

# Chapter 14

## Picturing Writing: The Transduction of Meaning Through Multimodal Literacy

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### ABSTRACT

*Whether an image is still or moving, created digitally or by hand, it has the capacity to communicate ideas and emotions that are often difficult for a student to actualize in their writing, especially in a culture where the image seems to have become more ubiquitous than text. Therefore, when the visual becomes a primary component of the composition class, students learn to literally and figuratively read and design their worlds and words in different ways. As Kress (2003) observes, “The world told is a different world to the world shown” (p. 1). The implications for the integration of a multimodal approach to college writing are rich with potential. Moreover, for the Millennial college writer who is thought to be underprepared, the less prescribed and more widely inclusive approach offered through multimodal social semiotic theories offers tangible, liberatory, and egalitarian ways through which the notion of deficit can be repudiated.*

### INTRODUCTION

Whether an image is still or moving, created digitally or by hand, it has the capacity to communicate ideas and emotions that are often difficult for a student to actualize in their writing, especially in a culture where the image seems to have become more ubiquitous than text. Therefore, when the visual becomes a primary component of the composition class, students learn to literally and figuratively read and design their worlds and words in different ways. As Kress (2003) foremost theorist in the study of multimodal communication observes, “[t]he world told is a different world to the world shown” (p. 1). And, what a world of difference the visual affords in the meaning making abilities of variously prepared students who struggle with the rigors of academic writing. The implications for the integration of a multimodal approach to college writing are rich with potential. Moreover, for the Millennial college writer who is thought to be underprepared, the less prescribed and more widely inclusive approach offered through

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multimodal social semiotic theories offers tangible, liberatory, and egalitarian ways through which the notion of deficit can be repudiated.

The use of multimodal social semiotics is a powerful premise and effective tool that expands the perimeters of ‘traditional’ writing across the academic spectrum, particularly in the college composition class, by allowing students to engage in authentic and empowering ways to ‘make meaning’ through the use of various visual modes/alternatives to written text. It is Kress, et al. (2001), who recognize that the possibilities for learning must be re-conceptualized in a culture that is heavily saturated with technology. While it is the technological interplay between students and their literacy practices that is a variable factor in the teaching of writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is one that can potentially be mediated by the inclusion of a multimodal social semiotic approach in classroom practice. The theoretical and conceptual framework upon which these practices are based emerges from a sociocultural perspective (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street (1995) and relational notions of identity (Moje & Luke, 2009) and is consistent with the work of the New London Group (1996) in its emphasis on multimodal social semiotics and which recognizes that a singular standard and prescribed method of teaching is not adequate for the widely diverse range of personalities and learning styles that are embodied by any one group of students. Instead, it advocates for the creation of aesthetically engaging and dynamic learning spaces in which assignments are more identity-friendly and move beyond the traditional written text into the spaces where students’ lives are lived. These are places in which pedagogy and curriculum are designed in such a way as to ensure that all students might have a more equal chance at decoding the complexities of what has been, and still remains, the prescribed academic discourse of the University.

The environments in which these practices are housed play a central role in bringing about these changes. They are places in which one of the primary objectives is to “enable our students to live within the arts, making clearings and spaces for themselves” (Greene, 2000, pp. 134, 135). Interaction with the arts is the stimulus for imagination, and when imagination is released, identities too, are released, transformed, and often actualized within the clearings and spaces that Greene envisions. It is also within these spaces that a significant and less discussed ‘affordance’ of a multimodal infused pedagogy is brought to light through the ways in which interactions with multimodality not only reveal students’ identities but also serve to capture and document the ways in which identities shift and change. Kress (2010) observes that it is through multimodal texts that the interests of the creator are displayed and are reflective of the “subjectivity of the sign-maker” (p.77). Rowsell and Pahl (2007) similarly note that, “...text making [i]s a process involving the sedimentation of identities into the text, which can then be seen as an artifact that reflects, through its materiality, the previous identities of the meaning maker” (p. 388). Thus, the visual emphasis in classroom practice expands the image of the student and the learning process, transforming them into valuable metadata that supports the disruption of literacy practices that are autonomous, fixed, and inherently hegemonic, in favor of one that embodies a more authentic and empowering ideological model of learning (Street, 1995; Gee, 1991; Heath, 1984).

## **MULTIMODAL DESIGN**

This chapter focuses on the way in which these clearings and spaces are achieved in a first-year composition class by drawing on Kress’s (1997) theory of multimodality and the ways in which the incorporation of a multiplicity of aesthetic semiotic modes such as art, film, and image--both moving and still—serve to emphasize the concept of design. Design is the primary concept of multimodality. The central pro-

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