Multimodality
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Introduction

Rapid technological change has meant that everyday practices surrounding reading and writing have shifted significantly over the last 20 years. Most homes have access to a range of digital devices and children are brought up in a world where they expect screens to be their companions, toys, entertainers, information givers and means of social communication. Many screen-based texts 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. But although many children experience digital texts and environments from a very early age their access to technology varies considerably. There will be differences according to social, cultural, personal and economic factors so that in thinking of how best teachers can respond to the digital experience of their children, focusing on skills is not enough.

Figures 1 and 2
Children of the screen age
It is not only the texts and their take-up in homes and schools which have changed; the ways in which they are composed, produced and distributed have undergone a fundamental change. New types of text and, in particular, the dominance of the screen, require changes in language to describe them. It may be that ‘literacy’ or the school subject ‘English’ are not sufficient to describe 21st century texts, contexts and practices: the combination of the representational modes of speech and sound, writing, image, gesture, with the communicative media of book, magazine, computer screen, video, film, radio. This means that approaches to teaching need to be reshaped to accommodate to shifts in communication and text experience in a multimodal, multimedia world.

Of course, multimodality is not new. For many years people of all cultures have used a range of modes to represent ideas and communicate meaning through speech, writing, gesture, image, movement, music and sound. Even the most familiar and every day communications are made up of complex combinations of modes. Talk, whether in face-to-face meetings or viewed on screen, is accompanied by movement and gesture; television and film combine moving images and sound to create an overall text. Any multimodal text might combine elements of:

- **performance**: gesture, movement, posture, facial expression
- **images**: moving and still; photographic, drawn, painted, computer-generated etc.
- **sound**: spoken words, sound effects, music and silence
- **writing**: including font, graphics and layout
- **duration**: shot length, sequence, rhythm and transitions.

(Bearne and Bazalgette, 2010:7)
These elements will be differently weighted in any combination of modes, for example, mime has no verbal dialogue, a photograph is a still image and a piece of streamed instrumental music is just sound, but film includes all the modes: performance, image, sound, movement, gesture, words and duration. The multimodal shift offers significant challenges to traditional forms of English/literacy education so that in the classroom, children need to be helped to identify the contributions made by each mode to any text.

In addition to using different modes to represent and communicate ideas, messages are relayed and distributed through different media of communication. These might be traditional media such as books, graphic novels, magazines and leaflets, for example, but digital technology now offers the medium of the screen in its various forms as well as sound files. Children now type as well as write by hand and use screen navigational facilities; mobile phones transmit images as well as words, can be used to play games, access the internet and much more - the number of applications is quickly expanding.

**Affordances of modes**

The multidimensional texts that children are familiar with are constructed in different ways from print texts and so have different affordances and demand different ways of making sense of them. 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. Getting a message across clearly and effectively means choosing combinations of mode(s) and media according to what they afford, or make possible. 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, a printed book affords a different kind of experience compared with watching a text on screen. With a book, the reader can decide to skip descriptive passages, vary the pace of reading and return to earlier pages to check details or recapture the narrative flow. Although with recording devices there is a review and fast forward facility, ‘skipping’ parts of audio or visual texts is rather more difficult (and disrupts narrative meaning rather more).

With visual texts, descriptive detail is part of the image so that it is almost impossible to skip or ignore elements. The affordances offered by different modes and media, then, influence the way texts are used, returned to, re-viewed or re-read and how they are organised and constructed and the choices made by the reader or composer/writer.

**Text cohesion**

Different types of text have varying organisational 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 newscaster, 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, for example, drama, dance, opera, imaginative play, combine both spatial and sound-repetitive cohesive devices but in this case, the spatial is three-dimensional.

Young people’s text experience provides them with implicit awareness that it is possible to combine different modes and media to get a message across.
**Reading multimodal texts**

In terms of print texts, many books available in schools cannot be read by attention to writing alone, as 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. Complex multimodal books or magazines use different reading pathways from reading linear narrative. Gunther Kress describes the differences in reading pathways between designed or displayed text and continuous print as the difference between telling and showing (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.

The reading path of continuous print in Western cultures, runs from left to right and from top to bottom. 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.

When reading a multimodal double page spread the eye may fall anywhere on the page, on a strong central image or on another significant part of the text, but from there, the reading pathway is less predictable. The eye will roam radially around the page, focusing on aspects of the text/images which seem important at the time. The gaze may be directed by devices such as arrows or strong vectors in the images, leading the eye rather like signposting. A comic book type layout might direct the reader’s eye through sequences of frames, or a screen page may direct the eye through expected layout and menu placing.

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*Figures 5 and 6*
*Reading and making comic strips from It’s seriously comic by Sarah Abramam and Rebecca Kennedy*
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. The reader has to make decisions about what Kress terms ‘criteria of relevance’ (Kress, 2003). Computer 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 process of writing and image dumping. Experienced readers (adults and children) are already capable of following varied reading pathways and so have funds of knowledge which could inform ways of talking with colleagues and the learners themselves about routes through multimodal texts.

**Talking about multimodality**

Being aware of the different possibilities of meaning offered by multimodal texts means explicitly discussing how texts work to express ideas. 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.

After a project with 9 and 10 year old bilingual children which used multimodal texts, including drama, to develop reading for inference, Jane Bednall and Leanne Cranston asked the children to reflect on their learning (Bednall et al., 2008). One of the texts they had read was *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan and the children discussed what they thought a multimodal text was:

Tasnia: *It can be all types of things. You can read in different ways, like you can read pictures, scan the pictures in your head, you can read from Braille like blind people do and you can read from different languages and that's what a multimodal text means to me.*

Muhammad: *When you look at something and you look at the similarities and differences between the words and the pictures.*

Rashida: *I think it’s looking at both… books with more words than pictures and more pictures than words and saying… which one do you prefer more? The Red Tree’s got more pictures than words because with pictures you can really feel the emotion. With words you can, but with pictures you can actually see the people’s faces… I never thought you could really read pictures. I thought they were just there to make it look pretty. Jane [Bednall] explained it to us… She taught us that you have to put the words and the pictures together. Really go into it… go into the picture world and really analyse it, you've got to really look at that person’s eyes and think and think.*

**Figures 7 and 8**
Reading and annotating complex picturebooks from *The Most Wonderful Adventure* by Jane Bednall and Leanne Cranston
When asked how they would explain to a younger reader how to read a complex picturebook, Tania’s explanation of the process shows an astute understanding of how these texts work:

Tania: Look at the pictures carefully. If they can’t read they have to look at it really carefully and look at the colours and what the person is doing – the facial expression and the body language. You have to look at the picture and the colours and the person’s face really carefully to ask yourself a few questions: How is the person feeling? What sort of state is he or she in? or maybe a few more questions. But I think that they should look at the picture really carefully... the colours and the face represent something.

These children show a sophisticated understanding of what a multimodal text might be and how words and pictures can work together to make meaning.

**Home experience of multimodal texts**

Studies of children’s home and school literacy and digital experience (Marsh et al., 2005; Cremin et al., 2015) indicate that many children have access to games consoles, laptops and PCs, internet-enabled tablet computers or smartphones and extensive experience of popular cultural texts. These are valuable assets to build on in the classroom, but before assuming what children know and can do with multimodal texts, it is worth finding out the facts. One primary school of 325 pupils in South East England decided to survey its children to find out about their use of multimodal texts, including digital technology, at home. The school wanted to review its use of digital technology and other multimodal texts in the classroom, so they asked all classes to complete a survey about their use of the following types of multimodal texts at home and at school:

- comics
- magazines
- newspapers
- television programmes
- computer games
- films/DVDs
- internet texts
- e-mails
- phone texts
- e-books
- books with words and no pictures
- books with pictures
- audio books

When the teachers reviewed the responses, they noted that the children’s popular cultural home reading of magazines and comics did not feature highly in the classroom, although the figures for reading newspapers are about the same at home and at school. Understandably, television and computer games were more likely to be used at home than at school, although the figure for using computer games in school was about half that of home use. Screen-based texts on the television and internet seemed to be used equally regularly at school and at home but emails and texts, hardly featured at school. Where children used e-books and audio books at home these were much less common in school, although books, with and without pictures were equally prevalent at home and at school.

In this school there seemed to be relatively few major differences in multimodal text use between the boys and the girls. More boys than girls read comics, and more girls than boys read magazines and newspapers. Television viewing is almost the same between boys and girls with the boys slightly higher and where almost all of the boys played computer games, the number of girls reporting playing games was not far behind.
Reviewing the information as a whole, the teachers decided on the following actions:

- Widen the range of reading material in classrooms to include children’s preferred comics, magazines, audio and e-books.
- Set up staff training sessions to look at how computer games might be used in the curriculum.
- Plan to use emails and texting as part of English teaching.
- Plan to use film more deliberately as texts to be studied, not just watched.

(For more details see Bearne and Reedy, 2018: 394)

**Describing progress in reading and composing multimodal texts**

National curricula commonly provide frameworks for describing progress in reading and writing, and sometimes in spoken language. However, these do not usually include reading/viewing and composing multimodal texts. Bearne and Bazalgette, (2010) developed a set of progression statements to describe progress in reading/viewing multimodal texts across the dimensions of:

- engagement, understanding and response to text
- inference and deduction
- structure and organisation of texts
- style and composition (including sound)
- purpose, viewpoint and effect of text on the audience
- social, cultural and historical context.

Bearne and Reedy (2018) describe progress in multimodal text composition as marked by increasing ability to:

- Decide on mode and content for specific purpose(s) and audience(s) choosing which mode(s) will best communicate meaning for specific purposes.
- Structure texts by conscious attention to design and layout, using structural devices (pages, sections, frames, paragraphs, blocks of text, screens, sound sequences, verbal, visual and sound cohesive devices) to organise texts.
- Handle technical aspects and conventions of different kinds of multimodal texts, including line, colour, perspective, sound, camera angles, movement, gesture, facial expression and language.
- Explain choices of mode(s) and expressive devices including words and improve composition or performance, reshaping, redesigning and redrafting for purpose and readers’/viewers’ needs.

**Starting early**

Children’s experience of multimodal texts starts very early. In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) they often draw on a wealth of assets in terms of their experience of watching, listening, helping and learning how diverse literacy resources are organised and accessed. Not only are they experienced – and critical – readers/viewers of television and film, but they are likely to have accessed iPads, mobile phones and playthings which use digital technologies. Also, their experience of environmental print and image, and of being in social settings, means that they know about how different oral, symbolic and printed texts work to make meaning. There are concerns, however, that some children spend too much time at home with screens so that this is something that a) needs to be discovered by discussion with parents/carers; and b) can be mediated in the setting in order to direct children to other kinds of multimodal activities involving books, toys, puppets, dressing up clothes, musical instruments and outdoor discovery. Imaginative outdoor play is intensely multimodal, involving a range of materials and opportunities to shape ideas.

**Figure 9 Leaf painting**

### Multimodality
There are implications for practice regarding the ways adults support young children in becoming literate in their uses of new media. Children’s funds of knowledge about multimodal texts are largely implicit, so children need guidance and scaffolding from adults to show them how they can use their experience of the complex forms of multimodal communication for further learning. However, there can be tensions about this as studies (Wolfe and Flewitt, 2010) show that many practitioners and staff lack the confidence and expertise to do this. In some instances, adults may appear as novices in mediating new digital resources, when they need to be skilled and confident in building upon children’s funds of knowledge.

There are also professional issues about positioning digital technology in EYFS classrooms/settings, for example, a desktop computer often pushed to the corner of the room, whereas oral story telling / book sharing is normally offered across the setting – on the carpet, indoors / outdoors, on table-tops, under tables… the list goes on. It is worth having a look at the placing of digital technologies in relation to other resources; rather than sitting in in the corner of a room, it should be centrally placed so that it can become the hub of social activity, allowing adults and children to share the experience of using the technology – just as they would when sharing a book.

**Observing and recording young children’s multimodal communication**

Before children read and write orthodox texts, they are nevertheless engaged in a range of different ways of communicating and representing their ideas. In recording children’s abilities in communication, it is worth taking time to observe how gaze, movement, gesture and positioning contribute to young children’s multimodal expression and dialogue. It is useful to observe children’s dialogue in play and particularly to note their developing talk, their early writing experiments and their storytelling as they ‘read’ a book. It is less usual to note how their gesture, gaze and movement also contribute to their development as communicators. For example, watching a child poring over a book, directing her/his gaze to different images, or observing children sharing a book, pointing to elements of the page or
working together to understand texts, can reveal a great deal about what they understand about character, factual information or the way texts work. Similarly, watching a child drawing and writing, particularly the pauses and glances away from the page indicate very clearly the process of thought as the writing/drawing is composed. In imaginative play, and particularly dress-up play, posture and use of the garments – swirling a cloak, holding a skirt, wearing a hat – can reveal notions of characterisation and story theme.

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
- **providing opportunities** for working with a range of materials.

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 observe children as they work with different materials, modes and mechanisms, to learn how to describe and record progress in multimodal representation and communication, and 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 both on screen and off.
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