

Digital Transformation of Creative Industries

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DIGITAL, MULTIMODAL, CREATIVE MEANING-MAKING

This afternoon I want to talk about the relationship between multimodality, creativity and the digital, and how this might provide us with new ways of looking at pedagogy in increasingly digital environments for learning.

Multimodality is a theory of communication which is interested in the ways that different resources come together to convey or represent meaning.

What I am going to talk about relates to my Doctoral Research where I am investigating how higher education assessment practices are affected by the pedagogical and societal shift to the digital. Part of my research has involved spending an academic year observing meaning-making around assessment in undergraduate courses in Architectural Design and American History, with a view to comparing how the rituals and strategies of students and tutors are affected by digital technologies and pedagogies.

On the understanding that Architecture is one of the creative disciplines, I'm going to draw on some of my experiences in the design studio to hopefully provoke questions about how we might think about multimodality in relation to pedagogy within, and beyond, creative fields.

MULTIMODALITY

Although it is variously interpreted and applied, in a broad sense we can say that multimodality depends on a narrow range of conceptual assumptions.

First, all communicational or representational acts are made up of a range of different meaning-making resources, or 'modes'.

A 'communicational act' could be an essay, a piece of animation, an architectural model, a presentation, a performance, a poem and beyond.

Second, what we understand to be a mode is contextually and culturally dependent.

Third, it is the particular selection and configuration of modes with a communicational act that influences how we interpret meaning: the prominence given to image compared to language, sound of whatever are the other constituent parts of the meaning-making assemblage.

This is the 'multimodality' that emerged from work in social semiotics: multimodality represents different work in medicine and in computer science, amongst other fields.

The critical interest in multimodality has grown at the same time as - and is closely bound to - the increasing digital character of education and society more generally. Which isn't to say we should conflate multimodality with digital scholarship: on the contrary: we only need to look at an illuminated manuscript to recognise the meticulous configuration of image, colour, typeface and language.

All the same, digital devices and online spaces particularly allow and encourage the communication and consumption of content in richly multimodal, creative and often highly visual ways.

At the same time, students are understood to have grown up surrounded by technology, prompting the emergence of new digital literacies, even if we should be cautious of conflating technical sophistication with critical thinking.

A dominant feature of the critical work within multimodality concerns the question of how pedagogy should adapt to take account of the increasingly, creative, digital and multimodal methods of meaning-making.

ARCHITECTURE: CREATIVITY, MULTIMODALITY, INTERDISCIPLINARITY

In order to investigate meaning-making around assessment, I spent two semesters observing students and tutors from a second year undergraduate Architectural Design course as they worked in the design studio, participated in exhibitions and review exercises, participated in field trips, attended marking meetings and so on. I shadowed students and also got them to send my digital postcards of their space as they completed coursework. This produced hundreds of photographs, hours of ambient sound recordings, and thousands of words of field notes. And then I followed this up with interviews with students and tutors.

What quickly became apparent was that Architecture seemed to encapsulate much of what we think about when we talk of creativity. I watched students draw on a broad range of resources, and a wide repertoire of skills, to design buildings and to construct meaning. As tutors placed value on inventiveness and imagination, I saw the construction of meaning and models by hand, on paper and on screen.

At the same time, Architecture was shown to be richly multimodal as students conveyed meaning across an orchestration of semiotic phenomena: texture, colour, shape, typeface and beyond.

As an outsider to the Architecture, I was interested in the way that tutors were able to make judgement of quality - to grade assignments - in the absence of the essayistic conventions of linearity, language and argument. Across long marking days I observed the tutor team examining 130 coursework projects and I recognised how their approach resonated with one of the most striking statements from the Manifesto for Teaching Online from the Digital Education team. When meaning was represented across a broad and imaginative use of resources, assessment became an act of interpretation rather than measure.

Third, for all that Architecture is one of the creative industries, I became aware that alongside invention and imagination, interdisciplinarity seemed vital to pedagogy and knowledge construction. As I hung-out in the design studio, I saw student draw on approaches from science, engineering, history, art and design, philosophy, music and beyond to realise their ideas.

Something I am interested in is whether the interdisciplinary character of the Architectural Design opens a door to other courses, programmes and contexts where we wish to pay greater attention to the digital and multimodal quality of pedagogy.

CONDITIONS THAT SUPPORT MULTIMODALITY

In light of the richly creative and multimodal approach to meaning-making around assessment, alongside the close relationship with between multimodality and the digital, I was interested to look at some of the conditions or strategies that were structured-into the Architectural Design course that might translate to other courses, programmes and learning contexts.

What is interesting about what I found is that while multimodal pedagogy and assessment in particular is often conceptualised in the literature as being unconventional, experimental or risky, the strategies that would seem to support it are regarded as what we might describes well established - and fairly conventional - examples of best practice around teaching feedback and assessment. This includes.

- Room to experiment in a low-stakes setting (e.g. Hounsell et al. 2007)
- Dialogue around quality, assessment, marking (e.g. Kepell & Carless 2006)
- Students learn through exposure to the work of their peers (e.g. Nicol & MacFarlane Dick 2006)

- Exercises generate feedback that 'indicates to learners where they have done well, where their misunderstandings are, and what follow-up work might be required' (Denton et al. 2008: 487)

PROVOCATION...

I want to end by briefly posing some questions that might contribute towards our discussion.

First, does pedagogy need to evolve in order to better take account of opportunities for digital, creative and multimodal meaning-making. For instance, is there something about the conventional essay that means it is no longer able to adequately account for changing methods of knowledge production? And I don't think is a given.

The second question regards the role of the tutor. How comfortable do we feel about supporting, interpreting and evaluating work where meaning is conveyed across a broad range of modes. For instance, if a student produces a highly visual assignment, do we need to have an understanding of 'how images work critically', assuming we don't already have this.

In fact more generally, can our assessment rubrics which may have been predicated on language or another form, account for the way that meaning is then represented across a broad range of resources.

And finally, by casting an eye over what takes place in the architecture studio, might we be able to respond to the challenges, and exploit the possibilities of digital, creative, multimodal meaning-making.

Ends.