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Multimodal Literacies: Fertile Ground for Equity, Inclusion, and Connection

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This article explores the potential of multimodal literacies to support equitable, inclusive teaching and powerful meaning making for students and teachers.

Multimodal literacies include a wide range of practices associated with consuming, producing, and critically analyzing multimodal texts. Anyone who teaches young children observes multimodal literacy regularly, as children shape their stories through talk, pictures, and gestures, just as surely as they shape them with words. Yet, multimodal literacies are not specifically classroom based. In fact, they are in the oral traditions of shared stories so many of us, and our students, grew up hearing at family gatherings complete with the specific languages of our heritages; they are also in the words (written and spoken), visual images, and sounds that combine in communications we receive and send in the ever-expanding digital world of the present and the future.

In this article, I explore the potential of multimodal literacies to support increased equity, inclusion, and connection in the literacy classroom. I begin with a working definition of multimodal literacies, then discuss connections between multimodal literacies and culturally relevant pedagogies, equity, and inclusion. I then move to practical examples by highlighting classroom-based approaches discussed in the literature, followed by a presentation of what these examples teach us about incorporating multimodal literacies in the classroom. Throughout, I encourage the reader to consider their current instructional relationship to multimodal literacies: How are multimodal literacies currently enacted in your classroom? What possibilities do you see for expanding or refining your current practice?

What are Multimodal Literacies?

ILA defines multimodal literacies as "systems of representation that use different ways of expressing one's self and different forms of media, such as print, drawing, photography, and audio and video recording" (ILA, 2021). According to The New London Group (1996), multimodal literacies refer to the meaning created through two or more of the following modes (also known as sign systems): linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial, and gestural. Within multimodal literacies, written words are one of several legitimate representations of meaning. An important aspect of multimodal literacies is that multiple modes not only co-exist, but *work together* to create a unique meaning—a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts (Dalton, 2020) Furthermore, Jewitt (2008) explained "how knowledge is represented, as well as the mode and media chosen, is a crucial aspect of knowledge construction, making the form of representation integral to meaning and learning more generally" (p. 241).

If multimodal literacies are systems of representation that include linguistic, visual, auditory, spatial, and gestural modes of expressions, as well as—and importantly—the ways in which these means of expression combine and work together, then *multimodal texts* are the results of this representation. Examples of multimodal texts are picture books, comic books, graphic novels, spoken word poetry, visual art and design, websites, infographics, photo montages and video, blogs, and text messages complete with shorthand spellings, emojis, and gifs. By definition, some of these multimodal texts are digital (e.g., websites, text messages) and others may be print or digital (e.g., picture books, graphic novels).

Digital texts are most often multimodal (although print alone on a screen is not) and *digital literacies* are a specific type of multimodal literacy that assumes skillsets in composing and comprehending multimodal digital texts. With the flood of information available online, a major focus of research on digital literacies pedagogy has been on teaching students to be critical consumers of online information, with an emphasis on both the cognitive and the technical skills required to do so (Watts-Taffe & Bauer, 2013).

A *critical literacies* approach pushes further the notion of being a critical producer and consumer of information,

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by teaching students how to attend to the voices, experiences, and perspectives that are present and foregrounded, as well as those which are absent or in the background. This includes knowing who has produced the text and how it was produced, as well as how the author and their process is situated culturally, linguistically, and politically. It also includes learning the skills needed to center one's own voice as a producer of text. As Dalton pointed out "we now live in a networked social and material world that offers unparalleled access to digital tools, technologies, media, information, and people. This hyper-connectivity is not neutral—it is used for varied purposes, and these purposes are always politically and socially constructed" (Dalton, 2020, p. 160).

Multimodal Literacies and Cultural Relevant Teaching

Many schools have adopted the principles of culturally responsive or culturally relevant pedagogy as they seek to meet the learning needs of a diverse study body. Based on extensive research with excellent teachers of African American children, Ladson-Billings (1995, 2021) established three elements of what she termed Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP): student learning/academic achievement, cultural competence, and socio-political/critical consciousness. While Ladson-Billings (2021) emphasized that CRP calls for all three elements, many people use the term loosely and without intentional work in each of these realms.

With respect to academic achievement, Ladson-Billings addressed the importance of interrupting trends of academic failure and disproportionately low academic outcomes for African American students, and she called for measures of academic achievement and demonstrations of learning beyond standardized testing. She also called for engagement with new technologies aligned with proficiency in multimodal literacies (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

With respect to cultural competence, CRP calls for classrooms to be spaces in which students' cultural and linguistic heritages are more than accepted; they are integrated into the fabric of teaching and learning. Culturally competent teachers are committed to learning about their students' cultural resources, or funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992), and they use these assets *both* as a bridge for students to learn traditional literacy skills *and* as a way to examine and expand upon the range of skills and strategies that constitute literacy. As a result, "students are secure in their knowledge and understanding of their own culture…AND are developing fluency and facility in at least one other culture" (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 71). It is important to note that students and teachers, whose backgrounds are more closely aligned with the dominant culture and dominant English, also develop cultural competence in at least one other culture. According to Ladson-Billings (2021, "The role of the teacher is not to elevate one culture or denigrate the other but rather to help students understand that different cultural stances help us to see the world differently" (p. 76).

The third tenet of CRP, socio-political/critical consciousness, is a stance of critical inquiry that allows for conversation and critique around "the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 162). Critical consciousness is on display in classrooms where students learn to harness literacy skills and strategies to understand, critique, and take action in areas that they see as problematic in the world around them. These might include issues of health and safety (e.g., lead in drinking water, bullying, homelessness) or issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., portrayal of immigrant families as "alien," lack of books by Black and Brown authors in the school library). When critical consciousness is taken up, teaching and learning can contribute to broader equity and social justice goals within our pluralistic society. Socio-political/critical consciousness recognizes what the New London Group (1996) asserted in its description of multimodal communication as being situated within cultural, historical, and political contexts, which represent a range of experiences, some of which are more privileged than others.

PAUSE AND PONDER

1. In what ways does a multimodal literacies approach align with, or challenge, your current mindset about literacy instruction? In what ways does it align with, or challenge, your current skillsets for literacy instruction?
2. Is your current approach toward multimodal literacies an integrated approach or do you incorporate multimodal literacies as an add-on? Do you consider the multimodal texts composed and consumed by your students as legitimate engagement with literacy? Do you explain, model, and provide practice opportunities with multimodal literacies just as with other literacy practices in your classroom?
3. How can a multimodal literacies approach help you and your students learn about the array of linguistic and cultural resources represented in your classroom?
4. In your current approach toward multimodal literacies, where do you see opportunities to center equity, inclusion, and/or connection?

Multimodal Literacies Can Support Equitable Teaching Practices

Multimodal literacies offer fertile ground for increasing equity in literacy teaching and learning, in at least three ways. First, when meaning making includes, but is not limited to, reading and writing as it has traditionally occurred in school, students can leverage resources associated with their cultural heritages, as well as their contemporary cultural identities, to engage in the literacy community of the classroom (Turner & Mitchell, 2020). Too often, students fail to see themselves as literate within the space of the classroom. A multimodal literacies approach can support students in cultivating a literate identity.

Second, multimodal literacies can cultivate cultural competence due to its inherent acknowledgment of a wide breadth of "what counts" as literacy. This relates not only to the way stories are told and information is conveyed, but also to which stories are told, what information is conveyed, and for what purposes. As students bring their heritage and contemporary linguistic and cultural assets to the classroom, there is an exchange of cultural capital. Multimodal literacies can support teachers in learning about students' funds of knowledge within the context of literacy instruction and can make concrete an asset-based approach to teaching and learning.

Finally, digital multimodal literacies in particular are important to educational equity because they engage students with new technologies *coupled with* new meaning making. In a systematic review of how 21st-century learning is currently conceptualized in the United States, Mirra & Garcia (2020) found that "technology and multimodal composing were paramount" (p. 489). Yet, there is a disconnect between these 21st-century competencies, and the competencies that are most often privileged in the classroom. Historically marginalized groups such as Black and Brown students, students from low-income neighborhoods, and students with disabilities, are more likely to use digital technologies for low-level literacy skill acquisition, than are their peers. Indeed, the "digital divide" is not merely about disparities in access to new technologies; it is also about disparities in the ways students are encouraged to engage with new technologies, particularly around both consumption and production of multimodal texts (Roswell et al., 2017). By giving all students access to new technologies, *and* the literacy practices associated with these technologies, multimodal literacies can contribute to educational equity.

Multimodal Literacies and Inclusive Teaching Practices

Multimodal literacies offer fertile ground for more inclusive teaching with respect to dis/abilities. In fact, incorporating multiple modalities into teaching, learning, and assessment is a central feature of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines which seek to reduce barriers to learning for students with disabilities (CAST, 2018). As noted in the guidelines:

> There is a tendency in schooling to focus on traditional tools rather than contemporary ones. This tendency has several liabilities: 1) it does not prepare learners for their future; 2) it limits the range of content and teaching methods that can be implemented; 3) it restricts learners' ability to express knowledge about content (assessment); and, most importantly, 4) it constricts the kinds of learners who can be successful. Current media tools provide a more flexible and accessible toolkit with which learners can more successfully take part in their learning and articulate what they know. (CAST, 2018)

UDL guidelines are often used to support traditional literacy learning objectives. For example, students may be encouraged to use visuals, instead of a written essay, to convey their understanding of a text, if their disability impacts their handwriting or expressive language. However, with the wide array of composition tools advocated within the guidelines, including multiple media (e.g., text, speech, drawing, film) and interactive web tools (e.g., animation presentations, storyboards), there are many ways to build students' capacities with multimodal literacies. Student understandings and representations of text can be extended beyond traditional expectations while enhancing learner engagement which is a central focus of UDL.

A Multimodal Literacies Approach in Support of Equity and Inclusion

Multimodal literacies do not, in and of themselves, create more equitable, inclusive learning environments. This happens when teachers, working alongside their students, adopt a multimodal literacies stance or mindset. Such a stance also builds capacity for greater connection—between students, between teachers and students, and between students and texts.

Using examples of classroom practice described in the literature, I now consider the affordances of multimodal literacies, with respect to equity and inclusion, as students produce/author their own texts and also make meaning from/demonstrate connections with texts

created by others. For the purposes of this article, my description of each classroom practice is brief, including particular attention to what teachers and students did, and what teachers and students learned, as they engaged in multimodal literacies. As you read, make note of any and all examples that are of particular interest, so you can follow up by reading the complete articles that describe them more fully.

Composing and Sharing Stories

The Family and Community Stories Project. The *Family and Community Stories* project engaged first graders, who were English language learners, and their families in digital storytelling as a way to honor and learn about their lived experiences (Rivera-Amezola, 2020). The project aimed (1) "to help preserve the diverse multilingual narratives families were willing to tell" and (2) allow students "to access familiar languages and stories while navigating English in school" (p. 325). The project was a team effort which included the digital literacy teacher, the first-grade teacher, and an ESOL teacher, as well as high school student helpers. With art materials, handheld recorders, and iPads (loaded with iMovie), students and their families created their compositions during (and sometimes between) a series of "Family Sharing Nights." Teachers were flexible throughout, paying close attention to how families interacted with the project. They used their observations and reflections to adjust the logistics of the project, as well as their understandings of how meaning would be constructed.

Logistically, for example, they learned that iMovie was not a "user-friendly" tool for most of the families in the project, and that the stories took longer to complete than they had originally planned. There were also lessons about meaning making. Teachers learned that the narrative structures most often used in school did not fit the narratives that families constructed based on their lived experiences and transnational identities. As Rivera-Amezola (2020) described, "Instead of tightly packaged narratives with a clear beginning, middle, and end, families conveyed what they felt comfortable sharing" (p. 326). In his words, this "upended our expectations about what a 'good narrative' should look like" (p. 325).

The Multilingual Family Storybook Project. In the *Multilingual Family Storybook Project*, students collaborated with family members to create storybooks to share at a school-wide bilingual storytelling event, and also on the school website *(*Kim & Song., 2019). Family storybooks included at least two languages and integrated multiple modalities, both digital and print based. This school–university partnership project took place in a racially and linguistically diverse Spanish immersion elementary school and its purpose was to actively engage students and their families in a way that highlighted family and community linguistic funds of knowledge, and specifically community translanguaging. Translanguaging is "the process whereby multilingual speakers use their multiple ways of expressing themselves in an integrated communication system" (ILA, 2021). According to Kim & Song (2019), "translanguaging supports the holistic view of bi/multilinguals' meaning-making repertoire as one integrated linguistic ecosystem instead of separate linguistic brains" (p. 268).

Teachers and researchers learned directly about families' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge, as they observed and supported families collaborating to create and communicate their stories through multiple modalities and multiple languages. These collaborative experiences positively impacted individual literacy skills and these individual literacy skills had a ripple effect. Kim & Song (2019) noted that individual linguistic repertoires impacted concentric circles of literacy networks, moving outward to the immediate family, extended family, and the broader community. Ultimately, friends, teachers, university faculty, and wider audiences have been impacted. In other words, individual repertoires became shared repertoires, and potential spaces for greater connection. The authors learned, "Such an integrated space also allows us—teachers, students, families, and communities—to cross multiple borders of difference, such as age, ethnicity, race, culture, language, and other modes" (Kim & Song, 2019, p. 277).

A Multimodal, Digital Composition Project. In *a multimodal, digital composition project* Cindy (a pseudonym), an 8 year old with autism created a multimedia autobiography alongside peers in the general education classroom (Pandya et al., 2016). The purpose of the project was to engage students in multimodal, digital composing practices with an eye toward the affordances and constraints for students' creativity and language use. Although originally the goal was not to study Cindy's work in particular, the authors recognized that her work processes and products might be a source of learning about how a student with a disability made meaning using multimodal literacies. With assistance from a paraprofessional, as specified in her Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Cindy was able to make meaning through hand drawings, drawing apps (e.g., Doodle Buddy, DrawCast), photographs, video, speech, and text, which were then integrated into an iMovie on the iPad.

Cindy demonstrated skills in conveying informational content, mood, and identity through writing, images,

screen titles, videos, voice, and music, reaching the learning benchmarks that had been set for all students in the project. Her teachers learned that Cindy was capable of reflecting on and presenting herself through an autobiography in ways that leveraged her strengths and interests. This project supported a composition reflecting her identity, from her perspective. Much of what Cindy enjoyed and valued, and how she saw herself, came through in her digital autobiography. By observing Cindy's engagement with multimodal literacies, teachers also learned that the project provided a forum for Cincy to engage in authentic social interactions, leading them to wonder about the affordances of a project like this for other children who struggle with expressive language or navigating social cues.

Examining and Engaging with Stories

Curated Multimodal Reader Responses. In a *curated multimodal response* project, 10- to 12-year-old students used multimedia to collaboratively construct a response to literature within the context of literature circles (Cloonan et al., 2019). The classroom teacher was part of a professional learning university–school research collaborative in a high SES education system in Australia. The authors described the concept of curation as "creating, identifying, and sharing multimodal resources with identity and self-representation foregrounded" (p. 648). The purpose of the project was "to build students' expressive vocabularies and multimodal capacities through thematic novel responses" (p. 650). Students engaged their voices and their choices in the creation of a 10-slide Photo Story presentation, which included drawings, words, maps, and music, as way of communicating their understanding of theme, mood, and literary devices in the novels they read. Their final products were shared with peers and others on the school website (to view a sample Photo Story, go to: https://vimeo.com/339252923).

In this project, the teacher learned how to build on her established literature circle structure, which included specific roles such as vocabulary enricher, summarizer, connector, and discussion director, to support students in new elements of group negotiation tied to multimedia curation. Cloonan et al. (2019) highlighted specific instructional moves including modeling and scaffolding to support students in using textual evidence and providing specific language choices to support students as they collaboratively negotiated meaning related to the text, then sought to represent that meaning using multiple modalities. "Positioning students as curators acknowledges the multiple processes involved when making multimodal meanings using digital media. These include deliberateness and criticality in deploying knowledge of literary devices; selection, combination, and arrangement of a range of meaning-making resources; and perspective taking as meanings in different modes are contemplated" (Cloonan et al., 2019, p. 655).

A Critical Book Club. In *a critical book club project*, third graders read one of five texts from a disabilities/difference themed text set and were encouraged to move beyond typical reader response toward critical literacy (Jocius and Shealy, 2017). With the aim of developing students as empathetic readers and responders, this book club was part of a year-long collaboration (Project ONEE) between a university researcher and the third-grade teacher in a suburban school. The larger goals of Project ONEE (Open minds + New knowledge + Empathy = Extraordinary change) included engaging students both in conversation and action based on their understandings of disabilities, difference, and stereotypes. Students learned how to make critical connections across texts and experiences, as evidenced in their conversations, writing, and multimodal responses to their reading. They demonstrated the ability to use textual evidence to support assertions, as well as the ability to question and re-evaluate perspectives on disability and difference.

Building on students' previous experiences with book clubs, teachers used explicit modeling and scaffolding to demonstrate critical inquiry. This included bringing in community members with disabilities, and allies of those with disabilities, to share their experiences and perspectives. Students also engaged in social action after reading. Collaboratively, they researched various disabilities, then used innovative platforms (e.g., iMovie, board game) for sharing what they learned with a wider audience that included parents and community members. Students also engaged in a unique partner project with a primary grade self-contained special education class at a neighboring school.

Reflecting on Multimodal Literacies for Equity, Inclusion, and Connection

While each of the highlighted examples is unique, collectively they provide several insights that resonate with the wider literature on multimodal literacies. These insights relate to teacher learning, student learning, collaboration, and connection.

First, teachers positioned themselves as learners. In each of the examples, teachers came to know and understand the strengths and capacities of their students in ways they had not before. They were genuinely curious about the meanings their students (and their students'

families) would create, and these meanings became a part of the teachers' new cultural knowledge. In describing the *Family and Community Stories Project*, Rivera-Amezola (2020) stated "The multimodal experience of recording a visual story helped to expand commonly held notions of literacy and narrative to which we ourselves, as literacy practitioners, unwittingly ascribe" (p. 236).

Also, some families chose to participate in the event but chose not to create their own story. This led teachers to consider cultural and logistical factors that might influence the decision to remain silent. For example, Rivera-Amezola (2020) found that their initial Family Sharing Nights were not well attended, and that many parents were unclear and perhaps unsure of the purpose of (and possibly safety of) sharing family stories. Being present with these unexpected outcomes, and reflecting on them led to changes in how the event was organized and how its purposes were conveyed. Ultimately, cross-cultural understandings were deepened with respect to how family stories are collected, for whom, and for what purposes.

Second, student learning went beyond the learning objectives associated with the project. In particular, each of the projects facilitated students' literacy growth but also their understandings of themselves as literate beings. This was particularly evident in the first three examples. In their description of the *Multilingual Family Storybook* project, Kim & Song (2019) wrote, "By positioning the parent(s), or the main caregiver(s) in the family, as an essential part of the project instead of taking a subsidiary role in developing the child's literacy skills, the project created a space in which all members could engage as story-making agents by using and combining one another's ideas, language skills, and identities" (p. 271). In this example, and in the *multimodal digital composition project* with Cindy (Pandya et al., 2016), deficit views about students based on language and/or dis/ability status, which often lie beneath the surface of school curricula and instructional approaches, were interrupted. Students' identities and positions with respect to school literacy were reframed and they found a place for their full selves within the classroom.

Third, teachers collaborated with others. In each of the projects discussed, teachers collaborated with others to support both their growing mindsets and their growing skillsets. A variety of teachers were represented across these projects including those with expertise in elementary ELA, special education, TESOL, digital literacies, and teacher professional development in the university setting. In many instances, family and community members were also actively involved. Much of what we know about students' engagement with multimodal texts, both as producers and consumers, comes from research conducted in out of school spaces, including art-based and community literacy initiatives.

Finally, these examples richly illustrate layers of connection that support classrooms as *communities of learners*. In learning communities, teachers and students see themselves as part of a connected unit. These connections are in constant motion; the work of building and maintaining them occurs daily. Engagement, empathy, identity, and agency are important parts of the fabric of a connected community, and multimodal literacies offer unique spaces for each of these to emerge and grow.

Each highlighted project increased opportunities for students to be known—to their peers, their teachers, and to themselves—as well as to know others. These relational connections can powerfully impact the quality of teaching and learning in the literacy classroom. We see this both in the projects focused on students' text composition, and in the projects focused on students' text comprehension. The critical book club project is a rich example of how students' deepened connections with

TAKE ACTION

1. Consider your current approaches to text composition and text comprehension. List places where you are already including multiple modalities, or could begin to include them. Select one of these places to grow your current practice by incorporating one take-away from this article.
2. Center multimodal literacies in your school or personal professional development. Partner with one or two colleagues to learn more by doing some shared reading and discussing. Or, suggest it as the focus of a Professional Learning Community.
3. Pay attention to the technologies your students use regularly. Instead of viewing these as a crutch or a distraction, view them as an asset. What do they say about the multimodal literacies your students bring to school? How might they be incorporated into your multimodal literacies approach?
4. Reach out to potential partners to grow your thinking and brainstorm possibilities for collaborative planning and teaching. Consider the following resources for partnerships: school or district technology and media specialists; community and youth organizations focused on literacy, technology, media, or the arts; school or public librarians; fellow teachers; community artists and storytellers; community-based websites focused on shared stories and other multimodal literacy experiences (e.g., Sharing our Story (http://www.sharingourstory.com/))

text might ultimately deepen their connection with those often deemed as "other" in our pluralistic society. In the family story projects, and Cindy's autobiography, we see students claiming their voice to frame their own identity, and assuming their place inside of the learning community, rather than being relegated to the outside.

These examples of multimodal literacies illustrate equitable, inclusive teaching, as well as teaching *for* equity and inclusion. When we equip all students with the complex multimodal literacy skills required to participate with agency in the social, political, and economic realms of our society, we contribute to remaking our broader society as more equitable and inclusive.

Conflict of Interest

None

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