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Review: Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric

Sipai Klein

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Review: *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric*
David M. Sheridan, and James A. Inman, eds.
Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2010

by Sipai Klein

About the Author

Sipai Klein is an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writers' Studio at Clayton State University. He received a PhD in Rhetoric and Professional Communication from New Mexico State University in 2011, an MA in English Literature with a Concentration in Creative Writing from The City College of New York in 2004, and BA in Physics from Yeshiva University in 2002. Before arriving at Clayton State University, he was a Visiting Professor at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs and a Marion L. Britton Postdoctoral Fellow at Georgia Tech.

Multiliteracy theory and practice have been recent developments in education, and *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric* brings this field into focus within writing center studies. In this collection, scholars and practitioners address multiliteracy studies, with their emphasis on multimodal composition, digital communication, and mixed writing modalities. This collection captures the possibilities and practicalities of multiliteracy within the broad spectrum common to writing centers, from peer-tutoring services, teacher-education graduate programs, and community extensions.

In a way, *Multiliteracy Centers* focuses on recent increased attention to what has become a salient topic in field of the teaching

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of writing, "the multimodal turn." As a writing center director, I too want to better understand this event in higher education simply because I wonder how our students' writing has changed due to the constant exposure to screen-based communication. I wonder how much time they authentically interact with other people with, or only with, a screen. When our lives are so interactively connected to screens, I also wonder how much my own life has changed due to exposure to them. The multimodal turn, with its emphasis on the influence of the screen on our communication practices and the ramifications of this influence, encourages wide discussion about multimodal communication in higher education. This collection reflects the breadth of this discussion by contextualizing it to our diverse writing centers.

In his introduction to the collection, David M. Sheridan helps us imagine the possibilities of transforming a writing center to a multiliteracy center before we, as researchers and practitioners alike, customize our writing support services to what they can actually become within our respective institutional contexts. Sheridan emphasizes the shift to the broadening of our definition of text. With this expansion, Sheridan also wants us to broaden our writing center mission to include the multifarious evolutions, if not revolutions, of contemporary texts: *"Multiliteracy centers should be spaces equal to the diversity of semiotic options composers have in the 21st century"* (6; emphasis in original). Putting aside the historical factors that have brought about the re-centering of writing in contemporary communication environments, Sheridan hopes that we are willing to not just wade through the demands placed on our writing centers but also to muster the courage to envision their role during these times of educational transformation.

The collection continues with a discussion of the multimodal turn as spatial design. James A. Inman's chapter, "Designing Multiliteracy Centers: A Zoning Approach," addresses how to think about and possibly articulate reasoning for the physical design of writing center spaces where writing tutors and students collaboratively work through and design class-assigned multimodal writing activities, such as video and audio texts. The purpose of this chapter is to begin addressing the gap in the scholarship regarding a methodological approach to writing

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center design. Based on "use zoning" principles, determined by the possible use of space through social interaction, Inman considers the various design decisions he made while founding the Center for Collaborative Learning and Communication at Furman University.

By contextualizing these innovative efforts within their own writing center work, this collection's authors essentially articulate how writing centers are research sites for understanding practice situated within the learning and teaching needs of specific multiliteracy centers. In this way, this collection allows its scholars to articulate what the New London Group terms a "situated practice" view of multimodality. The authors in this collection, for the most part, discuss how to envision writing tutors as multiliteracy tutors who engage students in conversation about both the rhetorical and technological aspects of multimodal texts. Multiliteracy work as situated practice makes room for further conversation regarding how writing centers serve as potential spaces to investigate, raise, and address multiliteracy research questions.

Examples of the collection's nuanced attention to multiliteracy theory as situated practice includes chapters by George Cooper and Troy Hicks, each of whom offer insight into the collaborative and often interactive efforts that occur in writing centers—places of multimodal meaning-making processes. George Cooper discusses how students in his service-learning course partnered with the school's multiliteracy center to work through multimodal assignments for a course's nonprofit clients. Troy Hicks describes the collaborative work between students in a K–12 teacher-training program and the university's multiliteracy center. Both chapters provide invaluable details about projects in which students and teachers alike can partake while working together with a center supporting a community of writers who compose texts that extend beyond the print medium.

In an effort to collate the various threads of formulating a multiliteracy center, Jackie Grutsch McKinney creates a starting point for what she calls "a model emerging for addressing multiliteracies in a peer tutoring setting" (207): tutor education specific to the literacy technologies adopted in the center, tutoring in specific technical literacies, and the actual hardware and software needed to compose multimodal texts. In this wonderful chapter, McKinney discusses how

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unfeasible it would be to set up expectations for all writing centers to go through a multiliteracy conversion process. Not only would funding and tutor education often be absent, but such demands may overstep the center's administrative reach within its institution. Let's recall Richard Lanham's (2001) reminder that we live at an historic crossroads where more words are being physically printed, composed, and read by more people than ever before in human history. Whether it's a center, clinic, lab, or studio, our writing community can and should feel comfortable with words as its salient supported mode of communication, without functional literacy skills consuming our tutors.

Multiliteracy Centers represents some of the finest work yet within the New Dimensions and Computers and Composition series on representing the complexity of multimodality in teaching and learning scenarios. That is why it is of little surprise that the book has been widely reviewed—in *Teaching English in the Two Year College* (December 2012), *Computers and Composition Online* (Spring 2012), *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* (2012), and *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (September 2011)—testifying to its ability to develop a conversational thread appealing to mainstream audiences in both the rhetoric and composition and the writing center communities.

Even with the subject's essential threads, from digital rhetoric to digital humanities, multimodality tends to elude us, and therefore articulating a modular definition has been an abstract journey. This collection illustrates that those who work in writing centers are reflective practitioners who wade through the transformative landscape of contemporary writing. Sheridan and Inman provide a set of conversational threads on multimodality and new media texts at the center of our writing support community. This collection raises many of the questions faced by writing center directors and scholars dealing with the challenges of assisting contemporary writers in a transforming educational landscape. If anything, readers of this collection should take away the rich data presented here to help them better understand their student population and the tutors who support these students.

Sipai Klein

WORK CITED

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  Text?" *Education, Communication, &
  Information* 1.1 (2001): 15-36. Print.

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