

Conference Paper

Video Composition As Multimodal Writing: Rethinking the Essay As Post-Literacy

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Abstract

This essay describes an academic experience that both authors shared during a research visit to Russia in November 2018. The goal of this experience was to introduce participants (students and professors) to the notion of multimodal writing as an alternative to how we create texts in class. The essay first contextualizes the idea of "post-literacy" as part of a worldwide move to rethink literacy, especially in this century. The essay then conceptualizes the notion of multimodality as a feature of these "post-literacies" and contextualizes this concept within the practical experience as both authors undertook in a masterclass at a Russian institution. For the masterclass, the authors asked everybody to make videos using only one smartphone and any other resources they had right beside them. After sharing what the activity was about and what attendants did, the authors provide a final moment of reflexivity for others who may want to consider implementing multimodal texts in their classrooms.

Keywords: Post-literacy, multimodality, design, video essays, text creation

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1. Introduction: The Meaning of Post-Literacy and Text Creation Today

Before we immerse ourselves in this conversation about multimodality and multimodal writing, first, it is important to situate the conversation around the idea of "post-literacy" that local Russian scholars have been exploring. The idea of post-literacy itself is already present in most recent literacy scholarship in the past few decades, as Mora [1, 2] has recently shared. Mora interpreted the idea of post-literacy (Fig. 1) simply as the response to the more traditional forms of literacy stemming from ideas in basic literacy and functional literacy. In this sense, post-literacy refers to the response to traditional texts and the call for more critical expressions in literacy, an idea inspired in the works of Paulo Freire [3], the influence of the Frankfurt School and the call for critical worldviews in academia [4], and the influence of French sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu [5]. Post-literacy, therefore, should be read as an invitation to play with alternative [6] forms



of text creation, with critical frameworks [7] to engage with texts, and with multiple forms of oral and written expression.

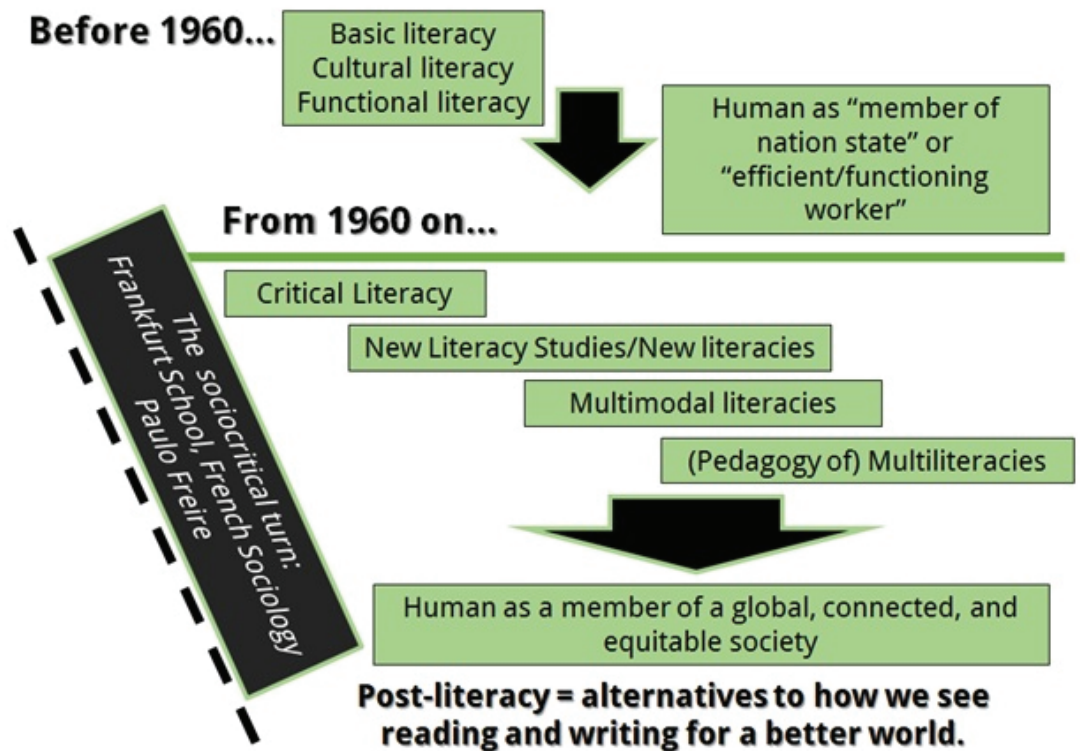


Figure 1: Understanding the idea of post-literacy in relation to literacy paradigms over the years (Source: [1], [2]).

This idea of post-literacy also dovetails with renewed calls to revisit what we mean by text and how we engage with it. As Sousanis [8] reminds us, texts and narratives are, in fact, “all-at-once [multi]dimensional, whole, all over, dynamic, fragmented” [8], and, therefore, trying to weave such narratives in the usual one-dimensional normative of print-based texts both makes no sense and leaves portions of these narratives untold. We need to raise questions about who is not favored in those narratives and what we are missing from not using other media to promote social and academic narratives. In fact, we wonder if texts are, in fact, multidimensional [9], then we must revisit the question about the kinds of texts we should create today.

This essay intends to introduce some ideas about multimodal text creation, based on the authors’ joint and individual experiences using multimodal texts in their classrooms. The goal of this text is to lay out some foundations for the use of multimodal writing as an academic exercise that others can replicate in their classrooms. We will first outline some characteristics of multimodality and multimodal composition. Then we will weave some considerations for those interested in creating multimodal texts in their own

classes, both from conceptual and technical viewpoints, with the actual experience that took place during the Master Class at Ural Federal University on November 15, 2018.

2. The Fundamentals of Multimodal Design

One important consideration about multimodal design is that, despite its rising popularity, it is not that recent as others may think. The authors, such as Kress [10, 11] or Kalantzis and Cope [12, 13], have explained that multimodal creation, in fact, precedes the graphemic forms of writing. We can go as far back as the cave paintings dating 40000 years as the first examples of multimodal narratives that have endured the test of time. Kress [10] and Mora [14] have returned to this idea to explain that children's writing, sometimes gleefully displayed on our home walls [15], is nothing but the evidence of how writing first appeared and how it has sustained itself over time. In this sense, if history has built the case for a different approach to writing, why not listen?

In the case of multimodality [8, 13, 16–19], we must begin by looking at the idea of *modes* as semiotic resources. When we are talking about modes, we refer to the different ways in which we can convey messages. We are talking about the use of the word, both spoken and written, as well as the different languages that are at our disposal [18, 20]. We are also talking about the presence of sounds [21], be it music or ambient noise surrounding us. Other modes include icons, the presence or absence of colors, the idea of motion, space as a factor in our textual choices, as well as memory and imagination [22–24]. The next variable in multimodal design relates to the actual *integration*, as opposed to mere *combination* of the resources, synaesthesia [13]. When we are creating multimodal texts, we are making meaning as we bring the resources together. It is also about choosing the best resources for the messages we intend to create. Equally important here is to consider that choosing the modes we will use in multimodal texts is not about the resources for their sake. It is about the kinds of messages that we wish to create through these resources, always keeping in mind that multimodal composition is about honesty, about bringing the realities of our worlds into the texts we are putting together.

3. The Three Elements of Multimodal Design

Mora [18] has proposed that there are three elements to consider when designing multimodal texts: *intention*, *meaning*, and *design*. Intention refers to considering the audiences you wish to reach with your messages, and it is about keeping in mind a

target audience and not just creating blanket messages. Meaning refers to having a clear purpose for your message as you want to reach your audience. Design refers to the careful selection of resources [25] that we must make in order to meet the purpose for our multimodal texts and the specific target audience. These three elements work together to make more powerful and nuanced messages through multimodal means.

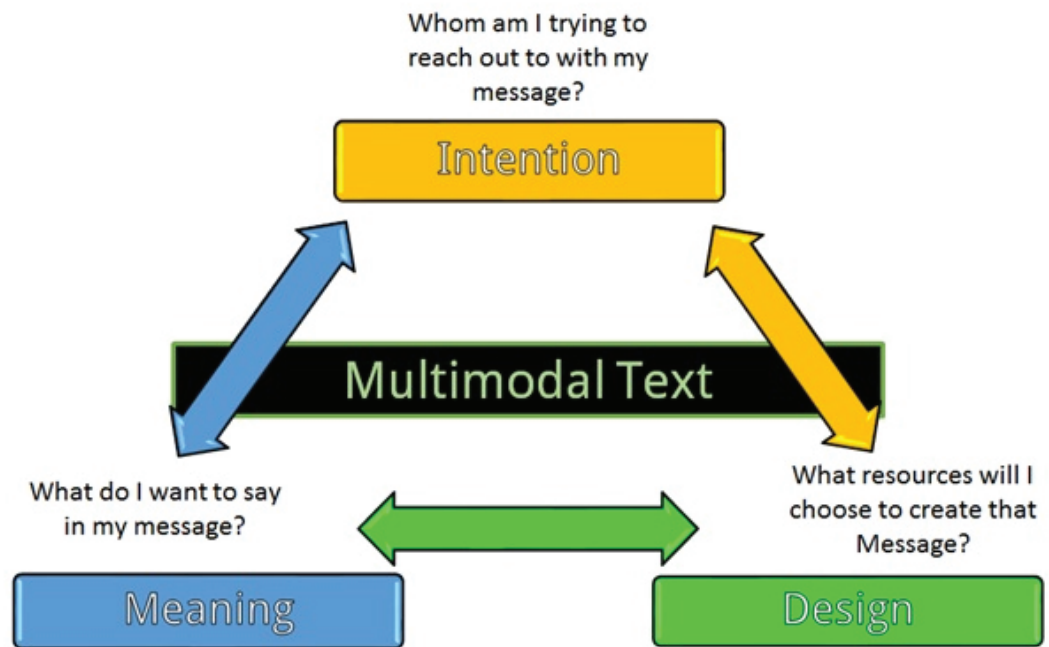


Figure 2: The three elements of multimodal design (Source: Author's original design based on ideas in [18])

4. Incorporating Multimodal Design in Video Creation

With the advent of new technologies such as smartphones and the presence of sites such as YouTube or Instagram, making videos is easier and more accessible than ever. However, there is so much more to making multimodal videos than just uploading them to these sites. Not every video out there is multimodal by nature. There are, in fact, videos that can be *monomodal* or that simply combine different resources without true integration. Composing multimodal videos is, above everything, a very conscious process that brings together the three elements we just introduced in the previous paragraph (intention, meaning, design). Before we go further, we find it fitting to offer a caveat: Multimodal composition is not just about making videos. There is a great deal of multimodal composing that can happen through other media besides videos and we invite those who wish to create multimodal texts to try with posters, blogs, and other tools out there.

Even so, it holds true that videos remain one of the most accessible outlets for multimodal text creation. Perhaps the main reason for this is that videos provide affordances (ref) that other media do not necessarily offer. Videos offer immense possibilities for resource integration as they enable us to integrate sounds, words, colors and so on, in a more user-friendly fashion than other outlets. Nevertheless, we must remember that multimodal video creation is more than just turning the medium into the message [26], instead using the medium to promote messages that are more diverse and easier to share with others. Multimodal videos (and multimodal texts at large) also open spaces for more integration. On the one hand, multimodal texts open the possibilities to thread different texts and events that share common sources (*intertextuality* [27]). On the other, multimodal texts can also be part of extended narratives that transcend video and being to weave other forms of media (e.g. novels, video games, social media) as part of a larger narrative (*transmediality* [28]).

5. Creating Videos: A Hands-On Experience at Ural Federal University (UrFU)

As we mentioned in the introduction, this essay both frames the conceptual underpinnings and the interactive experience that happened during our Master Class at UrFU in November, 2018. Learning to make multimodal videos, as Mora [26] has detailed, entails not just lecturing about multimodality, but getting directly involved in making videos. It implies being aware that there is always a learning curve when it comes to the equipment, the editing, and the dissemination of the videos. It also involves being aware that making videos, even if you choose to go through the *gonzo* (*In this case, we use the term gonzo as a derivation of the gonzo writing style of journalist writing popularized by Hunter S. Thompson in the 1960s. Gonzo refers to texts that are very raw in nature, usually first drafts, that often mixed facts and fiction as part of the narrative. These days, gonzo still refers the more unedited style of text-making*)(i.e. unfiltered, raw, and unedited) way of writing, requires planning and organization.

The hands-on part also entailed giving the participants a small period of time to experience the learning curve [26] that is always involved in learning to do multimodal videos. There are two ways to tackle an activity like this, depending on the accessibility of resources. On the one hand, when you have laptops available, one can also allow participants to experiment with the use of editing video tools. In that case, we might recommend using low-tech programs such as Adobe Spark (<https://spark.adobe.com>) or Biteable (<https://app.biteable.com/login>) as entry-point software. On the other hand,

as was the case here, laptops can sometimes be scarce. However, the ubiquity of smartphones also provides a great opportunity to learn to make single-take videos (in fact, as we were writing this, Raúl decided he will use this specific approach with his methods class next semester for some class activities). For the master class, we asked everybody to make the videos using only one smartphone and any other resources they had right beside them. We divided the class in small groups (sometimes for added value, it is interesting to mix your audience so that folks can have the chance to work with other people they have yet to meet) and gave them about 30 minutes to create their videos, which they share with us via WhatsApp and we then displayed them for everybody to see.

6. The Videos

There were five videos in total, each as creative as the next, displaying very diverse approaches to video-making. The first video we shared featured a visual display where all the team members laid their shopping cards on the table, making different piles and shuffling them around. This video, the authors explained, intended to be a metaphor for how consumerism affects us. The second video featured a toy speaking both Russian and English making a case that science does not have to be boring, all to the tune of *September* by Earth, Wind, and Fire. Each of the sentences in Russian and English highlighted some values of doing science and why it matters. The third video, using a unicorn pencil, print words, and notebooks and pencil bags, attempted to explain that multimodal texts are far more colorful than the traditional print texts. The fourth video used comics, music, and narration to share a story about the importance of being a responsible pet owner. The final video featured a cartoon character named Steven who went around the world visiting famous places, which the team members quickly made from modeling clay they had by chance in their bags.

7. Final Reflexivity: Lessons Learned

After making the videos, it was time to discuss what we all learned about multimodal composition. Participants agreed that making the videos helped them expand their understanding of what writing looks like and how it can go beyond just putting words in print. Composition in today's digital world has different shapes and avenues of manifestation, and it is important that teachers overcome some of the existing resistance [29] and embrace the possibilities that multimodal texts can offer their classrooms. Other



Figure 3: Thumbnail collage of all five videos created during the Master Class. (Videos created by Master Class attendants; identities anonymized for sharing purposes)

thoughts involved the need for organization and preparation in order to create videos with a clear and defined message.

Overall, when our classrooms embrace the possibilities to play with the multiple existing resources already available and those that our teachers and students bring with them, the potential of the classroom to be a space for collaborative construction become amplified, and we can turn it into a space that is realistic for our students and constantly engaging for everybody involved.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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