Transcription for Episode 4: Interview with Jason Palmeri
Run Time: 13:03

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JP: Jason Palmeri (guest)
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AH: This Rhetorical Life is a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Cue music: "One Word Extinguisher" by Prefuse 73.

JL: As writers and composition instructors, we struggle to keep up with the influx of new tools and composing spaces, from Twitter and Wordpress to tablets and smartphones. Though the digital age might have us believe we live in a unique era, we have always been multimodal, forced to choose between traditional alphabetic writing and other modes of communication, such as speaking, listening, and image making. Or at least, that's what Jason Palmeri argues in his engaging new book, *Remixing Composition*, released last spring by Southern Illinois Press. I had a chance to talk with Jason by phone recently about just some the challenges multimodality presents us as writers, teachers, and writing program administrators.

We began our discussion talking about this schism between multiple modes and digital tools. In his book, Jason revisits the field's scholarship before the digital age. I asked him to talk about some of the ways he's employed the analogue at his own institution at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio and the complications that arise from trying to reconcile those with the digital.

JP: I think when we equate the multimodal with the digital, we're inherently privileging the literacies of a relatively small group of people to our focus on using digital tools to compose. And so we aren't thinking about what we can learn from the literacy practices of a much larger group of people—some of whom are not necessarily using digital tools—and also a much larger history of multimodal composing since *before* the digital. I think part of it, too, just came from the practical realization that, you know, technological access continues to be very unequally distributed within our culture and across our institutions. And so my sense is that, if composition studies is ever *truly* going to make a multimodal turn as a whole field, we need to figure out a way to articulate multimodal pedagogy that wasn't dependent upon what the latest digital tools were.

Admittedly, I tend to focus a decent amount on digital modalities and production because that's of interest to me, but I also find myself increasingly interested in, for example, live performance or in giving students a wide range to think about—or really letting them make the choice. If I'm teaching a visual model of invention, I'm inclined not to say, "Everybody map out ideas in a Prezi" or "Everybody draw an image representing your

process." I'm inclined to say, "Choose your tool. *Decide* if you want to use a digital tool." What we're going to talk about is creating imagery as a way to invent ideas or a way to re-see a paper, and then I'm going to introduce you to a range of tools—some digital, some analog—and have you choose what works best for *you*." I think that's probably ultimately the right way to go.

This doesn't really come through much in the book, but I'm a big advocate of universal design approaches to instruction and sort of a recognition that we all have different strengths and limitations and abilities, and so we need a pedagogy that's flexible and allows people different ways to access content and different ways to invent and revise. So the ideal situation is—I think—moving between the analog and the digital in particular ways.

JL: Jason's book of course challenges our assumptions that the teaching of composition equals the teaching of alphabetic literacy. And so I asked him if he could talk a little about some of the strategies he's used to convince folks, including our own students, that such literacy is not always composition's only—or even primary—responsibility. Here's what he said.

JP: What our writing course is teaching you to do is develop *ways* of thinking about communication—ways of thinking about what it means to invent a text, to revise a text, to adapt that text to an audience, and to figure out who an audience is and to analyze who that audience is. And what we're doing is we're teaching you these transferable ways of thinking so that you'll be prepared to communicate in a whole variety of different situations.

Because one thing I make really clear to students is that it's impossible for a writing class to prepare you for every kind of communication you're going to do in your life. You'll be communicating with technologies that haven't even been invented yet. You'll be writing in genres much too diverse to cover in one class. So we can't provide you with a simple, here's-exactly-how-you-use-this-tool-and-this-genre-to-accomplish-this-end. What we can provide you with is a set of heuristics—a set of tools—so that you can go into a new communication situation and analyze it for yourself.

Partly when it comes to getting to this within our own program, many of our instructors have moved to a model of multimodal composing where they're actually asking students to make some choice about which modalities and technologies they're using—and then to justify that choice. So what they're really preparing them to do is to, well, to make the kinds of choices a 21st-century composer needs to make. You have a series of ways—a series of media you can use, a series of modalities you can use—and part of the skill of being a composer is to figure out which medium and which modalities are you going to use and why—for what purpose? And *that's* ultimately what we're teaching.

JL: At the end of his book Jason sets several modest goals for writing instructors and writing program administrators who are interested in incorporating multimodality into their

curricula. I asked Jason what he perceives as the challenges to some of his goals and how he's tried to enact them at his own institution at Miami.

JP: The biggest challenge that we have right now, in some ways, is—our curriculum is in many ways trying to do too many different things, [*laughs*] and it's increasingly feeling jam-packed. And so what we have succeeded in doing is in our 111 Composition & Rhetoric class, we have an assignment where students return to an earlier essay and then transform the argument—radically re-see the argument—through a multimodal composition and/or a digital composition. That's been working pretty well, but then what I find is when we made the space to put *that* in the curriculum, you know, we are to a certain extent truncating some of the other alphabetic essays.

What that means is that we can still get that done, but I'm having—I think—some trouble really incorporating multimodal forms of invention and revision *throughout* the course because the multimodality ends up kind of *all* put into a 4-week sequence and then, you know, there's a sense of time crunch when it comes to doing the drafts of the other essays, and so I'm trying to think through that. And I guess this is partly the institutional requirement as far as defending composition or what the university expects. There's certainly an *interest* in digital or multimodal composing, but there's also great interest in teaching students how to write a research-supported academic essay and spending time on issues of quotation and summary and paraphrase. All of that is really important, too, and so it becomes an interesting balance.

I would say it's very much the case that first-year comp has a lot of pressures on it from the entire university, and I think it's part of the reason that ultimately we're going to need to thread multimodal composing through writing courses at all levels. To a certain extent, first-year comp can only be an *introduction* to some ways of thinking about composing across modalities and can lay a groundwork, but it's going to require a broader curricular shift in order to really prepare students.

JL: At several points in the book, Jason talks about the importance of interdisciplinarity in designing and carrying out multimodal work. When I asked Jason about some of his successes in pursuing partnerships at Miami, he talked about his role on campus as a faculty member and as the director of composition.

JP: I'm an affiliate faculty in our Interactive Media Studies Program, as are several other of our Comp/Rhet faculty. We recently redesigned a new professional writing major, and our professional writing major had numerous English courses that are cross-listed with Interactive Media Studies courses. Interactive Media Studies here is truly a widely interdisciplinary program. It has people from art and engineering and education and English and business and, sort of, all put together all with some sort of interest in interactive digital media. So I think that's been a really productive location where I'm seeing students attracted to our major—or also attracted to the Interactive Media Studies major—who are getting a really richly interdisciplinary experience.

The one concern for me there is that that's still a bit too focused on the digital, though we're also starting up a Comparative Media Studies program that I'm getting involved in that's taking a broader approach to media historically, and there might be some room there. I'm still working on the best way to move forward beyond that. I've done some work—I've been co-facilitating the Writing Across the Curriculum workshop for faculty across the university for the past few summers, so I guess that's been good for my *own* thinking, but you know it's hard to institutionalize.

JL: Toward the end of our interview, I asked Jason to assess multimodality's status in the field and how it might be viewed by the teachers at a variety of levels, not just at Syracuse or Miami.

JP: To a certain extent, multimodality has definitely become, I think, much more *accepted* across a wider group of the field at this point then it was when I first began this project. And yet, I still think it remains a perennial challenge to support teachers in making that turn in their pedagogy across the field. And also I think there's still the tendency to equate the multimodal with the digital, and as long as we do that we're definitely leaving out wide flaws of the field that are teaching in locations in which intensively working with digital technologies may not be, and/or may not feel, possible for a variety of reasons. So I think that's a challenge, although I think there are a lot of scholars in the field right now who are definitely pushing the boundaries of what the multimodal could be. So I think about Jody Shipka's book, and I think about Adam Banks's work and a whole host of other scholars. I think that's opening up the conversation. I still think a lot of work remains to be done.

Especially in the process of writing the book that I wrote, I was pretty conscious of the fact that *actually* people in the field have been saying we've been focusing too narrowly on alphabetic literacy and we ought to open and consider alternative forms of communication for about 40 years. And yet we're still having to call for it. In some places, alphabetic literacy is still sedimented at the core of the field. So I think, it's not like we're ever going to suddenly wake up one day and be in a kind of totally transformed environment where multimodal composing is absolutely central to how composition is taught in every location, though I'm optimistic, I guess I would say. It's continuing to grow, and more importantly what I'm seeing is—I'm seeing a wider group of people who are interested in multimodal composing who wouldn't necessarily—and teaching multimodally—who wouldn't necessarily identify with computers and writing, for example, as their research area. But I think it's starting to become a practice that more people are accepting as just part of what it means to teach composition.

JL: Jason Palmeri is an assistant professor of English and the director of composition at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. His new book is called *Remixing Composition* and is available from Southern Illinois Press and NCTE. Thanks for listening to This Rhetorical Life. The music is by Prefuse 73. I'm Jason Luther.

Cue music: "One Word Extinguisher" by Prefuse 73.

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karrieann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.