

Chapter 2

Creating Multimodal Texts in the Classroom: Shifting Teaching Practices, Influencing Student Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The term “21st century” has been attached to teaching and learning, and to literacy for at least the past twenty years. Implicit in this discourse was that the teaching practices needed changing because they would not be relevant to or meet the needs of 21st century learners. Research into these practices in and out of school settings has predominantly been on what counts as “reading,” re-defining what constitutes reading in association with technology, particularly online reading. What counts as writing and the reconceptualization of “writing” has not resulted in the same amount of attention. It appears to be the “Neglected R” (The College Board, 2003).

Drawing upon literature, this chapter investigates what changes occur to teaching practices when teachers incorporate the creation of multimodal texts, mediated by technology, into their classroom curriculum, and what influence these changes have on student outcomes. The shifts in teaching practices identified include explicit teaching of different semiotic modes to create a text, the inclusion of authentic tasks for creating multimodal texts, the use of a collaborative approach to the construction of a text, and changes to assessment practices. The influence on students’ outcomes relate to learning of content, knowledge, skills, and level of engagement in learning.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last twenty years what counts as literacy and literate practice has changed (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Luke, 2000; New London Group, 2000). For many, the definition of literacy en-

compasses more than alphabetic understandings, or the ability to simply decode the sound-symbol relationships (New London Group, 2000; Zammit & Downes, 2002). Literacy is a social practice (Street, 1984). It is ‘a matter of how reading and writing are conceived and practised within

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particular social settings' (Lankshear & Lawler, 1987, p. 43). As such, it is dynamic and adapts to new social uses and purposes, such as occur as a result of technological changes. Meaning is conveyed and created to a 'reader' through their interaction with the socially constructed text, whether it is mono-modal, such as a written text, or multimodal. A similar view can be associated with writing a text: a writer is driven by a social purpose, with this purpose reflected in the choices she makes to convey her meaning. As students learn to compose a written text, they learn how to organise a text to meet their purpose, to carefully select words and phrase in order to ensure their meaning is conveyed the way they intend.

The term '21st century' has also been attached to literacy and teaching and learning for the past twenty years. Implicit in this discourse was that teaching practices needed changing because they would not be relevant to or meet the needs of 21st century learners. Much of this 'new literacies' research has a focus on online reading, re-defining what constitutes reading in association with technology (see for example Coiro, 2003; Henry, 2006; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). With the increased use of the Internet in classes, the texts students interact with are more complex than those in books. The processes associated with reading online are different to those employed when reading books. 'New literacies' also encapsulates work related to the use of 'new' textual forms enabled by new technologies, as well as new uses afforded to texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Shifts in teaching practices occur when teachers use the Internet in their classroom for learning (Castek, Bevans-Mangelson, & Goldstone, 2006).

What changes occur to teaching practices associated with writing and the processes associated with creating texts using technology, including those found on the Internet, has not resulted in the same amount of attention. Writing appears to be the 'Neglected R' (The College Board, 2003). However, using technologies to create texts goes beyond composing written texts. Technology af-

fords opportunities for students to learn how to create multimodal texts similar to those published by professionals and available on the Internet.

Teachers working with multimodal texts introduce students to new ways of creating meaning beyond written texts. As they incorporate the creation of multimodal texts, mediated by technology, into their classroom curriculum changes occur in their teaching practices. The 'shifts' in teaching practices, appearing in my own research and in the analysis of other studies, can be grouped into three areas: i) the explicit teaching of different semiotic modes to use in creating a multimodal text, ii) the inclusion of authentic tasks for creating multimodal texts, and iii) the use of a collaborative approach to the construction of a text. In addition to changes in teaching practices evident in the studies, changes to assessment practices also seem to occur when teachers include multimodal text creation as part of the curriculum.

Studies on multimodal composition are situated more in the area of 'multiliteracies'. The field of 'multiliteracies' provides a broader conceptualisation of what counts as writing, in comparison to the field of 'new literacies'. Multiliteracies acknowledge that texts are multimodal, and that students need to be able to 'read' and 'write' across a range of modes, beyond the written or print-based texts (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005; New London Group, 2000; Zammit & Downes, 2002). In comparison, new literacies appear to prioritise 'reading' over 'writing'. The teachers who implement a multiliteracies approach in their classroom change their teaching practices in an attempt to improve student outcomes and engagement. In these classrooms, learning about the affordances of the different semiotic modes and how to create multimodal texts prevails over learning about written texts in isolation.

As the New London Group (2000) and others have noted (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), each semiotic mode has its own *form* of conveying meaning. For example, written text is linear, visual is spatial.

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