Multimodal pedagogies and access to higher education

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Abstract
This article focuses on academic literacies and access to higher education in South Africa. Specifically, it explores the ways in which multimodal pedagogies can enable recognition of a diversity of student resources, whilst at the same time enabling access to dominant practices. Formal education often closes down access to a range of semiotic resources; thus, multimodal pedagogies could potentially recover ‘recognition’ of these. Recognition is about noticing resources in terms of some existing framework; utilising them in a range of contexts; and valuing them in terms of assessment. The article highlights the relations between multimodal pedagogies, academic literacies and access to higher education. The importance of writing is acknowledged and ways of using multimodal resources to access writing are discussed, including interrogating metaphorical objects, oral performance and multimodal citation.

Keywords: academic literacies, access, higher education, multimodal pedagogies, recognition

INTRODUCTION
As the Writing Centre Coordinator at the University of Cape Town (UCT), I am convinced that enabling student access to notions of academic discourse is important in redressing past inequities in higher education. This is not to be done through teaching conformity to standard norms and conventions. Rather, a critical dialogue needs to be set up between students’ ‘brought along’ resources and the expectations of the academy. Many multimodal pedagogical interventions in South Africa have attempted to do just that, to make visible a range of students’ resources which are often neither noticed nor valued in formal educational settings (Archer 2008; Harrop-Allin 2011; Newfield and Maungedzo 2006; Stein 2008). Examples of this would be recognition of students’ multiple language systems and the fluidity of movement between languages, varieties, genres and discourses. Thesen and Van Pletzen (2006, 19) have noted that South Africans have also relied on modes other than language, such as ‘their bodies and voices to read and express complex meanings in a society where racial identity has signified so much’.

All pedagogy is multimodal as speech, writing, gesture, image and space work together to create complex multi-layered communicational ensembles which are
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produced in particular contexts of power. However, an explicitly multimodal approach to pedagogy deliberately places emphasis beyond written and spoken language to value a range of modes, sometimes through formal assessment practices. In multimodal pedagogies, ‘there is a conscious awareness of the relationship between modes, learning and identity’ as learners engage with different modes in different ways (Stein 2008, 122). This article explores some of the links between multimodal pedagogies and access to higher education in South Africa. The aim of doing this is to identify the challenges and opportunities of using multimodal approaches to pedagogy in our diverse and developing context. The article focuses on the ways in which multimodal pedagogy can facilitate recognition of student resources, whilst at the same time enabling access to dominant practices, including academic writing and citation practices.

RECOGNISING STUDENTS’ RESOURCES IN MULTIMODAL PEDAGOGIES

A multimodal approach has the potential to make classrooms more democratic and inclusive, thereby enabling marginalised students’ histories, identities, languages and discourses to be made visible. Multimodal pedagogies can thus inform an equity agenda through ‘broadening the base for representation’ (Stein and Newfield 2006, 9). ‘Recognition’ of resources is an important feature of multimodal pedagogy employed in social justice. ‘Recognition’ is about ‘making visible’ resources and involves integrating resources in terms of (e)valuation and application in a range of contexts. The use of modes in classrooms is ‘the effect of the work of culture, history and power in shaping materials into resources for meaning-making’ (Stein 2008, 122). Thus, recognition of resources entails recognition of how power is operating in various social practices.

Recognition involves the teacher, the curriculum and the students as designers of meaning. People choose how to represent meaning from a range of possible options which are shaped within a particular context. This may mean drawing on resources that were previously devalued and marginalised in educational settings. However, the meaning-maker can choose to re-evaluate resources, assessing their appropriacy for the immediate contexts. Recognition thus develops self-reflexivity and the ability to understand the notion of semiotic choice, that is, to select according to criteria, context and design. The relation between choice and agency is exemplified in Figure 1. These diagrams are from two first-year students’ work in history and theory of architecture. There are a number of semiotic choices operating in each of these diagrams which both represent the same building and depict in different ways the historical development of a building over time. Sometimes the degree of ‘sketchiness’, such as student A’s drawing, can heighten credibility, thus strengthening academic voice in this context of architectural design, where the original and the hand drawn have value. Student A has chosen to draw lines free hand and without careful measurement, whereas student B’s diagram is far more precise with straight lines, clear measurements, word-processed text and more detail. Both
use colour as a resource to show development over time, with the extensions to the building indicated by different colours and explained in the ‘key’. In the diagrams, the students have chosen from a range of available resources in order to give shape to their interests and purposes within a particular domain.

A number of researchers and practitioners in the field of ‘academic literacies’ have begun to look beyond language-focused pedagogies to recognise the role of a range of modes in teaching and meaning-making. Thesen (2001), for example, examines utilising multimodal texts in the first-year curriculum for access. She looks at a first-year course, ‘Texts in context’, where the idea is to use visuals (disposable cameras and pictures of the university environment) to enable access for educationally disadvantaged students. Thesen’s later work (2007) continues to look at questions of power and access in higher education. She analyses the event of the lecture in higher education as a multimodal text and looks at the production of authority in lecture spaces in terms of the discourses circulating in South African society. Interestingly, she argues that lecture theatres provide important multimodal spaces for student learning and identity work to take place.

Many educators and researchers in South Africa have also explored the connections between resources, recognition and new technologies, particularly in response to the ‘digital divide’ (Castells 1998). Some have looked at ways of assisting students from under-resourced schools to integrate new technologies (eg, Prinsloo and Walton 2008; Walton and Archer 2004) and have looked at the role of new technologies in teaching academic literacies, exploring how technological environments change the creation and distribution of knowledge (Huang and Archer 2008; Walton and Pallitt
2012). However, research in South Africa has also interrogated the relationship between the technologies of writing and computing, and has looked at ‘low tech’ resources for meaning-making, such as posters, or the ‘lack’ of technology and using a resource for a different means.

I will now explore some ways of using multimodal resources in the classroom to access writing, including ‘symbolic objects’ and oral performance. I end by reflecting on how academics might interrogate academic citation if framed as part of multimodal citation practices more broadly, as in the domain of popular culture, for example.

**USING MULTIMODAL OBJECTS TO ACCESS WRITING**

In higher education, writing as a resource tends to be valued over other modes and thus the link between the real recognition of a range of multimodal resources and writing is important in terms of access. An example of this is the use of ‘symbolic objects’ in the classroom, where objects are seen as a way of mediating the multiple gaps between home, other contexts and the specific practices of higher education. I (Archer 2008) have written elsewhere on a ‘symbolic object’ project in an engineering foundation programme for students from less advantaged educational backgrounds. In that project, students identified everyday objects that have symbolic meanings and examined these in a range of physical, cultural and communicational contexts. The focus of this particular pedagogical intervention was looking at how to use objects and symbolism in order to engage with questions of diversity and identity. Objects were seen as a way of eliciting student narratives and highlighting notions of change (Archer 2008).

I have used ‘symbolic objects’ in a number of other contexts as well, with slightly different purposes in mind, as in the training of consultants at the Writing Centre at UCT, for example. The Writing Centre provides a walk-in, one-on-one consultancy service to students from all disciplines and academic levels of the university. The Writing Centre aims to increase students’ understanding of writing as a process and in this way facilitate access to higher education. I did an exercise with the Writing Centre consultants asking them to reflect on their writing processes from quite a personal perspective. I tried to open up the conversation to allow them to draw on their own resources by reflecting on an object that signifies their relationship to writing. I was hoping that by becoming more reflective about their writing processes, they would be able to, in turn, help students with their writing. Some of the objects the consultants identified were directly and obviously associated with writing, such as keyboards, pencils, paper and paintbrushes. According to one, a pencil is ‘always quite short, chewed up at one end, eraser used up or broken off, very much worse for the wear and ugly’. For this consultant, writing is a process that is ‘difficult (note short eraser), stressful (bite marks), slow (pencil rather than computer), reassuring and old fashioned, personal, requires constant breaks (to sharpen pencil)’. A blank page is seen as ‘possibility and a space to write’, like a promise of change and exploration,
but also perhaps a bit like a mirror. A paintbrush symbolises ‘the relationship in
my mind between image and text, and the leap I made at a certain point when I
conceived of writing as “painting with words” – this began in poetry writing but now
permeates my attitude to writing in all its forms’.

Other objects identified were not directly associated with writing and were more
particular to the individuals’ socio-cultural milieu – such as a ‘woven basket’ and a
‘herbarium’. Zadie spoke about a woven basket as an object that signified writing for
her. The basket is made up of individual strands of reed which have little use on their
own as they are fragile and not very attractive. This changes when they become the
‘stuff’ of the basket, which is not only beautiful and logical, but also useful. They can
be of various sizes, shapes, uses and colours. Zadie saw basket weaving and writing
as a social activity, but also as an individual activity; there can be single or multiple
authors. She drew analogies between weaving and cohesion in writing, and points
out the patience involved in both.

One of the most interesting objects signifying writing was a botanist’s herbarium.
The herbarium is about field work and data capture. The consultant said that her
own mini herbarium signifies her relationship to writing academic research (see
Figure 2). She claimed that the ‘translation of plants in the field to plants preserved
and put into book format seems a midway point between being in the field and the
actual writing of text’. The notation links into a well-established international system
which also makes her feel part of a larger research community. The herbarium files
are fascinating in that they function as a hybrid book form. They are somewhere
between ‘reality’ (the actual plants from the field) and the textual representation
thereof (the pages from left to right, the classifications, the captions). They have a
particularly tactile quality and also engage the sense of smell which reminds her of
the field. These very material aspects of the herbarium serve as a reminder of the
ways in which the concrete becomes abstracted into writing. The image she drew
in Figure 2 relates the herbarium to the gatherer of the data, as well as to the world
of research, as signified by the filing cabinet. The herbarium links the individual
researcher to the global research community, signified by the image of the ‘world’.
This is ‘empowering’ and ‘legitimises’ her research.
Lastly, there was Joseph’s rather cleverly chosen object, prestik. Joseph is both an academic and a creative writer. He chose prestik because of its elasticity, pliancy and capacity to change shape, which is analogous to experimentation with form or genres in writing. Prestik enables you to pin things up, display aspects of yourself through writing. According to Joseph, it also expires and the pin-ups fall down after some time, requiring you to put up new ones and to ‘re-energise’ the prestik. Lastly, he commented that prestik looks edible, but you cannot actually eat it. This reveals his relish for certain kinds of writing which he regards as ‘quite delicious’!

Although this exercise on ‘symbolic objects’ in the Writing Centre drew on both cultural and personal experiences, it seems to have been more personal and idiosyncratic than the engineering project. Objects are given meaning through the ‘narrativisation of broader discourses of self, identity and biography’ (Woodward 2007, 6). The objects chosen do not speak to the concepts of change and recontextualisation to the same extent as the engineering project. Objects are used as metaphors in this context rather than as artefacts indicating social change. However, the use of objects as metaphors fits with the goal of this exercise, namely to draw on the student consultants’ resources in order to enable a highly personal sharing of the common experience of writing. It also enabled the group to think through different aspects of the complexities of text-making.

Now, I will turn to another example illustrating the important link between multiple resources and writing, but in a different way, to the ‘symbolic objects’ exercise discussed above.

FROM ORAL PERFORMANCE TO WRITING

Newfield (2011) has done a lot of work on multimodal pedagogies in South African English classrooms. According to her, multimodal pedagogy has ‘encouraged
complex, creative and varied practices of text-making in classrooms that are counter-hegemonic at the same time as supportive of traditional language development goals’ (Newfield 2011, 31). Newfield and Maugedzo (2006) show how a multimodal approach to pedagogy which drew on African popular culture revitalised the poetry curriculum at a high school in Soweto. Shifting the focus from analysis (which is the predominant approach to the teaching and learning of poetry in high schools) to composition, enabled the students to experience poetry in different ways. In this project, poetry became a spoken form, a performance, and even an embroidered cloth. Changing the audience meant the students could write poetry to friends, and, finally, even produce their own poetry anthology. Although this particular example is from a high school context, it has relevance for higher education, as it was the move from reading to writing using multimodal means that made this pedagogical intervention such a success. Here hegemonic language and pedagogic practices were challenged, whilst simultaneously providing access to dominant language practices.

**CITATION THROUGH A MULTIMODAL LENS**

One way of providing student access to academic writing conventions that I have been exploring has been the use of multimodal texts to reflect on citation. Persuading readers about the relevance and validity of argument in academic texts involves encoding ideational material as well as establishing relationships within the discourse community through citation. Citation is a resource used in the design of meanings in socially shaped and regular ways. Choices about the integration of sources include the selection of material from the source, critical evaluation or some kind of framing, foregrounding or backgrounding a source. It is possible to cite in all modes, but the conventions differ and some modes are more legislated than others. Citation in visual and verbal modes involves appropriating a source into the author’s argument, thus creating a ‘new’ composition. In music, citation is ‘mixing’; in the fine arts, citation could be seen as ‘collage’. Although all creativity is variation on a theme and seldom ‘original’, art can operate on a continuum from complex and nuanced intertextuality to derivative (akin to copying). Downloading images and music, accessing open sources and remixing genres has become the norm, raising questions around copyright and ‘originality’. The use of sources in writing is perhaps more tightly policed and the conventions more firmly and widely known than in other modes and genres. Interestingly, quotations need not always show respect, they may also function ironically, the ‘ambiguous, dis-respectful, parodic-travestyng use of a quotation’ (Bakhtin 1981, 68). Examples of this would be file-sharing and remix genres which appropriate and co-opt music, art and film; placing politically correct language in quotation marks – using the term and questioning it at the same time; and using logos and brand names in culture jamming. These words or images have ‘conditions attached’ and Bakhtin (1981) refers to them as intentional hybrids. It is useful to consider how these processes of textual construction work in order to become more explicit about the ways in which academic voice is constructed. By
voice I mean the way an author establishes presence in a multimodal text through the choice and use of semiotic resources, as well as positioning in relation to sources and audience. Becoming explicit about these textual processes is important for enabling student access into academic discourse and the discourses of particular disciplines. I would argue that the placing of the in-text reference in writing or images or information graphics is of importance for the establishment of academic voice. Perhaps the source is more foregrounded if it is placed in the label of a graph rather than the caption, for instance. The way in which the source is introduced is also of importance. For instance, using the words ‘taken from ...’ to introduce a graph could indicate that it is a reproduction, in other words, a ‘quote’ from the original source with all the deferment of authority which that entails. If the source is introduced as ‘adapted from ...’, it could indicate paraphrasing and perhaps increased authorial engagement. The placement of the citation in a text has implications for the academic voice, as well as the degree of adaptation in terms of ‘paraphrasing’ or re-working text to best suit the particular argument. It is worth noting that ‘multimodal text-production through copy-and-paste is an affordance of the digital medium that has profound consequences in the ways texts are composed’ (Adami 2012, 131). Copy-and-paste makes direct quoting easier than paraphrasing, in all modes. It is when students battle with the conventions around citation that it becomes apparent how invisible, normative and complex they are. Becoming aware of the ways in which citation operates across modes, media, genres and disciplines is crucial to enable students access to academic practices.

**FINAL COMMENTS**

Exploring the functions of modes and modal specialisation within particular texts is important in developing academic literacies practices (Archer 2006, 2010). Overall, the article has highlighted aspects of multimodal pedagogies in relation to power and access to higher education. It has argued that multimodal pedagogies can open up spaces for reconceptualising which texts and which textual practices count and for whom, thus highlighting relations of power, social boundaries and inequality, political or commercial agendas. It is clear that recognition of students’ resources in multimodal pedagogies in higher education needs to be more than just an ‘improved teaching method’. Rather, it needs to be a revolutionary attempt to redress some of the inequities of South Africa’s past and to engage with a context of diversity and democratic change with all the profound challenges, changes, contradictions and possibilities this implies.

**REFERENCES**


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