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Multimodal Literacy and Why It Matters: A Brief Overview

by **Samantha Hines** (Head Librarian, Missoula College at the University of Montana) <Samantha.hines@umontana.edu>

Abstract: *Multimodal literacy: what is it and what does it mean for librarians and their users? How will the newfound attention to the differing ways users consume multimodal content so prevalent in the digital world affect us in library land? How can we best move forward?*

Information found in academic and school libraries develops more and more past the textual, and classroom instruction continues to evolve beyond the traditional lecture model. Traditional videos or CDs are transitioning to streaming media incorporated into search results via comprehensive databases or discovery tools, and academic work increasingly involves music, audio or video clips, and more. A rising concept in literacy discussions centers around multimodal literacy, which can be loosely defined as the understanding of the use of words, images, and sounds to create meaning. What does multimodal literacy mean for academic librarians and their users, both students and instructors? The newfound attention to the differing ways users consume the multimodal content so prevalent in the digital world will have clear impacts for librarians in their collections, service offerings, and instruction programs. This article will briefly explore the emerging trend and point readers toward longer pieces to further illuminate the concept.

A more thorough definition of multimodal literacy can be found in **Walsh** (2010), who describes it as "...meaning-making that occurs through the reading, viewing, understanding, responding to, and producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts" (p. 213). This is on the surface similar to information literacy, defined by the **Association of College and Research Libraries** (2006) as "the set of skills needed to find, retrieve, analyze, and use information" (paragraph 1), but lacks the library profession's emphasis on managing, retrieving, and organizing of information (Patterson & Muir, 2014, p. 182). However, multimodal literacy can be said to have a cultural literacy component that goes beyond the established information literacy standards (Cordes, 2009, p. 2).

It has been fairly well established that reading on screen differs from reading in print in fundamental ways for the reader. For a deep and entertaining examination of the science of reading and the effects of digital texts, I recommend **Maryanne Wolfe's** 2007 book, *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*.

For the sake of our discussion today, it is enough to know that reading on screen is less linear than reading in print, and that readers process and navigate works online very differently than they do print (Walsh, 2010, p. 241). This knowledge ought to affect how libraries, historically a repository of primarily-textual information, purvey their goods and services in the new multimodal world. A good awareness of multimodal literacy and how to teach it helps in this regard.

Another difference between print texts and digital texts is provenance of information. As texts are born and disseminated digitally, the lines between creators and consumers of information become blurred — as has been bemoaned by various Internet detractors. Although not exactly an Internet detractor, **Jaron Lanier's** 2010 work *You are Not a Gadget* does an excellent job outlining the concerns about content creation and the Internet's facility for sharing content. A good background in multimodal literacy can help make these distinctions clearer for our users as they will develop skills in determining who created content as well as who disseminated it.

This issue of provenance can also cause difficulties for cataloging multimodal works. With regard to the young adult series *39 Clues*, **Bowler**, et al. (2012) explores this issue, saying, "The very meaning of "authorship," however, may need redefining in the context of multimodal stories. What exactly does "authorship" mean in terms of the entire production? Is it perhaps more proper to think of the story as scripted or remixed?" (p. 45). The provi-

sion of access via the library catalog or other library finding aids in the era of multimodal works requires us as a profession to consider multimodal literacy. The traditional cataloging main entry will no longer be the main way to find works, and in any case may not be wholly accurate in this environment.

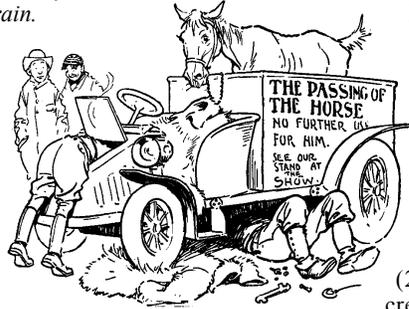
RLA represents a leap forward in rethinking access in this manner, and as it is more fully implemented it will be interesting to see how finding aids deal more effectively with multimodal works.

Beyond ownership and creation concerns, **Walsh** (2010) points out the increasing importance of the social network in multimodal

literacy, where content online can be created, commented, and shared in a vast variety of social ways — Facebook, blogs, YouTube, Twitter and so on (p. 215-216), ensuring that users need to focus on more than who created content, but also who passed it along and how they interacted with or perhaps even altered it. Also of interest in understanding multimodal literacy is an understanding of how texts are created, and keeping on top of these tools is an essential part of students', and instructors', work (p. 216). Part of this is understanding that design concepts and design tools, as layout and structure, have a great deal of impact on multimodal literacy (p. 214-215). Part of being well informed about technology and content creation for our users and our profession thus involves a functional understanding of multimodal literacy and design.

An excellent examination of multimodal literacy in library instruction and service was presented by **Sean Cordes** at the **International Federation of Library Association's** 2009 conference. Beginning with a general overview on the topic and a brief discussion on various types of literacies, the author argues for multimodal literacy-focused services and education both in theory and in practice as a way for libraries to move themselves and their users forward, saying, "Library personnel master new literacies and technologies to help enable these skills in users. And patrons work with librarians to empower themselves through access to symbolic information to create objects. In this way the library becomes a community of interaction where users can transform the self into a more literate state of being" (Cordes, 2009, p. 9). As an example, the author offers several assignments he has tested for instructing students in understanding multimodal literacy, including constructing and deconstructing a video using provided content

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Samantha Schmehl Hines received her MS in Library and Information Science from the **University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign** in 2003. In 2004 she was hired as the Social Science Librarian by the **Mansfield Library at The University of Montana-Missoula** and is currently the Distance Education Coordinator and Head Librarian for the **Missoula College** campus of **The University of Montana**. She writes and presents widely on issues of online library services, information literacy instruction, and library middle management, and is the author of *Productivity for Librarians* (2010, Chandos) and editor of the recent **IGI Global** title, *Revolutionizing the Development of Library and Information Professionals: Planning for the Future*. 🌿

and creation tools. The design process of creating the video was considered to be a key learning instrument and was one of the strongest recommendations of the article.

In my own experience, multimodal literacy instruction can be an excellent way to engage learners and highlight non-traditional library resources and services. An instructor for our Developmental Writing program at **Missoula College** worked with me to create a two-week unit assigning students the task of revising a previously-written text into a multimodal text incorporating photos, animation, sound, and video. Students engaged readily with the tools and were fascinated to learn about the extent of the library's resources in non-print areas.

Adopting multimodal literacy instruction into a library's instruction repertoire could allow the instruction program to develop more critical consciousness among users and elevate instruction practices by strengthening our educational mission (Elmborg, 2006, p. 192-193). Critical literacy theory, to which the concept of multimodal literacy belongs, moves instruction away from the transfer of skills and information into students' heads, and toward developing students as active agents in their educations and lives, engaging with and understanding the world around them (p. 193). Rather than viewing our role in the academic community as that of imparting knowledge and skills about acquiring, assessing, and using information, our job in creating literacy can and should be much more broadly given as well as our role in the provision of texts to the community. "[P]eople produce, read, and interpret texts in communities, not in isolation. Communities reach consensus about interpretation, sometimes easily and sometimes contentiously. Literacy cannot be described, therefore, in broad terms as a set of universal skills and abstractable processes" (p. 195). Libraries play a huge part in the construction of academic discourse on campus, and multimodal and other critical literacies can elevate the conversation.

A focus on multimodal literacy will also have an impact on library collections and policies. According to **Cordes** (2009), "Today's libraries and information centers create information as well as proctor it, and we help others create and distribute it too. In a way, we are moving away from the role of gatekeeper of logos to enabler of techné" (p. 10). In practice this means that instructors at an institution where multimodal literacies are explored and supported may request more digital and streaming texts and materials. Users may want more assistance in using services that transform works and share them with others. Library budgets, still mostly focused on the print models of purchasing copies to be used in perpetuity by users in a physical environment, still have a long way to go to clarify policies regarding licenses and access to streaming and digital materials, and the provision of services to create and share information with others.

In addition, selection criteria may need to be reexamined in light of multimodal offerings (Bowler, et al., 2012, p. 41-42, 45). Selecting a traditional book or video may involve different factors than the selection of texts with connected games, videos, audio materials, or software. As well, publishers of materials may have different use expectations for libraries versus individuals, and licenses or access models may make providing multimodal materials difficult for libraries.

An area of collections and services for libraries to consider when emphasizing multimodal literacy is that of design, as design becomes an increasingly important way of communicating information in a multimodal environment (Walsh, 2010). Libraries may want to collect works on good design and install software on library computers to aid in designing multimodal materials in order to provide support to learners in the creation of texts in any format or style.

While most of the current literature focuses on primary education, multimodal literacy will be an important force in higher education as well, and its practice is a fertile ground for further research in education generally and college and university libraries in particular. An awareness of multimodal literacy moves libraries forward in pedagogy and practice within the education community by ensuring we provide services and resources in support of our users and instructors. Streaming media, shared content and content creation, and the lowered usage of traditional print are not trends that will reverse in education. An adoption of multimodal literacy concepts in our services and resources will move librarianship forward as we encompass new and developing modes of knowledge and expand our mission beyond the curation of traditional print texts in academia, and will improve our relevance for the future.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Jewitt, C. and Kress, G. (Eds.). (2003). *Multimodal literacy*. New York: Peter Lang.

A foundational text on the concept for those who want a thorough overview and introduction.

Walsh, M. (2010). *Multimodal literacy: What does it mean for classroom practice?* *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 33(3), 211–239.

This article, cited frequently above, provides an excellent overview of multimodal literacy in education. The focus is on primary education, but the concepts discussed are directly applicable in higher education. Many articles discussing multimodal literacy focus on primary education in Australia, where it is part of the primary education curriculum.

Serafini, F. (2013). *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Another foundational text, with a broad overview on teaching the concept. This is primarily for K-12 instructors but may be of use to librarians exploring the concept for instructional purposes.

Bowler, L., Morris, R., Cheng, I., Al-Issa, R., Romine, B., and Leiberling, L. (2012). *Multimodal Stories: LIS Students Explore Reading, Literacy, and Library Service Through the Lens of "The 39 Clues."* *Journal of Education For Library & Information Science*, 53(1), 32-48.

While narrowly focused on a particular example that is mostly aimed at future children's librarians, this article still provides an excellent review of the concept of multimodal literacy and offers good theoretical discussion of how the concept may impact librarianship.

Cordes, S. (2009, August). *Broad Horizons: The Role of Multimodal Literacy in 21st Century Library Instruction*. Paper presented at the 75th IFLA World Library and Information Congress General Conference and Assembly, Meeting 94. Literacy and Reading and Information Literacy, Milan, Italy. Retrieved from <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=054E2E23F1AD4A8D5EFC1106DA-F642A1?doi=10.1.1.150.6385&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

This paper, also cited frequently above, gives one of the best available analyses of multimodal education in librarianship. Both practically and theoretically oriented, it offers ideas that can be implemented on both the individual librarian level as well as institution-wide.

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Elmborg, J. (2006). *Critical Information Literacy: Implications for Instructional Practice*. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(2): 192-199.

Patterson, E. & Muir, T. (2014). *Information Literacy: A retrospective of the literature*. In Fitzallen, N., Reaburn, R., and Fan, S. (Eds.), *The Future of Educational Research*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, p. 177-187.

Walsh, M. (2010). *Multimodal literacy: What does it mean for classroom practice?* *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 33(3), 211–239. 