Exploring the intertextual and multimodal connections young adults make in their explorations of hard copy and visual texts: Some implications for classroom teachers

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Abstract

This paper will examine the intertextual and multimodal connections identified and explored by young adults as they engaged with a hard-copy text (book) and a related visual medium (film). Four fourth-year pre-service teachers from the University of Wollongong were recruited to participate in extensive semistructured interviews, during which they explored their interactions with their chosen mediums. Focus was placed on how individuals constructed meaning, the connections they identified between the mediums, and any cultural knowledge they drew upon for interpretive purposes. The findings of this inquiry revealed five major themes that provide insight into the intertextual and multimodal nature of meaning-making processes employed for written and visual mediums, as explained by the participants. Through better understanding of how individuals construct meaning from these media forms, teachers are more able to adequately prepare students for future success in an advanced technological society.

Exploring the intertextual and multimodal connections young adults make in their explorations of hard copy and visual texts: Some implications for classroom teachers

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Keywords: intertextuality; multimodal; semi-structured interviews; constructivist; visual mediums; written mediums; technological society

Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the connections four fourth-year pre-service teachers make between hard copy and associated visual texts as they explore their interactions with the different mediums. Through analysing participants' discussions around their meaning-making processes, the study provided insight into possible teaching strategies for assisting students to understand and improve their personal interpretive processes. This ability to make meaning from different media forms is essential in today's rapidly advancing technological society, a notion actively acknowledged within literature. In particular, ACARA (2009, 2010a, 2010b), the new developing national Australian curriculum, clearly mentions the role of multimedia technology, and promotes the necessity for students to develop the skills and ability to engage with a variety of textual forms. Interest for the study derived from the personal desire to understand individual interpretive processes, in order to better meet the needs of my future students.

Literature review

Literacy is a highly contested term, and has a diverse range of meanings throughout society (Freebody & Luke, 2003; Livingstone, 2004). The definition of literacy is ever-changing as it seeks to incorporate the new skills and requirements that coincide with the technological advancement of the 21st century. Thus, literacy is moving beyond the traditional notions of print-based texts to incorporate electronic and new communications technologies (Gee & Levine, 2009; Holum & Gahala, 2001; Leu, 2000; Luke & Woods, 2009; Snyder, 2002; Walsh, 2008, 2009; Winch *et al*., 2006).

Multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Healy, 2008; New London Group, 1996; Unsworth, 2001) are also referred to as new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), multimodal texts, multimodal discourse, multimodality (Kress, 2010; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and multimodal learning environments (Jewitt, 2005; Kress, 2003). The term 'multimodal' refers to this textual shift from traditional literacies of print-based text, to literacies that acknowledge technological change and involve the integration or combination of visual, electronic and digital texts (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Walsh, 2010). These multiliteracies include wikis, blogs, social networking sites, the internet and video games, and are all responsible for social change (Gee, 2008; Walsh, 2010). It is necessary for a "pedagogical shift" (Walsh, 2009, p.1) that incorporates these textual changes in order to adequately equip students with the knowledge, skill and ability to interact with different media forms.

The Australian Curriculum: English places multimodal texts right at the forefront of what it means to be literate in today's society, explaining that text can be represented through "written, spoken or multimodal, and in print or digital/online forms" (ACARA, 2010b, p.2). This document defines multimodal as the combination of language with another means of communication, for example, images, spoken text and soundtrack, such as in the case of film.

It is evident that today's students need to be equipped with the skills that enable them to successfully participate in this ever-changing technological age (ACARA, 2009, 2010a; New London Group, 1996). While so, it appears that print-based texts continue to hold power within school environments (Blair & Sanford, 2004; Walsh, 2010). As children use technology on a daily basis and easily navigate through a multimedia world, it is essential they learn skills that allow them to make meaning from these textual forms. It is this meaning making, occurring through reading, viewing, understanding, responding, producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts, that is referred to as multimodal literacy and was of particular interest in the context of this research (Unsworth *et al*., 2005; Walsh, 2010).

Winch *et al*. claim that the new literacies "have their genesis in the old literacy" (2006, p.433) and depend on these processes for making meaning. Therefore, it is possible to make meaning through combining both traditional literacies and multimodalities (Walsh, 2008). Further support for this idea comes via Walsh's argument that "[t]hese processes involve a convergence: an interconnection and interdependence between … modalities" (2008, p.103). It is necessary to look at current theories of meaning making in order to put this study into context.

Intertextuality refers to the way meaning is made via a connection between author, reader and networks of texts (Barthes, 1977; Genette, 1982; Harris & McKenzie, 2005; Kristeva, 1980). The making of meaning relies on relationships to previous textual experiences on which readers can draw (Kristeva, 1980; Lemke, 2004), and readers must continuously move within and across texts in order to interpret. Building on the work of Kristeva (1980), Genette (1982) coined the more-inclusive term 'transtextuality', and identified five sub-categories: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality. This classification is a structure for identifying and discussing the network of relationships between and among texts, and is the tool for various interpretive possibilities. Foucault summarises the notion of intertextuality in his argument:

> a book … is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network … The book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands … its unity is variable and relative. (Foucault, 1974, p.23)

While intertextuality focuses on the connections between and among a text, transactional theory, by Rosenblatt, places focus on a series of transactions between reader and text to derive meaning. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that the process of making meaning involves either the reader acting on the text (interpreting the text), or the text acting on the reader (the text produces a response in the reader). According to Rosenblatt, "[t]he finding of meanings involves both the author's text and what the reader brings to it" (1978, p.14). Therefore, the act of reading involves a series of unique transactions and mutual exchange between the reader and text, highlighting the importance of both elements (Probst, 1987; Rosenblatt, 1978). These exchanges for personal meaning making were a focus of the inquiry.

Meaning making can also be reliant on the ability to use imagination (ACARA, 2009; Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2010; Guroian, 1996; Healy, 1990; Turgeon, 2010) and access past experiences (Eisner, 1994), or semantic knowledge (Winch *et al*., 2006), to extract greater understanding from literary texts. While the role of prior knowledge and experience when making meaning whilst reading is well documented within literature (see, for example, Chandler, 1995; Harris *et al*., 2001; Winch *et al*., 2006), it may be that prior experience plays a similar role for the construction of meaning from film. This study addressed the participants' understanding of their use of imagination and past experiences for meaning-making purposes.

When viewing film, there is a requirement to engage with many modes, focusing simultaneously on image, voice, soundtrack, characters, as well as various film features such as camera angle, lighting, close up or distant shots, setting, and so on. An individual needs to process these elements, and negotiate those essential for their interpretive purposes. Each individual processes the major aesthetic elements (light and colour, space, time/motion and sound) to different extents according to their own meaning-making strategies, while also examining the elements as a whole as to how they interact contextually (Zettl, 2008). This study sought to identify and explore some of the *mise-en-scene* elements (Moura, 2011) and strategies individuals employ in order to derive meaning from visual mediums.

While research highlighted the role of intertextuality and multimodality when developing meaning and interacting with different mediums, there was relatively little research that focused on the types of intertextual, multimodal and visual literacy connections young adults make as they examine and discuss interactions with different media forms (Fitzsimmons & Lanphar, 2010). It was evident that more research was needed into the strategies viewers employ as they seek to make sense of movies and digital technologies, as well as the interpretive connections between written and visual textual forms. This study addressed how individuals construct meaning from written and visual mediums; greater understanding of these interpretive processes will assist in teaching students the skills to more successfully function in this technological society.

Methodology

The research question that provided both a boundary and impetus for the inquiry was: 'What are the intertextual and multimodal connections young adults make in their explorations of hard copy and visual texts?' Participants explored the ways in which they create meanings when reading books and how the processes relate, or do not relate, to their associated visual medium. A qualitative methodology was employed throughout the inquiry, allowing the researcher to gain in-depth and contextualised understanding of the phenomenon under study from the perspective of participants (Creswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2010; Plack, 2005; Polit & Beck, 2010). A 'bricolage' (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) was created that was responsive to the particular purpose, site and participants involved in the study. Thus, the tools of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and aspects of phenomenology (Creswell 2007, 2009; Kervin *et al.*, 2006; Mertens, 2010; Van Manen, 1990) were employed throughout the methodology and analysis phases.

A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gain insight into the human experience of meaning making (Creswell, 2009; Kervin *et al.*, 2006; Mertens, 2010; Trochim, 2006). To ascertain the meaning of this lived experience (Creswell, 2007; Dickie, 2011; Van Manen, 1990), the researcher needed to explore the views of participants. Four participants were recruited from the University of Wollongong, three females and one male, representative of the gender intake in primary education courses around Australia (Department of Education and Communities, 2011; Richardson & Watt, 2006). A purposive sampling method (Bouma, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) was employed, enabling selection of participants who have the ability "to explain, understand and provide information about the research focus" (Kervin *et al.*, 2006, p.106). Believing that knowledge is created through interactions, constructivists see the inquirer as intimately involved in the study and, consequently, the researcher is the primary research tool (Flick, 1998; Plack, 2005). Due to this notion, constructivists use more personal and interactive modes of data collection (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2010; Plack, 2005). Subsequently, extensive semi-structured interviews were employed with each participant, in order to gather rich, thick and detailed information to enable the posed research questions to be answered (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Kervin *et al.*, 2006; Mertens, 2010). Interview locations were negotiated with each participant in order to best suit their university and personal needs, reducing the risk of attrition.

The tools of grounded theory were used in the analysis phase, providing a three-level framework of the systematic steps required for analysis and coding. The final concepts that emerged were grounded in the data and related specifically to the research question. These were: intertextuality, accessing past experience, entering the world of imagination, cinematic elements and teaching strategies for meaning making.

In terms of education, Van der Mescht highlights that phenomenological research "is a potentially powerful way of making sense of education practitioners' (and learners') sense-making, and can lead to startling new insights into the uniquely complex processes of learning, teaching and educational managing and leading" (2004, p.1).

The study provided access into the perceptions of the participants regarding the possible approaches to teaching meaning making within the classroom, based on their experiences. Using their new knowledge and understanding, each participant provided ideas for teaching strategies to assist students in their endeavour to extract greater understanding from textual encounters.

Findings

The results indicated that all participants made multimodal and intertextual connections for interpretive purposes of their hard copy and visual texts. However, the way in which the links within texts, between texts and to broader genres were utilised differed for each participant. This raised the possibility that meaning is made from textual networks of relationships (Genette, 1982; Kristeva, 1980; Lemke, 2004), allowing for numerous interpretive possibilities (Harris & McKenzie, 2005).

Two participants identified an avid use of imagination for meaning making of both mediums, representing a multimodal connection for interpretive purposes. Similarly, multimodal connections were evident through three participants accessing the past for interpretive purposes of both mediums, an important means of meaning making in particular for two participants. The fourth participant was unable to make connections to his past, perhaps representing a tokenistic understanding of meaning-making processes through accessing previous experiences, however, the participant made insightful connections via other means.

Although not representing a multimodal connection, all participants explored the role of cinematic elements for interpretive purposes of their visual medium; the unanimous use of film aesthetics for meaning making cannot be ignored. Using their new understanding of personal interpretive processes, all participants developed suggestions for teaching strategies to assist students to develop and employ their unique meaning-making processes to enable more in-depth understanding of their textual encounters. Whilst it is evident that each individual experienced their own personal strategies and processes for making meaning, common themes emerged. These themes can be used by current and future teachers as ideas for strategies to teach meaning making within the classroom.

Discussion

The purpose of the inquiry was to examine the intertextual and multimodal connections individuals constructed as they interacted with different mediums. As

data were collected and analysed, it became evident that each participant utilised unique meaning-making processes. However, it was clear all participants were using various forms of intertextuality (particularly intertextuality, intratextuality and architextuality) and multimodality when constructing meaning from the different textual forms. Thus, it became evident that teachers must be aware of intertextuality, and assist students to develop skills within each category, so they can successfully construct unique meaning from their chosen mediums. This also enables students to extract and gain greater depth of understanding and meaning from texts, evident in every participant's discussions throughout the study. Harris and McKenzie (2005) support this argument through their conclusion that intertextuality provides readers with the confidence and tools to make meaning and explore the various possibilities of interpretation.

The multimodal connections apparent between media forms necessitates the need for teachers to provide opportunities for students to be aware of the similarities and differences in their personal meaning-making processes when interpreting novels and films, thus allowing them to gain greater understanding and experience ease when creating meaning. Additionally, results suggested that it is the relationships recognised between texts that allows meaning to be constructed; meaning is not made within a single text alone (Lemke, 2004). In this way, teachers must allow students to analyse both written and corresponding visual texts, to enable in-depth meaning to be constructed from their textual experiences; a depth unable to be achieved through interaction with a singular medium alone.

Findings indicated that imagination was another important means for meaning making, used to gain a sense of the emotions depicted throughout the novels, to determine character appearance and characteristics, and combined with illustrations, to facilitate personal interpretation and confirm imagery in their mind; thus to gain greater understanding than reading words alone. Interestingly, two participants employed imagination to make connections between both textual forms, and also receive greater understanding from their visual adaptations. This evidence suggests that individuals are using similar meaning-making processes for different multimodal texts (Walsh, 2008). This knowledge is beneficial for the classroom as students can transfer their meaning-making processes between various multimodal texts, thus gaining greater understanding and experiencing more ease as they interpret.

Data from the inquiry revealed past experiences can be utilised to enable the construction of more in-depth meaning from both written and visual mediums. Three participants identified multimodal connections for interpretive purposes via accessing the past. It was particularly evident that the participants were using their semantic knowledge of content (Harris *et al.*, 2001) whilst attempting to construct meaning. This knowledge allows individuals to evaluate texts for significance and relate them to prior experiences and knowledge (Chandler, 1995). Thus, various interpretations are possible. It is, therefore, advisable that teachers allow students to voice their personal interpretation, and value different perspectives within the classroom (Harris, Trezise & Winser, 2004). Further, opportunities must be presented that allow students to explore textual connections to their real-world contexts. While literature acknowledges the role of past experiences and knowledge for meaning-making purposes for written texts (Chandler, 1995; Eisner, 1994; Harris *et al.*, 2001; Winch *et*

al., 2006), the results of this study indicated that, similarly, accessing the past also enables individuals to create more meaning from visual modes.

It was evident from the findings that, whilst not indicating a multimodal connection for meaning-making purposes, the intricate role of cinematic elements for interpretation of visual mediums cannot be denied. Results indicated a strong reliance upon cinematic elements and aesthetic features of film for the construction of meaning. Thus, students should be taught the roles and functions of a variety of cinematic elements in terms of context, purpose and structure, enabling students to inductively generate meaning from film (Pryluck, 1995). Further, teachers should assist students to dissect visual mediums, discovering the film elements they use for personal meaning making, and learning how to analyse each element for a more in-depth interpretation of their visual text.

In addition to the recommendations already presented, participants suggested sharing personal interpretive processes, teaching visualisation, using questioning techniques for character relation and collaborative analysis would assist students as they sought to construct meaning from various mediums. More research is now required that focuses on meaning making of other multimodalities, how communications technologies are being used in home environments, and further research into the categories and use of intertextuality.

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