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## Review of *Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame*

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What is the meaning of a stop sign lying in the back of a truck bed? What is the role of the digital landscape when considering social justice? What resources do we use when we communicate? The questions raised in *Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame* deal with notions of how we read the world around us, and how signs exist and operate. The text is particularly aimed at educators conveying messages in classrooms. Reading this text caused me to reconsider what I once thought to be simple communication practices in my day to day work as a classroom teacher and teacher educator, but which are in reality much more complex and nuanced.

Bezemer and Kress arranged their work in seven chapters, beginning with early stages of messages in “Recognition” (Chapter 1), and concluding with “Applying the framework” (Chapter 7), in which they suggested expanding their findings across more fields and situations. The authors began their discussion with what might seem to be a surprising scenario: a surgeon in the middle of a laparoscopic procedure. But, when considering literacy and social semiotics, or sign-making, all worlds are fair game for discussion. The surgeon performing the procedure uses a snapshot, a gesture, and spoken instructions to communicate meaning. In our current age, the concept of teaching, like surgery, involves using all possible communicative resources, including the visual and verbal tools we find at our disposal. One of the attractive and intriguing aspects of reading this book was the use of surprising foci, and I never felt that the examples were so removed that they could not translate to classroom habitus.

There was a distinction made between sign and mode, with signs being defined as the “starting point” of semiotics and as a place where the “*signified* (a meaning)” comes together with material resources to be “shaped by the environment in which [the sign] is made” (p. 8), while modes were defined as “socially shaped, culturally available *material* resources” (p. 7). Multimodality refers to what the authors called “ensembles,” in which multiple methods for sign-making occur together (p. 7). Bezemer and Kress contended that if educators

are truly interested in the learning process and all of the positive impacts that can take place in pedagogy, teachers and theorists should consider all manner of signs with no regard to their predisposed mode or the origin of sign-making.

That being said, the authors did not condone an equal consideration of all the sign-making taking place in an environment, but recommended a careful analysis of which signs were most meaningful, and how these meaning-bearing signs might aid in the larger work of learning and communication. This prioritizing of signs rang true as I considered sign-making and instruction. As a person who spends time communicating with students in university classrooms, as well as in middle grades, these ideas made sense to me and I recalled my own experiences of trying to explain often complex literary or grammatical concepts by using not only technological tools, but also the everyday tools of words and gestures.

The authors, to their credit, did not wish to spend a great deal of time engaged in what they call “naming,” which involves careful use of multimodal terms and formation of new terminologies; rather, they intended to be descriptive about how semiotics work in environments (p. 8). I found their intention to describe rather than produce a new lexicon of terminology freeing as I read this text. The book’s focus on applying ideas to situations rather than defining terms may be a potential drawback for readers who are just encountering concepts of sign-making.

### Shaping Engagement

Chapter 4, “Shaping engagement,” explored the interaction of text and image, and the role of intertextual learning experience was illustrated through a variety of examples, including excerpts from science textbooks and a screenshot of an education resource for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) teachers. As an educator, I would have found even more examples of this type helpful and interesting.

Digital platforms create an additional forum for communication. Each of these modes followed a specific frame, including elements of color, movement, and other design features. Interestingly, the absence of a feature could also be read as the presence of a feature, a comment which reminded me of McCloud's (1994) discussion of the space between panels when reading a graphic novel, and how these spaces can be interpreted, particularly when related to temporal constructs.

Bezemer and Kress considered learning as an all-encompassing, constant process and contended that, so long as the learner is engaged, communication and learning are taking place across a wide range. Learning, in fact, may not always rely on the presence of a teacher if the learner is truly engaged, and the role of teacher and learner is viewed more flexibly. Chapter 5, "Assessment and judgment," was particularly helpful in considering the changing roles of teachers and students.

### **Social Change**

Concepts of social change are explored throughout the text, but Chapter 6, "Gains and losses," addressed this topic directly. The authors included an historical account of the impact of design that takes place in multimodal texts, using examples including German poetry albums and a 1934 English textbook to talk about multimodality in a larger view. For those interested in additional reading, I would recommend Serafini's (2013) consideration of multimodal texts. Serafini's work focused on practical implications of multimodal literacy for pedagogy.

Most ambitiously, Bezemer and Kress set out to create a social lexicon that encompasses the sum of multimodal literacy, a process that they began early in Chapter 2, "Sign-making." Rather than using a multitude of terms, like visual literacy and nonverbal communication, the authors sought to use a terminology that would encompass a wider breadth of communication. Again, as in the case of the surgery example, the focus of agency for this task took on what may seem to be an unlikely

situation, or a set of situations. The discussion takes place within the context of a job interview, a Facebook status update, and a surgical operation.

In the case of the job interview, as one instance of interaction, the authors acknowledged that this is a "mode" in which speech is largely considered to be the dominant form of communication. The interview, however, turns out to be a more complex social-linguistic endeavor than a reader might first consider. Close consideration of taped interviews revealed other features at work, including gaze, lengthening of vowels, and expressions. The Facebook status update and surgical operation examples also revealed complexities beyond the surface of interaction. Such complexities carry with them intended meanings, such as "uncertainty" (p. 20) or a sense of "completion" (p. 21), among other messages; these uses of gesture and even silence help to contextualize interaction so that those wishing to communicate, including educators, can be analytic and responsive.

Bezemer and Kress went on to question power relationships in the process of learning and communication. The authors indicated that the learning process is usually conceived as one that begins with the teacher as the primary communicator who passes the learning on to the student as a receiver. Bezemer and Kress suggested the actual process is not simple; rather, learning is a complex process that involves both teacher and student. This discussion hinted at the highly political nature of taken-for-granted daily interactions. A learner's insights might be valued differently, depending on the priority given to his or her mode of communication. What used to be vertical positioning or hierarchical power relationship in social interaction has now shifted to a horizontal participatory relationship, and the import for literacy is that the "reader" is more involved in a shared role. Educators interested in the role of student-centered learning versus teacher-centered learning would find connections with this discussion of learning, and I reconsidered some of my own classroom interactions after reading this portion of the book.

The authors pointed out that frequently in our current landscape, the person who takes on the role of the learner eventually takes on the role of the instructor. This was brought home in an example of IKEA customers who built products and then were given the opportunity to participate in improving the online resources available for the building task they had just completed. Again, I appreciated this everyday example of what the authors were trying to convey.

### **Conclusions and Applications**

Bezemer and Kress rendered a sometimes surprising consideration of socio-linguistic signs in a multimodal world, and the implications for classrooms and beyond encourage readers to carefully reevaluate the ways in which meanings are communicated and learning takes place. According to the authors of this book, the processes of instruction are not simple, drawing on many

elements that speakers and listeners usually take for granted.

I found it difficult to avoid personalizing the findings. Students in my own classroom sit through a variety of intonations, gestures, and expressions, and these features are simply a list of my own embodied meaning-making practices. Behind me is usually a flicked-on screen that displays content that either accentuates or flattens the overall message of my discourse. In addition, that content often involves video and audio inputs which bear their own meaning in a variety of ways. Our world clearly provides many opportunities for communication and learning to take place. Without pausing for a close evaluation, too much is taken for granted in the language game. This book, although intended for an audience more inclined to theoretical texts, caused me to take a step back and give more thought to my own communication practices and my own assumptions about the process of learning.

### References

McCloud, S. (1994). *Understanding comics: The invisible art*. New York, NY: William Morrow Paperbacks.

Serafini, F. (2013). *Reading the visual: An introduction to teaching multimodal literacy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.