

Reading Multimodal Texts in the 21st Century

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As the world told becomes the world shown, the texts of the 21st century will require teachers to adopt new skills, strategies, and pedagogical frameworks to support students' transactions with multimodal texts. This shift from a focus on monomodal, print-based texts to a focus on the skills necessary for producing and consuming multimodal texts requires readers to navigate, design, interpret, and analyze texts in more complex and interactive ways. As the texts readers encounter grow in complexity, shifting from monomodal structures to multimodal ensembles, and are distributed in digital forms in addition to traditional print-based texts, the requisite skills readers draw upon will need to expand to handle the demands of these new texts and experiences.

Discussions concerning which literacy skills will be required of students in the 21st century have appeared in numerous educational publications recently and have been greeted with mixed reactions (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). It has been proposed that the skills necessary to be a literate citizen in the new millennium have expanded from simply being able to read and write printed text to being able to consume and produce a variety of texts across traditional and new technologies and working in digital and mobile environments (Kress, 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Luke, 1995). What needs to be emphasized in these discussions are the challenges associated with the visual and multimodal aspects of the texts readers will encounter. As the texts readers encounter grow in complexity, shifting from monomodal to multimodal, and are distributed in digital forms in addition to traditional print-based

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forms, the requisite skills readers will draw upon needs to expand to handle the demands of these new texts (Serafini, 2010).

The texts readers encounter in and out of school are usually accompanied by visual images and design elements in addition to printed text. Readers interact with print-based texts that contain multimodal elements, for example, picturebooks, informational texts, magazines and newspapers, as well as digitally based texts that contain hyperlinks, video images, music, sound effects, and graphic designs. Paul Duncum (2004) stated, "... there is no avoiding the multimodal nature of dominant and emerging cultural sites" (p. 259). Images and texts are being combined in unique ways, and readers in the new millennium will need new skills and strategies for constructing meaning in transaction with these multimodal texts as they are encountered both in and out of school settings (Serafini, 2009b).

While print-based reading materials in the form of basal readers, children's picturebooks and novels, writer's notebooks, and commercial worksheets have dominated classroom reading instruction (Allington & Walmsley, 1995), the texts readers encounter

outside of school continue to grow in complexity. Although print-based texts continue to dominate classroom reading experiences, students encounter digitally based texts with greater frequency outside of school (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Blogs, wikis, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter provide students with social networks, and their associated texts challenge readers to navigate the multimodal aspects of these digital and social environments.

As the world told becomes the world shown, the texts of the 21st century will require new skills, strategies, and new pedagogies to support students' transactions with these multimodal, multimedia texts (Kress, 2003; Serafini, 2011). This shift from a focus on monomodal, print-based texts to a focus on the skills necessary for producing and consuming multimodal texts requires readers to navigate, design, interpret, and analyze texts in new and more interactive ways (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Serafini, 2009a; Unsworth, 2002). Multimodal texts, comprising written text, visual images, graphic elements, hyperlinks, video clips, audio clips, and other modes of representation, require different strategies for navigating and comprehension (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

A focus on multimodality is an attempt to make the point that an interest in representational modes other than written language is essential and is central to actual forms of communication everywhere, not simply some kind of tangential or marginal concern that could be taken up or not (Kress, 2003, 2010). Literacy educators will need an expanded theoretical framework from which to discuss the interpretive strategies readers will draw upon to make sense of these more complex texts in the new millennium.

In this article, I offer a reconceptualized notion of the reader as "reader-viewer" that expands the concept of reading to include multimodal texts, graphic design elements, and visual images (Freebody, 1992; Serafini, 2010, in press). I will draw upon my earlier research to discuss the importance of supporting readers as they learn to navigate, interpret, and design the multimodal texts they encounter with greater frequency both in and out of school settings. I will finish the article by discussing how two print-based texts, in particular contemporary and postmodern picturebooks and graphic novels, may serve to bridge the chasm from the traditional literacies and print-based texts that dominate schools today, to the multimodal, visual, and digital texts of the new millennium.

The Four Resources Model

Freebody and Luke (1990) proffered an expanded conceptualization of the resources readers

utilize and the roles readers adopt during the act of reading.

The four resources model has been used as a foundation for curriculum reform (Ludwig, 2003), a theoretical framework to broaden educators' understanding of literacy and reading (Freebody, 1992), and as a socio-constructivist critique of the dominance of cognitive perspectives on literacy education and instructional practices (Luke, 1995). The original four resources model, comprised the following four roles: (a) reader as code breaker, (b) reader as text-participant, (c) reader as text user, and (d) readers as text analyst, and provided literacy educators, researchers, and theorists with a divergent perspective on what it means to be a successful reader in new times (Freebody & Luke, 1990).

In later reiterations of the four resources model, Luke and Freebody (1997, 1999) revised their original concept of the *roles* readers were to adopt from predetermined ways of acting and thinking that can be defined a priori for particular readers to fit into, to a set of resources or *social practices* that readers draw upon to make sense of their worlds. This reconceptualizing of the four roles or resources as social practices suggests these roles are constructed rather than adopted, developed in the context of reading rather than taken on as predetermined sets of cognitive skills performed in everyday classrooms, negotiated among practitioners, and redeveloped, recombined, and articulated in relation to one another on a continual basis (Luke & Freebody, 1999).

Expanding the Four Resources Model

To expand the original concept of the four resources model even further, one must reconceptualize the reader as a *reader-viewer* attending to the visual images, structures, and design elements of multimodal texts in addition to written language. Although the focus has shifted to multimodal texts throughout the later iterations of the four resources model, making the resources and social practices readers draw upon more explicitly focused on visual and multimodal aspects of screen-based and printed texts alike is an important consideration (Serafini, in press).

Multimodal texts present information across a variety of modes including visual images, design elements, written language, and other semiotic resources. These texts challenge novice readers as they work across multiple sign systems to construct meaning (Siegel, 2006). The amount of time students will spend looking at visual and multimodal texts in the new millennium will require a rethinking of current pedagogical approaches. The reconceptualized four resources or social practices

proposed are reader-viewer as: (a) navigator, (b) interpreter, (c) designer, and (d) interrogator (Serafini, in press). In this article, I will focus specifically on the shift from reader as decoder to reader-viewer as navigator, and the shift from reader as text user to reader-viewer as designer. First, I will briefly describe the shift from decoder of written language to navigator of multimodal texts. Next, I will discuss how designer is a more apt metaphor for the process of reading-viewing these complex and multimodal texts. I will finish with some pedagogical implications for these reconceptualized resources focusing on postmodern picturebooks and graphic novels.

Reader as Navigator

When students encounter multimodal texts, the traditional role of code-breaker needs to expand beyond word level decoding to include understanding the codes and conventions associated with design elements and visual images in multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In addition to decoding written language, readers must learn to navigate the design of print-based and digital texts, including the left to right orientation of English language texts, and understand the role that charts, graphs, diagrams, visual images, fonts, design elements, and illustrations encountered in picturebooks, informational texts, graphic novels, websites, and advertisements play as readers construct meaning in transaction with these multimodal texts.

In contrast to decoding written language, there is no preset or determined path that readers are required to follow sequentially through multimodal texts (Kress, 2003). Readers actively select objects from their visual fields to attend to and interpret in an order that suits their purposes and interests. Any particular multimodal text or visual image may contain compositional structures that lead a viewer's eye in certain directions, and features of visual grammar, for example, modality, framing, and salience, which draw one's attention to particular aspects of an image or multimodal text (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). However, the reader ultimately determines the reading path during their transaction with the text as they decide how to navigate its textual, visual, and compositional elements.

Navigating multimodal texts requires readers to attend to the grammars of visual design, in addition to the structures, typography, and graphic elements associated with written language. The decoding processes outlined by Luke and Freebody (1999), for instance, a reader's ability to break the code of written texts by recognizing and using fundamental features, including the relationship between

phonemes and graphemes, sight words, spelling patterns, and structural conventions may be subsumed within the larger concept of navigating. Navigating multimodal texts requires readers to decode written text, and additionally navigate the compositions and structures of design elements and visual images. These skills are too often missing from reading comprehension strategy lessons (Serafini, 2005).

As the complexity of the texts readers encounter increases, decoding, as a separate skill, becomes less an indicator of comprehension and should be viewed as only one aspect of a reader's ability to navigate the multimodal landscapes encountered. In addition, non-linear structures, hypertext, visual images, and multimodal compositional structures need to be navigated by readers if they are to be successful in today's educational settings. Navigating, including the decoding of written texts, is an important skill, and equally an important consideration for literacy educators, but it is an insufficient skill in and of itself to make readers proficient in new times.

Reader as Designer

Because there is often no preset path for readers to follow, multimodal texts readers design texts through the processes of navigation and interpretation by drawing upon the available semiotic resources presented in a text to construct meanings during the act of reading. Design is the process of organizing what is to be navigated and interpreted, shaping available resources into potential meanings realized in the context of reading multimodal texts (Serafini, in press).

The concept of *reader as designer* can be extended from producer of texts to the process of navigating and interpreting multimodal texts, as well. Making a shift from designer as producer of multimodal texts to navigator and interpreter of multimodal texts requires an expansion of the concept of design to include the active construction of meaning potentials during a reader's transactions with these texts. Unlike traditional written text that is presented in a sequential, linear manner, multimodal texts and hypertexts often are presented in a non-linear fashion. For example, textbooks and postmodern picturebooks (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008) require readers to navigate not only the visual and textual elements presented during the act of reading, but also actually to design the text to be read from the available semiotic resources. Like the traditional "choose your own adventure texts," the reader is required to become an even more active participant in the interpretation and design of the multimodal texts being read.

Numerous reading paths are possible given the

compositional nature and spatial arrangements of multimodal texts (Kress, 2010). However, the paths chosen by readers are not arbitrary, nor are they pre-determined by the artist or graphic designer, although these creators draw upon various compositional, visual, design, and typographical features to suggest how a text may be read. The interests, needs, and experiences of the reader motivate the paths selected. In this sense, the concept of design provides the reader with agency as she or he constructs meaning from the available semiotic resources presented in a multimodal text. Not only do readers construct meaning during their transactions with multimodal texts, they construct the actual texts to be read and interpreted.

The New London Group (1996) suggests, “meaning making is an active and dynamic process, and not something governed by static rules” (p. 74). They further suggest that any semiotic activity transforms as well as reproduces the same conventions (New London Group, 1996). This combination of reproduction and transformation is at the heart of any concept of design. The reader reproduces certain features of text and reading paths, while simultaneously transforming the path and text into something unique for each reader. Through this process the reader becomes an active, purposeful agent in their construction of meaning during the act of reading multimodal texts.

As the new millennium continues, educators find themselves in need of new literacy practices and instructional approaches that will provide support for students as they navigate the challenges of multimodal texts, digital environments, and new forms of texts, for example, blogs, wikis, text messages, and hypertexts. Educators also are required to help students comprehend and use the print-based texts traditionally associated with school settings and literacy education of the past century. I offer two multimodal texts in the following sections, namely postmodern picturebooks and graphic novels, that may serve as a bridge between the print-based literacies of the past and the multimodal and digital texts of the new millennium. Because these texts are commonly found in school settings and classrooms, teachers have experience with them and might feel more comfortable using these texts than the digital texts they will be required to help students comprehend in the future.

Postmodern Picturebooks

Picturebooks have been used extensively in many elementary reading programs, conveying meanings through the use of three sign systems: written language, visual design elements, and visual images or illustrations. However, the primary focus

in elementary reading education has been on the strategies and skills necessary for understanding the system of written language. This lack of pedagogical attention to the skills and strategies required for making sense of visual images and visual design elements presents serious challenges to teachers at a time when image has begun to dominate the lives of their students (Fleckenstein, 2002; Kress, 2003).

Picturebooks, in particular postmodern picturebooks (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008), might serve as a link or bridge from the print-based texts of the past to the multimodal texts encountered in the future. Postmodern picturebooks invite students to navigate non-linear structures and attend to various visual representations, design elements, and structures in order to comprehend the complexities inherent in these texts (Serafini, 2005). These complex texts call upon readers to become more self-reflexive, active readers who utilize a variety of interpretive strategies in order to construct meaning with the texts they encounter (Bull, 2002).

In turn, postmodern picturebooks require literacy educators to become more sophisticated readers of picturebooks themselves in order to demonstrate and support the types of interpretive strategies and reading practices necessary for dealing with these innovative elements and structures. To be successful in facilitating effective discussions with postmodern picturebooks, teachers need to address the ambiguities inherent in postmodern picturebooks, and suspend premature closure on students’ interpretations in order to explore the variety of meaning potentials available. These picturebooks also require teachers to attend to the visual images and design elements in their discussions and instructional experiences to help students construct meaning (Serafini, 2008).

Postmodern picturebooks often contain non-linear plots, polyphonic narrators, intertextual references, a blending of genres, and indeterminacies (McCallum, 1996). These features of postmodern picturebooks require the reader to navigate and interpret these texts in new ways, drawing upon their understandings of traditional print-based texts and their knowledge of visual images and design elements. As print-based texts, like contemporary picturebooks, adopt the non-linear and polyphonic structures of multimodal and postmodern texts, they will better serve as a bridge between the print dominated classrooms of the past and the digitally and multimodal texts of the new millennium. The strategies and skills readers will draw upon to make sense of these texts will need to expand as the complexity of the texts they encounter expands.

Graphic Novels and Comics

The most obvious difference between the novels of the past and those of the 21st century is the increased reliance on visual images as part of the story, advertising resources and materials produced by the publisher, including dust jackets, endpapers, cover art, and advertisements. Traditionally, novels contained primarily printed text and the pages were simply secured within a vellum or leather cover. With the advent of the computer, images and graphic design elements became easier and less expensive to include (Manguel, 1996), allowing publishers to include more complex graphic and design elements at relatively lower costs. These new technologies have supported many of the changes we have seen in contemporary novels.

Visual images are no longer included as simply illustrative of the printed text, but add to the story and the overall meaning of the novel in new and varied dimensions (Eisner, 2008). Images are no longer subservient to the printed text but are a system of meaning in their own right and an essential design element of the graphic novel and illustrated text. Learning to read novels has changed from a singular focus on learning to decode and understand written language to include the navigating and interpretation of visual images, design elements, and graphic structures (Serafini, in press).

Graphic novels, comics, manga, cartoons, and other graphic texts are a form of sequential art, relying heavily on graphic design and visual images to tell a story. Often referred to simply as longer comic books, these texts juxtapose images and words in sequential order to tell a story or dramatize an idea (Thompson, 2008; Yang, 2008). Because of the multimodal nature of these texts, they are more similar to hypertexts and digital texts than they are to traditional print-based texts (McCloud, 1994). Because graphic novels require readers to understand visual images and the structures of sequential art, teachers need to expand their pedagogical approaches to include strategies for comprehending visual images.

Multimodal texts and visual images will continue to dominate our literate landscapes far into the future. Because of changes in technology, we will most likely not go back to a time when written text is offered without any accompanying visual images. We might wish for a resurgence of the classic novel void of all images and cover art, but the chances of that happening are slim. The good news is the novel will probably not go away either. Although it might change in form, structure, style, and presentational formats, it remains an important literary genre and means of communication across generations. The

graphic novel is a novel, albeit a new form and structure. Teachers need to embrace these changes and find ways to incorporate the multimodal texts readers encounter outside of school into their classrooms and pedagogical repertoires.

Concluding Remarks

The disconnect between the texts students encounter in school and the texts they encounter in their lives out of school must be bridged to prepare students to be successful in the new millennium. Providing students with skills and strategies for navigating and interpreting visual design elements and images, in addition to the requisite skills for making sense of written language, is necessary to cross this pedagogical chasm. 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. Teachers' reluctance to embrace new literacies and its associated technologies is well documented (Dalton & Proctor, 2008). As the texts change, teachers will need to become more knowledgeable about the types of texts being read, the skills and strategies required to be successful, and the social contexts in which learning takes place.

Divorcing the skills necessary for reading from the texts being read aligns with an autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984), suggesting that reading is primarily a cognitive process devoid of socio-cultural contexts, and that literacy is a commodity that people have accumulated to varying degrees. An autonomous model also conceptualizes reading as a universal process, one that can be readily applied to a variety of texts with little difference or consequence. Reading is not a universal skill simply applied to a wide range of texts, rather it is a social practice that is conducted in a particular context, with a particular reader and text (Gee, 1996; Luke, 1995; Rosenblatt, 1978).

The reader in today's world needs to be positioned as a *reader-viewer*. This dual identity requires students to develop as many skills and strategies for interpreting visual images and design elements as they develop for making sense of written language. In addition to the strategies readers draw upon for comprehending written text, for example, inferring, summarizing, asking questions and predicting, readers require strategies for understanding visual images and design elements. Being able to discuss aspects of visual images, for example, modality, framing, salience, information zones, composition, and linear perspective, is as important as being able to draw inferences from

written text (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

The current research and focus on multimodal texts has been referred to as the *discovery of the obvious* (cf. Duncum, 2004). It would seem obvious that multimodal texts have been available for a long time. Picturebooks, textbooks, and how-to manuals have contained a variety of visual images and designs for years. However, what is not as obvious is the asserted effort to understand how these various features work together, and how they interact and often contradict one another in an effort to communicate ideas and tell stories. These investigations have only recently begun in earnest. Stöckl (2007) suggests multimodality is as old as representation. Thankfully, it is finally gaining ground as a focus in contemporary research and literacy education.

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