

Chapter 1

Beyond Words: A Review of Research on Adolescents and Multimodal Composition

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ABSTRACT

This review synthesizes and critically interprets the empirical research on adolescents' multimodal composition practices across contexts. Along with presenting descriptive statistics characterizing the 76 studies reviewed (e.g., research designs, contexts, and types of multimodal products), qualitative coding revealed six main themes in research focusing on adolescents and multimodal composition. Sequenced according to prevalence, research has found that multimodal composition is: 1) engaging for adolescents, 2) a collaborative, social process, 3) particularly beneficial to "marginalized" adolescents, 4) involves overt instruction, 5) is scaffolded in a variety of ways, and 6) is a complex, recursive process. At a time when notions of composition are expanding—educators are trying to catch up and researchers have just begun to understand and theorize multimodal composition—this review offers a comprehensive look at what has been learned thus far and suggests implications for research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

The compositional practices of adolescents have undergone numerous shifts—from the page to the screen and from text to multimodal. Many of today's adolescents rely heavily on multimodal communication—incorporating a variety of modes including image, sound, movement, text, and gesture—to express themselves, connect with others, and fashion their identities (Buckingham, 2008; Jewitt, 2008; Kafai & Peppler, 2011; Sefton-Green,

2006). Taking advantage of the relatively low cost of production and distribution of content in order to share in an online "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2008), a growing majority of young people, 64% of those ages 12-17 who use the Internet, create and share multimodal content online (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007).

Considering the technology laden, multimodal, and fast-paced personal lives of most adolescents, it is not surprising that many find school to be antiquated and uninteresting because of the discon-

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nects in literacy practices they experience in and out of school (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). Many adolescents who begrudgingly write structured essays on assigned topics for their teachers go home and devote hours to creating multimodally rich products that are shared with a receptive and global audience.

Kress (2003) explained that these shifts in compositional practices “are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain” (p. 1). In an effort to catch up to the out-of-school multimodal practices of today’s adolescents, educators have started to see the value in these compositional practices and slowly begun to incorporate multimodal literacies into the curriculum for a variety of reasons—including to make schooling relevant, improve equity, prepare students to be critical and global citizens, and meet the needs of today’s adolescents.

As a result of these shifts, the past decade has seen increased researcher attention to examining the multimodal compositional practices of adolescents. In accepting that “writing now plays one part in communicational ensembles, and no longer *the* part” (Kress, 2003, p. 21, original emphasis), current research has scratched the surface in understanding how adolescents use different modes in their technological communication and expression. Researchers have sought to capture the compositionally rich practices of adolescents outside of school, as well as to understand what happens when multimodal composition is brought into the traditional writing environment of schools.

In order to understand the current landscape of multimodal composition, this review synthesizes and critically interprets the empirical research on adolescent multimodal composition practices across various contexts (in schools, afterschool programs, and out-of-school). At a time when notions of composition are expanding—educators are trying to catch up and researchers have just begun to understand and theorize multimodal

composition—this review offers a comprehensive look at what has been learned thus far and suggests implications for research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN MULTIMODAL RESEARCH

The two prominent frameworks in research on multimodal composition, multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) and multimodality (Kress, 2003, 2010; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), are situated within New Literacy Studies, which recognizes that reading and writing are always positioned within specific social contexts, and that it is these contexts that give meaning to literacy practices (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995).

Multiliteracies Framework

The multiliteracies framework (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) guides much of the research on multimodal composition thus far and is based on two key arguments—“the multiplicity of communication channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity” (New London Group, 1996, p. 63). In laying out this framework addressing communication for multiple modes and multiple contexts, the New London Group asked two fundamental questions: One related to *what* students need to learn and the other related to *how* a multiliteracies pedagogy can support this learning.

Vital to the multiliteracies framework is the understanding that all meaning-making is multimodal, including linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial elements. These elements are in dynamic interaction with each other during communication. Within the multiliteracies pedagogy, *design* is central for answering what students need to know for composing in new times, particularly the cyclical relationship amongst Available De-

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