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Doing new things with texts: multimodality and *Mao's Last Dancer*

Anita Jetnikoff and Shauna O'Connor

This paper describes a senior, multimodal task developed by Shauna O'Connor and the English staff at Brigidine College after consultation in the form of media workshops with Anita Jetnikoff. Gunther Kress (2006) suggested recently that due to the affordances of media platforms such as Web 2.0, "we need to be doing new things with texts". The year 11 unit's *Finding a Voice* parent text was the memoir, *Mao's last Dancer*. The summative assessment task morphed over time from an 'identity portrait', into 'a multimodal, first person narrative'.

The current Qld Syllabus suggests, "a course in English must provide students with opportunities to explore and experiment with various literary and non-literary texts that are written, spoken/signed, digital and multimodal (Queensland Studies Authority, 2010, p. 5). Multimodality in its broadest sense can mean texts combining pictures with words, which could take the form of a poster or an advertisement. The ACARA (2011) framework describes multimodal texts as a "combination of two or more communications modes, for example print, image and spoken text as in film or computer presentations." Our central, collaborative premise was to have the students respond to literature by combining written text with visual, audio and video, producing texts that cannot be simply presented on paper. The Brigidine students would imaginatively engage with readily available media to make a multimodal (and multimedia) text. We chose the software Power Point, since it comes free with MS Office suite, is easy to use, and has the capacity to produce professional-looking, multimedia texts. We proceeded with a 'repurposing' of power point, which was originally designed to support speechmaking with an audiovisual component. The program however can be manipulated to render a free-running narrative, complete in itself as a multimodal and multimedia text, which, the students were able to easily manage. The unit also involved explicit teaching of the mediated features of the Power Point program along with semiotics, visual grammar through slide shows and secondary aesthetic texts, such as picture books.

OUTLINE OF INTENDED STUDENT LEARNING

Year 11 Unit – Semester One: Unit 1 "Finding a Voice": Representations of Private and Public Identity

Time: Approximately 10 weeks or 37 .5 hours

FOCUS: This unit will deal with texts that students should find moving and inspirational, namely autobiographical/biographical texts. Students will examine the ways that relationships and identities of individuals, groups, times and places may be represented in these texts. They will explore the ways we perceive firstly ourselves and then others, in particular, this unit will focus on the students at Brigidine College becoming culturally sensitive to a range of Indigenous and Asian writers through reading and examining excerpts from autobiographical texts and studying one in depth. This unit emphasises that no text is neutral; texts are merely versions of reality that promote particular ideologies and contain deliberate or unconscious gaps and silences. By constructing and deconstructing a range of autobiographies/ biographies they determine how representations of either themselves or others are influenced by cultural and societal factors and conversely have consequences on the way people think about and construct their world. The unit will culminate in students producing a written multimodal monologue which requires them to identify a "silence" in the class autobiography and allows them to take on the role of a character.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:**Orientating Phase:**

Students will be involved in:

- Discussing auto/biographical or life writing texts as constructions
- Reading different examples of auto/biographical writing (See *QLD Senior English* pp103-111)
- Analysing the knowledge, ideas, values and attitudes that underpin texts
- Comparing and contrasting representations of characters, groups, times and places in texts, and the ways viewers are invited to take up positions in relation to texts
- Choosing an auto/biography from the library to read or various extracts from various ones

Enhancing Phase:

Students will be involved in:

- Reading *Mao's Last Dancer*
- Examining the social, historical and cultural background of *Mao's Last Dancer*
- Analysing and reflecting the construction of various representations of characters, events and ideas through closer reading of key passages from the text
- Discussing and identifying the cultural assumptions underpinning *Mao's Last Dancer*
- Discussing questions relating to the plot, characters, ideologies, narrative voice and setting
- Comparing and contrasting the cultural similarities and differences in the autobiography to their own culture
- Identifying and examining gaps and silences in *Mao's Last Dancer*
- Analysing visual grammar in *The Peasant Prince* and *The Red Piano*
- Being imaginative with language including aesthetic features, to create new and reconstructed texts in response to others

RESOURCES:

- *Qld Senior English 1* (Miller and Colwill)
- *Mao's Last Dancer* (Li Cunxin)
All students to read

Student choice - from range of autobiographies (library) e.g.

Dibs in Search of Self

Angela's Ashes

Swimming Upstream

The Happiest Refugee – Anh Do

(Vietnamese refugee story)

Unpolished Gem – Alice Pung

Indigenous autobiographies e.g.

Don't Take Your Love to Town –

Ruby Langford

Wandering Girl – Glenyse Ward

My Place – Sally Morgan

Forcibly Removed – Albert Holt

Maybe Tomorrow – Boori Pryor

Autobiographies with strong female Representation e.g.

- *Bridge Across My Sorrows: the*
- *Noble Story* – Christine Noble
- *A Woman of Independence* – Kirsty Sword Gusmao

- Range of autobiographies (library)

- *The Peasant Prince* (Cunxin & Spudvilas)

- *The Red Piano* (Leblanc-Barrou)

- *Mao's Last Dancer* (movie)

- *Angela's Ashes* (excerpts from the movie)

Film

- *Mao's Last Dancer*
- *Angela's Ashes* (various excerpts)

Internet Resources

- Li Cunxin's website

<p>Synthesising Phase:</p> <p>Students will be involved in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying a “silence “ in the class autobiography which allows them to take on the role of a character • Revisiting, identifying and examining the features of genres to be used for assessment, e.g. written multimodal monologue, • Explicit teaching of PowerPoint features • Examining models of their assessment task • Creating their own response to the assessment task 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negus Interview transcript <p>PowerPoint Presentations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspects of Chinese History • Creating Emotions: Visual Grammar • Model Power Points <p>ASSESSMENT</p> <p>Written; Imaginative; Multimodal Monologue</p> <p>Conditions: assignment; 600-800 words; 4 weeks’ notice of task; extensive access to teachers during drafting and editing - two drafts may be submitted</p> <p>Sample Question:</p> <p>Identify a ‘silence’ in the class autobiography (<i>Mao’s Last Dancer</i>). Adopt the role (‘voice’) of a minor character and share your ‘story’. Amplify an event that has been alluded to, glossed over or completely silenced. The monologue is a written/multi-modal text (up to 20 images/podcasts/ videos/poems/journal entries etc.)</p>
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The students at Brigidine College on the whole enjoyed reading *Mao’s Last Dancer*. In a school that has a large multicultural cohort, it is a culturally sensitive autobiography and it also meets Senior Syllabus (2010) requirements to include texts with an Asian focus. There are a number of available resources that can be included in the unit of work, as can be seen from the above outline, that enhance further understanding of the cultural, social and historical background of the autobiography. The summative assessment task is reproduced below.

Multimodal Summative Assessment Task responding to Mao's Last Dancer

INTRODUCTION:

“Effective writing involves making appropriate selections from a repertoire of composing practices associated with a range of texts, including multimodal texts. Good writers need to be flexible in order to adapt and modify their writing or production practices according to the context and the situation. Furthermore, effective writing or creating of texts involves a complex process of thinking and planning – of conceptualisation. It also requires focused and systematic planning, drafting and editing.” (Miller & Colwill, *Qld Senior English 2*, 2010, Macmillan, South Yarra, p. 28)

We may not only embellish but also distort our version of events. This unit helps you develop a cautious attitude towards seeing texts as “real” by providing the opportunity to construct your filtered view. No text is neutral. Moreover, as we change and grow, our recollections will be different in certain ways; for we construct our pictures through the mind of “the person” we are at a particular point in time.

TASK:

In this unit, students have seen that auto biographers have the power to ‘construct’ and ‘shape’ characters’ identities as authors would prefer an audience to read them (the ‘invited reading’). Writers choose from among various ‘selves’ according to the times and circumstances in which characters are found.

Identify a ‘silence’ in the class autobiography (*Mao's Last Dancer*).
Adopt the role (‘voice’) of a minor character and share your ‘story’.

Scenario 1

Li Cunxin’s final performance with the Houston Ballet was in China in 1995. The first time he was allowed to perform in China since his defection to the West, the opening night was broadcast on television (see p. 443 of *Mao's Last Dancer*).

Imagine you are one of Li’s family, teachers or friends watching this final performance.

Compose/present a monologue (in PowerPoint format) for ‘reading’ by Beijing and Houston audiences.

OR

Scenario 2

2011 marks the fiftieth birthday of Li Cunxin and thirty years since his defection to the West from China. To mark these occasions, former Australian Ballet dancer Stanton Welch (now Artistic Director of the Houston Ballet) has commissioned a joint exhibition (between the Australian and Houston Ballets) detailing Li’s life and work. Apart from artefact displays (for example, costumes and photographs), Welch intends to incorporate eight to ten ‘stories’, collectively called ‘Li’s Life’. These PowerPoint presentations will detail Li’s relationships with ‘significant others’.

Imagine that you are a ‘significant other’ in Li’s life (family, friend etc).

Compose/present a monologue (in PowerPoint format) for ‘reading’ by Houston and Sydney/Melbourne audiences.

Approach

Create a **MONOLOGUE** and using PowerPoint software (multimodal format of up to twenty slides)

- Define (identify, describe, explain) your relationship with Li Cunxin and how it influenced/shaped your ‘life journey’.
- Share insight/s into your character’s life by reflecting on the ‘concepts, identities, times and places’ that form part of your ‘story’.
As ‘character’ and ‘author’, be aware representations shared through the text will position readers and should reveal your (and other characters’) ‘ideas, attitudes and values’.

As a multimodal presentation, the monologue should be illustrated with appropriate graphics, images, music and sound effects and draw from other generic forms - for example, poetry and journal entries. (Be aware of the role of aesthetic features in achieving specific purposes in your multimodal text.)

Context of Task

Genre:	(Autobiographical) Monologue
Subject Matter:	The chosen character's life, achievements and identity.
Purpose:	To produce insight into aspect/s of a character's life and thoughts, represented in a monologue
Audience:	Balletomanes (see <i>Mao's Last Dancer</i> , p. 256) and the general public
Roles & Relationships:	As 'author', you have the power to select and interpret events, and to construct one character's identity in detail. The relationship with the reader is usually close, because the specific traits of characters' lives are revealed.
Mode & Medium:	Written/Multimodal Assignment.

Conditions

1. Approximately three weeks is available to complete this task.
2. As this is the first written task for Year 11, access to teachers for advice about the use of language and organisation of ideas in draft work is allowed.
3. A draft of 'work-to-date' should be submitted by the 17th March. Teachers will advise the format and procedures for submission of drafts.
4. The elements of monologues and semiotics/images will be taught.
5. This assignment will be completed in class and at home, with open access to resources for editing.
6. The monologue is to be presented using the software program PowerPoint.
7. Length: 600 words minimum – 800 words maximum of connected prose. PowerPoint features (such as hyperlinks) are additional.
8. The final submission should comprise the following –
 - A paper print-out of the PowerPoint presentation (Handout format - 3 slides per page; black & white or colour)
 - A copy of the monologue using 1½-2 line spacing (paragraphed as per slide format) with a title page
 - Copy of the Task Sheet
 - Completed Text Production Process Sheet
 - Drafting (labelled and dated)

The PowerPoint software submission is to be lodged in the appropriate teacher/class drop folder as located on 'S Drive'. Go to 'S Drive', Drop Folders, English, Year 11, Class (11 A, etc).

The presentation should be labelled with the student's surname and the abbreviation (MLD 2011): e.g.

Smith (MLD 2011)

9. Dominant Core Curriculum Elements

- Interrelating ideas/themes/issues
- Creating/composing/devising
- Using vocabulary suitable for a context
- Setting out/presenting/arranging/displaying

Shauna's reflection: Secondary English teachers don't have to be IT experts to work with multimodal texts.

This is the second year that the English staff at Brigidine College has taught this unit of work. Modifications have been made to it after each time it has been taught. We are fortunate at the college to receive help from the teacher librarian who conducts presentations about the different autobiographies in the school library and the IT librarian who comes into classes to offer any assistance to teachers and students experiencing any difficulties with the task. I am not an expert in this area but I have found that there is always someone who you can ask for help, be it a fellow teacher or a student. I have loved some of the student work that has resulted from this task and it has been presented by Anita and me at an ETAQ seminar and by Anita at the 2011 QSA Vision to Reality conference, where it was also well received by fellow English teachers.

Anita's reflection on multimodal text creation

When we presented this at ETAQ recently, someone suggested accessing with students the web based advice, 'things not to do with power point'. Those cautionary texts, however, are made with the assumption that power point is to be used only as an adjunct to public speaking. For example the tips on using the program advise against using animation which distracts from the speaker's purpose and detracts from bullet pointed information being presented. Since the multimodal texts made by the students can stand alone; animation, and many words on a page combined with audio tracks and moving images can be processed by the reader/ viewer/ listener simultaneously. This occurs as a non-linear narrative, with hyperlinks, and can be presented as a standalone multigeneric, multimodal text. The student is present in the work as a designer, as a writer, as a semiotician and as a speaker, whose voice may be present as a narrative layer under the visual/ textual material as an audio file. The repurposing of the software in this way means the marking and sharing post writing and designing process is a 'reading/viewing' experience, private or shared as the case may be. My premise when approaching freeware (Anita) is always to see how far I can stretch it creatively, by which I mean how it can be deployed or even in this case repurposed "to make something original and of value" (Robinson, 2001). The Brigidine English teachers and students certainly proved that this program can be used in this way effectively, and they were certainly 'creating meaning' and engaging with both linguistic and visual aesthetics and 'doing new things with texts'.

My final reflection is in my role as a QSA state review panellist. The irony of creating imaginative, dynamic, multimedia texts; is that they get submitted for moderation and/or verification on paper. Such static presentation diminishes the full import and aesthetic impact of the texts. Perhaps future work can be submitted in soft copy on disk, as well as in hard copy. The brief to include the creation of multimodal texts in student folios also means we will have to begin to accommodate the way we review and share these new kinds of texts.

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