

Chapter III

Pedagogic Potentials of Multimodal Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the changed nature of literacy within new communication contexts, the literacy that is needed for reading, viewing, responding to and producing multimodal and digital texts. Potentials for redesigning literacy pedagogy within new modes of communication are demonstrated for educational contexts. As a basis for this discussion, the author analyses classroom evidence using examples of three case studies from a research project conducted in primary schools in Sydney, Australia. In the research project teachers in several primary schools worked with the author/researcher to consider ways of redesigning literacy pedagogy within e-learning and multimodal classroom contexts. Interesting and significant changes occurred in their classroom practice. Teachers developed programs that incorporated a range of technology, including Web 2.0, and were able to maintain a balance between print-based and new literacies. Examples are presented and discussed to highlight the differences in pedagogy needed for 'multimodal literacy' combined with traditional literacy practices.

INTRODUCTION

There is now an acceptance of the textual shift that has occurred for today's students whose environment is filled with visual, electronic and digital texts. The terms 'multiliteracies' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Unsworth, 2001), 'new literacies' (Lankshear, C. & Knobel, M. 2003), 'multimodal texts', 'multimodal discourse' and 'multimodality'¹ (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001, 2006)

represent attempts to describe the textual shift that has occurred and to conceptualise the changed learning paradigm that is fundamental for literacy and learning in an age of increased digital communication.

Students of today quickly learn the range of technology that allows them to multi-task with a variety of digital media and mobile technology to surf the internet, send a text message or photo to a friend, play a digital game while listening

to music, or create their own multimedia texts through hybrid texts such as weblogs. 'Texting' or SMS messaging is part of what has been termed the new 'textual landscape' (Carrington, 2005) that has expanded rapidly with the introduction of Web 2.0 technology. The multi-tasking involved in texting, that may incorporate rapid use of abbreviated spelling, numbers, photos, graphics and icons, is a skill needed for activities such as blogs, wikis, podcasting or gaming. Moreover, this multi-tasking itself incorporates the merging and synchronising of text, images, sound and movement. Do we really know how such multi-tasking and morphing is affecting the way children learn? Are the processes involved in activities such as texting, blogging, or communicating online developing different cognitive abilities than those required for reading and writing traditional print-based texts? Or are these new modes of communication merely requiring traditional literacy skills to be applied to new types of texts?

Such questions are currently being investigated by many researchers world wide. We are in a time of transition with new theories and new pedagogy evolving while at the same time newer forms of digital communication are emerging. There are arguments that classrooms are in danger of becoming redundant unless significant changes are made to curriculum and assessment practices. A recent report in the United Kingdom (Bearne et al, 2007) has shown that children of all ages are more likely to access digital rather than print-based texts outside school. This research has implications for the use of texts inside school. We need to consider what type of pedagogical shift is needed to incorporate the textual shift that has occurred and the underlying digital cultures that are embedded within multimodal communication. There are many reasons why schools cannot be expected to replicate the multimedia experiences that students engage in outside school. However we do need to examine how new modes of communication can be integral to classroom communication.

Curriculum documents and assessment requirements for reading and writing are based on established theories around the reading and writing of print-based texts. These theories have determined specific approaches and strategies for teaching reading and writing to assist learners at all stages of learning. We need ongoing research to theorise the interactions that occur as readers process various visual, aural, spatial and textual modes, separately or simultaneously, in digital texts. Do students read digital texts for meaning in the same way as they read print-based texts? What digital reading strategies need to be developed for deeper levels of inferential, analytical, critical and evaluative understandings? What differences are there between the process of sending a text message and handwriting a message on paper? How do we incorporate the possibilities of imaginative design and production possible for a website, blog or DVD into the writing curriculum?

If we consider the types of digital texts that students may access from the perspective of literacy education, it is evident that such texts involve much more than the traditional processes of reading and writing print-based texts. Often 'reading' may involve viewing, listening and responding, while 'writing' may involve talking, listening, designing and producing. In fact the traditional ideas of texts are blurred, as are the processes of literacy. Many texts have become hybrid texts that may involve an interchange of modalities and processes. For example, a blog is designed, produced and written for a screen to function online. It may include written text, images, graphics, video and sound and can be read, listened to and responded to by others with text, images, video or sound. The increased popularity of social networking sites like *YouTube*, *MySpace*, *Facebook* and *Second Life*, where people can participate with information about themselves or with a different identity, demonstrates that people are responding to the need to participate, create and produce their own texts for communication. Brun (2007) has highlighted this trend and has

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