Worlds have collided and modes have merged: classroom evidence of changed literacy practices

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Abstract

Debates continue in public and in educational policy forums about the ‘basics’ of literacy while many have not recognised that these basics may never be the same again. Rapid changes in digital communication provide facilities for reading and writing to be combined with various and often quite complex aspects of music, photography and film. At the same time, educational policy and national testing requirements are still principally focused on the reading and writing of print-based texts. This paper examines evidence from classroom research to analyse the nature of multimodal literacy, the literacy that is needed in contemporary times for reading, viewing, responding to and producing multimodal and digital texts. Examples of students’ engagement in multimodal literacy are presented to demonstrate how classroom literacy practices can incorporate the practices of talking, listening, reading and writing together with processing the modes of written text, image, sound and movement in print and digital texts.

Key words: literacy, multimodal literacy, multimodal learning environments, reading, writing, modalities

Introduction

While the long-term debate about literacy pedagogy continues among politicians, policy-makers and educators, reality is often ignored. The ‘future’, predicted and described in terms of ‘new literacies’ (Lankshear and Knobel, 2003), ‘multiliteracies’ (e.g. New London Group, 2000; Unsworth, 2001) or multimodal learning environments (Jewitt, 2002; Kress, 2003; Kress et al., 2001; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001), has existed for some time and has been rapidly enhanced by the affordances of web 2 technology, particularly through the growth of social networking sites. As important as effective reading and writing are, it is no longer realistic to talk about ‘reading’ or ‘writing’ as discrete skills needed for the future workplace. Reading and writing rarely occur in isolation for today’s students whose environment is filled with visual, electronic and digital texts that offer facilities for reading, writing, viewing, listening and responding simultaneously. We are already in a changed learning and communication paradigm where students are encouraged to be interactive and participatory. Yet educational policy and pedagogy have not been adapted to suit this changed context.

There are many implications for researchers, policy-makers, educators and parents in considering the way literacy should be understood and taught within the new ‘textual landscape’ (Carrington, 2005). The multitasking involved in the activities of texting, blogging or gaming may incorporate rapid reading, viewing, listening, filming, writing or recording with use of photos, graphics, sound and icons. As the recent Reading on Screen Report (Bearne et al., 2007) has shown, students are more likely to access digital rather than print-based texts for their interest. Students of today are more comfortable with the multitasking required for such texts. Do we really know how such multitasking is affecting the way students learn? Are the processes involved in such activities developing different cognitive abilities than those required for reading and writing print-based texts? How do we determine the reading and writing strategies that are needed for such digital texts while maintaining those strategies that we consider essential for effective literacy? Is it a matter of applying ‘traditional’ skills of reading and writing to digital texts or are there different approaches needed?

These are questions that researchers worldwide are investigating and for which we have no easy answers. Educational policy on literacy pedagogy has not caught up with the changed communication context. Several studies in recent years have been investigating specific aspects of this complex area, emphasising the importance of teachers knowing how to use multimodal texts and how to develop multimodal learning environments to enhance student learning. Bearne (2003) has examined students’ production of their own multimodal texts, demonstrating how they need to be incorporated in literacy assessment, while Bearne and Wolstencroft (2007) have recently developed a more specific approach to integrating writing, reading and visual communication with assessment. Unsworth et al.’s study (2004) of the use of images in national standardised tests in Australia has emphasised the importance of text instructors understanding image/
text relations and collaborating with researchers and teachers. Marsh’s ongoing research (2007) is demonstrating the need for changes in language and literacy curricula to adapt to the socio-cultural changes to literacy through technological advances. Walsh et al. (2007) have demonstrated the need for an explicit pedagogy around the reading of digital texts using the ‘reading practices’ framework of Luke and Freebody (2002). These few examples demonstrate that we are only beginning to understand the complexities of pedagogy and assessment for aspects of digital communication while the potentials for using digital texts are rapidly expanding.

If we consider the processes of literacy within new mediums of communication it is evident that ‘reading’ can involve the reading of written text, interacting and responding as well as viewing and listening, while ‘writing’ can involve talking, interacting, designing and producing. In fact the traditional ideas of texts are blurred, as are the processes of literacy, as many contemporary texts are hybrid texts that may involve a range of processes. For example a blog is designed, produced and written for a screen on a web page and may include written text, pictures, graphics, video and sound. It can be read, listened to and responded to by others and responded to with text, pictures, video or sound with the manipulation of digital technology. The increased popularity of sites like YouTube, MySpace or 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. The practices and cultures that have developed around user-led environments of web 2 mean that people are not just viewing and engaging with the web but they are using and producing their own versions of texts and/or participating in the texts of others. They are able to design, create and author their own work on the web in various ways. This is the digital environment that students of today are able to access and participate in.

While we may acknowledge this changed communication paradigm, we are a long way from understanding how these changes can be realised pedagogically. Theorists such as Kress (2003) have analysed how meaning is constructed through multimodal texts and different semiotic systems. The synchronous functioning of the modes of image, movement, colour, gesture, 3D objects, music and sound on a digital screen require a different type of ‘reading’ or ‘writing’, a literacy that entails non-linear and simultaneous processing. We need to further understand the impact and demands of new forms of literacy mediated through the varied digital communication devices along with the influence of social networking sites. In addition to understanding how these are influencing students’ motivation and learning, we need to know how to develop classroom learning experiences that are appropriate for both conventional and new forms of literacy. This paper examines the nature of multimodal literacy by examining classroom practices from a recent research study conducted in a number of primary schools in Sydney, Australia (Walsh, 2007).

The study

In the research study, nine teachers’ classes volunteered to include multimodal or digital texts within their classroom literacy programme. Data gathered included teacher and researcher observations, video data, teachers’ digital and print journals as well as student digital and print work samples. These data were collated and analysed to answer the two research questions:

(i) What are the literacy strategies that students need for reading, using and producing multimodal texts?
(ii) What is the relevant and explicit pedagogy appropriate for integrating multimodal literacies with conventional literacy practices?

Two of the teachers’ projects from this large study are now examined to demonstrate the changed nature of literacy and how classroom practices can accommodate this change.

Description and analysis of two projects

In each teacher’s project, the teachers planned to embed technology into the literacy programme, depending on the resources available within their school. Most of the schools involved large numbers of second language learners and varied in the range of digital equipment, and some schools had quite limited resources. Whatever these resources, teachers’ programmes were thoughtful and creative so that the results demonstrated multimodal environments where students worked with and incorporated different modes of print and digital texts within literacy and curriculum tasks. There were many literacy strategies that were used by the students that could be described as ‘the same’ as those used with print-based texts traditionally used in English and other curriculum areas. Aspects of literacy that are defined in current curricula, i.e. talking, listening, reading, writing and viewing occurred with various levels of meaning-making. There were, however, a number of ‘differences’ in the way these aspects were operating. These differences have been identified from the data as related to the convergence and interrelationship between modes of spoken and written language, sound, image and gesture. This convergence will be examined in the following discussion of Project 1 and Project 2, describing the learning episodes that students were engaged in.
Project 1: multimodal literacy within the podcasting process

Project 1 provides an explicit example of the changed nature of literacy; indeed it can be clearly described as an example of multimodal literacy. The teacher led his Year 3 (8-year-old) students through a podcasting project within their literacy block over several weeks. Podcasting has become a popular development within web 2 technology and enables a range of modes to be used in the production of a multimedia experience. In this example, students were engaged in a range of literacy tasks of researching, planning and writing texts for broadcasting while learning about the technology of using audio and video files to produce their podcasts. In pairs, the students were required to plan, develop, draft, produce and refine an 8-minute podcast suitable for sharing with a broad audience. The final podcasts were uploaded onto iTunes as well as onto the school’s website.

Each podcast had to consist of an introduction, an information report about an Australian spider, a serialised section of a narrative and a conclusion that could include jokes or puzzles. Each segment of the podcast had to be researched and written at first with the teacher modelling and scaffolding the different text types. The segments then were designed into storyboards, incorporating written text with visuals such as photographs or drawings, before recording could commence. Audio recording was edited along with sound effects and music. Figure 1 summarises the literacy practices that were involved in the development and final production of the podcasts.

In Figure 1 the left-hand column highlights all the processes students were engaged in throughout the podcasting task. Those aspects that are commonly referred to as literacy – reading, writing, talking and listening – occurred along with aspects of viewing, designing and using technology. This example demonstrates a difference from previous classroom literacy practices with print-based texts and this difference cannot be attributed just to the additional use of technology. The principle difference lies in the way traditional aspects of literacy were combined with other modalities and semiotic systems. These processes involve a convergence: an interconnection and interdependence between the modalities of written text, image and sound. In the podcast the mode of sound was predominant as students incorporated written text and visuals into the audio production that included their use of voice with simultaneous integration of music and sound effects. There was the further visual process of this all occurring on screen as the music and sound effects needed to be edited and synchronised through the use of the ‘Garage Band’ software, the visuals loaded through ‘Comic Life’ software and the eventual logging of this product onto a website.

For example, in the podcasting text the mode of sound was predominant so, in order to communicate their meaning through audio recording, students needed to learn to use aspects of tone, intonation, pause, pitch, modulation and stress in their voices as they prepared their text. Our observations showed that students became very conscious of their enunciation and of the effect of their voice on the listener/audience. Music and sound effects were integrated while producing a text on screen, synchronised with visual modes. At the same time the use of written text was integral as a dominant mode because the students had to write each text-type and plan the sequencing of the language for their audio production. If we consider the way writing, an essential aspect of literacy, was developed during the podcasting it is evident that the requirements for writing have changed within new modes of communication. Figure 2 illustrates the complexities involved

Figure 1: Multimodal literacy: the convergence of modes

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in the writing process that occurred for the students who were writing for an audio broadcast. The bold typeface indicates where aspects of digital technology occurred within the processes of reading and writing.

A classroom writing task needs no longer to be seen as confined to writing a particular genre or text-type to be edited and produced on paper. The podcasting process itself introduced a new genre that incorporated other genres. At the same time traditional or ‘basic’ conventions of writing, particularly text structure, sentences, grammar, spelling and punctuation were maintained while new conventions of digital production were learned. The students worked through a progressive process of learning with the teacher modelling and scaffolding structures and conventions at different stages. This whole process demonstrates a different literacy, or multimodal literacy, where modes converge. It was evident that these 8-year-old students achieved a depth of literacy and learning about information reports and narratives along with the design and production of the podcasting process. Engagement of students was high, particularly for many boys who previously had been disengaged from classroom learning. There was a cohesion in the literacy and learning that occurred. This was indeed an example of multimodal literacy that involved students working together: talking, listening, planning, reading, researching, designing, writing and producing using both print and digital modes.

Project 2: designing and learning through different modalities

In this project two teachers developed a cross-age programme. They combined Year 1 (6-year-old) and Year 4 (9-year-old) classes in an intense programme for 2 hours every day for 3 weeks with fairy tales as the theme of the programme. The teachers read and demonstrated traditional and alternative versions of fairy tales while students read and responded to a variety of these. The teachers developed students’ understandings of the narrative structures of plot, setting and characterisation, particularly focusing on the feelings of characters. They modelled and scaffolded components of narrative for the writing of joint constructions of the narrative text-type. The students researched fairy tales on Internet sites for other models as well as many different examples of picture-book versions. They were led to compare content, structure and the design of fairy tales in print-based stories, picture books, CD ROMs, stories in music and digital narratives.

A variety of literacy activities were embedded within the programme. Other aspects of the curriculum were drawn upon, especially creative and practical arts including cooking, drama, visual arts, technology, digital photography and filming, power point and claymation. Students read and responded to texts through drama, writing, craft and art to produce their own fairy tales in traditional and digital forms. Drama included role plays of characters’ feelings and dramatic enactments of fairy tales with students dressed in fairy tale costumes. Many of these were photographed and used for digital stories. Students were required to depict characters’ feelings through art and play dough was used to create two/three-dimensional shapes of fairy tale characters with digital photos of these. Students cooked ‘honey treats’ for ‘Mama Bear’ and designed invitations for a final ‘Fairytale Party’. The students produced a written version of a fairy tale, and learned to use and insert Clip Art so that they created their own fairy tales on PowerPoint or as digital narratives. After studying aspects from Wallace and Grommit the students produced their own claymation of a 4-minute animated story titled The Sumo Wrestlers and the Robot Princess. Different peer dynamics occurred in the cross-age grouping with some tensions at first but overall students of different ages mentored each other. Figure 3 summarises the rich range of literacy and learning activities that students were engaged in.

As shown in Figure 3, multimodal literacy is the way literacy can be defined within the convergence and interdependence between modes of reading, writing, talking, listening and viewing while using both print and digital texts in Project 2. Even more so, however, we can describe the teachers and students as working within a multimodal learning environment. There
were a rich range of interconnected activities that required teachers and students to be interacting and collaborating in their response to and production of texts. Design was pivotal within the range of tasks that students were engaged in. As students explored the features of the literary genre of fairy tales they were required to produce responses and versions of their own with technology as the tool to move between print and digital modes. Concrete activities related to Creative and Practical Arts, particularly drama, were predominant and the modality of gesture was an important feature within this multimodal environment developed by the teachers. These activities were transformed in various ways into digital modes through photography, animation and film. Design was central to all the art and craft activities, dramatic enactments and digital products. There was an integrated focus on visual, tactile, gestural, sound and kinaesthetic modes and, once again, a cohesive merging of traditional and digital activities and texts within the fairy tale theme.

As a further example, if we consider just the process of reading itself within Project 2 it is evident that reading involved a range of aspects, as shown in Figure 4. Bold typeface, again, indicates the digital processes that occurred along with conventional classroom activities.

The process of reading illustrated in Figure 4 demonstrates that engagement in reading, or meaning-making, is not simply a matter of teaching isolated skills. While students need to be taught decoding skills of phonics, phonemic awareness, word recognition...
and different levels of comprehension, these can be taught within a rich context, as many teachers have shown for years before the advent of digital technology. Even though the four boxes in Figure 4 are separated for the purpose of indicating specific aspects of reading within a multimodal environment, many of these occur simultaneously and are interrelated. As young students listen to a story read aloud, they respond internally, comprehending at different levels. Teachers cannot know what occurs inside the head of each student but they can build on students’ background experience, model aspects of prediction, literal understanding and inferring and allow intertextual links within a reading aloud experience with a class. These strategies can be followed up with individual students. Similarly the processes of both reading and viewing written text either on paper or on screen – and then responding with the production of a written or digital text – can be a simultaneous and interrelated process. Digital technology offers the facilities for literacy to be more multimodal than previously, providing opportunities for response to and manipulation of the visual, graphic, sound and kinaesthetic modes. There is an opportunity for literacy to occur within a holistic interrelated process. At the same time specific strategies and skills need to be taught at the point of need to the whole class, groups or individual students.

Discussion

The two projects examined provide classroom evidence that enables a definition of multimodal literacy. From the evidence in these projects, as well as from the whole study, we can define multimodal literacy as the 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 dramatising as well as the writing and designing of such texts. The processing of different modalities is often cohesive and synchronous. Multimodal literacy incorporates the traditional literacy strategies of reading and writing combined with the use of different modalities and semiotic systems. These modalities have always existed but have not had the potential within communication that is now available. As students combine different modalities it is essential that they understand them because those aspects of literacy that many adults refer to as ‘basic’ or ‘traditional’ do not exist in the same way for students of today or the future.

To read and produce multimodal texts, students need to be able to combine traditional literacy practices with the understanding, design and manipulation of different modes of image, graphics, sound and movement with text. The case studies have shown that this combining of traditional literacy with new technology can incorporate a range of variations. Sometimes there will be a transference between written and digital modes that transforms the product. For example, the written script for a podcast is transferred into spoken language that is recorded and produced in digital sound and video files. At other times there will be interactivity between modes, at other times a convergence of modes. This may be a simultaneous process or a particular mode such as written text, image or sound, may be dominant. Then there is the consideration of how particular modes, for example sound or visual, are constructing meaning and being processed. While researchers may still be searching for the exact terminology, there is an articulation and interdependence that occurs when multiple modes are processed and this articulation between modalities is quite different from our traditional theories of the processes involved in reading and writing print-based texts.

The examples from the two projects have demonstrated that the merging and interdependence, or convergence of modes, that occurs within multimodal literacy involves a different literacy that many researchers are still attempting to theorise. In the podcasting example of Project 1 the process of the students’ writing being produced into audio and video files onto a website for others to access digitally could be explained, not just as transference, but by what Kress (2003) has referred to as ‘transduction’. He describes transduction as “a process in which something which has been configured or shaped in one or more modes is reconfigured, reshaped according to the affordances of a quite different mode” (p. 47). This transduction process is one aspect of multimodality. Alternatively there are other aspects that can occur within multimodality such as the interaction between visual and gestural modes that occurred in Project 2. Sometimes it is not transduction that occurs but a simultaneity and interdependence as different modes are processed together as in the modes of image, sound, gesture and movement that occur in a movie or in other combinations of modes. Currently other researchers are developing different terms, for example ‘intersemiosis’ (O’Halloran, 2003) and ‘co-articulation’ (Martin, 2007), to further theorise the interrelationship between modes in a multimodal text or activity. Much more research and analysis are needed for us to understand such processes and to consider their educational applications. Nevertheless the classroom experiences that occurred through this research study provide evidence of a variety of ways in which students were making interconnections or transitions between traditional aspects of reading and writing within visual and digital mediums.

For the range of communication needed in their future lives students need to be able to understand, use and combine these different modes as well as being able to communicate with traditional and non-traditional texts that combine these modes. While students may be adept at the skills for using and combining different communication media outside school, it is essential
that they learn the meaning-making potential of these media within different curriculum areas and learn to evaluate and critique these. Proficiency in literacy indeed requires multimodal literacy: the practices of talking, listening, reading and writing together with processing the modes of written text, image, sound and movement. As the examples from the two projects have shown, there was cohesiveness in teacher planning and student learning when these were developed carefully with different stages that scaffolded the particular literacy or learning required.

There are significant implications for literacy pedagogy. Each project demonstrated how the teachers planned units of work that drew on the potentials of multimodal literacy in innovative ways. Teachers constructed learning experiences with multiple layers of learning ensembles, combining concrete experiences and print-based texts with digital texts. There was a strong focus on teachers’ modelling and scaffolding students’ learning with the types of texts used and produced so that rich learning experiences were developed, requiring the gradual development of metalanguage and metacognition. The common elements of the learning experiences were peer collaboration and problem solving in investigating, reading, writing and producing multimodal texts that included the content and skills needed for specific curriculum areas. The innovative approaches to cross-age grouping in Project 2 were a result of teachers being given the opportunity to plan creatively to engage learners and to utilise the potentials of technology resources.

Although the term and process of design was not a focus in the initial briefing and planning within the large research study, the data revealed that design is an essential feature for multimodal literacy. If we consider the processes involved in reading, critically evaluating texts, writing and producing texts for particular purposes and audiences, then design is an integral factor. Students’ understanding of design will augment their understanding of the social construction and purpose of a multimodal text. Similarly understanding design will assist students’ own construction of multimodal texts. Thus design may be the factor that will assist teachers in the future as they need to incorporate traditional with multimedia and digital communication. This emergence of design as an important feature within literacy pedagogy has been further developed in recent studies by Kalantzis and Cope (2004, 2005–2006) and by Healy (2008). While this paper has focused on two teachers’ projects, evidence from the larger study confirms that design is an essential element that needs to be considered for literacy in all curriculum areas, particularly the subject of English itself, where multimodal texts are being read or produced. Kress (2003) contends that design is a link between old and new media of communication, stating that: “The world of communication is now constituted in ways that make it imperative to highlight the concept of design, rather than of concepts such as acquisition, or competence, or critique.” He adds: “In multimodal communication, the concept of design is the sine qua non of informed, reflective and productive practice.” (pp. 36–37). The potential of design being considered within literacy pedagogy provides scope for understanding and planning with multimodality and the conceptual understanding of design may assist teachers in redesigning pedagogy.

Visual, tactile and kinaesthetic senses have always been important for learning, particularly for young learners. As this research study showed, the facilities of digital technology afforded concrete experiences to be used with and transferred into digital texts, as shown in the example of students making figures that were photographed, then developed as a story in a claymation. In one way we could argue that this is traditional learning being enhanced by new technologies; however, we need to acknowledge the possibility that a different process of learning is occurring in the way modalities are merging. This interdependence of print and digital media, with the dominance of visual, sound or other modes together with the immediacy of technology, provides the potential for establishing classroom literacy and learning experiences that are dynamic and cohesive.

Conclusion

There are many reasons why schools cannot be expected to replicate the multimedia experiences that students engage in outside school. However discussion of Projects 1 and 2 has provided examples of how new modes of communication can be used in meaningful ways in the classroom. Curriculum documents and assessment requirements for reading and writing are based on theories developed during the 20th century 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 various stages. We need ongoing research to analyse 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 traditional 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?

This paper has attempted to describe explicit aspects of what is meant by multimodal literacy and the nature of classrooms as multimodal learning environments.
While a great deal of further research is needed, this paper has illustrated the potential for change in classroom practice in ways that can be beneficial for both teachers and students. Different aspects of literacy and pedagogy have been demonstrated and these have implications for new understandings of literacy and for future pedagogy. Dynamic and cohesive learning experiences occurred within the research study without radical changes, within current syllabus requirements and in ways that can be sustained. Teachers developed multimodal environments that were appropriate for our multimedia age but within the realities of their schools’ resources and students’ development. The examples of the two projects are evidence that classrooms can be places where print-based texts and digital texts are read, viewed, responded to, designed and produced. Such approaches can involve a holistic literacy and learning that involves listening, reading, viewing, talking and interacting with texts and with others. These examples have shown how teachers and students have explored and demonstrated the potentials for literacy and learning in a new age.

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References


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