-D environment, literally walking students
through the elements of their written essay” (240). While the writing center director noted that this project was “Mind blowing!” and had helped her see that “Writing is more than text,” there is no evidence mentioned regarding this experiment’s efficacy for the students the writing center exists to help. The authors do not appear interested in these questions; rather, they explicitly say that they want to “[move] toward a deliteralizing of the written composition” (242). But is deliteralizing for the sake of deliteralizing enough?

The *Multimodal Literacies* collection, then, presents a variety of often contradictory answers to the first two opening questions in this review: “What exactly is composing or writing?” and “What should people teach and learn in composition classes? The answers presented here seem to range from “Writing is a flexible process that is always already multimodal; thus our task as teachers is to help students gain rhetorical dexterity in responding to a variety of complex, changing rhetorical situations” to “Writing is passé; the world is requiring less and less traditional textual communication; thus our task in composition classes is to engage students in entertaining or novel uses of technology and multimodality for their own sake.” While this may be a simplistic summary of views expressed in this collection, it does seem that there are at least two competing and contradictory ideas about writing, teaching writing, and our field at play here. Which view will win out? That depends on how we answer the question that Graban et al. prompt us to ask: “Will we keep our teaching rhetorical?” The answer will deeply impact the future of our field—and whether we remain a field that has at its core a coherent, recognizable subject of study.

If the questions regarding what counts as writing and what we should be teaching in a composition class are not difficult enough, Jay Jordan reminds us in his excellent monograph, *Redesigning Composition for Multilingual Realities*, that our classrooms are not homogenous, English is not monolithic, and the diverse array of students participating in any given composition classroom provide a rich set of resources on which teachers can draw. This succinct monograph builds carefully on existing research about theory and language use to move forward disciplinary conversations about multilingual writers. The book consists of an introduction (“Coming to Terms with ‘English’ ‘Users’ in ‘Composition’”) and four chapters that play on the word comp (“Compensation: Fixin’ What Ain’t Broke,” “Competence: Learning from ‘Learners,’” “Composition: Outdated Assumptions to New Architectonics,” and “Composing Intercultural Relationships”). Jordan echoes what many other language scholars have asserted: “multilingualism is a daily reality for all students—language
users—whether they themselves use more than one language or whether they interact with others in settings of multiple language contact.” (1). What this actually means for writing teachers has been less clear, so here Jordan’s goal is to “take seriously the charges to advance cross-disciplinary understandings of multilingualism and to develop specific pedagogical approaches to it—both of which charges point to a need to . . . ‘redesign’ composition” (4).

Jordan begins by providing readers with some “orienting” information regarding multilingualism in composition classes. He notes that we don’t know how many ESL students are in the United States and cautions us to remember that “not all international students are ESL and many U.S. citizens and permanent residents are ESL users” (4). He calls into question the assumed goal that ESL students in composition should be learning to “successfully negotiate entry into English-language communities whose discursive makeup is determined and arbitrated by monolingual native speakers of English” (5). Given their growing numbers (nonnative English speakers will outnumber native English speakers within the next fifty years) and their increasing global role as “targets for expanding goods and services,” Jordan follows Lu and others in arguing that we should reconceptualize “ESL students” as “fully competent English ‘users’” (7). Reconceptualizing in this way is difficult, for a variety of reasons that Jordan also details, including the long-standing view in U.S. schooling that “good citizenship” should be equated with “English-language proficiency” (8).

Jordan draws on a variety of language scholars to question what “English-language proficiency” is, noting that “the nature of ‘English’ . . . has always been in flux—a reality that challenges the idea of clear boundaries between ‘academic,’ ‘home,’ ‘standard,’ ‘second language,’ ‘and other English varieties’” (11). While English “has . . . solidified itself into a large-scale lingua franca,” “whose English it is” is an open question (11). Multilingualism is, in fact, more common than monolingualism, and multilingual nonnative English speakers are not “failed language learners” (13). Multilingual nonnative English users are, like all language users, “deploying their own, deliberative uses of language” (15) and, in the process, changing English (or, perhaps more accurately, Englishes).

This reminder that all language users are learning and adapting forms one of the primary foundations of Jordan’s book. Teaching what Keith Gilyard calls “critical language awareness” (20) should form the basis of all composition courses, in Jordan’s view, and is equally useful for all the language users who enroll in composition courses, whether native or nonnative, monolingual or multilingual. Moreover, native monolingual language users don’t necessarily
have the upper hand in this endeavor; rather, “the diverse skills of negotiation that so-called English language users often demonstrate position them as models of competence for changing symbolic practices” (22). Jordan draws on Wenger, Gee, and Bakhtin to argue that the “enduring condition of all language users” is to engage in dialogues that include a “mixture of different voices, different contexts, and even different languages” (42–43).

According to Jordan, we must stop assuming that “difference” equals “deficit” (26) and that the language diversity of nonnative or multilingual language users is a “contagion that must be located, identified, and contained for the benefit of the student-carriers themselves, their peers, and the institutions they enter” (25). Throughout the monograph, Jordan argues that we should replace our view of language diversity as a “bacteria” or “problem to be contained,” with a view that sees language diversity as “a resource to be encouraged and spread” (33). He uses what he terms a “‘viral’ alternative to prevailing bacteriologies” (26) throughout, suggesting that “otherwise alien, infectious influences” should be “allowed to, in Etienne Wenger’s words, create ripples of opportunity throughout conservative systems” (41).

Given the dialogic nature of all language use and the constant change that linguistic and rhetorical practice is constantly undergoing (52), Jordan asks us to reconsider what language “competence” looks like. We “cannot afford to continue ignoring the multiple competencies students have developed . . . before entering” (53) our classrooms. He draws on both his own research and a review of the research done by others to outline a set of competencies that multilingual language users seem to possess:

1. “Book” knowledge of English grammar
2. Lexical and syntactic innovation
3. Linguistic and/or rhetorical resistance/accommodation
4. Cross-cultural information/critique
5. Meta-task orientation (65)

Jordan’s third chapter describes a pilot cross-cultural composition course he taught that paired students in a composition course with students in a second language composition course. He describes his own and his collaborator’s efforts to help students see one another as competent language users who have much to learn from one another. Given what he learned in that pilot program, he ends the book by suggesting “pedagogical directions” for achieving a balance
between what *can* be done and what *should* be done given the constraints of a composition course, and “for situating composition in contexts of increasingly complex relationships” (113). In setting out these pedagogical directions, Jordan helpfully draws on the ICC (Intercultural Communicative Competence) project developed as a result of the Council of Europe’s “call to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” (120). The “ability to manage/to negotiate is the key component of intercultural communicative competence” (122). Given the fact that even the “most apparently homogeneous groups of students bring histories with them that are not easily or desirably checked at the door,” Jordan suggests a composition course design that cultivates and sustains relationships. Teachers can ask students to consider their contact with and “attitudes about difference” (128). Assignments can “encourage students to reflect on and analyze cross-cultural and linguistic contact and negotiate that contact in real time” (130). Students can take up the topic of “entering or adapting to [Gee’s notion of] Discourses” (130) and conduct “original research on communicative practices as they happen” (131). What Jordan calls “scaffolded peer interaction” (132) can play an important role in such a class, as can portfolio-based assessment (137). Jordan’s book, then, provides useful and thought-provoking answers to questions regarding language users enrolled in our composition courses and helps us better envision how the competencies of those language users can inform the content of our courses.

“Many composition teachers feel unprepared to work with large multilingual populations in their courses” (142), according to Jordan. If we add to this difficulty the complications with composing outlined in the Bowen and Whithaus collection, we can easily find ourselves despairing at the fourth question outlined at the beginning of this review: Who is doing the *teaching* in composition classes, and what is their expertise?

Questions of qualifications and preparedness are the important and difficult ones that Jessica Restaino takes up in *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of the Middle Ground*. Given the complicated nature of *writing* and *composing*, and the challenges and affordances provided when we can recognize the rich linguistic diversity our composition students bring with them, we can safely assert that there is a lot to know about teaching composition. Not only is writing a subject of disciplinary study, but that subject and the students who learn it are also constantly changing. Teaching composition is a challenging task for even the best prepared and most experienced writing scholar. But, as Restaino points out, many composition classes are not taught by such well-prepared and experienced writing schol-
ars; instead, they are often taught by graduate students (who are frequently enrolled in programs other than rhetoric and composition): “largely untrained, unsure of their responsibilities, and equipped with a syllabus that they did not design and perhaps a list of pedagogical procedures they do not understand” (1). Restaino argues, rightly, that “there is nothing simple about learning how to teach writing, and there is nothing simple to say about writing teachers” (14). In this monograph she attempts to fill what she sees as a gap in work that theorizes “the early experiences of graduate students as writing teachers and its potential shaping of graduate students’ understanding of composition as a discipline” (2).

Restaino’s effort to theorize the work of graduate student composition teachers leads her to follow four first-year teaching assistants at a public university. These TAs included two fiction MA students (Shirley and Anjel), one literature doctoral student (Tess), and one rhetoric and composition doctoral student (Nancy). They received a three-day orientation prior to beginning to teach and were given an assigned syllabus and a mentor (a more experienced graduate student). During the first semester of teaching, they were required to participate in a teaching practicum taught by a faculty member. Restaino visited the TAs’ classrooms and observed student conferences, attended parts of orientation sessions, asked TAs to fill out a survey, collected “at least two batches of student papers from each participant,” visited the teaching practicum “a couple of times,” collected their responses in that class, and corresponded frequently with the TAs outside of the practicum or composition classroom settings. To analyze the data she collected, Restaino draws on “the political theory of Hannah Arendt,” which suggests a “three-part theoretical construct of labor, work, and action” (14). After briefly outlining her theory and research methods in the first chapter, Restaino continues her analysis in the three remaining chapters: “Labor and Endlessness: Necessity and Consumption in the First Semester,” “Teachers-as-Students: Work and Action in the Middle Space,” and “Thinking What We Are Doing: Knowledge Making in the Trenches.”

Restaino outlines Arendt’s notion of “labor” as an effort that must be “repeated time and again” because “life itself depends upon laboring; however, the laborer always has nothing to show for his or her efforts” (23). Restaino attempts to connect this notion of labor to the work of composition TAs, arguing that “[p]arallels between Arendt’s laborer and the first-year writing instructor are at once frightening, reasonable, and an intellectual stretch” (23). Perhaps because of the differences between Arendt’s laborer and the first-year writing
instructor, Restaino never makes this parallel clear in any satisfactory way, nor does she demonstrate why this parallel is “reasonable”; indeed, throughout most of the book the connection feels only like a stretch; she never convinces me as a reader that Arendt’s notion of labor is applicable.

“What if,” Restaino asks, “new teachers learn to teach writing in a way that undermines the potential for the enduring, lasting contributions of instruction?” (24). The ensuing discussion of two of the TAs and their struggle with the process approach to writing encouraged by the writing program in which they taught does not illuminate Restaino’s argument. Instead, Restaino tells of the difficulties that TAs Tess and Shirley face in enacting a process approach that stems from theory and research they had not previously read, and their challenge in giving and defending grades on assignments they did not design. While their stories are moving and entirely to be expected in a program that provides only a three-day orientation before dumping unprepared teachers in front of a classroom, the theoretical analysis does little to illuminate their experiences. While Restaino briefly notes that others benefit from the labor of the TAs, she does not explore this fact or provide any historical context for it. Moreover, Restaino’s attempts to analyze the bits of data that she presents often feel forced. For example, when the students in Tess’s class resist and question her authority, Tess writes, “I feel like I have to know the answer, or my students won’t respect me; they’ll lose faith in me and this class” (48). Restaino then inexplicably argues that “looming above this struggle to survive is the constant threat of death” (48).

Restaino’s difficulty in analyzing the data in order to present a useful theory about the TA experience persists through the remaining chapters. In chapter 3, for example, she attempts to use Arendt’s theory of “action” (“the moment in which we reveal ourselves in the public arena for others to see, hear, and remember as distinctive, memorable agents” [53]) to frame her discussion of Tess’s difficulty gaining authority with a student referred to here as Philosophy Phil, of Nancy’s resistance to her role as a teacher and to the content of the composition course, and of Anjel and Shirley’s use of grading contracts to overcome their concerns about assessment. While these stories are compelling, the Arendtian analysis does little to enrich them. Restaino’s reading of the TAs’ struggles leads her to suggest that we should give TAs “the opportunity to sketch and try out alternate approaches” and avoid “creating machines” (104). The point she does not take up is glaring: how can graduate students with no training or expertise in a field sketch out alternate approaches to teaching a
subject they know little about? While certainly we want to nurture “thinking and highly skilled writing teachers” (104), doing so should probably start with reimagining an institutional structure that allows people with no expertise or training in an area to step into the classroom in the first place. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Restaino’s efforts to use Arendt seem to blind her to alternative readings of the highly compelling TA stories that she shares.

Restaino notes repeatedly and explicitly that Arendt’s theory is not an easy fit for an analysis of the composition classroom: “Arendt’s concepts are not an initially easy model for thinking about classrooms, about teaching, and certainly about graduate student teachers, those wayward souls located in the precarious position of being both teacher and student” (55). Yet she persists in attempting to apply an Arendtian frame, and the result is disappointing. While Restaino nods to the many problems inherent in the situation of the TAs she studied, she ultimately does little to push forward the theorizing in which she sets out to engage. Restaino’s concluding sentences demonstrate the difficulty I encountered with this reading of the TA experience: “If it is Arendt’s ‘love of the world’ that keeps us, in part, doing what we do in ‘our’ world, how do we show our love? My own response is that we honor beginnings, particularly those of the new graduate student teachers” (119).

Restaino began the book stating her desire to theorize “the early experiences of graduate students as writing teachers and its potential shaping of graduate students’ understanding of composition as a discipline” (2). That she ends by admonishing us to “honor beginnings” is, quite simply, not enough. This is especially true because the circumstances of the TAs that Restaino studies beg a lot of extremely important questions: What is there to know about writing and teaching writing? How does a teacher come to know these things? How can new writing teachers become better prepared to teach? Why is it that our very own programs seem to deny the subject of our study and place graduate students with no disciplinary training at all into a writing classroom? Who benefits from such unexpert labor? Why does such a system persist? But, at most, Restaino only nods to these questions and instead pursues an unfulfilling attempt to analyze the “labor, work, and action” of the TAs without a real consideration of the historical and current contexts that created the problems.

The difficulties that Restaino’s new TAs experienced, when read in light of the Bowen and Whithaus and the Jordan books, remind us that teaching writing is no easy task. There is a lot to know about both writing and teaching, and our ability to effectively help our students learn depends a great deal
on our understanding of language and language users. That so many of us
still operate in institutionalized structures that simply do not recognize these
facts and instead act as if there is nothing to know about writing or teaching
writing does a disservice to all of us: it does a disservice to our students, who
are not learning as they should and could be, and it does a disservice to our
discipline, which still struggles mightily to have any role at all in the making
of public policy as it relates to writing. Responding in a fruitful way to the
challenges set out by this trio of books will require a great deal of collective
effort and a determination to act out of what we know instead of accepting
what we have inherited.