STUDIES IN WRITING

Multimodality in Higher Education

Edited by Arlene Archer and Esther Odilia Breuer

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Multimodality in Higher Education

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A Multimodal Response to Changing Communication Landscapes in Higher Education

Arlene Archer and Esther Breuer

Introduction

Multimodal communication is playing an increasingly important role in everyday life, the workplace, public sphere, as well as in academic settings. Changes in the communication landscape in Higher Education have engendered an increasing recognition of the different semiotic dimensions of representation. Multimodality refers to "a field of application rather than a theory" (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010, p. 180). It offers a theoretical perspective that brings together socially organised resources that lecturers and students use to make meaning. These resources include modes (such as image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, posture) and media (such as screens, books, notes). In Higher Education, multimodality manifests in multimodal pedagogies (including the use of digital technologies), in multimodal student texts, and in the increasing inderdisciplinarity of both content and methods (for instance, the analysis of film in the discipline of history).

Most research on academic discourse has been based on the analysis of written text (for example, Galtung, 1981; Swales, 1990) and as a result, most classes on the teaching of academic writing have concentrated on language. However, student assignments require increasingly complex multimodal competencies and Higher Education needs to be equipped to help students with the construction of these texts. As with predominantly written assignments, multimodal texts raise issues about power and access in Higher Education. The norms and conventions around constructing multimodal texts are no more 'transparent' than the norms around writing. As a consequence and as will be shown in the different chapters in this book, multimodality in Higher Education is important

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and in need of further research, both in the analysis of academic texts and in the ways in which a multimodal approach can foster the writing and learning processes of students. *Multimodality in Higher Education* shows how a multimodal approach is used and could be used in different texts and contexts in Higher Education.

Writing in Higher Education

Key to *Multimodality in Higher Education* is the exploration of how to define the scope, nature, and function of writing in Higher Education, especially when 'writing' now includes oral, visual, multimedia, and technology-enriched aspects. Writing has always been a multimodal practice. Old Egyptian script was based on images, and so still are Chinese and other logographic languages (Coulmas, 2003). The visual and spatial dimensions of writing are evident in spelling, typography, emphasis and layout. For instance, differently spelt words have different visual connotations. Spelling is used to differentiate between voices, indicate spoken voice in writing and degrees of informality, and can also index a 'cool visual dialect' such as in the language of mobile telephones. Typography includes fonts, lettering systems, calligraphy, and gives writing materiality through the medium used, such as pens, brushes, pencils, word processors. Emphasis can be achieved through font size, use of bold, boxes around text, point form. Layout and the use of white space can complement the writing, as in instructions, or can intrude on the writing as in calligraphy and concrete poetry where clarity gives way to visual appeal. Writing thus creates a "web" not only of semantic meaning, but also of "visual connotation" (Sharples, 1999, p. 137).

What is seen as 'academic' writing is contestable and always emergent. Bhatia (2002) understands academic communication as the "situated linguistic behaviour in institutionalised academic or professional settings" (p. 22) and Swales (1990) talks about the "classes of communicative events which typically possess features of stability" (p. 9). In order to understand how texts work, one must, therefore, include the analysis of multimodal elements in texts, how they interact with each other, as well as with the genre in which they are performed.

In all approaches to genre analysis, no matter how different they can be (e.g. Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Bhatia, 1993; Martin, 1993; Martin, Christie & Rothery, 1987; Miller, 1994; Swales, 1990), it is essential to keep in mind that different genres (creative writing, journalistic writing, business writing, academic writing) have social origins and that genres have varying degrees of status in particular domains. Genres have been developed over time for

particular communicative purposes and thus reflect the disciplinary cultures of specific social groups. It is the discourse communities that own them, the "socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals". Members of these discourse communities possess a "familiarity with the particular genres that are used in the communicative furtherance of those sets of goals" (Swales, 1990, p. 9). There are textual and discursive features in disciplinary genres, as well as contextual and disciplinary factors that define them. This means that the writer does not have complete freedom to change these genre characteristics—especially if the writer is not a long-standing member of the academic community (Bhatia, 2004; 2010; Hyland, 2004).

When comparing academic texts emanating from different academic contexts, one can see that students from English speaking backgrounds tend to focus on creating linearity in texts that contain content that is topic relevant (Clyne, 1994; Siepmann, 2006). Other academic approaches, for example in France, Germany, Russia, Arabia, do not cohere to this rule of linearity but prefer to present a wider picture of the topic or of taking different perspectives on them (Galtung, 1983). Reading these texts is more demanding, and could result in academic communities being seen as elitist, trying to 'keep out' readers that do not belong to the academic community. These traditions tend not to 'sell' ideas as does the English academic community, but rather to 'tell' them (Swales & Feak, 1994, p. 214), and the text is understood as working as a "stimulus for thought or even intellectual pleasure" (Yakhontova, 2002, p. 230). English (which today means internationally accepted) academic writing tends to 'empathise' with the reader, developing the argument in a linear way, making sure the reader can grasp the argument and share the opinions introduced by the author. This shows that original German and English academic styles are somewhat different. However, in recent years German academic writing has changed because it has become crucial for academic success to be published in international (in terms of English language) journals. If writers do not meet the textual ideologies applied by the evaluators, texts are refused not because of content or purely linguistic inappropriateness, but because the reviewers do not accept the different discursive and pragmatic patterns (Clyne, 1994; Lillis & Curry, 2010, p. 156).

One of the main challenges for teaching writing is to provide access to academic and disciplinary discourses through making explicit how texts work in a critical manner, whilst at the same time, inducting students into these discourses (see Archer 2010; Breuer 2013). Discursive practices are ideological in the ways in which they serve to maintain existing social relations of power. Street (1996) shows how joining a particular 'literacy club' can be problematic for those trying to learn its rules of entry from non-dominant, or disad-

vantaged positions in the power structures of the university and the society in which the university is located. Social, political and economic power is closely associated with access to and knowledge of certain discourse forms. There are social, educational and political advantages of acculturation into university practices for individual students. If students are denied access, their marginalisation is perpetuated in a society that values these practices. However, socialization into dominant practices could contribute to maintaining their dominance and uncritically perpetuating the status quo. Dominant practices include languages, varieties, discourses, modes of representation, genres and types of knowledge. Teachers of writing are, therefore, in a double-bind. On the one hand, it would be in their learners' interests if they could help them to conform to the expectations of the institution. On the other hand, by doing so, they are reproducing the ideologies and inequities of the institution and society at large

Writers need to acquire the textual genre features as well as the knowledge about social and cultural practices in the foreign language setting. They have to identify the social forces that underlie the form and purposes of genre and its changing function (Dufrenne, 1963; Galtung, 1981). Concentrating only on formal features in academic texts without showcasing why it is that we write in a specific way, does not lead to a critical engagement with these texts (Hyland, 2004). This is even more so for international students because, as noted above, "given acts and objects appear vastly different in different cultures, depending on the values attached to them" (Oliver, xi). In addition, there is always a tension between convention and a dynamic for constant change. This is the effect of the "constantly transformative action of people acting in ever changing circumstances" (Kress, 2003, p. 108). Thus, there can be no sense of a 'pure genre'; rather there is constant change, mixing and hybridisation of genres (see Breuer, 2011). A more generative notion of genre for Higher Education is not one where you exclusively learn the forms of existing kinds of texts in order to replicate them, but "where you learn the generative rules of the constitution of generic form within the power structures of a society" (Kress, 2003, p. 121). Teaching writing should thus aim to bring generic conventions into focus, to show what kinds of social situations produce them, and what the meanings of these social situations are. Students need to explore the nature of the discourse community they are working in to identify the discourse conventions and the dominant genres so that they can gain critical access to those genres.

The challenges of teaching writing and multimodal composition are compounded and enlivened through changing communication landscapes in Higher Education in terms of both spaces and texts. It is to these changing spaces and texts that we now turn.

Changing Spaces in Higher Education

Changes in Higher Education, such as shifts towards managerialism, commercialism, and accountability have increasingly resulted in a reduction in dialogic spaces. However, it is imperative to recognise the value of unregulated spaces where contesting knowledge and subject positions can be foregrounded since there is a strong link between a particular learning space and the creation of an academic identity. These can be physical spaces which can be more or less performative or dialogic. In thinking about changing spaces in Higher Education, Thesen's chapter on lecture theatres is particularly apt. She offers new ways of thinking about lectures that highlight embodiment and performance, as well as multivocal and distributed meaning. Thesen argues that the rise of the new media may strengthen the potential of lectures: "As the online environment gets drawn into pedagogy and assessment, and with the increased 'textualization' of academic work ... this performative face-to-face aspect may be kept alive" (Thesen, 2007, p. 49). Hunma's chapter also explores alternate spaces in Higher Education, particularly in relation to performativity which can facilitate the development of the 'authorial self' in academic writing. Unregulated spaces are enabled through image theatre, where students are invited to negotiate the "positional and spatial boundaries of pedagogical spaces" and the "rules and reach for creative and critical textual performance" (Hunma, this volume, p. xx).

Changing Texts in Higher Education

Along with the changing spaces in Higher Education, there are also changing texts. Archer (2011) mentions three types of multimodal assignments encountered in Higher Education, namely predominantly visual texts, written texts that use images, written texts that analyse and discuss visuals. Researchers have also explored the changing nature of the doctoral thesis, including the visual and performing arts doctoral thesis (Ravelli et al., 2013; Fransman, 2012; Kress, 2012). Digital media have enabled students to create and distribute multimodal work which has had implications for the ways in which we engage with text in Higher Education. As Kress notes, a mode is a "socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning" (2009, p. 55). That is, the way different modes work does not lie in their materiality per se, but in the way that social groups define and use them. For example, in academic writing double inverted commas usually indicate a quote, whereas single inverted commas often signal metaphoric expression or irony.