

## Chapter 4

# The Dynamic Design of Learning with Text: The Grammar of Multiliteracies

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter, the authors explore the current challenges facing educational institutions to design learning spaces congruent for learning with and through multimodal textual practices. The chapter reviews the inherent design, or grammar, of multimodal literacy practices and that of learning with these texts. Using examples from secondary and tertiary contexts, constructs from complexity theory offer a theoretical lens that is more generative for conceptualizing and analyzing dynamic literacy practices in educational institutions than multimodal literacy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the tensions that arise from these examples, using Bourdieu's (1984) habitus to problematize the future of designing dynamic educational spaces.*

### BACKGROUND

Across various academic fields, the advent of the information age, with its explosion in quantity and format of multimodal texts, has ushered in various reconsiderations and investigations into the nature of textual practices and systems. Within education, the publication of the New London Group's landmark treatise (1996) on literacy, information communication technologies (ICT), and pedagogy initiated myriad inquiries into research and practice,

most often within literacy education, information communication technologies, and critical literacy. The New London Group were largely credited with coining the phrase, 'multiliteracies.' The 1996 publication set forth a call and need for educators to address literacy learning which the Group believed were always inextricably connected to available technologies of the time. In this way, the Group emphasized that investigations into literacy and literacy pedagogy must be in concert with new and yet-to-be-seen communications media. Underpinning the work of the New London Group and our work recanted in this chapter, is a view of

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literacy from sociocultural perspectives. As such, our theoretical perspective on literacy positions language and text as always implicated by culturally situated processes of making, conveying and negotiating meaning. People in situated contexts have opportunities to both express themselves and make sense of the world through multiple and multiply designed modes of communication (linguistic/textual, visual/graphical, musical/audio, spatial, gestural).

Throughout these quantitative and qualitative changes in textual practices, the field of literacy research and investigations into literacy pedagogy have been keenly interested in what counts as literacy, literacy competency, and assessment thereof (e.g., Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004).

A lesser addressed question, and the focus here, is what parallels can and must be drawn between theories of learning spaces and theories of multiliteracies. A particular focus of this chapter is the exploration of this question, in light of some of the problems schools have encountered as they have worked to educate students in these textual practices. Now that multiliteracies, multimodal texts, and digital literacies are far from 'new,' we extend upon New London Group's initial theorizing about these changes in textual processes to more deeply investigate the complexities involved in planning deliberately for and with multimodality.

To anchor our analyses, the authors (we) present two case studies to explore learning and multiliteracies and examine these case studies and relevant theories through the filter of praxis. Praxis is a key concept outlined by Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, as part of his mapping of the actions and perspectives central to sincere and purposeful social change. Within this outline, Freire underscored the necessity of praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 36). As we explore the two case studies' uses of dynamic designs of learning with multimodal texts, we employ praxis to note what we can learn from available theories of learning

and multimodality and also what educators should pay attention to among the dynamics of texts, space, and participants when hoping for change in practice. To contextualize this work, we first turn to a discussion of the historical problems that have emerged as schools have attempted to adopt a multiliteracies perspective.

### **ISSUES: HISTORICAL PROBLEMATICS IN SCHOOLING MULTILITERACIES**

While multiliteracies offer compelling reasons for consideration and use, their appropriation into institutional spaces of education also demands investigation into the kinds of learning processes and practices that are compatible with these texts. The incorporation of a multiliteracies approach requires a fundamental shift in how teaching and learning spaces are conceptualized, including the particular challenges of reconceptualizing these spaces within the school. Such reconceptualizations of space will be explored in the case studies offered in this chapter. Through the use of selective case studies, it was not assumed that the educational institution contained spaces automatically inclined towards learning, and more so, learning with and about multimodal textual practices. While it is facile and common to conflate learning with education, our inquiry into the intersections of learning spaces and multimodal texts requires an intentional attention to learning, which occurs in all kinds of spaces, public, institutional, and countercultural. While public pedagogies, those that occur outside of the orchestrated contexts of schools, tend to be marked by user-driven inquiries and highly utilitarian teaching/learning exchanges, the roles of learner, teacher, within the spatial boundaries and temporal rhythms of classroom learning have yet to be similarly transformed (Gee, 2003). Institutional spaces of education, however, are traditionally marked by relatively inflexible patterns of interactions (Hargreaves, 1994).

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