Reading visual and multimodal texts: how is ‘reading’ different?

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Extract

Multimodal texts are those texts that have more than one ‘mode’ so that meaning is communicated through a synchronisation of modes. That is, they may incorporate spoken or written language, still or moving images, they may be produced on paper or electronic screen and may incorporate sound. Different types of multimodal texts that students commonly encounter in their educational environment in print form are picture books, information books, newspapers and magazines. Multimodal texts in non-print form are film, video and, increasingly, those texts through the electronic screen such as email, the internet and digital media such as CD Roms or DVDs.

Reading in a multimodal environment

Is the reading of multimodal texts a different process from the reading of print-based texts? A reader of a picture book or an information book needs to simultaneously process the message in the words, picture, images and graphics. With an electronic or digital screen there will be added combinations of movement and sound. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) have challenged the notions of traditional literacy’s emphasis on print in the light of the growing dominance of multimodal texts and digital technology. They contend that a language based pedagogy is no longer sufficient for literacy practices that are needed in our information age. Crucial issues being raised by Kress and others (e.g. Heath, 2000; Bearne, 2003) are that ‘the screen’ and multimodal texts are developing new ways of communication. Written text is only one part of the message and no longer the dominant part. Heath (2000) has argued that visual texts are impacting on ‘neural networks’ and changing conceptual schemata. New types of texts require different conceptualisations and a different way of thinking. Kress (1997, 2003) describes significant differences between the words and images. He shows that, with writing, words rely on the ‘logic of speech’ involving time and sequence, whereas the ‘logic of the image’ involves the presentation of space and simultaneity. Thus the reading of visuals involves quite a different process than the reading of words. Kress and Bearne (2001) have shown that schools foster the ‘logic of writing’ whereas contemporary children’s life experiences are grounded in the ‘logic of the image’ and the ‘logic of the screen’.

Extract from: