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Embracing Multimodal Text: New Challenges and Opportunities

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The articles in this issue confirm that we have for our perusal new challenges and new opportunities ahead of us. These opportunities require things not required of us in the recent past: embracing understanding of sound and sonic composition, as well as viewing positively the notion of assemblage and multimodal compositions as valid texts. More importantly, such texts and the social practices they engage need to be integrated wholly into our curricula and assessments, rather than haphazardly or not connected to standardized testing at all.

To these ends, in “Defining Instructional Text: Eight Literacy Scholars Discuss Framing and Trade-offs,” Hruby and his colleagues examine extended notions of instructional texts using an array of theories and conceptual frameworks for their analysis. The authors highlight the benefits of incorporating into research and instruction more complex ideas and values than mere print-centric views of instructional text; values that would embrace visual, audio, and other multimodal elements as well as a diversity of text. They also discuss tensions and trade-offs associated with diverse and expanded understandings and use of instructional text for specific purposes, contexts, and student populations.

Questions are raised by our author Frank Serafini such as “Can we level visual images and picture book illustrations in the same manner as we have leveled written language texts and defined textual complexity?” and “What would a 90-95% accuracy level look like when dealing with a multimodal ensemble?” These questions provide direction for teacher educators and teachers as to how to unpack and integrate expanded concepts of text into instruction and assessment.

Another theme common across articles in this issue is the idea of collaborative listening, interpreting, interrogating, performing and producing multimodal texts. Such positioning of

knowledge retrieval and learning implies the “multiple” roles that readers, artists, language learners, and producers must assume as they de-construct and construct multimodal text. For example, Kelly Chandler-Olcott (in Hruby et al.’s piece) argues that interpreting sports play (a multimodal instructional text) relies on mutual dialogue, back-and-forth exchanges of individual analysis, and working together toward integrated knowledge and interpretation by drawing from discipline-specific understanding that experts in sports education (PE teachers, coaches) have and to which discipline-specific literacy educators can contribute as well. Knowing discipline-specific vocabulary without having access to the ways of thinking, interpreting, and working with disciplinary content that experts in the respective disciplines engage (Gee, 2012) is not enough today. Although the importance of disciplinary knowledge for information processing has been recognized in the fields of reading and literacy for some time (Alvermann, O’Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Swift, 2017), employing collaborative interdisciplinary processes for interpreting a multimodal text deserves more attention that it has been given before.

In addition, the articles are a call to grant new life to imagination. That is, they encourage educators to enable language learners, readers and writers to engage the mind’s eye to traverse the sensory, spatial, tactile, and visual landscapes of perception for retrieving and processing language and text as well as for creating and communicating meaning. This will require providing access to and assistance in understanding, interpreting, and using the rich semiotic systems and resources available to learners for cross-modal learning, reading, and text creation.

In the synthesis of literature review on arts and emergent bilinguals, “Linguistically Diverse Students and the Arts: A Scoping Review,” Glause reviews various approaches and structures for integrating arts production and language acquisition to further growth in

imagination, creativity, inquiry, and cognition, among other aspects of academic language development by emergent bilinguals. The author identifies where deeper understanding and more unified research methods are needed, and also points out to the practices and models that hold promise.

Alternatively, in “Critical Listening for Social Change: The Possibility of ‘Playback’ in English Language Arts,” Marudas and Doerr-Stevens call to combine critical consciousness with imagination as students engage in multimodal text interpretation and creation. Specifically, Marudas and Doerr-Stevens’ study examines how adolescents engage critical listening, music creation and performance to analyze and interrogate the perspectives and agendas concerning the social justice issues of interest to youth and how they employ imagination, creativity, and collaborative critical listening for imagining new possibilities for their futures.

Collectively and individually within their respective areas of investigation, the authors in this issue remind us that interactive, collaborative, and performed literacy entails the collective literacy experience. Such an experience means knowledge building, interpreting and interrogating ideas, art, and media production. This interrogation, in turn, involves re-inventing and re-distributing the learners’ capacity and agency to participate and contribute to democracy ideas and creative work within the classroom and at a broader level, in the community, nation and even the world. The literacies enacted and explored in these studies thus have a more “compelling motivation than the social and personal motives that normally drive schoolwork and technology and serves higher purpose than the usual goals of informing and persuading” (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2019, para. 3).

The motivation such studies bring to the fore, in different ways, is grounded in sociocultural influences and understandings and critical mindfulness (Wertsch, 1991). This

necessitates multiple educator roles, texts, pedagogies, and approaches to assist learners in constructing, advancing, and practicing civic engagement through assignments that will prepare them for their future roles as an “active corps of people conducting service in their communities, participating in organizations that comprise our civil society, and engaging politically” (Evans, Marsicano, & Lennartz, 2019, p. 34).

As such, the articles in this issue envision new possibilities for transformative learning and critical consciousness connected to multimodal text that is socially and technology mediated across space, modality, form, and medium. It is enacted, performed, and created by children and youth as they collaboratively or individually learn to read the words, images, sound bites, music, art, and other cultural artifacts, and it connects them to the worlds in which they reside and the greater global reality. Only through Freire and Macedo’s (1987) like reading of the diverse forms of communication and artistic expression that are explored in this issue, will literacy educators be able to empower their students to expand their understandings about these complex worlds and the socio-cultural, historical and political dimensions that these texts and their agents represent.

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