Introduction

Multimodality is a relatively new term in the literacy vocabulary. Transformations in communications mean not only that the acts of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ have to be redefined, with attendant implications for the English curriculum, but also that the texts which are included in the reading and writing curriculum deserve re-appraisal.

There is now a vast range of texts available in different combinations of modes and media so that ‘text’ has come to include not only words-plus-images but moving images, with their associated sound tracks, too. Digital technology has increased the number and type of screen-based texts: 3D animations, websites, DVDs, playstation games, hypertextual narratives, chat sites, email, virtual reality representations. Many of these combine words with moving images, sound, colour, a range of photographic, drawn or digitally created visuals; some are interactive, encouraging the reader to compose, represent and communicate through the several dimensions offered by the technology. Not only are there new types of digital texts, however, but a massive proliferation of book and magazine texts which use image, word, layout and typography, often echoing the dimensions of screen-based technology. The availability and familiarity of these texts mean that young people bring wider experience of text to the classroom. This means that the literacy curriculum and approaches to teaching need to be reshaped to accommodate to shifts in communication and text experience in a multimodal, multimedia world.

The different modes and media

Modes of representation are broadly the different ways that a culture makes meaning through speech, writing, image, gesture/movement, music/sound. Multidimensional texts can also be multisensory of course, including smell, taste and touch, but since these are not usually capable of being retained (as print, images –still and moving, gesture and sound can recorded and retained through video/DVD) they are not included here. Over time, cultures develop regularities, patterns and expectations in any mode(s) of representation. People use more than one mode to represent ideas. Gesture accompanies speech and pictures are familiar and established ways of communicating ideas. So it can be argued that texts have always contained multimodal elements or possibilities (Andrews, 2001; Bearne, 2003; Kress 2003) and that these have been used to engage young learners for centuries. Over time, the different modes available to a community give rise to a range of media for carrying meaning: book, magazine, computer screen, video, film and radio.

… and what does affordance mean?

This is to do with text structure. In terms of communicating meaning, affordance is about what it is possible to do with one mode or another, or with a combination of modes. When we want to get a message across we choose the combination of mode and medium according to what they afford, or allow us to do, in terms of communication. Some messages are best carried by words spoken face to face; others might best be written so that they have more permanence and can be re-read. When it comes to reading, for example, a printed book affords us a different kind of experience compared with watching a text on television. With a book, the reader can decide to skip descriptive passages, vary the pace of reading and return to earlier pages to check out details or recapture the narrative flow. Although with a video player there is a review and fast forward device, ‘skipping’ is rather more difficult (and disrupts narrative meaning rather more). Similarly, since descriptive detail is part of the visual image, it is almost impossible to ignore the descriptive elements. Film does not afford the same reading approach as a book does.

It is not only a matter of considering what writing affords or allows for ease of communication or, in comparison, what image offers, but the classroom implications of working with learners whose text experience is mainly multimodal. Being aware of the different possibilities for meaning offered by multimodal texts means explicitly discussing how texts work to express ideas.

The affordances offered by different modes and media influence the ways texts are used, returned to, re-viewed or re-read and how they are organized and constructed. Different types of text have varying organizational
structures, or patterns of cohesion. Texts are shaped by what the combination of modes and media afford to the reader or viewer:

- Written narrative or report depend on chronological cohesion so that ideas will be linked by time connectives, for example, *then, later, finally*…
- Texts which are constructed visually or diagrammatically depend on spatial cohesion, using visual links, for example, arrows or simply the juxtapositions of blocks of print and pictures or diagrams.
- Texts relayed through the medium of sound, the single voice of a radio newsreader, for example, also depend on chronological logic but in addition are made cohesive by repetitions which would be redundant in written texts.
- Texts which are relayed through physical movement, sound and gesture – plays, ballet, opera – combine both spatial and sound-repetitive cohesive devices but in this case, the spatial is three-dimensional.

Young people’s text experience is made up of implicit awareness that it is possible to combine different modes and media to get a message across. Since multimodality is part of everyday text experience, there is a pressing issue about the relationship between traditional aspects of reading and writing fostered in schools and multimodal experience.

**Home experience of multimodal texts**

In considering the definitions and educational demands of multimodality, it is important to include home and cultural literacy experience. However, it has to be acknowledged that children’s preferences in popular cultural forms of reading and viewing out of the classroom are part of their own landscape. In the classroom, the teacher selects the texts and ensures that they will come under some kind of critical scrutiny. Since many of the new forms of text are encountered outside the classroom, and often at home, talking with young people about their own experiences of texts will contribute to a view of multimodality.

**Extending the reading repertoire**

In terms of classroom learning, many books available in schools now cannot be read by attention to writing alone. Meaning and information are frequently carried by images, often presented in double page spreads which are designed to use layout, font size, shape and colour to complement the information carried by the words. In addition, since multimodal texts do not follow the linear direction of print and are made up of images as well as words, they cannot easily be read aloud, although they can be ‘told’ or narrated.

There are important questions about how reading multimodal texts should be taught, as distinct from verbally sequenced narrative or information. It would be useful to discover what readers are doing when they take in information or narratives from multimodal texts and whether it is different from reading printed text involves multilevel processing at letter, word, syntactic and semantic levels, is the processing more complicated, or much the same, when layout, typographical features and image are added?

Attempting to unpick these complexities means considering reading pathways as well as the ways that readers process print. Gunther Kress describes the differences in reading pathways between designed or displayed text and continuous print as the difference between showing and telling (Kress, 2003: 152). In reading a piece of continuous printed text, a story, for example, the reader is told about the relationships between events through a sequence of sentences; in reading an image, the reader is shown relationships between ideas or the significance of objects through the placing of images in space.

The reading path of the continuous print is clear: along the lines from left to right and from top to bottom (in western print). In a displayed text, where images, blocks of text, typeface and colour are placed across a double page spread, for example, the reading path is not so clear. The reader has a choice of pathways, although there are some conventions in western text organization which can direct the reader’s eye. In complex pictorial or multimodal texts, the reading pathway might be radial.
Consider reading a double page Dorling Kindersley-type spread: where does the eye fall first? It may be on the strong central image or on another area of the page, but what is the reading pathway from then on? It is likely that the eye will roam radially around the page, choosing to focus on aspects of the text which seem important at the time. This may be directed by devices such as arrows or strong vectors in the images, leading the eye rather like signposting. Similarly, a picturebook maker might direct the reader’s eye through sequences of frames or present a more open route as in collage-type double pages or a screen page may direct the eye through expected layout and menu placing.

In tackling screen-based texts, experienced readers take equally complex pathways as they seek information or communicate with others. Searching the web often means zigzagging back and forth between screens, making sense of the proffered information through a kind of network of ideas. Playstation games tend to involve sequential and recurrent pathways whilst communicating with others through websites combines networking moves with the creation of meaning as part of a (very fast) process of writing and image dumping. Experienced readers (adults and children) are already capable of following varied reading pathways and so have a fund of knowledge which could inform ways of talking with colleagues and the learners themselves about routes through multimodal texts.

**Extending the writing repertoire**

One of the classroom implications of young people’s multimodal experience is the need to make explicit how different modes work and how meaning can be translated from one mode to another. Since accurate and coherent writing is still an important aspect of literacy learning, there needs to be some discussion of the different purposes and impact of words alone and of words plus images. For example, it is worth making explicit how words, images, design and layout work together – or separately - to make a text which genuinely communicates with the reader.

Marlon, aged 7, was asked to design a poster as part of PHSE work. The question was ‘What can you do if you’re angry?’ He chose to combine image, layout and words with a strong central image of a football and words on each segment of the ball suggesting things you can do to relieve anger, and the headline **IF YOU’RE FEELING ANGRY… Kick your feelings away** (see More than Words UKLA/QCA 2004:6). In designing his poster he showed a wealth of understanding about how communication works, for example:

- that what a message looks like is important
- that layout and visual impact are part of what you want to say
- that font size and shape, punctuation and the design of image will help get a message across.

When asked about the choices he made, he said:

* I did a poster about if you’re angry. I thought of a football cos I like football and I put lines on it, then I found out I could put words on it. I prefer writing more than drawing because you don’t have to take time. I’m happy with the poster because I like how I done it. I’m particularly pleased with the words inside the football.

Perhaps even more striking, however, is the knowledge that he reveals about the different modes he can use and when he can decide which is most appropriate:

* You can use just one – or more than one. Sometimes if you use all of them you can’t communicate with other people ’cos it’s too much in one go.

Marlon, like his classmates, is growing up in a world in which he is surrounded by multimodal texts on advertising hoardings, on TV and computer screens. His teacher routinely has conversations with the class about the choices they make when they want to communicate messages. Conversations like these are invaluable if teachers and learners are to use their knowledge and resources to meet the demands of new forms of text. As a profession we need a descriptive vocabulary for the several dimensions of texts, including the movement, the sound, the dynamics of image plus word (print and sound) whether paper-based or on screen.
Describing progress

It is difficult at the moment to describe what getting better at reading and designing multimodal texts might involve. As far as reading is concerned, how can we judge when learners are getting better at reading multimodal (including multimedia) texts? What does progress in representing meaning in multimodal or multimedia texts look like?

A starting point might be to select a few multimodal texts from each year in the school and simply consider if it is possible to identify indicators of development. This would mean thinking about the descriptors which might be used:

• Can the school’s existing assessment framework for ensuring progress in written texts helpfully be applied to multimodal texts?
• What doesn’t apply at all?
• What needs to be added?

Visual Approaches to Teaching Writing (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007) offers a series of progress descriptors for development in composing multimodal texts.

Implications for practice

If young people’s text experience is to be genuinely recognised in the classroom then it is important to discover just what they know about the texts they encounter inside and outside school and the many ways they might represent their ideas. Literacy teaching now means teaching about multimodality, involving:

• understanding how texts and modes work;
• demonstrating this understanding in the classroom;
• encouraging learners to use multimodal representation to shape and communicate their ideas;
• helping them to develop a repertoire of approaches and then be selective in matching mode with purpose and in making appropriate choices.

However, the task is not only to engage in dialogues which will help learners recognise the different representational demands made by different texts. It is equally important to develop a community of professional experience about multimodality, to consider how young readers and viewers can be helped to read critically beyond the images as well as reading between the lines of verbal text.

References


Recommended Reading


UKLA members who produced this Occasional Paper: Eve Bearne, Sue Ellis, Lynda Graham, Guy Merchant, Julie Meiner and Helen Wolstencroft.

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