



Multimodality

Reading/viewing and writing/designing often work across modes, media, and genres for contemporary learners.

- Multimodal approaches to teaching and learning recognise how meaning can be made across linguistic, visual, aural, kinaesthetic, and spatial-temporal modes.
- Written or printed language is but one mode for representing understanding and conveying meaning.
- Multimodality seeks to engage with the ever-changing communications landscape that comes with technological development, as well as engage with cross- and inter-cultural communication. It is therefore both a creative and a critical domain.

Multimodality requires teachers and learners to rethink conventional definitions of literacy that focus on the technical skills of reading and writing print-based texts (Kress, 2015; Lim, 2018). Instead, this approach requires that we recognise 1) that print language (i.e. the linguistic mode) is one of many available modes of communication, and 2) that building a strong capacity to deconstruct and (re)construct texts using a variety of modes and genres is necessary for contemporary society. Given that new genres and media are increasingly being used in and out of schools (from WordPress to TikTok), literacy education must draw on teachers' and learners' own ways of consuming and producing texts in order to remain relevant. It becomes necessary, then, to gain proficiency in the grammars of:

- language or the linguistic mode
- visuality or the visual mode
- sound or the aural mode
- movement/gestures or the kinaesthetic mode, and
- space-time or the spatial-temporal mode

as well as the ways in which these modes are assembled together (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Serafini, 2012). For example, consider how media stories are reported and then anchored by selected photographs. Furthermore, consider how these photographs re-emerge in the telling of new media stories and can be used to contribute to fake news and misinformation.

UKLA recognises that contemporary communication is, more often than not, multimodal. Reading across linguistic, visual, audio-visual, and other modes has become normalised as digital platforms expand and online communication dominates (Zacher Pandya, 2012). Furthermore, Web 2.0 ushered in an increase in the production of texts by everyday people across contexts, which often take up multimodal forms. Increasingly, people are accessing as well as producing blogs, videos, images, memes, GIFs, and other genres to serve a range of communicative functions (Jewitt, 2008). However, the multimodal nature of communication is not restricted to online platforms. Multimodality therefore provides a lens through which to re-look and re-think taken-for-granted literacies and communication as embodied (Taylor, 2016). Such engagement with text production and consumption across modes is also tightly bound to issues of identity, emotion, and representation, with strong implications for how practitioners think about what literacy education (including assessment) looks like and who it is meant to serve (Burgess and Rowsell, 2020). Despite this, much of language, literacy, and literature education, and their assessment strategies, still take the linguistic mode (i.e. printed text) as the most valued means of conveying understanding, knowledge, and academic success (Taylor, 2014). Adopting a multimodal approach therefore enables teachers and learners to raise important questions about pedagogy and access to knowledge:

What modes and media are we using to enable learners to access formal curriculum content?

What modes and media are learners able to bring into the classroom to help demonstrate their growing engagement with and understanding of curriculum content?

To what extent do we think about not only what makes curriculum content knowledge but also how curriculum content knowledge is accessed, used, and represented?

How might multimodality enable us to rethink assessment in ways that allow learners to demonstrate their understanding, growth, and development in critical and creative ways? That is, how might we and our learners imagine beyond the dominant modes, media, and genres of established curriculums and standardised testing?

Critical Transmodal Pedagogies

While much research related to multimodality capitalises on the use of digital platforms and practices, there is also a question of who has access to the necessary technology. Multimodality, then, is not confined by online media – although, it certainly benefits from it. A multimodal approach therefore also seeks to consider

how teachers and learners use a variety of non-digital spaces and media to construct meaning: from oral storytelling, to drawing and annotating, to body-language and choreography.

In a recent study with final-year student teachers, Govender (2020) reported on the ways in which multimodality and transmodality helped to construct a space where students could traverse traditional genres of storytelling. Where multimodality means working with multiple modes for meaning-making (Kress, 2015), transmodality involves moving, or translating, meaning from one mode to another (Newfield, 2014). The student teachers in this course were therefore required to redesign a print-based story (such as a short story or folktale) into a visual narrative that experimented and played with image and word. As a result, the students were able to rethink the genre conventions of stories by using colour, layout, materials, and so on to retell the stories they had chosen.

This has certain implications for teaching and learning through multimodal and transmodal practices:

- Recognising that genres are constructions means teachers and learners can deconstruct and reconstruct them for different audiences.
- When students feel they can play with language and other modes, some also feel they can play with convention itself.
- Images can do more than illustrate the meanings written through language. They can convey complex meanings and work with words to deepen and expand meaning.
- Teachers and learners can begin to draw on the oral, visual, and gestural practices from outside prescribed school practices to bring cultures into the classroom. It is not only about what stories are told, but also how stories are told, that can place learners in positions of power (Ohito & the Fugitive Literacies Collective, 2020).

Sources

Govender, N. N. (2020) Critical Transmodal Pedagogies: Student Teachers Play with Genre Conventions. *Multimodal Communication*, 9(1), www.doi.org/10.1515/mc-2019-0009

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Kress, G. (2015) Semiotic work: Applied linguistics and a social semiotic account of multimodality. *AILA Review*, 28 pp.49–71.

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Lim, F. V. (2018) Developing a systemic functional approach to teach multimodal literacy. *Functional Linguistics*, 5(13) pp.1–17.

Newfield, D. (2014) Transformation, transduction and the transmodal moment. In C. Jewitt (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis*. London: Routledge. pp.100-113.

Ohito, E. O. & the Fugitive Literacies Collective. (2020) “The creative aspect woke me up”: Awakening to Multimodal Essay Composition as a Fugitive Literacy Practice. *English Education*, 52(3) pp. 186-222.

Serafini, F. (2012) Expanding the four resources model: Reading visual and multi-modal texts. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 7(2) pp.150–164.

Taylor, R. (2014). Meaning between, in, and around words, gestures and postures: multimodal meaning making in children's classroom communication. *Language and Education*, 28 (5), 401-420. <http://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.885038>

Taylor, R. (2016). The multimodal texture of engagement: prosodic language, gaze and posture in engaged, creative classroom interaction. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 20, 83-96. <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2016.04.001>

Zacher Pandya, J. (2012). Unpacking Pandora’s Box: Issues in the Assessment of English Learners’ Literacy Skill Development in Multimodal Classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 56(3) pp. 181-185.

Classroom example

Instapoetry

In a recent *Literacy* article by Kate Kovalik and Jen Scott Curwood (2019), the authors investigated how Instagram was used by adolescents (aged 13-15 years) to create and interact in a community of ‘Instapoets’¹. The instapoets also demonstrate how they draw on a range of knowledges about what constitutes poetry and how multimodal ensembles (texts) enable a certain amount of play with language and visuals. The online platform therefore becomes a space for consuming and producing multimodal poetry where young people are moved to construct texts in ways that bring their school knowledge and everyday lives together. The young people involved managed to 1) create a community of text designers and consumers that provided feedback on each other’s work, 2) use their agency to play with language and image, filters and composition, to construct meaning, and 3) capitalise on being able to construct Instapoetry anywhere and at any time, using their mobile phones whilst also learning to use the online literacy practices of social media to reach wider audiences.

While the poetry presented in the article helps to illustrate how young people used Instagram as a generative space for producing and sharing texts, as well as supporting each other as a community of text designers, the authors also note certain implications for literacy education:

1. The out-of-school (and digital) literacy practices of young people can be capitalised on in order to place young people at the centre of writing curriculums. Online platforms, like Instagram, can be used to engage with more traditional genres of text such as poetry alongside more contemporary methods of designing texts. Learners can become experts of their own out-of-school online practices and use them to engage with more formal curriculum content.

2. While reading poetry is vital for English curricula, the practice of writing enables deeper engagement. This is true for multimodal text design. Learners can reflect on and rationalise their design choices as part of a literacy curriculum.
3. Communities of writers can transgress the classroom walls and school boundaries. Online platforms, when used safely, can provide learners with access to authentic audiences and feedback. These audiences can be closed (i.e. comprised of learners from the same class or school) or open (i.e. comprised of a wider, more public audience).

¹ UKLA members can access this article via their member login on the UKLA website.

Furthermore, learners can begin to interrogate the ways in which they interact with images, filtering options, photographic and video editing software in more critical ways. By engaging with the design of multimodal texts, learners may perhaps also learn to better understand how existing multimodal texts in their everyday (online) lives have been constructed to position them.

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Further Reading

The following resources may be useful for teachers who want to adopt multimodality (and transmodality) into their repertoire of teaching practices across home language and second or foreign language education:

Ajayi, L. (2015) Critical multimodal literacy: How Nigerian female students critique texts and reconstruct unequal social structures. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 47(2) pp.216–244.

Burgess, J. & Rowsell, J. (2020) Transcultural-affective flows & multimodal engagements: reimagining pedagogy and assessment with adult language learners. *Language & Education*, 34(2) pp.173-191, DOI: 10.1080/09500782.2020.1720226

Kovalik, K. and Scott Curwood, J. (2019) #poetryisnotdead: Understanding Instagram Poetry within a Transliterations Framework. *Literacy*, 53(4) pp. 185-195.

Liang, W. J., and Lim, F. V. (2020) A pedagogical framework for digital multimodal composing in the English Language classroom. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, pp. 1-15.

Sousanis, N. (2015). *Unflattening*. Harvard University Press.

Tan, L., Zammit, K., D'warte, J. & Gearside, A. (2020) Assessing multimodal literacies in practice: A critical review of its implementations in educational settings. *Language and Education*, 34(2) pp.97-114, DOI: 10.1080/09500782.2019.1708926

Walsh, C. S. (2007) Creativity as capital in the literacy classroom: Youth as multimodal designers. *Literacy*, 41(2) pp.79–85.

See also

UKLA bookshop www.ukla.org/shop

Beyond Words: Developing children's response to multimodal texts
edited by Eve Bearne and Cary Bazalgette

"I know what to write now!": Engaging boys (and girls) through a multimodal approach by Petula Bhojwani, Bill Lord and Cath Wilkes

UKLA website www.ukla.org/resources

UKLA Occasional paper Multimodality
https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/ukla-occasional-paper-multimodality/

UKLA Viewpoints Critical Literacy and Digital Literacies
https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/ukla-viewpoints-critical-literacy/