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Title of paper: Writing as Design: Enabling access to academic discourse in a multimodal environment

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Title

Writing as Design: Enabling access to academic discourse in a multimodal environment.

Abstract

This paper builds on and contributes to work in writing pedagogy, with a particular focus on multimodality. Research on writing and academic literacies have examined changing texts in higher education, yet there has not been a particular emphasis on how these texts are reconfigured in the multimodal moment. This paper examines the implications of a more inclusive view of the representational landscape for writing pedagogies and academic literacies. It explores the visual nature of writing, and some of the ways academic discourse is constructed across images and writing in texts in Higher Education. It also questions the extent to which visual and verbal modes can be used as critical 'metaforms' for reflection. The aim is to create awareness in order to enable student access to a broader multimodal notion of academic discourse.

Key words

Academic literacies, multimodal texts, image-writing relations, design, access

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that literacy pedagogy can no longer be confined to the realm of language alone, but needs to account for the role of images and other modes of meaning-making in texts, including, the audio, the visual, and the spatial (Jewitt 2009, Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006, Kress 2000, 2010, Stein 2008). Information technologies have transformed some of the ways we communicate with each other, and the ways in which information is produced, distributed and accessed (Costanzo 1994, Jewitt 2006, Kress 2003). The implication of this shifting representational landscape for Higher Education is that a variety of multimodal text forms are being given more recognition and are reflected in the curriculum. However, the teaching of academic literacy practices has tended to over-emphasize the teaching and analysis of writing, often to the neglect of other modes and their interconnectedness (Author 2006, 2010). By mode I mean “socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning-making” (Kress 2010), such as writing, speech, image, layout or gesture. Bezemer and Kress (2008) argue that the use of digital media and the increasing importance of image as a carrier of meaning in text, raise questions about the function and forms of writing as mode, and that in multimodal texts, ‘design’ and ‘principles of composition’ become foregrounded. This paper explores ways of enabling student access to this broader notion of academic discourse and writing as ‘design’.

The tasks set for students’ assignments often require competence in using and integrating modes and even written assignments take design and layout into consideration. Student produced texts need to select and integrate different semiotic resources according to their principles of organization. Many assignments use visuals as evidence in disciplines such as anthropology and history, whilst some assignments

are predominantly visual in nature, such as posters. These multimodal texts raise questions about access in Higher Education, both in their interpretation and production. Interpretation of multimodal texts can be complex, requiring students to engage with different types of language, namely English, the language of academic discourse, mode-specific language and a metalanguage of critical analysis (Thesen 2001). Producing multimodal texts is also complex, involving selection of available resources and weighting each mode in a particular text. Decisions need to be made, for instance, about which mode carries the proposition and which the evidence in an argument.

The purpose of this paper is to argue for a pedagogy that opens up access to Higher Education through making explicit how multimodal texts work. It explores the ways in which multimodal student texts are constructed and the extent to which students internalize the often unconscious practices of the discipline. Making these practices explicit and visible is crucial in the teaching of writing. The theoretical basis for the analysis and suggested interventions is multimodal social semiotics. The assumption underpinning this approach is that meaning is made through the selection and configuration of modes in texts and through the interests of the sign-maker in a particular context (Jewitt 2009: 15). I look at first year student-produced texts which illuminate aspects of the argument. This includes a ‘culture jamming’ assignment in media to explore the notion of using one image to critique another in what I have called a critical ‘metaform’. I also look at student assignments from a first year History and Theory of Architecture course to examine visual-verbal relations. Student texts realize the significant features of the social environment in which they are formed; they are thus constituted by and constitutive of practices in the discipline.

Looking at student texts can highlight the constructed nature of academic discourse through inconsistencies and disjunctures, thus exposing the normative practices of the discipline, which may be more seamless and less apparent in published texts.

Writing as visual design

Learning to write in part means learning how to produce well-designed print and digital texts, and learning how the design of the page contributes to rhetorical import. Writing needs to be seen as a resource susceptible to design. Design refers to the “process of giving shape to the interests, purposes, and intentions of the rhetor in relation to the semiotic resources available for realizing/materializing these purposes as apt material, complex signs, texts for the assumed characteristics of a specific audience” (Bezemer and Kress 2008: 174). This notion of design suggests we consider both the material and visual nature of writing alongside its cognitive dimensions. Design is a useful analytical concept – it can be used as a verb (as in the notion of ‘interested action’) as well as a noun (as in the design of the text). Design as a verb points to the “interest and the intent of the designer to act in a specific way in a specific environment, to act with a set of available resources, and to act with an understanding of what the task at hand is, in relation to a specific audience” (Kress 2003: 180). In thinking about design as a noun, there are a number of levels of organization of written language. These emerge as a result of “the interaction between the graphological resources of the written language and principles of spatial layout and organization” (Thibault 2007: 122). These levels provide “visual-spatial criteria for the reader’s optical scanning of the text, for relating graphological structures to each other” (Thibault 2007: 123). Graphological structures include paragraph clusters,

paragraphs, sentences, colon units, comma units, words and letters. These also include typography (font size, type, case) and colour.

The choices writers make in laying out writing and images on the page generates multiple meanings for its readers. There are different ways of showing emphasis, for instance, font size, use of bold, boxes around text, bullet points, use of white space. Differently spelt words have different visual connotations. Goodman uses the examples 'gray' and 'grey' to illustrate mood (1996: 44). Differently spelt words can also index a "cool visual dialect" (Author 2005) such as the written language of mobile telephones which include homophones and emoticons such as "U guys r askin me 2 much. I already got enuff catchin' up 2 do". This kind of e-language can sometimes appear in 'process' texts, such as mind-maps, which are often assessed and given a grade. When considering spelling, one also needs to be aware of differences between British and American spelling, and make decisions about which would be more appropriate for a particular audience. Typography also combines visual communication and writing in an inseparable unit. Letter forms have distinct characters which are partly based on association and partly on form and shape. Fonts, typefaces, lettering systems, calligraphy, the use of pens, brushes, pencils, typewriters, word processors all produce a range of different meanings. The typeface of a text can "convey a mood, signal cues as to content or even suggest a point of view (Goodman 1996: 45). Sans-serif typefaces such as Ariel are often used in academic writing as they are open and unadorned and thus suggest 'modernity' as well as objectivity. Serif typefaces, such as Times New Roman or Garamond are also commonly used, the short decorative strokes on each character perhaps suggesting classical elegance. When unusual fonts are chosen for an academic essay, it could

demonstrate a certain immaturity in terms of academic discourse. Different fonts are more appropriate in different media, on paper or on screen. Since word processors, expression through typographic expression has become accessible to all and therefore writing teachers need to teach a certain amount of “typographic literacy” (Van Leeuwen 2005b: 142). See table 1 below for a summary of the visual features of writing discussed above.

The materiality of assignments is another design dimension to consider in terms of paper weight, texture of paper (whether glossy or matt), whether the assignment is bound into a booklet or not. Students could make use of fold-out appendices, to make simultaneous reading of the appendix and the main text possible. In terms of materiality, it is worth bearing in mind that any text has a financial cost linked to its production, which is pertinent in a diverse student body. This raises important questions about multimodal composition and inequity.

Design resources	Description	Functions
Emphasis	Font size, bold, boxes around text, white space, bullet points.	These guide the reader through the macro-structure of the text, signify authorial engagement, highlight contrast.
Materiality	Paper weight and texture, binding, colour.	Materiality aimed at a particular audience (glossy brochure, handwritten first draft for consultation)
Spelling	Connotations of differently spelt words, British versus American spelling, for example.	Used to differentiate between voices, indicate spoken voice in writing and degrees of informality, signify a ‘cool visual dialect’.
Typography	Letter forms as graphic shapes, font type and size.	Convey mood, signal content, signal macro structure, imply multiple voices in a text.

Table 1: Summary of the visual features of writing

Metaforms in different modes

Visual genres are often framed or anchored by writing in assignments in Higher Education. This is partly because of the valorization of the written mode in this context, but may also have something to do with the affordances of the written mode for critical reflection. Familiarity with a basic ‘language’ for talking about images tends to make reflections on visual compositions easier and facilitates more systematic analysis of multimodal texts (Author 2010). For instance, in a first year film course, students need to produce a storyboard for a short film in a computer tutorial. They choose images, and then provide details on setting, cinematography, shot action, sound, lighting, editing for each image. They need to provide a written rationale for their design choices, drawing on the theory of the course. In this case, the metalanguage for the written reflection requires terms from film and film editing, such as point of view, flashbacks, camera angle, voice over.

I would argue that we need to expand the notion of a ‘metalanguage’ to that of ‘metaforms’. By ‘metaform’ I refer to a means of description and analysis, which can work across modes. These metaforms entail systematic technical knowledge of the ways semiotic resources are deployed in meaning-making. Although it is more common in Higher Education to use the written mode to reflect on the visual, it would be interesting to explore the instances where the visual is used to pass critical commentary on another visual or on written text, such as producing a satirical cartoon to comment on historical writing.

An example of a metaform in the visual mode could be ‘culture jamming’, where one visual is used to implode or critique another. Culture jamming is a form of resistance

to the norms and conventions of mass culture that ‘denaturalizes’ or parodies the images we see in everyday media by making us question their underlying ideologies (Klein 2000). The most common form that culture jamming takes is that of an advertisement. For instance, third year media students have to produce a text in their choice of media genre which passes meta-commentary on the concepts of the course. Their production can comment on the way that texts work (colour, modality, composition, genre conventions, audience), or can take the form of ‘culture-jamming’, namely the critical imploding and re-reading of existing texts through the production of a new text. The following is an example of a text produced by one of these third year Media students.

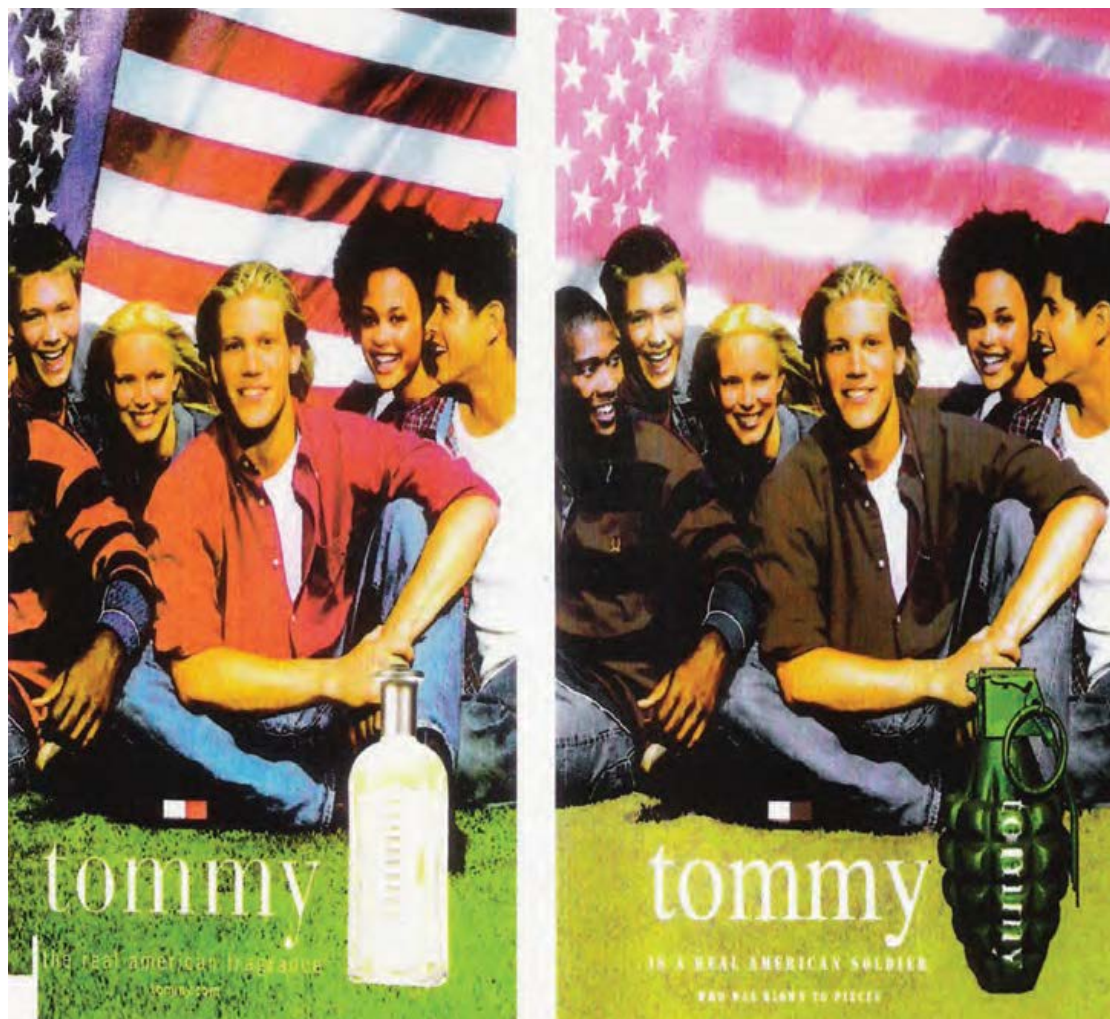


Figure 1. Culture Jam of an advertisement for perfume

In the original Tommy Hilfiger advertisement, a clean-shaven, healthy looking lad is sitting on lush green grass, surrounded by equally wholesome looking friends. In the background is the American flag. There is a fresh, vibrant and youthful energy here, the epitome of the American dream which is echoed in the red, white and blue of their clothes. In the photo-shopped image, the colours are less saturated. The grass has changed from a lush green to a lifeless brown. The sepia-like colour of the image creates a sense of nostalgia, for a once happy time. The khaki and brown clothing also point to the colour of military uniforms. Both the sense of nostalgia, and the connotations of the military are reinforced by the written text “Tommy is a real American soldier who was blown to pieces”. In the altered advertisement, the blue is taken out of the flag, leaving only red and white, and the connotations of ‘blood stained’. The divisions between the colours are not so clear cut and certain as the original flag with its clear boundaries. The bottle of perfume is replaced by a hand grenade. This culture-jam is a strong criticism on America’s ‘war on terror’ and the so-called ‘American dream’. Culture jamming through the adaptation of an image / logo is an affordance of new technologies which enable the manipulation of texts in a contemporary communication context. Here a visual is used to pass critical commentary on another visual text. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which semiotic resources have been deployed to present a particular view of the world. Exploring these metaforms with students in a range of modes could be a useful and generative exercise to encourage critical thinking, as well as reflection on which modes suit particular purposes.

Relations between images and writing

Written assignments in Higher Education utilize images and information graphics in a range of ways – in conjunction with the written mode to provide context, illustrate a point, make an argument, furnish evidence, organize data. We need a way of looking at how argument proceeds through relationships between different modes, across writing and image. Is the image or the writing carrying more of the content, for instance, or is the image performing more of an interpersonal function. What aspects of argument are represented in what mode? Using examples from an assignment in a first year architecture course, History and Theory of Architecture, I will explore some of the relations between the visual and the verbal. In this assignment, students are required to compare the social, cultural, experiential and design characteristics of two buildings.

Generally in academic texts, captions are used to explain the image in terms of the key point being made in the overall argument and to explain the inclusion of the image. However, the relations between image and writing can be quite complex. Many multimodality theorists have thought about typical patterns of image-writing relations and attempted to systematically describe these (Martinec and Salway 2005, Royce 2002, Unsworth 2006). Most of them draw on a social semiotic approach to text, specifically using concepts from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday and Hasan 1989). They classify and describe the visual-verbal relations differently, but there are some underlying trends that emerge, namely similarity relations, opposition relations and complementary relations. These similarity, opposition and complementary relations are close to Halliday's concept of 'extension': the verbal and visual modes provide different, but semantically related information.

In similarity relations the ways in which one mode exemplifies the other is of importance. Generally, captions are not ‘transduction’, namely the same information conveyed in a different mode. Captions are not positing the *same* information as the image, but are directing a way of looking at the image. They point to something. The caption and the image together constitute a ‘new composition’. The rhetorical relation of elaboration is probably the most common relation between text and image across different types of register in academic writing. A graph, map or table can often function as an elaboration of a particular passage of writing. Here the image or display elaborates on the writing by providing more detailed information or a series of quantifications, while the writing provides an interpretative generalization. Linguistic references to the displays often elaborate by providing a more general specification, indicating how the display might be read. Common terms used include ‘presents’ or ‘shows’ or ‘compares’ or ‘summarizes’, as in: “Figure 1 compares data from the 1980s with data from the 1990s”. This could also take the passive form, as in “The comparison of data from the 1980s with data from the 1990s is shown in figure 1”. Sometimes the reference to the display is only given parenthetically: “Overall cases of cholera increased from 839 in the 1980s to 3820 in the 1990s (figure 1)”.

When talking about visual-verbal linkages, Unsworth (2006) has a category called ‘redundancy’. However, semiotically-speaking, redundancy cannot exist. In spoken language, ‘redundant’ words or phrases may be considered those that are repetitive or those that mark thought processes (like ‘um’). However, these are not ‘redundant’ in terms of meaning-making – they may point to hesitancy, insecurity or thought processing. Certainly, in terms of captions and visual-verbal linkages, redundancy

does not make sense. One can talk of ‘rearticulation’ or ‘restatement’ of the meaning of the image in the caption or written text. It is seldom that this would be a simple ‘restatement’ of the *same* meaning, however, as different modes have different specializations.

In opposition relations, the content of the written text contrasts with that of the image. This is a relatively unusual visual-verbal relation in academic writing but is more common in popular genres, where often the opposition between writing and image is used to generate humour or irony or to pass critical commentary. In figure ii below, the caption passes critical commentary on the entrance to a large shopping centre in Cape Town, highlighting the materialism and consumer-driven nature of the centre. The formulation “this is not” makes you re-look at the image and question it in terms of the argument encapsulated in the caption.



Figure 2. This is not an entrance but an economic landmark.

In complementary relationships, what is represented in images and what is represented in writing may be different. Thus, in looking at the relations between image and writing, it is useful to bear modal specialization in mind. Image is more specific than the written text, the shape of the building *has* to be shown in an image, for example. Images can visualize the unverbilized qualities of the represented participant (like shape, colour and texture) and also visualize the locations of things (Unsworth and Cleirigh 2009: 156). See figure 3 below.

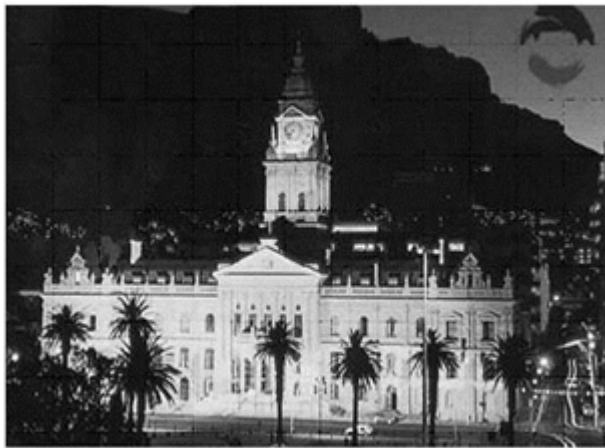


Figure 3. Affordances of writing and images

The arrangement of textual entities in figure iii above (taken from a first year History and Theory of Architecture essay comparing two buildings) tends to favour Cape Town City Hall which is placed above Leeds Town Hall. The image and captions are placed so that images read from left to right, to match the captions which read from top to bottom. This is echoed in the camera angles, where the Cape Town City Hall is represented squarely from the front, whereas the Leeds Town Hall is represented at an oblique angle. In terms of social relations, Cape Town City Hall is abstracted and made into something of an icon. It is shown at night with the hall lit up and the dark

mass of Table Mountain behind it forming a stark contrastive backdrop. This differs from the representation of the Leeds Town Hall which draws the viewer into a very concrete, bustling and ‘peopled’ space. Being aware of the epistemological affordances of modes can assist students in being aware of the construction of argument across image and writing, which is useful for both critiquing and analyzing texts.

Prior domain knowledge enables understanding of the image, understanding of the caption, and the relation between the two. This highlights the importance of audience in image selection and what goes into the captions. Bearing this in mind the relation between the images and the captions could be one of similarity or elaboration. Given that the reader knows that the halls are Cape Town City Hall and Leeds Town Hall, the writing and image reflect one another. As such, the written caption is an exposition of the image. However, if the reader is unfamiliar with the buildings, then the caption is an elaboration where the writing instantiates the image.

In looking at the relations between image and writing in a number of student texts, this paper has begun to explore the complex ways in which academic argument proceeds across modes. The implications of this are important for teaching composition to students, as the disciplinary conventions are often embedded and implicit.

Final comments

This paper has demonstrated that writing is a resource susceptible to design and has looked at a number of ways that teachers of writing can raise awareness of design

aspects, including layout, spelling and typography. On a more theoretical level, it has argued the need to redefine writing pedagogy in Higher Education through the development of metaforms that will facilitate awareness and analysis of multimodal textual construction. ‘Graduateness’ is about being able to articulate an argument and is about being critical, yet this need not always be realized through the written mode. The paper has also looked at multimodal composition, particularly focusing on ways of thinking about the relations between the visual and the verbal. The main argument is that reading and writing practices are only one part of what students have to learn in order to be produce academic discourse. When composing texts, people select from available resources which are most appropriate to express their meaning to a particular audience. Students should be helped to understand that no act of meaning-making (analysis or composition) takes place in a social vacuum and we need a pedagogy which will open up access to academia through making explicit how multimodal texts work. ‘Academic literacies’ in the twenty first century entails being able to navigate multiplicity, to critique representations in multiple modes, media and genres, and use a range of technologies in composing multimodal texts. We need to make this range of processes and practices explicit in order to enable student access to Higher Education.

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End notes

Cut to JEAP paper



Figure 1 Cape Town City Hall

Figure 2 Leeds Town Hall

Cape Town City Hall does not consist of colonnaded facades as extensively as the Leeds Town Hall. Both town halls are based on a rectangular base and the rooms are shaped in a square or rectangles – depending on the function – which is quite rigid. The corridors and staircases oppose that specific structure. The front facades of the town halls has exact proportions to itself, bringing the Gothic Revival elements, as these were considered to be classical architecture.

Figure 1. Example of modal specialization as semiotic constraint on academic voice

An example of modal specialization can be seen in figure 1. Images can visualize the un verbalized qualities of the represented participant, like shape, colour and texture (Unsworth and Cleirigh 2009: 156) and the locations of things, such as the context of Table Mountain for the Cape Town city hall. A number of features of the city halls are portrayed in the image, such as the colour and shapes of the buildings, the contextual setting, the weather (clouds), whereas the captions, ‘Cape Town city hall’ and ‘Leeds Town Hall’, and the surrounding writing do not represent these features. Academic voice in these images is thus necessarily different to that in the written mode. The academic voice in the writing and the captions is about labeling and description, distanced and impersonal. The passive is used: “are based” and “are

shaped”, and the “corridors and staircases” are given agency. However, there are some aspects of the personal in the writing, such as the evaluative adjective, “rigid”, which alerts us to the difficulties of assigning particular functions to different modes in any deterministic way. Academic voice in writing can be more subjective than we generally think of it, and images can be less emotive and more technical in images than we often assume (see Archer 2006). In thinking about the ways in which academic voice is realized in different modes, it is thus crucial to bear the specificities of context in mind.