Chapter 9

Considering Design: The Challenges of Assessing Multimodal Texts

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ABSTRACT

Technology continues to change the possibilities for text creation within the classroom, promoting student engagement in multimodal text production. Such a shift requires corresponding shifts in assessment discourses, from a justification for assigning a particular grade to a reflection of both the students’ learning and intention. This chapter presents insights from classroom researchers as they engage in multimodal text creation with both elementary and secondary students, highlighting the tensions present in attempting multimodal text creation with students while attempting to adapt print-centric assessment models. This work suggests a needed move away from traditional assessment tools, such as rubrics, and an increased awareness on behalf of teachers in regards to the intentions of students within the multimodal text creation process.

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing inclusion of a variety of technologies in educational spaces, students are no longer limited to the written word as the primary medium through which their understandings can be conveyed to their teachers, peers, and a wider audience. Rather than writing a paper, students may engage in the process of design, of creating “configuration[s] that distribute meanings across the boundaries of modes and modal connections” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 252). Integral to this process of creating distributed meanings are the intentions of the sign maker; students are, in essence, accessing existing meaning making resources and recasting them as new sign, reconfiguring them for their own social needs within the context of creation as well as a perceived audience (Kress, 2003). Researchers have turned their energies to the ways both teachers and students are both producing and
consuming multimodal texts in school settings, though significantly less attention has been paid to how these texts are assessed.

Schools exist within a regime of accountability: educators are charged with teaching particular standards within their classrooms and those standards need to be reflected in the products students create. Assessment, then, becomes an essential element as both students and teachers engage in the consumption and production of multimodal texts in the classroom; how these products both answer to the siren’s call of standards while and convey sophisticated understandings of how modes can be networked to create meaning. As researchers, the concept of assessment in relation to multimodal text has an established sense of gravitational pull: for Nicholas, this pull manifests in his own reactions to the elementary-aged filmmakers with whom he works while for Julie, this manifests in the ways the design of a rubric shapes student work in a high school context. Assessment is how our individual work, work that seems separated by the age differences of our participants, converges. It is neither the developmental assessment of multimodal text nor the development of a tool that we concern ourselves in this chapter; rather, we seek to explore the nature of design as a series of intentional decisions within the production of a larger text and how those intentional decisions are understood within the context of assessment. Emphasis will be placed on the intent of the designer and how, within a classroom context, the notion of whose intent counts. To this end, we seek to outline our individual projects and present insights into how they speak to one another and how we might be able to use these projects to further understand the creation of multimodal texts within the classroom as well as how we might move in new directions of assessment that “recognize agency in learning and for the recognition of many modes through which learning becomes evident” (Kress, 2011, p. 215-6).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We approach this work as literacy scholars, interested in the ways individuals “learn to mean,” as framed by Halliday (1975). Our work is influenced by perspectives on literacy not as “an armoury of concepts, conventions and practice” (Street, 1985, p. 38) but as embedded within social practices that evolve at a rapid pace (Appadurai, 1990; Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2003) and is mediated via a variety of communication channels constituted largely by digital media (Boulter, 1999; Kress, 2010). New Literacy Studies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; New London Group, 1996) shifts understandings of literacy from skills derived from the manipulation of symbol systems to a concept that is nestled amongst social, historical, and cultural contexts. In this way, literacy networks become inherent only in the examination of “socially organized practices [that] make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). Expanding upon the concept of literacy within the New Literacy Studies, Cope & Kalantzis (2000) further delineate the use of technology in the process of being literate, attending to the ways in which individuals in contemporary times experience “increased multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral, and so on” (p. 5).

These significant modes of meaning making are networked within the creation of multimodal texts; meaning in these texts manifests through “the situated configurations across image, gesture, gaze, body posture, sound, writing, music, speech, and so on” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). In other words, an author can construct meanings through systems beyond print. These modes come together within the creation of the sign, comprised of both form and meaning (Kress, 1997), and only comprehensible within its’ environmental and interactional contexts (Kress, 2010, p. 54). To this end, the
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