RESEARCH ARTICLE

REDEFINING MEANING THROUGH MULTIMODALITY AND MULTIMODAL LITERACY – AN INTRODUCTION

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ABSTRACT

The rise of digital technology and new media communication has given rise to growing interests in redefining meaning through different modes of communication rather than just language. This development has characterized communication as multimodal. It is said that meaning today is constructed through multiple semiotic resources or modes. And these semiotic resources or modes are socially shaped over a period of time within a shared social and cultural context of a society. Incidentally, these multimodal semiotic resources or modes have impacted literacy and it has changed the very face of learning through different multimodal texts like graphics, posters, comics, videos, and others. What is multimodal? What are these resources or modes which have impacted meaning-making today? This article is an attempt to understand this persistently growing field of multimodality and its impact on the current transition in education. It will introduce, define the concept of multimodality and multimodal literacy, and attempt to comprehend the paradigm shifts and transition in the field of education.

Keywords: Multimodality, Multimodal literacy, Meaning Making and Current Transition in Education

Introduction

"It is no longer true that proficiency in language is the only measure of literacy.
Multimodal literacy is the current paradigm of education."

Since the 4th-century 'multimodality' has been studied and has developed as theory throughout the history of reading and writing. The term was not defined until the 20th century. This two-decades-old concept has today developed systematically to address questionable debates regarding the changes occurring in the new media, information superhighways, and digital technologies. It is an interdisciplinary approach that comprehends communication and representation "to be more than about language". It presumes that representation and communication depict itself from multiple modes, all of which contribute greatly to the meaning of any text. *As John A Bateman* (2008) has rightly pointed out "nowadays …text is just one strand in a complex presentational form that seamlessly incorporates visual aspect 'around' and sometimes even instead of the text itself".
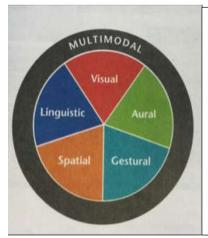
Fig 1 – Multimodality, Representation and New Media

Multimodality

Multimodality today has become "a normal state of human communication" (Kress 2010). Through technology, it has evolved. In recent years, "the social impact of digital technologies for text production, among other factors, has made more visible the fact that texts are multimodal and hence that language alone cannot suffice to explain meaning made through them" (Adami, 2015, p 5). Consequently, language is no more the only means of meaning-making. "As communication practices have become increasingly shaped by developments in information and multimedia technologies, it is no longer possible for us to think about literacy solely as a linguistic accomplishment" (Jewitt, 2008, p. 241). All kinds of modes or resources can be used for understanding the meaning; like writing, images, signs, gestures, body language, colours, and many other modes lending themselves to doing different kinds of semiotic work. Each of these modes has "distinctive potential for meaning". Hence multimodality "in its most basic sense, is a theory of communication and social semiotics, it describes communication practices in terms of the textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources - or modes - used to compose messages" (Kress, 2010).

Semiotic systems like

- **Linguistic**: vocabulary, structure, grammar of oral/spoken/written language
- **Visual**: colour, vectors, still/moving images
- **Aural**: volume, pitch, rhythm of music and sound effects
- **Gestural**: movement, speed, facial expression and body language
- **Spatial:** proximity, direction, position of layout, organization of objects in space.

Semiotic systems combined together forms Multimodality

Fig 2 - Aural, Linguistic, Spatial, Visual and Gestural resources or modes - used to compose messages (Google Images)

Modes

Kress (2009) defines mode as "a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning and problematizes this notion from the perspective of qualifying criteria as well as features and descriptive planes which help differentiate between individual modes. Secondly, they are shaped by both the intrinsic characteristics and potentialities of the medium and by the requirements, histories, and values of societies and their cultures". Further, Kress traces the roots of modes to Halliday's semiotic framework to modes other than dialogue and writing. He adopts Halliday's (1978) ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions used for explanation of meaning-making through images and their shared use with writing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p 2). Furthermore, he says that resources have to fulfill three criteria in order to be recognized as modes. They

need to represent 1) states, actions, or events (ideational function); 2) social relations of participants in a given communicative act (interpersonal function); and 3) both of the above need to be represented as coherent (both internally and within their environments) texts (textual function). (Kress, 2010, p 79-87). Lyons (2016, p 1) opines that "modes, rather than fixed, are created through social processes, and thus fluid and context-dependent. In order for a particular resource to be a mode, the community in which it is used needs to recognize it as a mode and share a cultural sense of how this resource can be organized to construct and convey meaning. The choice of mode is a central aspect of interaction and meaning-making. A mode is often contrasted with medium, i.e., the substance through which texts are disseminated, e.g., a printed book or an audio file".

Subsequently, multimodality is previewed under communication theory as well, it examines how people in general "communicate and interact" not just by writing but also through speaking, signal or gesture, art, music, dance, gaze, and other visual forms. As communication is semiotic and multimodal in nature, even crucially communication in the operating theatre is considered multimodal: a gaze, a touch, a spoken comment, a gesture, a change in position, all might act as a prompt to create meaning (Kress, 2010, p 2). "It can be argued that multimodality can be used as theory, as perspective, or as a method, and that these different degrees of engagement with multimodality help to make sense of what is seen to count as multimodal" (Jewitt, 2009). Consequently, it is a persistently growing field of discourse from an exclusively "print-based to screen-based" presentation. Text per se is no longer the central mode of representation because of the immense growth or presence of digital media. It is widespread while applying it to texts like advertising, fine arts, social media, and literature.

Therefore, all communication is and has always been, multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; qtd in Adami, 2015, p 4). Image, gesture, sign language, have been part of human cultures since times immemorial, academic disciplines like psychology, history, music among others have studied them, but today theorists have made an attempt to bring all of them under one theoretical unified roof of multimodality. The vast web of social, economic, cultural, technological changes have revolutionized the world of communication today in a very powerful manner, globalization can give us an answer because "this condition makes it possible for characteristics of one place to be present and active in another" (Kress, 2010, p 5). Stemming from these significant changes across the world, far-reaching changes can be seen in meaning, representation, semiotic production, dissemination, distribution, mediation, and communication of messages which have undergone great changes. Globalization effects are very clear and everywhere, from print to electronics; books to screen; and writing to images, among others. Academic interests in the new communicational world and its characteristics of multimodality are belated, and there is a need to get back to the saddle.

Consequently, today multimodality as a field of research attends to different tasks. Its goal is to examine the meaning potentials of each mode (i.e., speech and writing, differently conceived of, through a multimodal lens), and to give an account of how modes 'shaped historically in different cultures and societies' fulfill particular tasks. It likewise aims to find shared labels that can describe meaning made in all modes, to be able to treat all modal resources in a unifying and coherent account. Finally, it aims to define and describe meaning made through the relation among modes in multimodal ensembles, given that the meaning expressed by each modal resource influences the other in a text. (Adami, 2015, p 7)

To comprehend this term better let us look at a few more definitions:

- *Oxford dictionary defines multimodality "as the use or availability of several different modes, methods, systems, etc".*

- *Oxford reference defines multimodality as "the use of more than one semiotic mode in meaning-making, communication, and representation generally, or in a specific situation. Such modes include all forms of verbal, nonverbal, and contextual communication".*

- *Within the field of "multimodal studies" (O'Halloran & Smith 2011), the phenomenon of multimodality is approached through different theoretical perspectives (Jewitt 2009a; O'Halloran 2011), all hinging on four key assumptions (Jewitt 2014a), namely that (a) all communication is multimodal; (b) analyses*

focused solely or primarily on language cannot adequately account for meaning; (c) each mode has specific affordances arising from its materiality and from its social histories which shape its resources to fulfill given communicative needs; and (d) modes concur together, each with a specialized role, to meaning-making; hence relationships amongst modes are key to recognize every occurrence of communication (Adami, 2015; qtd in, p 3).

- *"Multimodality refers to the interplay between different representational modes, for instance, between images and written/spoken word. Multimodal representations mediate the sociocultural ways in which these modes are combined in the communication process" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001, p 20).*

It is also said that multimodality is underpinned by three interrelated theoretical assumptions. They are:

1. Multimodality presumes "representation and communication" as constantly representing "multiplicity of modes, which contribute to meaning". Its focal point is on investigating the full inventory of "meaning-making resources" that people use in different context like written, spoken, visual, gestural, three-dimensional, and others on developing means that demonstrates how these are prearranged to make meaning.

2. Multimodality presupposes that resources are socially shaped over a period of time to become meaning-making resources that articulate the meanings to different communities. These sets of semiotic resources are called modes, these modes, in turn, become central aspects of interaction and meaning. They also need shared cultural sense within a community that can be organized to realize the meaning.

3. People devise significance through their assortment and pattern of modes, foregrounding the connotation of the interface between modes. Thus, "all communicational acts are shaped by the norms and rules operating at the moment of sign making, and influenced by the motivations and interests of people in a specific social context" (Jewitt 2009; qtd in, Jeff Bezemer, 2012).

Thus, one can conclude and say multimodality cannot be understood without four core concepts which are common starting points – modes, semiotic resources, model affordance, and inter semiotic relations. Subsequently today, multimodal texts like web pages, animation, films, e-posters, digital shows, digital stories, dance, music, drama, storytelling, moving or still images, etc., through combinations construe and convey meaning. It is said that these multimodal texts have a consequential impact on the minds of young as they are digitally exposed. Mark Prensky (2001) coined the term "digital natives" to describe these young minds who have grown up/are growing up in the "era of ubiquitous technology" or the "digital age". These coinages were owing to the exponential upsurge in digital technologies where information was/is disseminated with the speed of light or a click of a button. Consequently, this increasingly digitalized world and multimodal texts have raised the need for teaching the young minds or the digital natives to comprehend and construct meaning-making. For these young children to communicate and interpret multimodal texts, meaning-making, and digital technologies, they need to be multimodal literate. "A 'multimodal literate' student must be sensitized to the meaning potential and choices afforded in the production of the text, rendering an enhanced ability to make deliberate and effective choices in the construction and presentation of knowledge" (O'Halloran, K.L. & Lim, F. V. 2011)**.** Lim, F.V. & Tan, K.Y.S. (2018) rightly opine that **"**as educators, we need to develop the knowledge and pedagogy to teach multimodal literacy. We cannot assume that just because our young are growing up in a media-rich world, they will be able to view multimodal representations critically and not be naive consumers of media texts." Contextually, what is multimodal literacy?

Multimodal Literacy

The term "multimodal literacy" originated from the concept of "multimodality". In the 80s this concept saw advancement and hypothesized learning through cognition. Consequently, Neil D Fleming's through his research on "neuro-linguistic learning styles" propagated three styles of learning that is, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Fleming described that these styles fundamentally enabled the learner to learn better and construe meaning-making. These styles at the same time helped the learners to create innovative texts by employing

digital technologies. Furthermore, Gunther Kress and Carey Jewitt proposed the term "Multimodal Literacy". Michael Halliday, a well-known linguist propagated this pedagogical approach. Basically, the term originated from social semiotics. And today we see a transformation where traditional forms of teaching and learning have conveniently shifted to multimodal teaching and learning forms.

Currently, the terrain of education is ever-changing and is in a metamorphosis stage. Within the existing contexts in education, literacy needs to be reexamined and reevaluated. Today learning environments are changing into multimodal environments along with changes in the pedagogies to ensure classroom environments as a response to modern communication and learning contexts. Educationists and researchers are attempting to respond to digital technologies within the prevailing curriculums and pedagogies across the world. Kress (2003) aptly writes:

> "It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological, and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain". (p 1)

Consequently, the current paradigm of education is evident enough for educators to combine print-based learning with digital technology. Furthermore, society at large and predominantly the growing children are impacted by digital technologies. These digital technologies have given birth to "digital natives" who are born in this digital era and are totally digital-savvy. Numerous multifaceted digital resources like colour, images, gestures, metaphors, music, graphic, sound, smells, pictures, photography, and movies, etc. have entered, as resources, into the classroom to enabled learning and meaning-making. Multiliteracies have become crucial skills for interactional and learning contexts in classrooms. This emergent research has today brought numerous innovative and creative means to engage students in effective learning by incorporating notions of new communication landscape brought about by digital technologies. This kind of pedagogic approach converging on obvious teaching strategies helps learners or students to develop "evidence-based interpretation of texts and critical thinki*ng*". Subsequently, with this construct in the background, education needs to redefine itself with *"new language and literacy criteria"* within the framework of multimodal literacy.

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This term multimodal literacy has numerous definitions. Few noteworthy ones are:

* *Kress and Jewitt (2003) state that "multimodal literacy refers to meaning-making that occurs at different levels through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, producing and interacting with multimodal texts and multimodal communication. It may include listening, talking, and dramatizing as well as the writing, designing, and producing of such texts. It also refers to comprehending the different ways knowledge is represented; the way discourse is designed to interact and integrate multimodal texts like advertisements, posters, reports, websites, films, etc. It is also interpreted as an extended form of social semiology dealing with how society interprets and manages signs and symbols. In this type of literacy, the text has to be interpreted separately in terms of sounds, writing, and visuals, and then has to be interpreted as a whole as a multimodal entity".*

- *Theo Van Leeuwen (2017) states "Multimodal literacy is, therefore, the ability to use and combine different semiotic modes in ways that are appropriate to the given context, both in the sense of the context-bound rules and conventions that may apply and in the sense of the unique demands made by each specific situation".*

- *Hocks (2003) states that "this process includes reading, comprehending, and analyzing the texts shared in electronic media and then producing new texts through writing (cited in Tüzel & Tok, 2013)*

- *Mills and Unsworth (2017) state that "multimodal literacy refers to the study of language that combines two or more modes of meaning".*

- *Walsh (2010) describes it as "...meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, and producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts" (p. 213).*

- *Cordes (2007) in his research papers states "multimodal literacy is the synthesis of multiple modes of communication. This communication can result in a transformation of the singular modes into a form that often contains new or multiple meanings. The multimodal object can require a range of tools, skills, and sensibilities and often reflects collaborative as well as an individual effort".*

In the most basic sense, multimodal literacy:

- is a pedagogic tool that makes meaning by using multimodal texts.

- is a combination of multiples modes or resources which create and interpret meaning.

- can produce, scrutinize, construct meaning using any intermingling of modes which are digital, visual, linguistics, aural, gestural, and spatial in nature.

- uses different objects of expression to make meaning.

- examines language by using different modes to understand how meaning is construed.

- uses digital technology and media tools to augment study and interpretation of meaning.

- combines semiotic resources to the appropriate meaning of a particular context or situation.

- is a critical tool used to look at multiple texts, multiple meanings, and make sense out of it.

The below framework of multimodal literacy showcases the multiple tools used under visual, audio, linguistics, gestural, and spatial design through which construction of meaning is shaped in the process of learning:
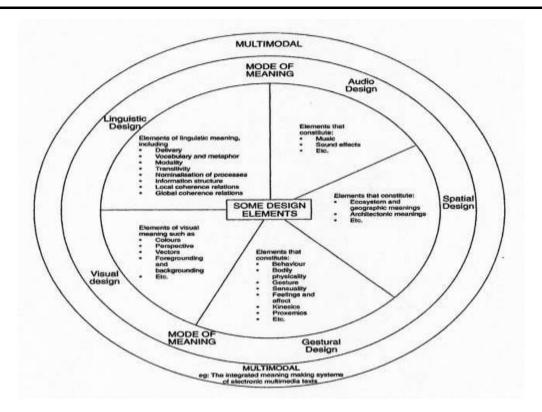
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Figure -3 Multimodal Literacy Framework Source: Adopted from Rush, 2003

In addition to the above frame few semiotic tools used in multimodal classrooms which can enhance meaning-making and learning are digital and multimedia texts, digital and verbal storytelling options, dancing, use of gestures or nonverbal communication methods, arts, scribblers, constructions, pictures, magazines, journals, audio and video recordings, blogs, WordPress, collages, comic strips, infographics, photography, podcasts, storyboards and many others.

Consequently, the application of digital technology has a very profound impact on how these multiple tools are used to process information through exchange and expression in a classroom setting for a better understanding of knowledge. This pedagogic approach can be functional and applied to all fields of discourse, as its intentions are to evolve students to be perceptive readers and producers of multimodal texts. Currently, there is growing attention to multimodal literacy because even in informal social contexts like homes, workplaces, communities, recreational sites, and others.

The future of education is intertwined with digital technologies, multimodal conventions, and practices. Today because of very early exposure to digital technologies, digital natives comprehend multimodal texts better than us. We as educators need to understand this influence and progress in developing different modes to enhance literacy skills and make them multimodal literates. Furthermore, multimodal pedagogies can transmute genuine classroom learning to newer heights.

Pedagogists, linguists, educators, curriculum makers, and researchers are observing this ever-growing field of multimodal literacy to bring about transformation in learning and meaning-making to meet the needs of diverse social, cultural, economic, and digital contexts of students. The application of multimodal literacy in the classroom needs a thorough examination of classroom pedagogies, as each student is unique and has different learning preferences. There is no escape from globalized communication environments for today's students. Consequently, these learners need advanced digital, critical, and alphanumeric skills to understand the range of knowledge they are continuously exposed too.

Contextually, diverse curriculum designs isnd innovative teaching strategies can be implemented through a multimodal approach that can go beyond language to embrace auditory, pictorial, three-dimensional, haptic, vocalized, and other semiotic resources for meaning-making, to prepare students to learn transversely at all

levels of education. The pedagogy should comprise of different language-based, live and digital multimodal texts or resources like textbooks, picture books, artworks, records, graphic novels, comic books, posters; texts like drama, dance, live performance, simulations, role play, conversations and storytelling; and texts like soap operas, movies, animatronics, reality shows, documentaries, digital stories, e-posters, and creative web pages to improve critical learning in classroom settings.

Zhang Delu and Ding Zhaofen (2013) opine that "with advancements in modern science, globalization, diversification and technology, high quality and versatility of talents are becoming the need of the hour and center for modern talent training mode. Today's students must not only have language and communicative competence but correspondingly have multimedia, multicultural, and multimodal communicative competence. They should also have the abilities in "multidisciplinary knowledge courses". Cultivation of such talents is not possible by the traditional teaching methods. New innovative methods, teaching, and learning models proposed by the New London Group are effective for cultivating such talents.

At present, very few educators have realized the significance and dynamics of developing multimodal texts and classroom practices, to make students multi-literacy savvy.   It is essential to augment "teachers' and students' multi-modal awareness and formulate clear teaching objectives and evaluation mechanism for multi-literacy (Qian Jinxiu, 2013). Educators must proactively design, employ, and utilize:

- Infographics, Videos, Slides. Visual worksheets, Interactive learning, Online, and blended learning, and other multimodal texts.

- Appropriately establish the output to reduce overload.

- Use digital technologies and digital learning opportunities to keep up with the everchanging landscape of digital communication.

- Design multimodal assignments and assessments.

- The feedback system should adopt a multimodal approach to give feedback.

To conclude, 21st-century learners are constantly evolving, traditional practices are no more inclusive in classrooms. Currently, we need to emphasize on multimodal learning design, creation, and innovation. Teachers should recognize the needs of the learners, ensure the incorporation of digital technologies in classroom communication. Teachers should also reinvent and reimagine pedagogical practices to sustain students' swiftly changing needs. Train the trainer and teacher's educator's programmes must generate context and learning spaces in learning technologies. In short, educators and teachers have to re-discover and re-determine ways to weave Multimodal literacies to augment students learning in a classroom.

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