Guest editorial

Guest editors' introduction: theorising multimodality through children and youths' perceptions and experiences

Firstly, thank you for reading this special issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. This was a project conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic; we are thankful to have had the ability to work online and stay connected as colleagues and to be able to bring the exciting projects in the issue to our fellow researchers and educators. We want to begin with an autobiographical vignette from David that illustrates some of the reasons we undertook this work on youth perspectives on multimodality:

> Years ago, as a newly minted 11th grade English teacher, I always looked forward to discussing with students the symbolic meanings of colours as they appeared in the literature I assigned them. From Edgar Allan Poe to Charlotte Perkins Gilman to Alice Walker, colour symbolism abounded across the American literary curriculum. *The Great Gatsby* was a particularly rich example. White was purity, yellow corruption. (A daisy and an egg are white on the outside and yellow at their centres. How else to interpret Daisy's and East Egg's inner depravity?) Green, red, blue, and grey also contained descending layers of meaning. Occasionally, a student would ask how they were supposed to know what a colour represented. Did green *always* symbolise hopeful yearning, as it did when Gatsby gazed at the green light on Daisy's dock? How about the times when green symbolised nature, innocence, fertility, envy, guilt, or money? What about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or *Green Eggs and Ham?* Did authors ever provide a cheat sheet for readers to decode their symbolic intentions? (No.) Could green just mean green and possess no symbolic meaning whatsoever? (Perhaps. See Gertrude Stein.) Did authors agree with the ways readers made meaning of their works? (Not necessarily, I would respond, and it didn't matter.) At this point, I would conjure the image of a literature professor, wrapped in tweed, holding a rather large pipe, and dead. I used this phantom sage to argue an indefensible point: that academicians, cloistered in ivory towers, held a monopoly on analyzing literary texts. Engaged in esoteric analyses, these luminaries developed tools for interpreting literary symbols, including colour. They told us what things meant, and as lowly readers, it was our job to employ their hard-won knowledge to unlock texts. Interpretation and analysis were owned by the (white, male) academy and loaned out to novices to apply with fidelity. Who were we to argue?
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> That was half a lifetime ago, prologue to a long and ongoing journey. As a recent college graduate (white, male), I had learned a lot about cleverly analyzing texts through a handful of academic lenses, but I had received no training in sociocultural framings of literacy. I had never heard of reader response theory, critical literacy, multimodality, or culturally responsive teaching. I had never seen the word literacy used in its plural form. I had never really reflected on the concepts of canon, authority, or disrupting texts. I had certainly never been invited to decide what a text *meant*, pulling from my own lived experiences. As a new ("green") teacher, my methods reproduced what I had experienced – Rilke's (1923/1995, p. 157) "the child bent becom[ing] the bender, inflict[ing] on others what he once went through". My methods were author- and text-centred, and far too often they represented a narrow (white, male, canonical, monomodal) view of textual interpretation. Luckily for everyone, I went back to school and encountered new (to me) paradigms and methodologies that demolished my earlier positions. I interrogated my own practice and abhorred what I found there. I learned to see literacy as plural, contextual, multimodal, multilingual, socially and culturally situated, rife with ambiguity, and intimately connected to identity. I learned to see meaning and interpretation as political and always mediated by power – including (and especially) the power of the academy.

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Who gets to decide what green means anyway? It's not such a simple question.

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In coming together to plan this special issue, David, Jessica and Lisa had several conversations about the current state of multimodality scholarship. One thing we kept returning to was the disconnect between how multimodality is theorised by academics (similar to us) and the ways children and youth make sense of multimodal texts and composing contexts. Many scholars we hold in high regard have worked to develop vocabularies, grammars, analytic tools and other instruments for interpreting semiotic modes in isolation and in concert. Baedekers such as Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* and van Leeuwen's (1999) *Speech, Music, Sound* help literacy scholars analyse semiotic resources as wide-ranging as colour, line, shape, movement, timbre and melody. The issue, we determined, is not whether such toolkits are useful at producing meanings (they are), but that toolkits for interpreting modes tend to follow from the presumption that multimodality, similar to symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*, is best understood and described with academic lenses and language. Of that we were not so sure.

Informally surveying the field of multimodality, and our own places within it (Jones *et al.*, 2011; Jacobs and Low, 2017; Kervin and Mantei, 2017; Low and Pandya, 2019; Pandya *et al.*, 2015), we agreed that methodologies developed by and for academics are often removed from the contexts in which multimodal literacies are enacted, in spaces populated by children and youth. Additionally, educators are often expected to apply theories generated within academia into their pedagogical practices with children and youth. Throughout the world, children and youth design, produce, consume, interpret, analyse, critique and make meaning with multimodal texts. However, based on our own efforts reviewing the extant research, we know that children and youth are poorly represented in the scholarly theorising of multimodality. It is these perspectives we need to understand.

Each of us has our own children, and as we struggled to teach, write and think during the pandemic (when most of the special issue's work took place), we also watched our own children and the multimodal literacies they demonstrated and remembered that we were fundamentally interested in how children think, what they know and what they might teach us about multimodality (instead of the other way around). With our special issue, we wanted to highlight a broader swath of multimodal theory generation and to expand the definition of who may be considered a multimodal theorist and what we can learn from a range of perspectives. We sought to bring together a corpus of articles that attend to ways children and youth perceive of and experience multimodal texts and composing processes through a range of formal and informal educational contexts relevant to English language arts and literacy learning.

In our call for papers, we posed the questions: What do multimodalities look similar to from the points of view of children and youth? What sorts of theorising do young people do in making sense of the properties of various modes? How might youth-led theorising complicate scholarly semiotic theories? And how might children's and youths' theorising shape the ways educators incorporate multimodality into their pedagogies? The articles we have compiled for this special issue respond to these questions, and others, in a number of generative ways. Articles in this issue grapple with how to create and sustain youth-centric processes for theorising multimodal communication. Importantly, the authors featured in this issue ground theory-building in the lived realities of the young people to whom multimodality is perhaps most meaningful so that it may inform educational theory and practice. The articles address the ways English language arts/literacy researchers, teacher educators and teachers might take up these findings in their own work, bridging multimodal theories with youth contexts.

Two pieces in the special issue focus on elementary aged learners. Examining the literacy practices of children in a multilingual classroom, *Sally Brown* puts the literature around emergent bilinguals' translanguaging in conversation with multimodal transactional theories of reading comprehension. The result is a portrait of multimodal text design in early childhood spaces that reminds us, as readers, why we need to create space for children to draw on multiple literacy resources, from digital resources to human resources. Brown encourages all teachers, regardless of their own linguistic abilities, to enact translanguaging pedagogies. She also encourages educators to provide children with rich, multimodal design spaces in which to acquire and shape their own 21st century literacies. *Courtney Shimek*, meanwhile, calls all educators to notice the negotiations of meaning children demonstrate during literacy practices. In this research, she draws upon members of a kindergarten classroom and reports how these young children enact and embody reading practices, looking specifically at how they respond to and construct meaning from non-fiction picture books. Shimek's multimodal analysis of the interactions of three boys shows the connections these children demonstrate through their physical movements during the reading process and how this helps them to understand abstract concepts, communicate with others and enact the meaning they make.

Of the articles that focus on youth in middle/upper elementary and secondary classrooms and other learning spaces, *Jessie Nixon* shows how, when students sign up to take a video production class and are equipped with tools of critique (argumentation, inquiry and feedback strategies) by seasoned and innovative teachers, they may still struggle with how to process and incorporate peer feedback. Nixon argues that youth need more instruction in how to participate in shared feedback spaces/participatory cultures so they can become better at engaging in discourses of film critique and feel more able to edit and revise their own work to meet their own high production standards. Then, in her article, *Talia Hurwich* examines how comics adaptations of traditional texts can engage adolescents in conversations about gender and society. Through an analysis of interview, think-aloud and survey data, Hurwich highlights how adolescent students identifying as Modern Orthodox Jewish females responded to three graphic novel adaptations of religious Jewish texts. Hurwich reports that students focussed on visual elements in each adaptation, using images to spark personal reflections on topics that are often explicitly or implicitly suppressed on account of social norms. Finally, *Joohoon Kang* explores how three Korean adolescents created digitally mediated multimodal compositions across different genres of writing in the EFL context and the different ways they enacted processes of text composition. Presented in the paper are insights into the practices of these high school students, including an annotated example of a piece of work that shows the interplay between the audio, text and images, with excerpts from interviews with the creator. The processes for creating multimodal products that are showcased throughout the paper emphasise the importance of participants making meaningful connections with both the topic and their context, availability and choice to use the most appropriate semiotic modes for the task. This analysis emphasises how pedagogical practices may be reshaped by being flexible and adaptive to the needs of the participants to enable multimodal enactments.

Several articles in the special issue focus on hybrid or post-secondary contexts. *Emily Hellmich*, *Jill Castek*, *Blaine E. Smith*, *Rachel Floyd* and *Wen Wen* take up pressing questions about students' visions for their multimodal compositions (in a foreign language learning context in the USA), and how those visions might be in tension with teachers' visions, their own multimodal skill sets and abilities to craft what they envision and with audiences' expectations. The authors surface some fundamental misalignments that should push readers to consider how their assumptions about audience, affect and the influence of peers makes multimodal composing at the secondary level very complex and worthwhile of further study and practice.

Esther Ohito's article is anchored both theoretically and methodologically in Afrocentricity. Through a qualitative case study approach, Ohito investigates multimodal composition as a powerful tool for youth to theorise Blackness, bringing nuance and criticality into their meaning-making. Ohito shares and analyses a number of multimodal artifacts created in response to curricular invitations within an Introduction to Black Studies (ITBS) course, making a strong case for these artifacts as critical to students' theory generation.

In their article, authors *Christina Romero-Ivanova*, *Paul Cook* and *Greta Faurote* share work from a program designed for high school students planning to enter the teaching profession. In this unique context, youth created multimodal portrayals of a crucial educational event from their lives and discussed and evaluated one another's digital stories. Romero-Ivanova, Cook and Faurote describe an interactive reflection process in which students gained perspectives on others' lived experiences and learned to critically analyse multimodal storytelling through peer feedback. Finally, in their timely piece, *Mary Beth Schaefer*, *Sandra Schamroth Abrams*, *Molly Kurpis*, *Charlotte Abrams* and *Madeline Abrams* foreground three adolescents theorising about their meaning-making experiences during a three-month stay-at-home order. While adding new perspectives to child–parent research methodology, this paper also makes significant contributions to theories of learning generated by youth about their learning. The paper presents a unique opportunity to hear directly from adolescents as they explain their understandings and responses. How these youth theorise multimodal practices gives us insights into how they operate independently and with others to create multimodal meaning. The musical form of a motet provides a metaphor that scaffolded the participants' responses, further enabling them to organise their understandings and extend their meanings. The overarching themes of time, frustration and space will speak to us all.

We hope you find the arguments and evidence presented herein, as well as the complex stories of how children and youth make meaning of, with and across modes, to be compelling and useful. For us, it has been a wonderful journey of discovery as we have worked with these impressive scholars, with the support of our very generous reviewers, to produce a collection of thought-provoking and fresh perspectives on theorising multimodalities from the perspective of young people. We close out this introduction by importing a favourite James Dickey (1960, p. 30) stanza, which we recontextualise in the spirit of young people theorising multimodality for themselves.

> *And he is free, strangely, without me.*
> *With his head still browsing the greenness,*
> *He walks slowly out of the pasture*
> *To enter the sun of his story.*

Rather than knowing with academic certainty what green means, rather than teaching students about its symbolic valences, we invite you, the readers of this special issue, to accompany children and youth in *browsing the greenness*.

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Further reading

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