

Chapter 64

Multimodality in Action: New Literacies as More than Activity in Middle and High School Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present two classroom portraits of a 5th and 9th grade classrooms as activity systems where teachers and learners are engaged in multimodal composing. In their analysis, they are most interested in how principles of design, affordances of modes, and multimodality become internalized as psychological tools that shape learning in the context of activity. The authors ask two research questions: What are the mediational artifacts (both ideal and material) in these activity settings? What does this reveal about multimodality as a socially situated process? Conclusions drawn from the two different cases lead the authors to suggest that multimodality must be carefully understood as part of an activity system.

INTRODUCTION

Across the last decade, there has been a dramatic increase in practitioner and research publications related to digital literacy and multimodal composing. Clearly, there is a great interest among scholars and practitioners around how to enfold multimodal composition practices into classrooms and what such a digital shift means for learners as well (e.g., Bruce, 2009; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Miller

& McVee, 2012; Shanahan, 2013). Although we believe that digital multimodal composing affords opportunities that were not readily available to prior generations, we also run the risk of overemphasizing the ‘whiz-bang effect’ of technology—that cool factor that arises when viewers experience a powerful visual digital presentation that combines image, movement, and sound or when learners engage with a new technology for the first time. This type of stance emphasizes engage-

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ment with emerging technologies for the sake of merely engaging or experiencing technology. Such an approach attaches the label of “New Literacies” to particular activities or learning events simply because new technologies are involved. That position does not acknowledge that textual and social practices and available semiotic resources have shifted in ways that require teachers to adopt what Bailey (2012) refers to as a “New Literacies stance.” In addressing this concern, we feel it may be helpful to researchers and practitioners to ponder multimodal composing as part of an activity system. To do so, we present portraits of a 5th grade and 9th grade classroom as activity systems where teachers and learners are attempting to engage in multimodal composing and where digital technologies are among the mediational tools within the classroom. We ask these research questions: What are the mediating artifacts (both ideal and material) in these activity settings? What does this reveal about multimodality as a socially situated process?

SEMIOTIC POTENTIALS: MEDIATIONAL TOOLS AND MEDIATED ACTION IN CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIMODAL TEXTS

Increasingly, attention has focused on the composition of digital texts (e.g., Hull & Nelson, 2005; McVee, Bailey, & Shanahan, 2008; Miller & Borowicz, 2006; Shanahan, 2012). However, despite the burgeoning amount of attention to composition of digital texts in both research and practice, attention to multimodal compositions is a relatively new area when compared to writing studies as a whole. As such, this area is still in need of exploration through various theoretical lenses (Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2009; Miller & McVee, 2012). In our work, we have always seen multimodal literacies as fused to New Literacies, in part, because our own understandings of both

these evolving bodies of work were framed by sociocultural perspectives of Vygotsky (1978), and more importantly, by neo-Vygotskian scholars (e.g., Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1991), and more recently by activity theorists such as Engeström (1987). We see many parallels between social semiotics, or the study of sign systems that puts emphasis on meaning and communication (Kress, 2010), and socio-cultural perspectives that focus on mediation, action, and meaning. Scholars exploring sociocultural theory and multimodality have an interest in particular modes, technical skills, or tools, but only as a means to an end.

Wertsch (1991) emphasizes that it is not merely the presence of action or activity (e.g., not merely the use of a technology) that is important. In addition to action, it is important to consider semiotic signs—language and other tools used in meaning making—in relation to the cultural, social, historical contexts in which they are used. These sign-based systems provide the critical link between the various nested contexts of teaching and learning and individual learners. Action and meaning for individual learners are never insular. Even when students work alone, say perhaps to create a multimodal text, the process of composition is filtered through or mediated by the social, cultural, and historical contexts surrounding them. They are influenced by their teacher, classmates, their out of school lives, pop culture, and historical and institutional constraints such as classroom design, budgets, testing and many other factors. Within such an instance of multimodal composing or any particular learning events activity, sign use, meaning and contexts are all important.

These broader sociocultural contexts are also important in the work of Kress (2003), the New London Group (1996) and others whose work figures prominently in New Literacies (e.g., Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Unsworth, 2001; Zammit, 2010). Sociocultural contexts also form the landscapes that foster digital epistemologies that have recently garnered much interest (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leander, 2009).

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