

FILM 1

INTRODUCTION

For the end-of-semester assignment, students participating in *H9000: Cyberpoetry and Posthuman Verse* are asked to submit an assignment on a theme covered during the course. Like much of the coursework at The University of The Near Future, the assignment is to be prepared using a digital format.

The topic that Sam decides to explore in his assignment concerns the use of imagery within posthuman verse. For the format meanwhile, he's keen to experiment with video, a multimodal approach that gives him the opportunity to represent ideas through image, text and sound.

My own work, aims to explore the potential of the multimodal assignment itself, and whether it offers a vision of the future.

I'll begin by offering a definition of the multimodal assignment. Then, using Sam's experience as an example, I'll consider how the multimodal assignment might be regarded by learners and teachers in The University of The Near Future. To do this, I will primarily draw on the work of scholars who have examined how digital technology is changing the educational landscape.

DEFINING THE MULTIMODAL ASSIGNMENT

The multimodal assignment can be seen as a piece of work that uses two or more modes to represent ideas. Adapting the work of Kress I have chosen to view "mode" as the form of literacy used to present information.

A single medium – a film in Sam's case – can simultaneously communicate information presented in a range of different modes – text, image and sound, for example.

I have chosen to regard the process of creating a multimodal assignment as *the simultaneous appropriation of numerous modes for the purpose of representing academic ideas and opinions.*

FILM 2

THE LITERACY REVOLUTION

In exploring the potential of the multimodal assignment, it's worth briefly considering the academic environment from where it might flourish.

In a 'world of multiple literacies' (Thomas et al (2007), where students 'have grown up immersed in media-rich environments' (Carpenter 2009), some commentators, Kress suggests, believe that new digital literacies are replacing traditional texts. The written form, it is argued, is giving way to the image and other digital literacies.

'it seems evident to many commentators that writing is giving ways, is being displaced by image in many instances of communication where previously it had held sway.' **Kress (2005:5)**

Hobbs (2002:27) meanwhile uses the metaphor of revolution to describe the radical shifts taking place within literacy and the wider educational landscape. Borrowing Hobbs' metaphor, we might see the student as a protagonist in this revolution. After years of immersion in his media-rich world, Sam enters the University of the Near Future with new, radical ways of communicating which, in Carpenter's view, forces the academy to rethink its view of literacy.

Sam also arrives in class armed with the digital technical expertise to accompany his communication skills:

Students: 'enter composition classrooms already possessing technological skills that often surpass those of their teachers.'

Carpenter (2009:139)

If it is the case that students possess both digital technical ability and literacy skills, this has important implications for the multimodal assignment. A body of digitally astute students would seem perfectly equipped to exploit the multimodal assignment, using 'a wealth of strategies (Carpenter (2009:146) to communicate ideas in 'complex, multi-faceted ways.'

However, we need to ask whether it's possible to equate digital experience and technical expertise, with the ability to use in an academic setting.

CRITICAL AWARENESS

A common discussion topic amongst staff at The University of The Near Future is whether the technical proficiency of students' digital work is matched by what Carpenter describes as 'critical awareness'.

'students may have developed electronic literacies through frequent immersion in digital environments and systems, but does that mean they possess critical literacy skills as well?'

Carpenter (2009:146)

Sam's familiarity with the digital means of production doesn't necessarily mean he knows how to meaningfully apply particular modes towards the creation of academic argument.

'Young people may already seem proficient users of visual technologies, but most are unaware of the principles underlying the tools they so readily adopt and cannot make important connections between types of visual technology and its uses.'

Spalter and van Dam (2008:94)

Sterne, Spalter and van Dam and Thomas et al. all suggest that, in terms of how knowledge and ideas are communicated, each digital literacy merits individual consideration.

This is significant for the multimodal assignment. For a traditional, single-mode assignment such as the written essay, a student need critical skills within a single literacy. Each new form of representation within the multimodal assignment however requires different, unique skills of interpretation and communication.

Presenting information multimodally isn't simply a case of channelling information through different digital media. Instead, the multimodal assignment challenges Sam to demonstrate understanding across a range of literacies, which involves considering how meaning is conveyed through each mode.

TRANSLITERACY

Assuming Sam is able to represent ideas across a range of modes, he's what Thomas et al. would describe as a transliterate student:

'Transliteracy is the ability to read, write, and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks'

Thomas et al. (2007)

Transliteracy is important in relation to the multimodal assignment as it reminds us that we are not concerned entirely with new, digital literacies. Indeed, the multimodal assignment would seem to be an ideal medium for transcending new and old literacies.

Take Sam's film for instance. Although it incorporates digital literacy in the form of sound and vision, this is merged with traditional written text to help him share the ideas in his head. After all, words can appear on screen, as well as on the page.

When one views transliteracy in conjunction with the flexibility of the multimodal assignment – and by this I mean the potential to select which combination of mode to employ - the student has the opportunity to exploit a combination of analogue and digital means of representation.

MEANING

Assuming Sam's assignment communicates information across a range of literacies, it is worth considering how his tutors might be required to respond to his completed work. Like Sam, they will need to be transliterate in order to interpret meaning from his work. And how should they go about creating a single set of assessment criteria for a piece of work that simultaneously presents information across a range of modes.

This is a challenge exacerbated by the difficulty in interpreting meaning from information presented digitally. Kress acknowledges the perceived difficulty in establishing meaning through image:

'The still existing common sense is that meaning in language is clear and reliable by contrast, with image for instance, which, in that same commonsense, is not solid and clear.'

Kress (2005:8)

While Spalter and van dam highlight:

'The conviction that visual perception may cloud, rather than reveal, the truth' **Spalter and van Dam (2008:97)**

However, Kress and Spalter and van Dam's are focused here on the merits of individual literacies, whereas the multimodal assignment simultaneously presents ideas across a range of modes.

Herein lies a potential strength of the multimodal assignment. Whereas it might be difficult to depict an idea through a single mode, the multimodal assignment allows layers of meaning to be built up, offering a richer representation of information. For instance, Sam might demonstrate the use of iambic pentameter in digital verse through a short animation, where text appears on screen at different intervals, and a voice-over explains what's happening.

As Thomas et al. (2007) suggest, this will challenge Sam to recognise how each of modes can be crafted together to work simultaneously, in order that they might collectively offer a united, rich and clear representation of his ideas.

'understand how the aural (in the form of music, sound effects, the narrator's voice), visual (images and text) and interactive modes function simultaneously.'

Thomas et al. (2007)

In this sense, perhaps the notion of building layers of representation should be replaced with a metaphor where different strands become entwined until they appear as single whole.

So, rather than being concerned with how to represent and interpret information through a series of modes, both Sam and his tutor might benefit from seeing the multimodal assignment in a holistic way, or what Thomas et al. describe as a unifying ecology of literacies:

'a unifying ecology not just of media, but of all literacies relevant to reading, writing, interaction and culture, both past and present.'

Thomas et al. (2007)

FILM 3

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

In deciding how to share his ideas about imagery within digital verse, Sam might consider which combination of modes best match his existing strengths. To help us visualise how Sam might go about this task, it is perhaps useful to consider the work of Howard Gardner.

In 1983, Gardner published a theory of multiple intelligences that has since had a major influence on curriculum design, even if it hasn't been universally welcomed amongst educators:

'Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences has not been readily accepted within academic psychology. However, it has met with a strongly positive response from many educators.'

Smith (2008)

According to Gardner's theory, Sam possesses a combination of intelligences that shapes how he learns, communicates and relates to the world.

'There are at least eight discreet intelligences, and these intelligences constitute the ways in which individuals take in information, retain and manipulate that information, and demonstrate their understandings (and misunderstandings) to themselves and others.'

Veenema and Gardner (1996:70)

Seen in the context of the multimodal assignment, assuming Sam is aware of his strengths, he might exploit Gardner's theory to select the modes that will enable to him represent his ideas most effectively:

Assuming Sam's initial decision to use a combination of text, sound and images within his assignment, was the result of personal reflection, it would suggest that Linguistic, Logical-mathematical and Musical, are his dominant intelligences.

We can draw a parallel between Sam's assignment and example given by Veenema and Gardner, when they used an educational CD-rom to demonstrate how a

multimodal, digital approach might enable future students to blend their intelligences in order to demonstrate understanding.

‘These more adventurous forms give maximum opportunities for students to draw on their own distinctive blend of intelligences, thereby both giving them new venues for demonstrating their understandings’

Veenema and Gardner (1996:75)

Although critics have pointed to a lack of evidence to support Gardner’s work, it is nevertheless useful in demonstrating the principle that the flexibility of the multimodal assignment might enables Sam to select a combination of modes based around his strengths as a learner and a communicator.

APTFNESS OF MODE

The multimodal assignment also gives Sam the flexibility to think about the modes that might best suit the information he hopes to represent. In a process that Kress describes as ‘considering aptness of mode’, Sam might give thought to ‘affordances’ - the potentials and limitations of each mode, to share his ideas:

‘The new media make it possible to use the mode that seems most apt for the purposes of representation and communication’

Kress (2005:19)

By considering aptness of mode – and using his conclusions to exploit the flexibility of the multimodal assignment - Sam might align the representation of information to the needs of his audience – in this case, his tutor:

‘I can now choose the mode according to what I know or might imagine is the preferred mode of the audience I have in mind.’

Kress (2005:19)

For instance, Sam might know from earlier coursework that his tutor responds well to digital storytelling. Or perhaps formative feedback encouraged him to represent ideas in visual form?

However, for aptness of mode to be exploited, we have to assume that Sam is able to correctly identify the approach that his tutor prefers. And with this achieved, there's a further assumption that Sam literacy skills or intelligences – match those of his tutor.

FILM

CONCLUSION

Although this assignment has considered Sam's experience at The University of the Near Future, the conditions that encouraged him to craft a multimodal piece of coursework, exist in the present.

I have argued that the multimodal assignment is the natural product of a media rich world.

The student that possesses, or develops, critical digital literacy skills might craft the multimodal assignment to exploit their own intelligences, to suit the subject itself, and also to meet the perceived needs of the intended audience.

I have also suggested that by merging different strands of representation, the multimodal assignment might overcome some of the perceived difficulties in establishing meaning in digital texts. Indeed, this approach might offer a clearer, more rich representation of ideas than written text alone is capable of.

However, the focus of my this work has been to consider the multimodal assignment on it own merits, rather than directly comparing it with the traditional essay. If the multimodal assignment is to become a common sight at The University of The Near Future it will be *alongside*, not *instead of* traditional approaches to assessment.

As Sam sits down to begin writing - and composing, and sketching, the equivalent of 2000 words on the use of imagery in posthuman verse, he concludes that the multimodal assignment offers a mixture of potential to be exploited and challenges to be overcome.

