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Maggie Glos
maggie.glos@gmail.com

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Stories Beyond Words: Research & Practices for Multimodal Literacy

Maggie L. Glos

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College of Education

University of Wyoming

Abstract

Monomodal practices are a regular occurrence in the elementary classroom, where the reading and writing of traditional print-based texts are often what is tested and what is valued. Yet, multimodal literacy practices provide students with engaging ways to communicate meaning and prepare students for the texts they will encounter outside of the classroom. While teachers may already use multimodal practices, these practices are often selected without an understanding of what multimodality is and may be used inconsistently or haphazardly. Although much has been written about the importance of multimodal literacy, less is known about practical ways to incorporate and assess multimodal literacy in the elementary classroom. This article provides four areas of practice, drawn from the research on multimodal literacy, that can be used in creating a multimodal literacy classroom: seeing, showing, telling, and moving through a story. Research-based ideas for assessing multimodal products are also provided. Multimodality is the way forward in preparing our students to be literate for the future.

Keywords: Literacy, multimodality, primary grades, multimodal assessments, monomodality

Stories Beyond Words: Research & Practices for Multimodal Literacy

Though I had taught for four years, it was not until my graduate studies that I first heard the term *multimodal*. As a teacher of a K-2 elementary classroom in a rural mountain town, my students were practicing aspects of multimodal literacy: drawing illustrations, retelling stories, acting out part of a book. Yet, until I learned what multimodal literacy meant and how it compared with monomodal literacy, my classroom multimodal practices were unintentional. I was not teaching intentionally so that my children developed a deeper understanding of how to communicate in multiple modes, nor did I understand how easy it is to fall into valuing monomodal reading and writing of printed text above multimodal creation of a wide variety of products. My goal in my classroom was to teach my students to read and write, and with that goal came an unintentional emphasis on monomodality.

Indeed, monomodality is the norm in many classrooms and as Rowsell (2014) confirms, the twentieth century has been defined by monomodal literacy, where thoughts are expressed primarily in printed words. While children in the primary grades are given some opportunity to experience multimodality, as children "get into the serious business of literacy" (Vincent, 2006, p. 51) and testing begins, time to learn and play with words, movement, drawing, singing, and more is less and less encouraged and often removed from any main curricular time. In my own classroom, this has certainly been true. Despite knowing the importance of multimodal literacy, it can be challenging to utilize multimodal approaches without a set of practices that can be used in any classroom with any curriculum.

Although much has been written about the importance of multimodal literacy, less is known about practical ways to incorporate and assess multimodal literacy in the elementary classroom. In this article, I begin by defining what monomodal and multimodal literacy are and

what these terms mean for classroom practice and student outcomes. Without knowing these terms, teachers may use these practices without an understanding of the deeper meaning behind them. After defining monomodal and multimodal literacy, I present a theoretical framework for my research on the topic. The second half of the paper presents research in four areas of multimodal literacy practices for the classroom that I categorize as seeing, showing, telling, and moving through a story. Before concluding, I provide suggestions for assessing multimodal products in the classroom.

Defining Monomodality

Most often, literacy is defined as reading and writing, and perhaps also speaking and listening, with little emphasis on other modes of creating and communicating meaning (Leigh & Heid, 2008). Monomodal literacy means that students are primarily engaged in the reading and writing of printed text, rather than other modes of text, such as images, sounds, or movement. As a teacher myself, I know how it becomes all too easy to emphasize reading and writing over other modes of communication. I find myself justifying my decisions with reasons like, "*My students have to learn to write-that is how the world communicates*" or "*They must be successful in these traditional literacy areas because future success depends on it.*" Leigh and Heid (2008) describe this monomodal approach as "verbocentric" (p. 2), a common problem in education where teaching and learning revolve around verbal modes of communication.

In Western education, written and verbal expressions are often prioritized. As Vincent (2006) writes, "Monomodal verbal facility is generally considered to be a key educational asset" (p. 52), going on to note that this is demonstrated through the prominence of Western standardized testing that assesses, and thus accords value to, word-based skills. Beyond standardized testing, what drives this emphasis on the written word? Wright (2007) argues that

monomodality is situated firmly in our social and cultural context in which "*literal* language and *written* modes of expression" (p. 24, emphasis original) are given more weight; indeed, Wright (2007) notes, "Such beliefs and curricular practices may be related to the underlying assumption that if something is not expressed through spoken or written language, it is considered to be outside *rational* thought, outside *articulate* feeling" (p. 24, emphasis original).

While few teachers may articulate this as reason for valuing the written word above all else in the classroom, the social and cultural contexts in which we teach influence how and what we teach. In a culture where rational thought and the written mode are cornerstones of society and what are tested and asked for from students, it follows that teachers will teach in ways that reflect these values and practices. Leigh and Heid (2008) discuss this cultural shaping of teachers, writing:

> Her training in early childhood education, standards, and high-stakes testing has required that she place a premium on written language. The cultural and historic context of her knowledge has also influenced her classroom practice. She has been convinced that without good reading and writing skills, children will be illiterate. (p. 2)

However, when we focus on monomodal means of communication, we ignore the fact that socially and culturally, students are encountering more modes of communication. While writing and reading continue to be important forms of communication, the ways in which students write and read are evolving. This is due in part to technology, as students encounter texts through screens and access new learning through videos, hyperlinks, visual images, and sounds, as well as social media.

Even print texts are evolving, incorporating new and varied design features and visual images that students must learn to interpret and use in their own texts. Serafini (2012) writes that

for students to be literate citizens in the coming years, they must be able to do more than read and write. They must also be able to "consume and produce a variety of texts across traditional and new technologies and working in digital and mobile environments" (Serafini, 2012, p. 26).

To prepare students to participate as future citizens and learners, we must shift from monomodal classrooms, where the written word is privileged above all else, to multimodal classrooms in which students learn and create through a variety of means, all equally valued, taught, and shared. If we are to embrace multimodality, we must first understand it, discovering the benefits of multimodal learning and the ways in which multimodality can be intentionally practiced in the classroom.

Defining Multimodality

In its simplest form, multimodality means multiple modes of communicating, or what Martinez and Nolte-Yupari (2015) refer to as "sign systems" (p. 12). Bearne (2009) develops this idea of sign systems more fully, explaining, "A multimodal text is created by the combination of: image, sound (including speech and music), gesture and movement and writing or print, communicated through paper, the screen, face to face meetings, performative space" (p. 158). Multimodality encompasses both the modes themselves and how the modes interact and combine to create new and unique texts (Bearne, 2009). Teaching students to decode, comprehend, and create using multiple modes or sign systems is the task of multimodality (Martinez & Nolte-Yupari, 2015; O'Neil, 2011). Again, when I learned what multimodality meant, I realized that while I had been utilizing some multimodal practices in my own classroom, I had not been teaching students to decode, comprehend, or create using these practices.

Since multimodal literacy means a variety of sign systems, it follows that the concept of text will be redefined. Serafini (2015), in his work on multimodal texts, writes, "One of the

primary considerations in shifting the focus from written language to visual images and

multimodal texts is rethinking the *concept of text*" (p. 414, emphasis original). He expands text

from a written work to a visual object, a multimodal event, or a sociocultural artifact. These new

classifications shift instruction from simply word-based to noticing visual elements of the text,

how the illustrator uses visual elements to communicate meaning, and how texts are produced,

received, and used as representation (Serafini, 2015). This reconceptualization of text asks

students to critically analyze text for more than the written message, a skill needed in our current

society as students encounter ever-increasing amounts of information that require students to

question text rather than simply read it.

Beyond asking children to be critical consumers of new types of text, multimodality also

prepares students for the types of text they will and do encounter outside of the classroom.

Vincent (2006) notes students are growing up in a society where content is communicated

through a variety of modes, and these modes are becomingly increasingly complex. Pantaleo

(2017a) describes the "visually saturated world" (p. 153) in which our students live, a world that

demands multimodal skills to think deeply and critically about the visual images they see.

Written language is no longer the primary means of communication in children's books and in

children's lives, and multimodality prepares students for this (Hassett & Curwood, 2009;

Vincent, 2006).

A Theoretical Framework of Multimodality

Framing my research on multimodality is the idea that multimodality is socially situated,

reflecting Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that our thoughts are shaped and reshaped by

the world around us, and language is a cultural tool used to shape these thoughts. Pantaleo (2016)

writes, "In schools, students' text making is socially situated and framed by multiple contextual,

teacher, and learner factors" (p. 240). Students' family and cultural backgrounds, communities, use of language, school environment, and peers all play a role in mediating how students communicate. Literacy as situated social practice emphasizes this interconnected nature of literacy, that literacy is shaped by and evolves along with society, culture, and history (Hamilton, 2010). Modes are a social support and part of a cultural identity, as Heath and Street (2008) write, "Modes, socially learned and displayed, support individuals, groups, and institutions as they gain and sustain expertise and identity" (p. 21).

As literacy is socially situated and impossible to isolate from social, cultural, and historical contexts, so multimodality, as a part of literacy, is impossible to isolate as well; as Lenters and Winters (2013) write, "Multimodal approaches acknowledge that all literacy practices are embedded within socially situated practices and cannot be isolated or understood in isolation" (p. 228). Students do not learn in a vacuum; neither do they create in a vacuum. Knowing that students are influenced by classroom environment and teacher discourse means that even small shifts towards multimodality can have a substantial impact on student learning.

Multimodality challenges the traditional importance of print-based texts in Western education. In shifting from monomodal to multimodal literacy, students' social and cultural contexts are intentionally considered rather than hidden, situating multimodal literacy in students' contexts. Multimodality is complex and can be uncertain territory for educators to venture into. However, putting multimodality into practice does not need to be overwhelming; intentional changes, however small, can yield benefits. In my research, I categorized the research on multimodal literacy into four areas of practice for teachers to use in building a multimodal literacy classroom. I term these areas: seeing, showing, telling, and moving through a story.

Research & Practices for a Multimodal Classroom

Seeing a Story

When venturing into multimodality in literacy in the primary grades, one of the first and most practical places to start is pictures or seeing a story. Seeing a story encompasses encouraging students to use drawings to tell stories, teaching about the visual and design elements illustrators use, and developing a metalanguage, or vocabulary, to describe these design elements. Children often enter school more at ease with the sign system of visual images, and as children begin to learn the systems of reading and writing, they practice code switching, as when someone learning a new language switches between the familiar and the new (Leigh & Heid, 2008). In the same way, children switch between drawing and writing to communicate meaning. Allowing students the freedom to use pictures to communicate helps build a bridge from students' familiarity with drawing to communicating through writing and starts the shift to multimodality (Martinez & Nolte-Yupari, 2015).

While providing children greater freedom to communicate through drawing is the first step, teachers must also provide instruction in visual images and teach the metalanguage or vocabulary to communicate about these images (Serafini, 2015; Thomas, 2011; Wilson, 2011). O'Neil (2011) writes, "Although few teachers fail to explicitly teach text decoding and comprehension strategies, many teachers are hesitant to address aspects of visual literacy, perhaps because they themselves have had little training in the concepts" (p. 214). O'Neil (2011) suggests starting slowly by teaching familiar aspects of design, such as color, line, shape, style, and composition. One lesson that O'Neil (2011) suggests involves guiding students to the cultural associations we have with specific colors, such as blue being a sad color or yellow happy (pp. 220-221). By beginning to analyze visual elements, multimodality becomes a comprehension strategy that can be used in tandem with word-based strategies.

As students recognize that visual and design features convey meaning in picture books, Serafini (2015) writes, "…the next step is to develop a vocabulary for discussing and naming the various visual images and design features of multimodal texts" (p. 415). This metalanguage provides students with the technical, or academic, language to discuss what they see and to use what they see to comprehend. Serafini (2015) suggests using metalanguage such as *orientation, perspective, line, foreground,* and *background*. Teachers unfamiliar with these terms may find that enlisting the aid of the art teacher and collaborating on lessons that incorporate visual design and written text eases the transition from monomodal to multimodal literacy.

These practices within seeing a story are becoming a part of my classroom and can be used with any book we read and curricula we use. In my multi-grades classroom of kindergarten, first, and second grade students, we often discuss how the illustrator is communicating meaning in books. Reading *Green Eggs and Ham* by Dr. Seuss may lead to a discussion of how the lines behind a train are showing the speed of the train as it whooshes along the tracks. We may discuss the use of color as it highlights a specific object, as when the green eggs and ham are the only object in color in the dark cave, or when the illustrator uses blue instead of black to show the darkness of the cave. These conversations about line and color demonstrate the beginnings of metalanguage development and seeing the story in action. Instead of only focusing on the words, seeing a story is a means to draw attention to the equally important mode of visual images that, whether alone or with words, communicate meaning.

Showing a Story

Though pictures alone can tell a story, words and pictures together can powerfully communicate meaning and support students in learning. This step of words and pictures together I label *showing a story* and involves teaching children to analyze how the illustrator uses pictures

and words together to develop a story and create stories independently using both words and pictures. In O'Neil's (2011) research on reading pictures, she describes four modes of interaction between pictures and text: reinforcing, description, reciprocal, and establishing. That is, pictures can reinforce or support the text, pictures can provide description alongside the words, pictures can equally share the weight of telling the story along with the words (reciprocal), or pictures can establish the story themselves (O'Neil, 2011, pp. 215-216).

Regardless of the specific terms, when words and pictures are used together, a powerful, multimodal story is created and communicated. Drawings can be a tool for students who struggle to communicate solely with written words. Zimmerman (2012) writes, "Drawing provides opportunities for struggling readers to organize and communicate their literacy knowledge…Drawing can act as a bridge from one symbol system to another" (pp. 578-579). In Zimmerman's (2012) research, struggling readers used drawings and writing to communicate what to do when they encountered an unfamiliar word. Drawings acted as a buffer for students, helping to prevent frustration when encountering an unknown word; instead, students could think through a strategy using drawings as a comprehension tool (Zimmerman, 2012).

From the earlier examples of seeing the story, the development of metalanguage and the beginnings of analyzing illustrations were shown. As my students have continued to develop confidence in interpreting pictures, they have put that knowledge to work in creating their own stories using visual and design elements. Learning about line may lead to students using lines to communicate feeling, such as diagonal lines to demonstrate anger in the eyebrows of a character or lines coming out of a character's head to show that he is thinking angry thoughts. Curved lines are used to show a smile or eyebrows that are, once again, normal. As students learn about color, color then becomes a tool to communicate meaning, such as using red on a character's face to

demonstrate anger or using blue as a background to show feelings of sadness. Students translate

what they have learned from analyzing illustrations in seeing a story to using those same tools to

create illustrations in showing a story.

Telling a Story

Using multimodality in literacy can be more than intertwining pictures and words.

Another component of multimodality is oral storytelling, what I term *telling a story*. While

students often retell stories in the primary grades, an intentional approach to telling a story

involves teaching students the components of effective storytelling and incorporating storytelling

with other multimodal forms of literacy. Bearne (2009) writes, "Since multimodality goes

beyond the written word, *sound, vocalization*, and *gesture* come into play" (p. 160). These

aspects and others, such as intonation, emphasis, pause, and voice quality, are powerful parts of

oral storytelling, and teachers can model and teach these components to students (Bearne, 2009).

Oral storytelling is not used in isolation; as discussed previously, multimodality is the interacting

of multiple signs systems, so that sound interacts with facial expressions, gestures, or movement

to create a story (Lwin, 2016).

In Lwin's (2016) research, voice and gestures helped students to infer word meanings,

but voice and gesture can also help students to relate to characters, create visualizations, and

understand plot. Lwin (2016) analyzed vocal and visual features of oral storytelling to determine

whether these features assisted children in understanding word meaning and found that these

features acted as context clues to the story; for example, when the storyteller used the word

"lonely," a softer voice and a sad facial expression provided clues as to the word meaning. These

features can be modeled and taught to students as they learn to effectively tell stories. Vocal

features include pitch, volume, emphatic stress, and pauses. Visual features include mimic

gestures (representing concrete objects), metaphoric gestures (representing abstract ideas), and propositional gestures (measuring space or size) (Lwin, 2016).

During oral storytelling, children should also be encouraged to participate in the storytelling. This is a practical way to start intentionally using storytelling in the classroom. Lwin (2016) suggests that participation will keep children engaged in the story and promote better understanding as children mimic gestures and voice. In the classroom, oral storytelling can also be combined with other modes to create a multimodal experience. For example, storytelling can be combined with movement, which will be examined below, or with visual art, such as puppets, to tell a story (Martinez & Nolte-Yupari, 2015).

While I am currently focusing on using visual and design elements, writing, and movement (seeing, showing, and moving through a story), I plan to begin incorporating storytelling into my literacy curriculum in the spring. With primary grades students, we will start by using familiar fairy tales so that students have background knowledge to build on memorizing a story. I will start by reviewing with my students the elements of narrative, which we have learned through oral retelling of class texts. I plan to also teach the elements of voice and facial expression. Modeling for students how the pitch and volume of your voice changes the story and how facial expressions can be "read" by the audience and giving students multiple opportunities to practice telling their fairytales with voice and facial expression will help to prepare students in this mode. At the end of our unit, students will perform for the class individually, providing an authentic purpose and audience. There is also potential for using these lessons with movement, a final form of multimodal literacy that I explore next.

Moving through a Story

The final aspect I suggest using in the classroom is moving through a story or the use of physical movement and acting as a sign system. Acting is a sign system that children naturally engage in as play and can be used with the visual and the verbal to tell a story. As with other forms of multimodality, educators may encounter push-back against something that is seen as frivolous or as only play, rather than as a valuable learning experience. Kornfeld and Leyden (2005) write:

> …drama is increasingly looked upon as a frill in elementary schools-an enrichment activity that teachers might lead on Friday afternoons after the important work is done for the week. But dramatic engagement can greatly enhance students' understanding of the stories they read, adding a depth and dimension to the plot, setting, and characters that simply reading the printed words rarely accomplishes. (p. 230)

Creating and performing a play engages students in a multimodal way that monomodality simply cannot accomplish and can function to "disrupt dominant pedagogies that tend to privilege print alone" (Lenters & Winters, 2013, p. 235).

For aspects of drama and acting that teachers can model and teach students, Bearne (2009) suggests gaze, movement, and posture. Guiding students in critically analyzing the use of gaze or movement and modeling for students these aspects shift acting from simply play to a tool for learning. As children feel more confident in using these aspects, the teacher can guide students in creating and performing plays based on classroom texts. Kornfeld and Leyden's (2005) research on using drama with first grade students documented the process of student-created plays. After hearing stories of historical events read aloud, students wrote, staged, and performed plays. The entire learning experience incorporated every multimodal literacy practice discussed so far. Students created maps, masks, quilts, and scenery, using visual and design

elements (Kornfed & Leyden, 2005). Students wrote the plays and used oral storytelling in their performance, and finally, students used their bodies in the actual dramatic retellings (Kornfeld & Leyden, 2005).

In my own classroom, my students and I have been experimenting with creating tableaux or entering a scene and freezing to recreate an illustration from a book. Recently, we read *Lily's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes, a story I read at the beginning of every school year. I recommend creating tableaux from a book students have heard several times, as it is easier to create a character's facial expressions and posture when the character is familiar. After assigning students into groups to pose as the problem or solution, I give students several minutes to work together to recreate the scenes by analyzing the facial expressions of the characters and the emotions they are expressing, each student picking a character to reenact.

After this planning session, I call students back to the carpet and each group presents. One student at a time enters the tableaux space, which is our reading carpet. As they enter the scene, they freeze as their character, using posture, body language, and facial expression to communicate meaning. Once all the students in the group have taken their place, the other students take turns guessing who is which character based on their poses and emotions. This is a developmentally appropriate way for early elementary students to engage in moving through a story, as they can communicate through their bodies without the challenge of memorizing lines and coordinating movements, more difficult aspects of this mode of communication.

More than Standardized: Tools for Assessing Multimodality

We have now examined what defines monomodality and multimodality, established that multimodality prepares students to be active and engaged participants in learning and in society, and examined practical ways to intentionally incorporate multimodality into the literacy

classroom. Yet, one of the most challenging aspects of multimodality for teachers, administrators, and educational systems is assessment. If multimodality is the act of using multiple sign systems to communicate meaning in a creative and engaged way, what does that look like? How do we determine if a student is learning? How do we assess an entire class? How do we ensure that students are held to consistent and high expectations when all students' products may not look the same and may not even be physical products at all?

In his research on multimodal literacy assessments, Vincent (2006) writes:

To assess a multimodal text you would have to understand the grammar of each semiotic mode used: graphic images, sounds, music, animation, and text all carry their own assessment requirements, implying assessment techniques that have not all yet been developed…*This is difficult territory*. Multimodal outcomes can become unpredictable and almost impossible to assess. (p. 56, emphasis added)

However, allowing students to create multimodal products for assessment is an issue of both relevance and equity (Vincent, 2006). Students live and communicate in a multimodal world; because of this, students should be allowed to harness multimodal communication in school.

In the same manner, students who are not successful using traditional forms of monomodal literacy must be given opportunities to use multimodal literacy. If students are only allowed to communicate their learning through a mode in which they are unsuccessful, we communicate to students that they are, in essence, illiterate, while they may be as literate as any classmate, simply in another form of literacy, equally useful and equally valuable (Vincent, 2006).

Multimodal Elements Checklist

Student Name_____

Check each element that students use in their product:

☐ Student uses images

☐ Student uses language (spoken or written)

☐ Students uses sound or vocalization

☐ Student uses gaze

☐ Student uses movement

Notes:

Figure 1

Multimodal Elements Checklist, using Bearne's
(2009) framework

If multimodal literacy assessments are both difficult territory and an issue of equity, how

can we, as teachers, assess multimodal products in ways that work within the constraints of

curricula? What follows are potential tools for formatively assessing multimodal products.

Several categorization schemes have been utilized by researchers of multimodality in elementary

literacy classrooms and provide ideas for possible assessment rubrics or checklists of multimodal

products. Bearne (2009) created a framework for describing children's multimodal work using

the following elements of design: image, language, sound/vocalization, gaze, and movement. A simple checklist can be used to identify how many modes students use in their product, as seen in Figure 1. When using this checklist, set a goal with students for how many modes they will use in their product. For younger students, I would suggest selecting two modes you would like to see. For older students, three to four modes can be the goal. Older students could also participate in the creation of a more detailed rubric of criteria for each category.

Another possible framework for a checklist comes from Pantaleo's (2005) development of a framework for analyzing and assessing student work in her research on multimodality (see Figures 2 and 3). Pantaleo (2005) uses the categories of parallel and interdependent storytelling to classify students' written and illustrated works, as well as the subcategories of interdependent storytelling: "pictures extending text, text extending pictures, and pictures extending text and text extending picture" (p. 4). A student using parallel storytelling will tell the same story through words and pictures, meaning one mode can be removed and the story will still make sense. A student using interdependent storytelling uses both modes to communicate, and the reader needs to read both to understand the story. Neither mode of storytelling is right or wrong but simply different means to communicate with an audience, whether primarily through words, picture, or both.
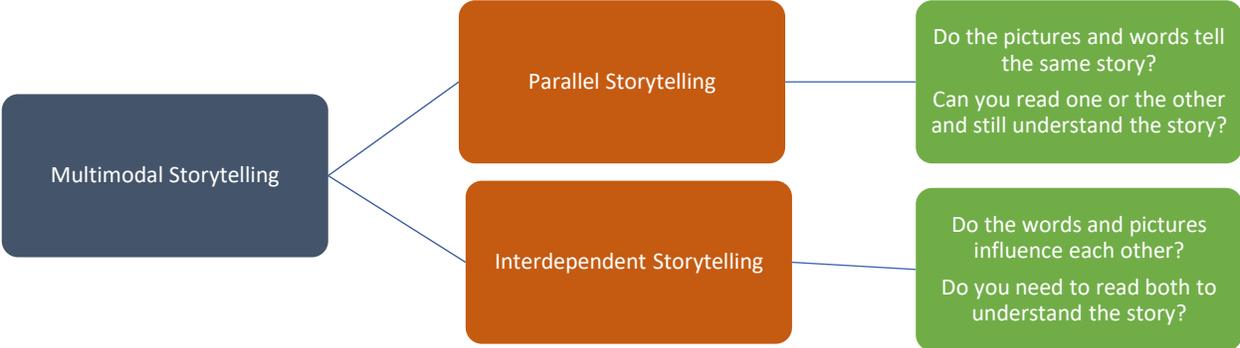
Figure 2

Pantaleo's (2005) classifications of multimodal storytelling

Forms of Storytelling

Student Name_____

How does the child use words and pictures?

☐ Student uses parallel storytelling

☐ Student uses interdependent

storytelling

    ☐ Pictures are more detailed than text

    ☐ Text is more detailed than pictures

    ☐ Text and pictures are equally

    detailed

Notes:

Figure 3

Forms of Storytelling Checklist, using Pantaleo's (2005)
framework

Beyond categorization schemes and rubrics for assessment, Vincent (2006) suggests the

use of portfolios, which may feel more comfortable for teachers, as portfolios are more well-

known in the world of education. Portfolios of students' multimodal products, along with

recordings or interviews to describe products in greater detail or capture performances and oral

storytelling, would provide teachers, parents, and administration a timeline that captures student

growth in multimodality. Asking students questions (Figure 4) about why they have chosen

specific modes of communication can also provide insight into student views of multimodality,

and interviews are used heavily in researching students' multimodal representations, as they

allow students to elaborate and extend on their written or illustrated products (Leigh & Heid,

2008; Pantaleo, 2016; Pantaleo, 2017b; Thomas, 2011; Vincent, 2006; Wright, 2007). Lastly,

quick anecdotal notes on student responses and work are a way to formatively assess student

growth in multimodality.

Multimodal Assessments:
Questions for One-to-One Interviews

Student Name_____

- Tell me about your story/drawing
- How did you use visual elements (line, color, composition, etc.) to tell your story?
- What modes did you use?
- Why did you choose those modes?
- Could you have told your story in another mode?

As students provide answers, follow-up questions on specific visual and design elements should be used (i.e. "What does this line represent? Why did you choose this color?")

Figure 4

Questions for student Interviews on multimodal products

Assessing multimodal literacy work is not without pitfalls. For example, Pantaleo (2005) cautions that only using a categorization scheme does not encompass the complexity of a child's work; "Rather, the categorization scheme provides one way to talk about the dynamic and complex relationship between two modes of expression" (p. 9). Whatever method a teacher chooses to assess multimodal work, whether through a portfolio, interviews, and/or a categorization scheme, it is necessary to consider all aspects of the student's work, being careful not to favor aspects like written language over aspects such as movement or image (Pantaleo, 2005). Rather, these assessments can serve as a formative way to assess student strengths and needs in multimodality, providing the teacher with ideas for supporting growth and encouraging success.

If assessment is what stands in the way of incorporating multimodality into the literacy classroom, these suggestions provide practical means of assessment that feel realistic for the teacher new to multimodality. Using seeing, showing, telling, and moving through a story combined with a student portfolio or a checklist or rubric creates a pathway to a multimodal literacy classroom. As Vincent (2006) writes, "However it is accomplished, there is urgent need for a change to our current assessment procedures, to allow teachers and children to work with the multimedia realities of the twenty-first century" (p. 57). To prepare our students for the world outside of the classroom, a world where multimodal means of communication are evolving and increasing in importance, our educational practices and assessments must reflect that world. Multimodal practices and assessments are that reflection.

Conclusion

Literacy is never static, nor is there a single definition of literacy that encompasses all parts, skills, sequences, and the ways in which literacy is influenced by and influences society,

culture, and history (Scribner, 1984). Multimodality, the ability to communicate meaning

through modes, both old and new, is not static either. As part of literacy, especially the literacy

that is now being practiced more and more outside the classroom, multimodality challenges

teachers to move beyond the monomodal, writing-based classrooms of the past and into a new

way of teaching that incorporates drawing, writing, reading, speaking, listening, storytelling,

physical movement, technology, and more. These modes are active and engaging and bring a

new depth and authenticity to the literacy classroom.

It seems that children already know this. Hassett and Curwood (2009) write that "children

have always been multimodal; their social and cultural resources for making meaning include

talk, gesture, drama, drawing, and ways of incorporating, integrating, and extending linguistic

signs" (p. 271). It is often the formal public education system that restricts their multimodality,

as we emphasize what is tested and what is valued in our culture, the concrete and logical written

word (Leigh & Heid, 2008; Vincent, 2006). As adults, we are less likely to embrace this

multimodality in the classroom when the systems in place do not support it, when time is a

concern, when standardized testing is the measure of success, and when reading and writing are

still the most valued skills we teach.

However, as educators, it is our job to engage children in authentic tasks that teach the

skills students will need to be successful in their communities outside of the classroom.

Multimodality provides a powerful way forward, whether a teacher chooses to start with seeing,

showing, telling, or moving through a story. In addition to these multimodal practices, creating a

practical and effective way to assess multimodal products, through a framework or rubric for

categorizing products, portfolios and interviews, or anecdotal notes ensures that multimodality

can be communicated to educational stakeholders at all levels and provides feedback to teachers

on how students are learning and using multimodal literacy practices.

      We are at a crossroads in education, where we can choose to continue with traditional

methods of monomodal learning or create new ways of multimodal learning. Serafini (2012)

writes,

> As the texts readers encounter change, and grow in complexity, the requisite skills they
>
> will need to be successful will need to change and grow in complexity as well. What it
>
> took to be literate at the turn of the 20th century is not what it will take to be literate in
>
> contemporary society. (p. 30)

The way forward is clear. To teach our students to be literate, we must embrace multimodal

literacy in the classroom. Here we go!

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