

INTRODUCTION

Multimodality in Education

Maria Papadopoulou and Maria D. Avgerinou

Since the mid '90s when linguist, semiotician and social theorist Gunther Kress introduced the term Multimodality in the context of the seminal Multiliteracies project, new educational discourses have emerged, evolved and impacted both theory and practice. Multimodality foregrounded the notion that learning is not only a linguistic accomplishment, but is also linked to the dynamic interrelationship among the different semiotic modes of meaning, such as the linguistic, the visual, the gestural, the spatial or the audio mode, which individuals can draw on to derive and produce meaning.

More recently, there has been a strong, ongoing interest in applying multimodality in educational practice. The development of students' multimodal literacy skills has gradually been introduced in the school curricula in the areas of language, history, arts, math and science education, as it encompasses nearly all subject areas. Similarly, it has been used as a framework for the analysis of textbooks, learning resources, and student-created multimodal productions, as well as for the understanding of classroom interactions. However, as learning occurs not only in educational settings but in many other instances of everyday life, exploring the ways people learn multimodally is not restricted to school classrooms. In formal and informal educational contexts, from pre-primary to tertiary education, the attempts to change the dominant linguistic paradigm and adopt a multimodal perspective has produced especially fruitful and even fascinating results.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned impact of multimodality on education is not unanimously embraced, and often not even recognized as a quite different approach to learning. In many cases, multimodality constitutes just an 'extra', a minor component in the learning process, without sufficiently challenging the dominant paradigm. Yet, multimodality could be proven useful for bridging the school and the out-of-school experience, that is, students' informal ways of learning and the formal educational practices, thus providing an authentic, seamless, and well-integrated education, while enhancing students' autonomy and supporting their active engagement in the learning process.

This special issue of *Punctum* on 'Multimodality in Education' aims to contribute to the investigation and the understanding of the impact of multimodality on contemporary educational theory and practice and, by implication, to the development of multimodally literate students.

The issue starts out with Arlene Archer's paper who questions the standard assessing practices for not recognizing and acknowledging the resources that students bring with them to school and for overvaluing some resources, such as oral and written competencies, over others. Based on Halliday's (1978) social semiotic theory and, particularly, on the notion of 'metafunctions', she proposes a social semiotic framework for assessing texts across modes. She also outlines a number of principles for recognizing the students' resources aiming at making classrooms more democratic and inclusive.

In the following article, Aleksandr Fadeev uses Vygotsky's theory of mediation to address the challenges of forming a holistic approach in the analysis of digital learning environments. The author discusses whether, and how the simultaneous representation of artistic texts through various digital media shapes the process of learning and teaching. Particularly, he explores the role of inner speech in mediation of the study material in the digital platform 'Education on Screen' that proposes digital ways to engage in literature, history, social and culture studies in terms of school curriculum.

As part of a larger, on-going research, Sofia Gorla's study sets out to present and establish a framework for teaching multimodal literacy in early childhood education. For that reason, a proposal for assessing preschoolers' multimodal products such as their own video advertisements was also included. The researcher's view is that skills related to the comprehension of multimodal texts' meaning, structure and effects could be assessed through conventional tools such as grid analysis tools.

In his contribution, Ilias Karasavvidis acknowledges the lack of empirical research examining how novice users utilize color-related effects to communicate meanings when creating digital artifacts. Having analyzed 46 student-created, digital videos, the study concluded that only a small portion of the students utilized effects that adjusted the color of the visual resources, while just three main patterns of color-related effects were utilized: defective, inconsistent, and consistent. As a result, more research is recommended to not only explore students' differential response to color, but also to determine how to best support young people to signify with color.

In the following article, Eleni Katsarou and Konstantinos Sipitanos argue that multimodality, especially its social semiotic approach, can contribute to the social inclusion of all students and to fostering of a democratic culture in educational settings. Moreover, it can offer democratic ways to produce, distribute and disseminate knowledge. Having worked with the Knowledge Democracy initiative (Sousa Santos, 2018) in an Erasmus+ Project called Backpack-ID and developed as a bottom-up innovation in participating schools, the authors attempt to

demonstrate, through specific examples, that the students' drawings and digital storytelling can create prospects for social inclusion for all students in the classroom. More specifically, they attempt to illustrate and discuss in detail and through instances of practice, how a classroom, as a multi-semiotic space, can become a democratic space founded on the inclusion of diverse histories, memories, languages, identities and epistemologies.

Maria Koutsikou and Vasilia Christidou attempt a comparative analysis of two multimodal texts about animals aimed at preschool children, to examine the meanings created visually and verbally at the interpersonal and compositional level. Their analysis indicates that the two texts differ regarding the role gradually assigned to the reader (address) and the nature of the relationship developed between the reader and the represented animals (social distance). Moreover, the interpersonal meanings are affected by the positioning of the elements on the page (information value) and their relative emphasis (salience). Different possible combinations of the visual and the verbal means for communicating interpersonal and compositional meanings, are discussed as regards their pedagogical appropriateness, especially as they may promote science literacy.

In the following paper, Susana Liruso, Ana Cecilia Cad and Hernán Ojeda present research results on integrating Multimodality in teaching foreign languages to young learners. Focusing on interpersonal meaning (social contact, social distance, and subjectivity), the authors present three classroom interventions in 'English as a Foreign Language' contexts. The findings of their research confirm that young learners are able to assign meaning to images that could be articulated in the foreign language at the levels of both comprehension and production. Furthermore, the students showed sustained interest while also being highly participative in the tasks provided. The authors conclude that integrating multimodality in foreign language learning can enhance students' communicative abilities, favor language understanding and engagement, and promote critical thinking.

Innovating education in literature through a digital learning platform is the topic of Alexandra Milyakina's research work. Her research took place in Estonian schools, and focused on evaluating the effectiveness of the learning activities as those were supported by the platform 'Education on Screen'. The author supports that the informal, multimodal practices offered to students through the various tools (i.e. tests, timelines, maps, role-playing and world building games) of the platform, engage students in getting acquainted with literature texts via multiple versions and retellings, starting from adaptations in different media and on to memes, comic strips, and posts on social media.

In their contribution, Francesco Piluso and Pier Mario Demurtas question the dominant reflexive bio-reductionist paradigm in medical education that is characterized by a technical language abstracted from the social materiality of the body and the disease. They claim that this paradigm objectifies the patient, supporting at the same time, relations of power. The authors perceive multimodality as the variety of semiotic relationships amongst social actors

(patients, medical doctors, students) and cultural values (health and disease) within a specific context. They present experimental, alternative multimodal practices of medical education in Italy. In addition, they advocate for an alternative multimodal medical education method that should be based on the adoption of multiple modes of sign relation beyond the hegemonic symbolical one in order to overcome the bio-reductionism paradigm.

Rumico Oyama-Mercer discusses the positive impact of multimodality in the reading of literary texts in English as foreign language environments. Students' visualizations on the Hemingway's novel 'Cat in the rain' are analyzed regarding the interpersonal and textual metafunction. The author supports that visualisations are instigated by the readers and that they indicate students' interpretation of the verbal narrative. Rumico Oyama – Mercer claims that a transmodal approach can enhance awareness towards language use and provide a better and more profound understanding of literature.

Producing multimodal texts in school context is a core target in many school curricula. Marina Rodosthenous-Balafa, Agni Stylianou and Liza Pitri present the difficulties 12 to 15-year-old students encounter while creating multimodal artefacts. The authors discuss findings of their research with students working in groups as they address linguistically and visually various dimensions of meaning for the production of their multimodal texts, and subsequently reflect on the production of their multimodal meaning making. The study emphasizes the need to support students through systematic approaches on how to address the different dimensions of meaning in multimodal text production.

Last but not least, Inesa Sahakyan's work seeks insight into the impact of multimodal learning environments on the development of creativity. Her case study is based on a three-day workshop titled 'Creativity and Innovation', and involved first year Master's students. The goal of the workshop was to assist students, through the use of Creative Problem Solving (CPS) techniques, in finding creative and innovative solutions in a real-life problem-solving task. Drawing on the analyses of the learning environment and learners' multimodal productions, this study advocates the need for revisiting traditional learning practices. Furthermore, it suggests that multimodal learning environments can positively impact learner motivation; develop creativity, and foster multimodal literacy provided that learners' awareness of multimodal meaning-making practices is raised through self-reflective processes. Finally, the study highlights the significance of investigating multimodality practice for the field of multimodality research.

We are humbled, honored and grateful to all contributing authors for trusting Punctum with their outstanding work, and for their continued professionalism throughout the long, and demanding publication process. It was precisely due to their invaluable contributions that several aspects of Multimodality in Education have emerged regarding the development of multimodal pedagogies, the design of multimodal learning environments and also the assessment of students' multimodal productions. Moreover, innovative perspectives have been proposed on multimodality as applied and manifested in educational contexts.

In closing, we would like to dedicate this special issue of *Punctum* on 'Multimodality in Education' to the late Professor Gunther Kress as a small tribute to his life and legacy. In his long, productive and influential academic career, Gunther worked and published extensively on a wide array of topics including pedagogy, multimodality, discourse, power, genre, ideology, communication, and representation. As his academic niche, the Institute of Education (University College London, UK), recognized and celebrated in their own tribute to Gunther, "his ideas were influential beyond academia, across education as well as advertising and graphic design"¹. Indeed, he was a great pioneer in the fields of critical linguistics, critical discourse analysis and social semiotics. For us, his particular contribution to multimodality, that is, to the notion that there is more to meaning making than the verbal, became the light that provided the direction, helped us navigate our respective academic paths, and fight our own battles in education. We will also remember him for being a people's person, a modest yet passionate man with a big, warm smile and an eager ear for anything new and innovative.

T.S. Eliot wrote that '*we don't actually fear death- we fear that no one will notice our absence- that we will disappear without a trace*'². This will never be the case for Gunther Kress who inspired and guided us all.

*Fare thee well, wind of the soul*³

Maria Papadopoulou, Associate Professor, Department of Early Childhood Education, School of Education, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

E-Mail: mpapadopoulou@nured.auth.gr

Maria D. Avgerinou, Editor, Journal of Visual Literacy (JVL), Director of eLearning and Sr. Fellow, The Institute, American Community Schools (ACS) Athens

E-Mail: avgerinou@theinstitute.gr

1 IOE, June 21st 2019. In memory of Gunther Kress (1940-2019).

2 T.S. Eliot. 1922. *The Waste Land*

3 G. Seferis, *AYIA NAPA II* (translated by Björn Thegeby)