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Communicating with Multimodalities and Multiliteracies

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Communicating with Multimodalities and Multiliteracies

Summary

Comic books are currently enjoying a resurgence in both public and scholarly interest. However, most of that scholarly focus has focused on how to use comics to engage with reluctant readers; educators are still struggling to recognize the medium as a "complex form of multimodal literacy" (Jacobs 2007). In both their complexity and their appeal, comic books gesture towards multiliteracy, a term that recognizes "the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; to account for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate" (New London Group 2000). Multimodal forms, in general, have very recently become of particular interest to instructors seeking new tactics to engage students within increasingly diverse classrooms. Lisa Leopold (2012) highlights widening research suggesting that learning styles can vary, among other things, according to culture. The results demonstrate that in order to appeal to students of all backgrounds, educators need to consider auditory, visual, and kinesthetic models or 'texts' for understanding the concepts and theories they hope to convey. Multimodality, herein, becomes important as the term that is used to describe the different texts of meaning, or rather the convergence of these texts, where different forms of communication work both together and in contrast in order to convey meaning. Comic books provide a unique opportunity to explore this convergence, given that they are hybrid texts themselves. By asking participants to think critically about how different modes of communication can be incorporated into a comic book, this workshop encourages educators to reconsider how the modes in which they communicate to their students can appeal to all learners.

A wealth of recent scholarship suggests that important revisions need to be made to the traditional concept of literacy. While text slang, gifs, and emoticons provide us with dramatic examples of the organic formation of systems of communication, educational reform is still centered on linguistic learning. In order to free ourselves from the conventional view of literacy as a simple matter of words, it is important to consider the multiple systems of meaning – or *multiliteracies* – that we all navigate as functional members of society. As Jacobs (2007) argues, when we analyze comics as examples of multimodal literacy, we practice 'critical engagement' that can then be translated to other multimodal texts that we encounter in our daily lives. In this workshop, participants will first be challenged to utilize these multiple literacies in a group reading of a comic book. In the concluding half, participants will use this experience to investigate how incorporating elements of multimodal design into their lessons can be beneficial in appealing to the widest possible audience.

Keywords
comic books, multiliteracies, multimodal literacy

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SUMMARY

Comic books are currently enjoying a resurgence in both public and scholarly interest. However, most of that scholarly focus has focused on how to use comics to engage with reluctant readers; educators are still struggling to recognize the medium as a "complex form of multimodal literacy" (Jacobs 2007). In both their complexity and their appeal, comic books gesture towards multiliteracy, a term that recognizes "the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; to account for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate" (New London Group 2000). Multimodal forms, in general, have very recently become of particular interest to instructors seeking new tactics to engage students within increasingly diverse classrooms. Lisa Leopold (2012) highlights widening research suggesting that learning styles can vary, among other things, according to culture. The results demonstrate that in order to appeal to students of all backgrounds, educators need to consider auditory, visual, and kinesthetic models or 'texts' for understanding the concepts and theories they hope to convey. Multimodality, herein, becomes important as the term that is used to describe the different texts of meaning, or rather the convergence of these texts, where different forms of communication work both together and in contrast in order to convey meaning. Comic books provide a unique opportunity to explore this convergence, given that they are hybrid texts themselves. By asking participants to think critically about how different modes of communication can be incorporated into a comic book, this workshop encourages educators to reconsider how the modes in which they communicate to their students can appeal to all learners.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to:
- describe how to read a comic using design and syntax clues;

- analyze the different modes of communication embedded in any discourse as a means of equipping themselves to function within it;
- identify at least three different ways in which individual modes of communication can be combined to create complex meaning; and
- develop strategies to combine those modes in their individual teaching environments as a way to optimize the communication of concepts or ideas.

REFERENCE SUMMARIES

Jacobs, Dale. (2007) More than words: Comics as a means of teaching multiple literacies. *The English Journal*, 96.3, 19-25.

Jacobs (2007) demonstrates how comic books can be used in the classroom to help students develop multiliteracies. His assertion is that comic books – a traditionally maligned or debased art form – have much to offer in introducing readers to a "complex form of multimodal literacy" (Jacobs 2007, P.20). Multimodality has always existed in certain forms, but it has become especially pervasive in our contemporary, digital context. In analyzing comics, then, we are developing a critical awareness of the ways in which different 'modes' work together to construct meaning in a variety of texts.

We can consider Jacobs' (2007) analysis of *Polly and the Pirates* as an example of some of the ways we can discuss multimodal literacy. Of particular importance is the way in which Jacobs (2007) organizes his insights according to the "six design elements" we engage with in multimodal texts: linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial elements, as well as those elements which can be seen as connecting those preceding elements of design (P.21). The focus in this analysis shifts from the elements themselves to a larger consideration of how those elements contribute to a narrative meaning in the text.

One useful distinction that Jacobs (2007) makes is that meaning is something that is made but is also something that is 'negotiated' by the reader. As educators, instructors, and presenters, this is an important concept to keep in mind as we reach out to our audience. By appealing to elements of multimodal design, we can appeal to the multiple literacies our audience members are already practicing. Inviting the type of critical analysis that allows for negotiated meaning by appealing to familiar forms provides our audience with a greater opportunity for understanding.

New London Group, The. (2000) A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. In B. Cope and M. Kalantzis (Eds), *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. New York: Routledge. 9-37.

Penned by a consortium of literacy theorists identified as the "New London Group", this article outlines the pressing need to open up educational practices to concerns of multiliteracy as a way to better prepare students for the realities of the modern workplace (New London Group 2000). In the broadest sense, it preaches the responsibility educators have to provide students with the means to readily adapt themselves to multiple discourses that, by their nature, are constantly realigning themselves. To this end, the New

London Group (2000) envisions a new kind of pedagogy that repositions literacy within strategies of design and posits a dynamic system in which the elements of that design produce complex meaning. This pedagogy should find increased momentum in the current digital context, where communication is more dynamic than ever.

This article is invaluable in contextualizing multiliteracy. First and foremost, it provides educators with compelling reasons to teach to multiple, non-traditional literacies. The New London Group (2000) argues for the need to recontextualize human knowledge within the domains from where it originated: "embedded in social, cultural and material contexts" (30). This vision of a new pedagogy relies on four components: "situated practice" or immersion; "overt instruction" or analysis; "critical framing" or interpretation; and "transformed practice", the transfer of those meanings (See New London Group 2000 Pgs. 30-36). The goal of reorienting pedagogy around these components is part of a "larger agenda focusing on Situated Practices in the learning process, which involves the recognition that differences are critical in workplaces, civic spaces, and multilayered lifeworlds" (New London Group 2000, P.36). By recognizing that meaning making takes to many different formats and designs, the New London Group challenges us to consider the ways in which our pedagogy can make meaningful connections to our students.

From a pragmatic standpoint, the New London Group (2000) introduces instructors to the design elements upon which notions of multiliteracy are formed. The article lists six elements of design: "Linguistic Design, Visual Design, Audio Design, Gestural Design, Spatial Design and Multimodal Design" (New London Group 2000, Pg. 25). Each is imagined as having its own accompanying metalanguage. The New London Group (2000) analyzes Linguistic Design in order to demonstrate how we can conceive of metalanguage. These demonstrations will provide instructors with a useful understanding of how to disseminate different types of design, in order to appeal to them. The article also elucidates many of the concepts that Jacobs (2007) draws on in his exploration of the comic book as a complex form of multimodal literacy.

Kress, G. (2010) *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. New York: Routledge.

Just as the New London Group serves to underscore Jacobs, Gunther Kress' work in *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach* examines the structures of meaning upon which multiliteracy, and more importantly, multimodality relies. Kress was also a member of the New London Group. In this book, Kress (2010) undertakes a sociological study of the mechanisms of meaning making. Because his focus is multimodality in specific, his discussion helps instructors utilizing multimodal concepts ground their work in "a theory that deals with meaning in all its appearances, in all social occasions and in all cultural sites" (Kress 2010, P.2).

Kress (2010) makes two distinctions that are useful for educators seeking to incorporate multimodality into their pedagogy. The first is his shift from conceptions of grammar and language conventions to semiotic resources. This recasting lends itself to an understanding of practices in communication as socially affected. From the perspective of an instructor

seeking to incorporate multimodality in the classroom, it allows for a critical engagement with the way meaning is made and regulated. Developing this skill is a necessary step towards being able both to navigate multiple literacies in the classroom and to provide students with the tools to do the same.

The second useful distinction resides in Kress' (2010) discussion of each element of design carrying its own, unique semiotic load. As part of his focus on Design, Kress (2010) seeks to resituate each discourse within the work that it does. Where this bears on complex, multimodal forms is in its suggestion that each element of design takes on its own share of the semiotic load, performing some share of the work that is essential to communicating the message.

Leopold, Lisa. (2012) Prewriting tasks for auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. *TESL Canada Journal/Revue TESL Canada 97* 29.2, 96-102.

Leopold (2012) confronts the reality of diversity in the classroom as necessitating multimodal teaching practices. She presents a compelling argument for the way in which cultural background can position students to respond to some learning styles better than others. While her cultural discussion provides peripheral knowledge of the ways multimodality can help facilitate cross-cultural exchange, more generally Leopold (2012) demonstrates the need to reconsider teaching styles in order to better address diversity in the classroom – whatever form it takes.

Where Leopold's (2012) work intersects with the aims of this workshop is in positing that a multimodal approach to learning presents students with greater opportunities for success. As Leopold (2012) argues, "a match between learning and teaching styles has been correlated with higher student achievement rates" (P.97). As the digital, globalized context changes the way we read and write, the way we think undergoes corresponding shifts. With the evidence Leopold (2012) suggests here for the large numbers of visual and kinesthetic learners, teaching styles must adapt to those contexts as well.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION

Two versions of this workshop follow. The first is designed for 90 minutes while the second includes an additional section to extend the workshop to 120 minutes in length.

Duration [min]	Subject	Activity	Purpose
5	Welcome and Introduction	Welcome the participants and introduce the topic by defining multimodality and multiliteracy. Ask the participants to imagine a presentation without words.	By challenging the participants to envision a presentation that does not rely on words, introducing the idea that meaning is made in multiple ways.

15	Introducing Different Modes of Communication	Ask participants to consider the different tools we use in negotiating meaning in our daily lives. To spark discussion, suggest different scenarios for consideration (See *Presentation Strategies*). During the discussion, compile a list of features that participants identify as particular to that discourse. Participants are likely to attribute multiple meanings to the same features.	This segment will introduce participants to a consideration of how meaning is constructed, mitigated, or negotiated within any given context.
35	Reading Comics Critically	Provide each participant with a comic book. The book should be the same title and issue in order to allow participants to refer to features being discussed in their own copy and share insights. Ask participants to read through the comic books in groups of 2 or 3 and discuss amongst themselves, making note of the different ways in which the author and artist construct meaning in the narrative.	Participants will perform an analysis of the narrative, similar to that performed in the first segment, noting where and what meaning is communicated, how it adheres in the text, and which modes are being used to convey it. Starting the discussion in small groups allows participants to compare readings and find like terms to identify those aspects that are unfamiliar to them.
20	Group Discussion	Ask participants to share their insights with the group. The presenter will compile a list of each feature as they are discussed, as in the first segment. The result should be a comprehensive list of the features comic books rely on in order to make meaning. The instructor should focus the discussion on examining each element's semiotic load.	This exercise allows the participants to categorize each design feature found in the narrative under the modes of communication previously discussed in the first segment. This will provide the group with the opportunity to discuss how meaning can function multimodally, layered among different elements of design.

10	Critical Framing	Distribute the comics terminology provided in Appendix A. Lead the group in matching their insights to the terminology provided.	Participants will reflect on how they have interpreted the different elements of design by considering their insights in relation to the definitions. The participants will be enacting "critical framing," translating their insights towards a particular discourse.
5	Conclusion	The presenter will invite each group to share its insights with each other informally. The presenter should make him/herself available to discuss different strategies for incorporating elements of multimodality and multi-literacy into different discourses.	Participants will share insights with each other informally and will have the opportunity to ask questions.
Total Time: 90 minutes			

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION of the additional section for a 120 minute workshop. Ideally, this section would follow the Critical Framing and precede the Conclusion.

Duration [min]	Subject	Activity	Purpose
30	Applying the Principles	Break participants into small groups. Present each group with a learning objective particular to one discipline (see Appendix B for examples). Participants will be asked to consider how they can achieve that objective using multimodal elements according to the chart in Appendix C.	Participants will be enacting "transformed practice." The goal is to consider how educators can appeal to multimodality and multiliteracies within their own discipline by identifying the multimodal potential of that discourse.

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES
Welcome and Introduction: Multimodality and multiliteracy are ideas that encourage us to challenge the primacy of word-based texts. By challenging the participants to envision a presentation that does not rely on words, the presenter is introducing the group to the idea that meaning is made in multiple ways.

Introducing Different Modes of Communication: Participants will be asked to brainstorm the different modes of communication that are embedded in any given situation. To spark discussion, the presenter will suggest different scenarios for consideration: for example, driving on a city street, chatting on the internet, watching a movie. Plan five minutes of led discussion for each scenario. While considering each scenario as a group, the presenter will compile a list of features participants identify as particular to that discourse on the board or projection screen, or where ever the list is most accessible to each participant. This segment will introduce participants to a consideration of how meaning is constructed, mitigated, or negotiated within any given context. Scenarios will be selected in order to consider a wide variety of modes of communication, including linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, and spatial modes. Each feature participants identify should be related to a particular mode: for example, identifying the turn signal as a visual signification of the action of turning, or the car horn as an audio signification of warning. Participants are likely to attribute multiple meanings to the same features.

Reading Comics Critically: There are a number of avenues a facilitator might consider when sourcing comic books for a large group. Many local comic book stores are ready and willing to work with educators who are interested in exploring the medium. International industry initiatives such as Free Comic Book Day regularly provide free comic books to thousands of readers each year. Developing a good relationship with a local store can allow facilitators to find a title to serve their purposes, often free of charge. Additionally, websites such as comixology.com and digilibraries.com provide free comics on a regular basis in a digital format.

Upon receiving the comic books, participants will be asked to perform an analysis of that particular narrative similar to those performed in the first segment. Participants will be encouraged to read in groups of 2 or 3 and discuss amongst themselves. Starting the discussion in small groups allows participants to compare readings and find like terms to identify those aspects that are unfamiliar to them. Each participant will be asked to keep a written list of those examples or features in the book where they found meaning was being communicated, noting what that meaning is, how it adheres in the text, and which modes are being used to convey it.

Group Discussion: This exercise allows the participants to categorize each design feature found in the narrative under the modes of communication discussed in the first segment. When students are asked to share their insights, it is likely that different meanings will be attributed to the same design feature. This will provide the group with the opportunity to discuss how meaning can function multimodally, layered among different elements of design. The instructor should focus the discussion on examining each element's semiotic load, or what those elements 'do'. Participants should be encouraged to debate the suitedness of each element to these corresponding functions, as well as their limitations.

Conclusion: The presenter should make him/herself available to discuss different strategies for incorporating elements of multimodality and multiliteracy into different discourses.

PRESENTATION STRATEGIES for the alternate additional section:

Applying the Principles: In an effort to demonstrate how to transfer the ideas of multimodal design to a particular discipline, the participants will be enacting "transformed practice". Depending on the make up of the group, the presenter should try to match each objective to students within that discipline. The goal is to consider how educators can appeal to multimodality and multiliteracies within their own discipline by identifying the multimodal potential of that discourse.

APPENDIX A: Comics Terminology

The following is a list of terms referring to different elements of comic book design.
<u>Note</u>: Unless otherwise specified, all definitions have been quoted from *Drawing Words, Writing Pictures* by Jessica Abel and Matt Madden. All pagination is provided accordingly.

- ***Medium shot***: "A shot showing part of the body of one or more characters" (154).
- ***Long Shot***: "Usually a full-length shot, emphasizing the background and the blocking of the characters. A long shot can be further qualified as a medium long shot or extreme long shot" (154).
- ***Close-up***: "Usually a torso or head shot, when dealing with characters. But it can also be a close-up of an object" (154).
- ***Over the Shoulder***: "A shot incorporating the shoulder and rear three quarters profile of the character whose point of view we are closest to. Often a series of contrasting OTS shots will be used to show a conversation" (154).
- ***High – Angle/Low - Angle***: "The [POV] looks up or down at the action" (155).
- ***Shallow Focus/Deep Focus***: "Film and photography can use shallow focus, where only one plane (foreground, or, less commonly, background) is seen clearly, or deep focus, where the foreground and background are both in focus. This is a useful tool for guiding the viewers' attention, and it can be simulated in comics in any number of ways" (155).
- ***Iris Shot***: "An early camera effect from the silent era, in which a circular area closes in on a detail or opens to introduce a scene. The iris effect was common in early animation (think "Th-th-th-that's all, folks!"), and its effect can still be seen in the use of circular panels in comics" (155). (I.e., in the script, when Jaquez describes the giant in a spread-wide splash page on pages 54-55)
- ***Canted Angle/Dutch Tilt***: "The camera is tilted to one side so that the horizon line is no longer parallel to the edge of the screen" (155).
- ***Establishing shot***: "A shot, usually at the beginning of a scene, that shows us the setting where the action will take place. The establishing shot could be of a cityscape, a deep-space vista, or a suburban interior. In comics, this is often a splash panel or page" (154)
- ***Grid Pattern***: "The concept of organizing elements using a grid…the underlying structure that helps ensure a readable, integrated composition… creating panels of uniform shape and size will give your comic a steady rhythm that you can punctuate and accentuate through repetitions and variations from one panel to the next" (71).
- ***Tier***: "A horizontal row of panels" (80).
- ***Panel/Frame***: One picture or scene (7).
- ***Gutter***: "The space between panels" (7).
- ***Emanata***: Refers to "various sweat beads, motion lines, curlicues, and stars that emanate…from comic characters" (8).
- ***Spread***: Two pages placed in secession joined at the spine of the comic/graphic novel (7).
- ***Splash Page***: "A full page image" (7).
- ***Bleed***: Where an "image runs off page" (7)

APPENDIX B: Instructor Tools

Below are but a few examples of possible scenarios from a variety of disciplines that participants might be asked to address using multimodal strategies:

1. You are tutoring an English as a Second Language (ESL) student studying engineering. The student is new to Canada. She has a very clear understanding of the scientific and mathematic principles involved in the discipline, but she is failing her classes because she struggles to express those ideas within the native discourse. Think of ways you might incorporate multimodality or multiliteracy to help them bridge the language gap. What are the different multimodal elements inherent to their discipline, and what semiotic load do they carry?
2. A local amateur theatre company is staging a production of a play that many of the players are unfamiliar with. As the director, it is your job to present a clear vision of how you feel the play should look and feel. Imagine how each element of your vision can be translated to a corresponding element of multimodal design. Keep in mind that your cast and crew are largely volunteers and have varying degrees of experience with the theories of drama, music, and the visual arts. How will you convey stage directions, set descriptions, etc?
3. As the instructor of a first year university organic chemistry class, you are teaching your students about organic compounds. The class is having difficulty understanding the differences between natural and synthetic compounds. Devise a lesson plan utilizing multimodal strategies to help your students differentiate between the two types of compounds. Remember that your students are predominantly first year students, and have likely only just been introduced to the ideas and concepts of organic chemistry.
4. The business school has been asked to develop a business strategy for a local restaurant. The owner has asked the school to consider how he can expand his business into a chain of restaurants, with the expressed purpose of becoming a franchise within ten years. How might you incorporate multimodality in presenting the strategy to the client?
5. In your spare time, you have volunteered to coach a local youth sports team (the sport can be of your choosing). Your team consists of children of varying ages, genders, and athletic ability. They have never played together, and many are playing the sport for the first time. Organize a practice session that incorporates multimodal communication to help acclimate the kids to the sport, as well as playing as a team. Match each skill, function, or quality that you want your team to learn to the multimodal element that best reinforces it.
6. You are a university medical researcher seeking a federal grant to help fund your ongoing study of a particular compound that you feel could lead to a medical breakthrough. The grant council has asked you to but together a forty-five minute presentation explaining why they should fund your research. The members of that council are from varying disciplines and professional backgrounds. Consider how you might incorporate multimodal elements into your presentation, detailing the semiotic load each element will carry.

Appendix C: Handout for "Applying the Principles"

Multimodal Element	Specific Use	Semiotic Load
Linguistic		
Audio		
Gestural		
Spatial		
Visual		