DIMENSIONS OF MULTIMODAL LITERACY

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Abstract

This article discusses two dimensions of multimodal literacy and describes how the Singapore's education system is infusing multimodal literacy into the curriculum to prepare students for the digital information age.

1. Introduction

"To say we move in a new world, the digital information age, is already a cliché. Our challenge appears to be the navigation through and adaptation to not so much an actual, material environment but the virtual semiotic, informational environment— an environment of our own making, incorporating the discourses of many millions of multiliterate social agents; and yet an evolved rather than designed environment" (O'Halloran & Smith, in press-a).

If education is preparation for life, it has to transform in tandem, and, in as much as it is possible, to anticipate the critical skills and competencies needed in the world of tomorrow. There is a growing recognition that, increasingly in this day and age, information is packaged multimodally (for example, using language, image and audio resources), rather than just through language alone. O'Halloran, Tan, Smith & Podlasov (2010: 4) explain that "we believe that, in practice, texts of all kinds are always multimodal, making use of, and combining, the resources of diverse semiotic systems to facilitate both generic (i.e., standardized) and specific (i.e., individualized, and even innovative) ways of making meaning". Educators have the responsibility to understand the multimodal ways in which knowledge is presented and, beyond that, to teach students to access, appraise and appropriate the multimodal texts which they will inevitably encounter.

Current research and analysis of multimodal discourse provides a basis for introducing the importance of multimodal literacy in education (see, for example, O'Halloran (2004), Ventola & Moya (2009) and O'Halloran & Smith (2011)). This will help to equip students with the necessary skills and competencies to become competent both in the production and consumption of multimodal text and the ability to critically 'read' multimodal texts, uncovering the ideological posturing and positioning as well as the design of such texts.

2. Multimodal Literacy

Djonov (2010: 119) proposes that "[l]iteracy should not be fragmented into different kinds of literacy such as visual literacy, digital literacy, emotional literacy, etc., which ultimately

leave the hegemony of traditional literacy untouched. It should be defined as design, as an active dynamic process of creating meaning out of multimodal semiotic resources".

The term 'multimodal literacy' is about literacy as design. Multimodal literacy explores the design of discourse by investigating the contributions of different semiotic resources (for example, language, gesture, images) co-deployed across various modalities (for example, visual, aural, somatic) as well as their interaction and integration in constructing a coherent text. Based on some of the work in multimodal literacy, Lim (forthcoming) argues that it appears that the notion of multimodal literacy has two dimensions (see, for example, Kress, 2003, 2010; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress et al., 2001, 2005 and Walsh, 2009).

The first dimension is with respect to the prevalence of multimodal texts, specifically through multimedia texts afforded by the digital media, hence stressing the need for a literacy to produce and access information. Multimodal literacy acknowledges the significance of all the semiotic resources and modalities in meaning making. The semiotic resources are not reduced to paralinguistic resources which are ancillary to language, but are viewed as semiotic resources that are conferred the same status as language and are just as effective in semiosis. The functional affordances and constraints of each semiotic resource and their contribution to the multimodal discourse are considered as well. As O'Halloran & Smith (in press-b) reflect, "[d]ifferent semiotic resources bring with them their own affordances and constraints, both individually and in combination, as well as analytical challenges in terms of the natures of these media, the detail and scope of analysis, and the complexities arising from the integration of semiotic resources across media". For instance,

Kress (1999: 79) argues that language "is necessarily a temporally, sequentially organized mode... [t]he visual by contrast is a spatially and simultaneously organized mode".

Following from this, it can be inferred that a 'multimodal literate' student must thus be sensitised 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. Armed with such an understanding, students will not only become discerning consumers of multisemiotic texts but they also will become competent producers of multimodal texts themselves.

The second dimension concerns the recognition that the experience of teaching and learning is intrinsically multisemiotic and multimodal. As O'Toole (1994: 15) observes, "[w]e 'read' people in everyday life: facial features and expression, stance, gesture, typical actions and clothing". While new media technology has foregrounded the multimodal nature of our communication, meanings have always been constructed and construed multimodally through the use of semiotic resources like language and corporeal resources such as gesture and postures across different sensory modalities through sight, smell, taste and touch. Norris (2004: 2) observes that "[a]ll movements, all noises, and all material objects carry interactional meanings as soon as they are perceived by a person". In this sense, all interaction is multimodal. Our communication is more than what is said and heard but by what we perceive through expressions, gazes, gestures and movements.

Hence, there is a need to understand how the lesson experience is constructed through the teacher's use of a repertoire of semiotic resources as embodied in his/her pedagogy. Appreciating the functional affordances and constraints of these semiotic resources and modalities as well as how they are co-deployed in the orchestration of the

lesson can provide understandings which may lead to more effective teaching and learning in the classroom (see, for example, Lim, 2010, Lim, O'Halloran & Podlasov, submitted for publication, Lim, forthcoming).

From the dual perspectives of multimodal literacy in multimodal text and in multisemiotic experience, the infusion of multimodal literacy has two aspects. They are 1) the inculcation of multimodal discourse analysis skills for students and 2) the sensitisation in the use of multimodal resources (the affordances and constraints each bring, their orchestration (contextualising relations) and their potential to shape the lesson experience) in the classroom for teachers.

Kress (2003: 1) predicts that multimodal literacy will "have profound effects on human, cognitive/affective, cultural and bodily engagement with the world and on the forms and shapes of knowledge". In a sense then, research and insights in multimodal studies ushers in the need for a multimodal literacy; a literacy poised to meet the demands of the digital information age.

3. Education in Singapore

Singapore has always placed a strong emphasis on education. This is reflected from the substantial financial investment of the nation's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the Ministry of Education's budget, as well as the regular reviews conducted to ensure the system remains robust and relevant. Singapore has also received international accolades for its educational system. For instance, Singapore was ranked by the global consulting firm, McKinsey & Company in 2007, as amongst the top five best performing systems in the

world[i]. In 2009, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development also measured the reading, mathematics and science literacy of students and ranked the Singapore's education system as amongst the top five systems across 65 countries surveyed[ii].

The educational landscape in Singapore has been progressively changing over the past decades as the Singapore's economy develops from a technical skills-based model to the current knowledge-based economy. With shifting societal values and perceptions on what is needed to prepare students to meet the challenges of the future, the Ministry of Education in Singapore has been periodically reviewing its curricula and programmes. This is to ensure relevance and to equip students in the best possible manner for the future.

There is also a strong ideological connection made between the education of individuals to their role as citizens and in ensuring Singapore's continual economic success. In the recent round of educational review in 2010, Winston Hodge (2010: 1), Director, Training and Development Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore, reiterates that the mission of the Ministry of Education is "to prepare a generation of thinking and committed citizens who are capable of contributing towards Singapore's continued growth and prosperity". As such, the Ministry of Education is "constantly revisiting its curriculum to ensure that the skills and knowledge taught in schools meet the challenges of the 21st century" (Hodge, 2010: 1).

In the latest review of syllabi and curricula, there have been discernible attempts to introduce facets of multimodal literacy in Singapore's educational system. While the term 'multimodal literacy' is not used expressly as the impetus for the various educational

reforms, it is possible to identify some of the changes as laying the foundation for the education of a multimodal literate generation in Singapore.

4. Multimodal Literacy in Singapore

Evidence of the first dimension of multimodal literacy can be inferred from the latest review of the English syllabus. In recognition of the multimodal nature of texts and the ubiquity of multimedia texts, the English Unit of the Curriculum Planning and Development Division (CPDD) has, in its English Syllabus 2010, included two more aspects to the existing areas of language teaching. They are the aspects of 'Viewing' and 'Representing':

> "[t]he skills of Viewing and Representing are integrated with Listening, Reading, Speaking and Writing to take into account the importance of developing information, media and visual literacy skills in the teaching and learning of EL (English Language)" (CPDD, 2008: 16).

In addition, the English Syllabus 2010 also recommends the use of a variety of multimodal and multimedia texts that provide the context for the teaching of listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and representing. This recommendation is a reflection of the attempt to incorporate elements of multimodal literacy into the English curriculum. At present, curriculum materials and textbooks which incorporate multimodal literacy are being developed for use in schools in Singapore.

Teachers are also increasingly exploring alternative form of formative assessments beyond the traditional tests in this respect. For instance, teachers may get the students to create an e-portfolio or even upload their presentation as a webpage on portals like

Glogster[iii.] This requires students to develop media literacy skills as well as multimodal discourse analysis skills in sifting through information in the multimedia sources and appropriating them for the purposes of their assessment.

In relation to the second dimension of multimodal literacy, a key impetus for multimodal research in education is that it paves the way to a more focused and intentional deployment of semiotic resources for effective teaching and learning. That is, a multimodal approach sensitises teachers to the range of semiotic resources which are available, encouraging a more congruent and effective co-deployment of the resources in the classroom. This reduces the possibility of semantic divergence which results in conflicting, and possibly confusing meanings. Multimodal literacy thus offers teachers the opportunity for reflection on their use of multimodal semiotic resources so as to critique and design these aspects of their professional practice, which has implications for teacher-training. For instance, Kress et al. (2005: 170) recommend an "in-service programme" to help teachers use semiotic resources more effectively in teaching and learning.

Specific to Singapore, the report by the committee on Secondary Education Review and Implementation also emphasises the importance of such teacher-training. It "recognizes that teacher capacity is crucial – teachers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills, and strengthen their social-emotional competencies in order to perform their pastoral role effectively" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2010: 8). The report explains that "teachers also serve as role models for the desired social-emotional characteristics in students. Therefore, it is important to provide teachers with the necessary training in social-emotional competencies, besides the skills to facilitate social-emotional learning of their students" (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2010: 31).

In a sense then, the second dimension of multimodal literacy relates to teaching training in pedagogy to bring about the effective use of multimodal semiotic resources in the classroom. A consolidated effort to improve teacher's professional development can also be observed in the setting up of the Academy of Singapore Teachers in 2010. The mission of the academy is to build a teacher-led culture of professional excellence[iv]. The academy serves as the hub for the teachers' professional training and development course, such as the "in-service programme" to which Kress et al. (2005) alluded.

An example of courses to develop multimodal literacy is the Ministry of Education's English Language Teaching Seminar 2009, which adopted the theme "Multiliteracies: Exposing, Exploring and Experimenting". O'Halloran gave a keynote address "*Language and Multiliteracies: Making The Connection*" and Lim conducted a workshop on "*Teaching Viewing*" to English Language teachers. The purpose of the sessions was to prepare the teachers to handle the two new aspects of language teaching: Viewing and Representing. In relation to socio-emotional training, an example of training to equip the teachers is the "Social and Emotional Learning Conference" in Singapore which has been an annual event since 2008. The conference series serves as a platform to generate greater awareness of the need to develop socio-emotional competencies to enhance effective teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

In response to the changing digital environment, Singapore's review of the educational system in 2010 has led to discernible efforts towards the development in the two

dimensions of multimodal literacy. While the initiatives and reforms are not as far-reaching or profound as they could be, they are certainly steps taken in the right direction.

Multimodal literacy prepares students for the world of tomorrow by making learning relevant for them today. A concerted initiative to expressly infuse multimodal literacy in any educational system grows ever more pressing along with the requisite to navigate and adapt in our virtual semiotic, informational environment.

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[i] http://www.mckinsey.com/App_Media/Reports/SSO/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf

[ii] http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/60/46619703.pdf

[iii] http://www.glogster.com

[iv] http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/press/2010/09/academy-of-singapore-teachers.php