Multiliteracies in Practice: Integrating Multimodal Production Across the Curriculum

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Supported by ever-evolving digital tools and online spaces, we argue that multiliteracies can be used to close the gap between teacher-directed, individual, and assessment-driven learning, and authentic, shared, and purpose-driven learning. This is particularly evident through multimodal composition and collaboration in primary classrooms. Over two decades ago, the New London Group argued that all meaning-making is multimodal. By representing their knowledge through multiple modes and for local and global audiences, students can express their identity, exercise agency, and foster a sense of authoring through multimodal production.

A Classroom Scene

Within the expansive, light-filled space, the energy is palpable. In one corner, a small group of students use tablets to engage in historical research and animatedly discuss their findings; on the stairs, students work individually on their laptops as they edit scientific documentaries; at the far side, a teacher draws a mindmap on the whiteboard, as a dozen students share their thoughts on literary characters.

Years ago, these 180 upper primary students would have found themselves in 1 of 6 individual classrooms. But today, a concomitant change in architecture and curriculum finds them all working within one large, open space. Moving across physical and virtual spaces, interacting with the eight teachers, working at their own pace, and collaborating with their peers allows these Australian students to engage in multiliteracies and advance their disciplinary knowledge. The walls have come down.

Introduction

In light of technological innovations, schools increasingly adopt digital tools and promote
online spaces for learning. New technologies not only have expanded the means for meaning making, but have also reshaped traditional ways of communicating and representing meaning (Jewitt, 2005). In the currently shifting digital age, students need to learn to navigate alphabetic print texts as well as multimodal representations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Curwood, 2012). Consequently, teachers must design learning contexts in order to scaffold and evaluate students’ composition processes that draw on diverse semiotic resources, involve multiple modes of representation, and embody new literacy practices.

In this article, we explore the impact of multiliteracies on everyday school practices. Supported by constantly evolving digital tools and online spaces, we argue that multiliteracies can be used to close the gap between teacher-directed, individual, and assessment-driven learning, and authentic, shared, and purpose-driven learning. This is particularly evident through multimodal composition and collaboration in content area classrooms where teachers and students have reimagined the physical and digital architecture of the learning space. The New London Group (1996) argued, “In a profound sense, all meaning-making is multimodal” (p. 81). By working across spaces, and by representing their knowledge through multiple modes for local and global audiences, we suggest that students can express their identity, exercise agency, and foster a sense of authoring through multimodal production.

Understanding Multiliteracies

The seminal work of the New London Group’s (1996) “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” marked the need for rethinking the meaning of literacy in a technology-driven society. Stornaiuolo, Hull, and Nelson (2009) defined a multiliteracies perspective as “one that understands literacy as a negotiation of multiple linguistic and cultural differences through the design and redesign processes” (p. 382). Whereas literacy was previously associated with the reading and writing of print-based text, now literacy also involves the reading and writing of digital text along with representing meaning through still image, video, audio, and gesture (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Thus, contemporary literacy practices involve a dynamic, multimodal, social, and technologically mediated process (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu., 2008). This shift contrasts with the traditional literacy model defined by the correct use of formal language as prescribed by the high cultural text of the literary canon, which has still a wide application in schools today (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012).

One key aspect in the conceptualization of literacy practices involves the consideration of new ethos stuff and new technological stuff (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Although the former refers to the social aspect involved in new literacies, the latter stems from the mediation of technological tools that enable new ways of inscribing meaning. Consequently, from this perspective, writing an academic essay, participating in a discussion on a social network, creating online fan fiction, playing videogames, or programming with Scratch can all be considered literacy practices (Fields, Magnifico, Lammers, & Curwood, 2014; Hull, Stornaiuolo, & Sterponi, 2013; Padgett & Curwood, 2016; Thibaut, 2015).

New technologies not only have expanded the opportunities for meaning making but have also shaped the relationship between the writer and the text, allowing the author to also become a designer and producer. This, in turn, has affected the nature of the notion of authorship, shifting from a static text-author process to a more dynamic and dialectic process. At the same time, Jacobs (2013) cautioned that multiliteracies limit the multiple aspects of literacies when the term becomes synonymous with digital technologies. Changes in tools, modes, and relationship between agents and tools are also reshaping traditional ways of communicating and representing meaning (Jewitt, 2005). Consequently, new models of literacy are not replacing prior, or outdated, models of literacy. However, they are forcing us to reconsider our conceptualizations of texts.
In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies,” the New London Group (1996) defined a text as any artifact of production. Leander and Boldt (2012) stated, “This included the body-as-text (e.g., in ‘spatial,’ ‘behavioral,’ and ‘gestural’ modalities). The human body was treated as a sign system and sign-generating system that expands our ways of writing and reading the world” (p. 24). Although the multiliteracies framework defines texts broadly, Leander and Boldt (2012) argued that it includes a text-centric approach to understanding learning and identity. For researchers, this means moving away from beginning an analysis by examining texts and their associated modalities to starting with the body and its “position within time” (Leander & Boldt, 2012, p. 35). This effectively broadens multiliteracies research to include questions of “place, space, and landscape” (Stornaiulolo et al., 2009, p. 388).

We argue that multiliteracies are crucial for understanding how teachers and students interact with each other, and with texts, within blended spaces for learning. In this article, we examine a multimodal project created by upper primary students as part of a class assignment in an Australian school. To understand how meaning making is supported in the classroom and to get insights into student production, we also include interview and observational data related to the multimodal production process. In particular, we ask:

1. How are students engaging in multiliteracies, and how are these shaped by the position of their bodies and texts across physical and digital spaces?
2. What are students’ and teachers’ perceptions on multimodal production in the blended classroom?

**Multimodal Production in Practice**

The study was conducted in a K-12 independent faith-based school in Sydney, Australia. Over the last decade, the school has gained an international reputation for technology integration in the classroom, innovative professional development for teachers, and redesigning physical and online learning spaces (Thibaut, Curwood, Carvalho, & Simpson, 2015). To understand the process of multimodal production and its impact on students’ meaning making, we analyzed a video designed and produced by three Year 6 students as part of a task activity, which involves multiple content areas. In this task designed by the teacher, students had to represent the history of the school. The topic of the video was given, yet the ways to communicate meaning, design, and production were chosen by students.

Conscious of Leander and Boldt’s (2012) critique of the multiliteracies framework’s focus on texts, our analysis strived to incorporate the role of body-as-text and text-over-time. We recognized, at the outset, that this textual production was made possible by the physical architecture of the learning space, the agency that students had to move within it, and the availability of multiple digital tools and learning configurations. By taking screenshots every 2 seconds of students’ videos, we were able to break down students’ meaning making production. We then mapped what could be seen in the screen at each 2-second interval with the following categories: time, image, action, written text, audio, and transition. This allowed us to analyze the occurrence, absence, and/or co-occurrence of modes in the multimodal text and to unravel the underlying relationships existent between content and modes (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009). The video was observed several times and a description of the codes found in each screenshot was included; it involves two layers of analysis: (a) context and transcription and (b) social-semiotic account.

**First Layer of Analysis: Context and Transcription**

This video was part of a class activity about the history of the school. Three senior teachers were invited to the class to tell the students about what it was like to be at the school at that time. Students worked on mind maps and brainstormed ideas in their notebooks, comparing what sort of
texts, tools, and technologies they had in the past with what they use now. Patrick, Sam, and Eric (all names are pseudonyms) first discussed ideas for their video and then together designated roles, with Patrick and Sam acting and Eric serving as cameraman. The teacher designed the task so that students could choose a medium for portraying the history of the school, while also giving students boundaries. For instance, students were not allowed to speak in the movie. This constraint forced them to think on alternative ways of communication such as written words or gestures. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the students’ video which demonstrates how they used their bodies along with tangible tools to portray the history of the school.

According to the students, they wanted “more than anything” to represent the concept of a silent movie, and to reflect a “then and now” in the history of the school. The students showed us the different steps they followed to make the movie. In the process, students demonstrated awareness and competence of complex technical aspects of video production. While dragging images, selecting transitions, deciding on the music, or choosing the style of credits at the end of the movie, students engaged in conscious decisions within their multimodal production. For instance, according to the students, working with transitions made their movie look more professional. When asked about how they learned about the production process of making a movie, students answered, “We like to play around.” This reflects the agency allowed by the task, as well as the accessibility that students had to different tools and technologies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Matrix Task" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Change of scenario" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Students as if they were talking" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Students moving the white wall" /></td>
<td><img src="image5.png" alt="New text on the white wall" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Text appears</td>
<td>Change of scenario. Classroom background: two students looking at each other</td>
<td>Students as if they were talking</td>
<td>Students moving the white wall</td>
<td>New text on the white wall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written text</td>
<td>Matrix Task</td>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>Hi</td>
<td>The school was small. Sometimes there were 3 people per grade. The school was year 3-10. They used the Lifepack system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written text in use</td>
<td>White large letters on a red background</td>
<td>Handwritten text</td>
<td>Continued</td>
<td>Handwritten letters framed on a bubble speech</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>Silent movie piano music</td>
<td>Continued</td>
<td>Continued</td>
<td>Continued</td>
<td>Continued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Transition by flipping the whiteboard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Images 0 to 8 of Sam, Patrick and Eric’s video.
After the interview with students, our next step was to analyze the video. By capturing the video in 2-second segments, we were able to see how the parts contributed to make the whole of the artifact, which was comprised of 152 screenshots. As Figure 2 illustrates, each 2 second segment of the video was narrativized by code.

First, the type of images selected by the students showed a combination of the actual environment of the classroom along with predesigned PowerPoint slides. The video started with an opening image that contrasted with a white bold font against a strong red background. Next, the realistic environment was portrayed with two students standing up, but not facing the camera, just looking at each other sideways. The text says “Hi” in handwritten font. Students repeatedly used a “bubble” frame on the whiteboard as a way to represent speech. Bubble frames can be considered as semiotic resources used by the students to signify their story used in conjunction with their physical gestures. Due to their use of the bodies within the physical space, the whiteboard was used repeatedly to show information, transitions, and themes. Students also used humor, a predominant characteristic of silent movies that has been addressed by literature on cinematography (Landecker, 2006). For instance, this can be seen when Patrick asked, “What is the Lifepack system?” and in a bubble we can see Sam’s thoughts, “He should know this already!” This move in the script not only imparted informational facts and humor, but also helped the viewer to become closer to the history of the school.

The next move in the film was marked by the comparison between the school in the past and present: “Now that you know about early school and how it started, let’s show you how it has changed.” Then the students wrote the following words on the whiteboard—*chalk, couches, whiteboards, and laptops*—highlighting the changes in technology in the classroom space over time. As seen in Figure 3, students marked the transition of technological tools on the whiteboard.

### Second Layer of Analysis: Social Semiotic Account

Next, we analyzed the multimodal production of Patrick, Sam, and Eric in three main aspects: (a) the narrative aspect, (b) students’ positions and interaction with the viewer, and (c) juxtaposition of modes to convey meaning. This is adapted from the three metafunctions system: ideational, interpersonal, and compositional (Halliday, 1978).

#### The Narrative Aspect

Screenshots 0 to 152 depict the development of a story in which students portrayed the origins of the school and the way it has changed. Students considered differences in technology available and differences in the pedagogies. When looking at the video, it becomes evident that image and text have a complementary relationship. Both image and text were directed toward the same topic and neither of them has superiority over the other; thus, the handwritten text and the gestures of Sam and Patrick worked together to construct meaning. From a text-level perspective, multimodal practices offer students complex and versatile ways to communicate and allow the viewer/reader to interpret the text in multiple ways, not restricted from left to right or to decoding words. In addition, it adds a visual and often aesthetic component to the representation of meaning. As a result, a multimodal artifact encompasses a unique composition (Jewitt, 2005) that offers the audience a way to engage in multi-layered sensory experiences.
Students’ Positions and Interactions with the Viewer

How students positioned themselves in this school task was analyzed through their choices of framing and shot angle (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). As mentioned previously, the shots were taken in the actual classroom environment, which consequently became the setting for the film. The angle from which the viewer positioned her body and looks at the action in the moving image represents the level of involvement of the viewer (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). The analysis of this component reveals that most of the images were taken from a mid-lower gaze level. As a result, the viewer is positioned, most of the time, as a participant of the classroom. Thus, the viewer becomes part of the classroom.

As portrayed in the video and as explained by the teachers, teaching and learning in the school involved a constant negotiation between autonomy and control between students and teachers. This can be a reflection on how students move their bodies and positioned themselves within the classroom. Particularly in this classroom space, the teacher was frequently standing up and the students were sitting down, on chairs, steps, or the floors. Interestingly, when linking students’ shot decision with teachers’ perceptions of their role in the classroom, there is consistency between both. As one teacher shared, “For me, it is a fine balance of looking over their shoulders and keeping an eye of what they are doing, and allowing them to take their time and work at their own pace.” Figure 4 shows the transition from high level of involvement (being a student) to a level where the viewer is able to oversee action (being a teacher). Moreover, the angle of shooting transitions from mid-lower gaze level to a higher gaze level. This is detailed in images 26, 36, 50, 140, 142 and 150. As the level of shooting changes, the power of the viewer also changes from a student to teacher level. In this latter, surveillance may be enacted (or not; Foucault, 1975; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

In addition, social distance has been described in semiotic analysis to refer to the level of proximity existent between the body of the viewer and the text. Social distance is marked by the use of close ups or conversely long shots (Burn & Parker, 2003). With the exception of close-up images used for transitions and images 140–150, the distance between the viewer and the text in this video has a mid-shot social distance. Hence, the viewer is not too far away from the action, yet not too close. This suggests that social distance as shot by the students in this video mimics conventions of social distance in public spaces in Western cultures (Goffman, 1959).

Juxtaposition of Modes to Convey Meaning

Students’ final work was a remix of traditional and contemporary styles of filmmaking, mediated via digital media production and physical classroom spaces. For instance, they constructed the transitions in the movie relying on the effects provided by the iMovie software, but also on the action of flipping the whiteboard, and, importantly, through their gestures. In addition, music was another mode added to the movie. It was purposively selected to denote a silent movie style. Thus, the movie mimics films where spoken dialogue was not available (Landecker, 2006). Because of this constraint, filmmakers in the early 20th century were forced
to draw on other modes to make the story appealing, included exaggerated gestures and body movements. This is something that was mimicked by Sam and Patrick (Barthes, 1981). Hence, music was a powerful resource that helped to mark the pace and the variance of the action, and it also helped to involve the viewer in the film by evoking feelings and emotions. By drawing on such resources, the students recalled a past time, signalling the main concept of the movie: to revisit the history of the school.

Concluding Thoughts

Although there is academic work that theorizes multiliteracies, the focus has often been on a text-centric approach. By incorporating the role of body-as-text and text-over-time, we show in this analysis how both elements are intertwined. In the classroom, the teacher created a task where students could select a medium to reconstruct the history of the school. This allowed students to exert agency, as well as have autonomy in tools, texts, bodies, and technologies. Consequently, a multimodal composition encompasses more than just various modes, but another language that has to be decoded, understood, and produced (Burn, 2003). Although multimodal composition has a long tradition (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984), new technological tools are changing the set of skills, and the processes that are established for interpretation and meaning production.

By remixing old and new ways of filmmaking to convey meaning, students demonstrated competency in new literacies and actively constructed meaning, through the incorporation of their own perspective in their narratives. In addition, the video showed how formal content knowledge can be reshaped through multimodal production. This was achieved when students incorporated old and new elements that were familiar to, and popular with, a young adult audience. As observed, new literacy practices require not only a set of new competencies to be taught, but also a different approach to teaching and learning (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009). In this classroom, teachers believed in equipping students with new literacies, but also in giving students physical space, work time, and flexibility over multiple lessons to play around with different kinds of tools, practices, and representations.

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References


Additional Resources


Mary Beaumont Medd’s work gives insight on the history of environments for learning. It highlights lessons from the past regarding the effect of school design in teaching and learning.


This article draws on a 4-year ethnography of an innovative Australian school. Situated within a networked learning environment, it brilliantly highlights how classroom spaces can move beyond traditional ways of schooling.


This multimodal glossary offers teachers and researchers alike rich definitions and valuable resources to understand multimodality in both theory and practice.