



A Professional Association of Educators in English Studies, Literacy, and Language Arts

Multimodal Literacies and Technology

SUMMARY STATEMENT: MULTI-MODAL LITERACIES

“Has there ever been a time when we have not been awash in a remarkable torrent of symbols and opportunities for reading and writing them?” (William Kist *)

Declarations concerning the broadest definitions of multi-modal literacies:

- **Integration of multiple modes of communication and expression can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond illustration or decoration.**

What this means for teaching:

o It is the interplay of meaning-making systems (alphabetic, oral, visual, etc.) that teachers and students should strive to study and produce. “Multiple ways of knowing” (Short & Harste) also include art, music, movement, and drama, which should not be considered curricular luxuries.

o All modes of communication are codependent. Each affects the nature of the content of the other and the overall rhetorical impact of the communication event itself.

- **Young children practice multi-modal literacies naturally and spontaneously. They easily combine and move between drama, art, text, music, speech, sound, physical movement, animation/gaming, etc.**

What this means for teaching:

o Children who grow up in impoverished or repressed literacy environments may not experience this important early literacy foundation.

o The over-emphasis on testing and teaching to the test may deprive many students of the kinds of multi-modal experiences they most need.

o An exclusive emphasis on digital literacies is not what most advocates of technology-rich composition advocate. Such an emphasis would limit students’ access to other modes of expression.

- **The use of different modes of expression in student work should be integrated into the overall literacy goals of the curriculum and appropriate for time and resources invested.**

What this means for teaching:

o “Students should be able to both read critically and write functionally, no matter what the medium.” (William Kist) In personal, civic, and professional discourse, alphabetic, visual, and aural works are not luxuries but essential components of knowing.

- **Because of the complexity of multimodal projects and the different levels of skill and sensitivity each individual brings to their execution, such projects often demand high levels of collaboration and teamwork.**

What this means for teaching:

o Teachers of the English/Language Arts already have models for this type of collaboration, such as those for producing a play. Any dramatic production includes speech, movement, costumes, props, sets, lighting and, sometimes, music and dance. Beyond the performance itself is the need for producing appealing programs and advertising. And, beyond that are the persuasive verbal skills needed to raise funds to produce the production.

o Other kinds of more traditional multi-modal projects also require this type of collaboration. When students produce brochures, literary magazines, books, videos, or greeting cards, collaboration improves the product and helps all students involved learn more.

• **The use of multi-modal literacies has expanded the ways we acquire information and understand concepts. Ever since the days of illustrated books and maps texts have included visual elements for the purpose of imparting information. The contemporary difference is the ease with which we can combine words, images, sound, color, animation, video, and styles of print in projects so that they are part of our everyday lives and, at least by our youngest generation, often taken for granted.**

What this means for teaching:

o Readers in electronic environments are able to gain access immediately to a broad range and great depth of information that not 15 years ago would have required long visits to libraries or days of waiting for mailed replies.

o The techniques of acquiring, organizing, evaluating and creatively using multimodal information should become an increasingly important component of the English/Language Arts classroom,

• **From an early age, students are very sophisticated readers and producers of multi-modal work. They can be helped to understand how these works make meaning, how they are based on conventions, and how they are created for and respond to specific communities or audiences.**

What this means for teaching:

o Students should be invited to collaborate with their teachers in the study of new literacies and in the practical aspects of integrating those literacies into the curriculum.

• **The additional dimensions of multi-modal work add increased complexity to the tasks of teaching, learning & therefore the evaluation of those learning experiences.**

What this means for teaching:

o The complexity of multimodal work suggests that an assessment process must be developed and refined collaboratively by students, teachers, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders over time.

o Goals and criteria need to be clear to all from the beginning of the work.

o The difficulty of grading the work using traditional methods may prevent some teachers from attempting this kind of work.

Declarations concerning the unique capacities and challenges of digital forms:

• **There are increased cognitive demands on the audience to interpret the intertextuality of communication events that include combinations of print, speech, images, sounds, movement, music, and animation. Products may blur traditional lines of genre, author/audience, and linear sequence.**

What this means for teaching:

o Skills, approaches and attitudes toward media literacy, visual and aural rhetorics, and critical literacy should be taught in English/Language Arts classrooms.

o “Unfortunately, while there have been increased calls for a broadened conception of literacy, there do not currently exist resources for the traditional teacher to begin to incorporate new literacies into their classrooms on a continuing basis.” (William Kist)

o “We must be able to approach others with generosity, alert to the differences in language use and in assumptions about what constitutes appropriate communication in any context. We need to be good at recognizing the range of strategies others use in communicating, and at figuring out how to open and carry on conversations (in the appropriate medium) with others.” (Anne Wysocki)

o Certain conventions of design are more effective than others for visual, aural, or multimodal texts. English/Language Arts teachers will need to become more informed about these conventions because they will influence the rhetorical and aesthetic

impact of all multimodal texts

• **In digital forms, students, even very young students, are often more literate in the technical aspects of digital production than many of their teachers. Many students are frequently exposed to popular technologies, have the leisure time to experiment with their own production, develop the social connections that encourage peer teaching and learning, and may have access to more advanced technology than is available at school. The “definitions” of multi-modal composing may be written by educators, but they will most likely have first been pioneered by these young people.**

What this means for teaching:

o Students may find school instruction increasingly irrelevant. (National Educational Technology Plan)

o Educators will have to devise ways of including students who are advanced technology practitioners in the development of curricula, professional development experiences, teacher recruiting, and the setting of relevant policies.

o Implications of the digital divide. Institutions and teachers must create ways to bridge the digital divide, providing access and resources for all students. More specifically, “for students [and teachers] we need to provide adequate, safe, and supported work time” (Dickie Selfe). “We must call on our institutions to provide the necessary support and infrastructural, cultural, and technological adjustments, including access to technology for people with diverse abilities and needs” (BETHA group).

• **Creating images, sounds, designs, videos and other extra-alphanumeric texts is an aesthetic, self-originated, self-sponsored activity for many writers. Digital technologies have increasing capacity for individuals to adapt the tools for their own information and communication purposes. Students have the capability to apply literacy skills to real world problems and knowledge-building. They are able to exercise creativity, work for social justice, and pursue personal passions (CCCC Feb. 2004 position statement). They have the means to publish their work to a global audience.**

What this means for teaching:

o Young people are particularly adept at recognizing creative applications for new technologies, but their in-school work should be guided by the wisdom and sophisticated curricular knowledge of their teachers. In addition they need direct instruction in ethical, critical, and legal considerations.

o Students and teachers will need assistance in the skills of multi-tasking, accessing “just in time” information, problem solving, and prioritizing tasks and resources to accomplish the goals of their assignments.

o Their work may at times be more like that of the workplace than that of the traditional classroom.

o With more opportunities and greater ease in sending their work out into the world, the quality of the ideas and the effectiveness of the communication media will become more important and more relevant to students.

• **With the development of multi-modal literacy tools, writers are increasingly expected to be responsible for many aspects of the writing, design, and distribution processes that were formerly apportioned to other experts.**

o While digital publishing is often immediate and of an ephemeral nature, the writer loses control over the work and its potential audience in a way that wasn’t as true in print publishing. This will blur and complicate ethical issues of ownership, plagiarism, and authenticity.

o Teachers will need to “master technologies enough to guide students in the ethics underlying their use” (Dene Grigar).

*** Quotes, For Your Information**

The quoted materials in this statement came from personal correspondence with scholar/teachers while the Multi-modal Literacies Issue Management team was collecting materials for the NCTE Executive Committee’s briefing book on Multi-modal Literacies.

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