



STORIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT (TITLE SLIDE)

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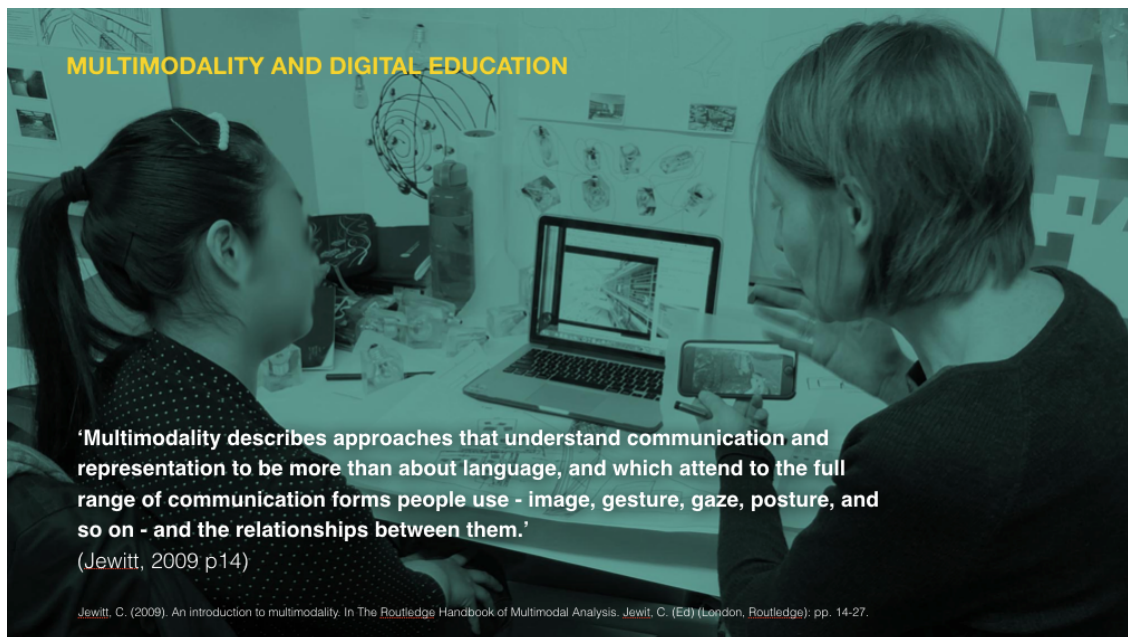
WHEN EDUCATION BECOMES POSSIBLE

24 OCTOBER 2017

Michael Gallagher* and I share an interest in the ways that digital technologies and pedagogies can bring education to new places and to new audiences. This includes taking learning out of the classroom and into the street, as well as research investigating the ways that online distance students conceptualise the university and construct spaces for learning.

My Doctoral Research is investigating the ways that higher education assessment practices are affected by the societal shift to the digital. In keeping with the theme of today's event and the International Storytelling Festival, I am going to share some stories about transformative assessment. By 'transformative assessment' I am talking about the way that assessment and teaching might have a transformative effect on a learner's educational and life opportunities. I am going to ask whether paying greater attention to the multimodal character of assessment provides another way of supporting the learning, and recognising the talent, of students who experience what we might call 'educational disadvantage' or come from a position of 'educational deficit'. In particular, I will ask whether multimodal assessment has a role to play in supporting students who are refugees or forced migrants.

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MULTIMODALITY AND DIGITAL EDUCATION

Multimodality is a theory of communication which recognises that the communication of meaning takes place in ways beyond language in its different forms.

Perhaps a useful way of thinking about multimodality is through the example of assessment itself. Those of us working in the Humanities and Social Sciences are well-versed in the essay and dissertation, pieces of work that heavily depend on printed language. Through these assessment instruments a student's understanding, knowledge and ability - or whatever the particular interests of the assignment might be - are evaluated through words on page or screen. We might call this 'monomodal' assessment in the way that the marker and the assessment criteria are concerned with the 'written mode'.

To offer a contrast, after my presentation today I will walk over to School of Architecture and, if I step into the design studios, will see examples of richly multimodal assessment, where students are conveying ideas through a combination of different modes: image, sound, language and beyond.

Over the last fifteen years there has been a growing critical interest in the relationship between multimodality and pedagogy, prompted by the increasingly digital nature of education and society more generally. It's not that multimodal communication depends on technology, however digital learning spaces, social media and digital devices particularly encourage the construction and consumption of content in ways beyond words, and particularly in visual ways.

STORIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT

'Access is both material (including access to computers, books, teachers) and symbolic, including access to particular forms of knowledge and meaning-making. The challenge is to facilitate recognition of students' diverse resources, whilst at the same time enabling access to the content and discourses of official curricula and formal methods of assessment.'

Archer (2015 p.8-9)

'Our task, therefore, is to reimagine not just what assessment of multimodal learning look like, but what we mean by literacy itself in a global world.'

Stornaiuolo et al. (2009 p.383)

'Assessment of multimodal teaching and learning becomes dependent on a commitment to recognising, flagging, recording, layering, interpreting and reflecting - and then acting - on the part of both teacher and learner, and importantly, community constituencies.'

Newfield et al. (2003 p.68)

Archer, A. (2015). Multimodal designs for learning in contexts of diversity. *Designs for Learning*, 7(2), 8. doi:10.2478/dcl-2014-0061
Newfield, D., Andrew, D., Stein, P., & Maungedzo, R. (2003). 'No Number Can Describe How Good It Was': Assessment issues in the multimodal classroom. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 10(1), 61-81. doi:10.1080/09695940301695
Stornaiuolo, A., Hull, G., & Nelson, M. E. (2009). Mobile Texts and Migrant Audiences: Rethinking Literacy and Assessment. *Language Arts*, 96(5), 382-392.

STORIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE MULTIMODAL ASSESSMENT

I am going to share three stories - case studies from the research literature - where the introduction of a multimodal assignment in place of entirely language-based forms such as the essay, were seen to support the learning and achievement of groups of students coming from backgrounds of educational disadvantage.

In her work around multimodal designs for learning, Arlene Archer describes how encouraging students to draw on their repertoire of creative skills had the effect of surfacing talents that otherwise tended to be missed within formal educational settings. Archer uses the example of 'culture jamming' where students drew on their own life experiences, literacies and technological skills to convey knowledge in ways beyond the more conventional authority of the written form. This produced assignments that deftly drew on the potentialities of the digital form to convey knowledge in ways that were simultaneously humorous and scholarly. In this way, Archer's work is suggestive of the ways that higher education writing centres can become what she refers to as 'transformational learning spaces' for student from diverse backgrounds.

Within this case study, Archer makes the vital point that equality of access extends beyond the material to include the symbolic. Equality of experience around assessment is shaped by a student's cultural capital, as well as the physical or digital resources upon which they might draw. If we think about this issue in relation to refugee and migrant students in particular, equality of opportunity isn't limited to a place within a degree programme and access to the university's facilities, but also comes with the recognition that a student newly arrived in our education system might lack the kind of background knowledge taken for granted by others more familiar

with their academic surroundings. We might ask how students with a first language other than English might immediately be equipped to express themselves in the ways that are implicit around assessment. As Archer recognises, access can go beyond unfamiliarity with assessment task to a more epistemological level, where knowledge and meaning-making is differently understood and conceptualised across groups.

A call that can be heard with some regularity across the literature concerned with multimodal assessment, is that teaching and assessment needs to adapt to reflect the increasingly visual, digital and multimodal meaning-making practices of students outside the classroom. This presents the intriguing possibility that if some of our established and overtly language-based assessment approaches do not always best serve the needs of learners, perhaps an attention to more social-oriented representational practices might better enable us to recognise talent, and support and acknowledge learning.

A case study which looks at the experiences of migrant learners in particular is that by Stornaiuolo et al. While the central argument of this case study posits multimodality as a way of rethinking literacy and media in a new digital age, the article begins by reproducing a text message from Alana in California as she introduces herself to two other children, one in India and in South Africa, as part of an educational project. The text message is a charming mixture of emoticons and words as she aims to break to the ice with unseen friends in the far corners of the world. As Michael will come on to discuss, the mobile phone has a profound importance within refugee communities. Further, in the parts of the world from where refugees and forced migrant typically originate, the smartphone far outweighs the desktop computer and laptop as the means by which access is secured to networked content, whether educational or otherwise. Software companies are increasingly designing first for mobile devices, counter to our experience in the UK with our tendency to refer to the 'mobile equivalent' of the computer-mediated or printed educational resource.

Pointing to the increasingly digital, visual nature of global society, Nicholas Mirzoeff has pointed to the the trillion-plus photos that are taken annually on mobile devices, a collective response to a world 'too enormous to see but vital to imagine' (2015: 12). Mobile phones have rapidly moved beyond language-based communication to become devices that enable the production of images, sounds and words. Whereas the production of videos or the remixing of pictures and sounds were until recently the preserve of those with a high level of technological ownership and technical sophistication, these opportunities are now in the hands of the millions of learners with access to a smartphone.

From the research by Stornaiuolo et al we might look to consider how assessment that pays particular attention to digital literacies and access of refugee learners might better suit their potential to demonstrate knowledge and understanding.

For my third story **I want to talk about a case study by Denise Newfield** and colleagues. Perhaps more than anyone, Newfield has looked towards multimodality as a way of alleviating educational inequality. Set in an English classroom in Soweto, we hear how disaffected youth have been inspired by assessment exercises that set out to encourage and reward learner's imagination by making linkages between images, words and other resources: what we understand as a multimodal approach. The title of the journal article "No Number Can Describe How Good It Was': Assessment issues in the multimodal classroom' articulated the elation of previously disenfranchised students, as they were pushed to draw on their own life experiences and interests to demonstrate understanding and ability.

I think one of the most important arguments that Newfield and her colleagues make is that introducing multimodal assessment requires a bigger commitment than simply replacing a written essay with a video assignment. Assessment isn't something that is 'done unto students' but instead needs their investment, alongside that of the teacher. In this way assessment is much less about judging how the student performs against a set of criteria at the end of the semester, and instead places emphasis on the 'process' of composition, in order to take account of the decisions that were made, the iterations that were gone through, the progress achieved - what we might call 'learning', in fact.

Thinking about these case studies - and similar examples of transformative stories around assessment within the research literature - we are drawn to the ways that students with a first language other than English; coming from adverse social situations; and with diverse prior educational histories; were newly able to learn and to demonstrate their talent by assessment approaches that looked beyond language and instead placed a greater emphasis on multimodal meaning-making.



ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

'As a refugee may not be familiar with the different types of HE assessment, or what may be expected of them, institutions could use alternative approaches that must be accompanied by clear, supportive information and advice to help applicants prepare. These approaches could include: interviews; written assessments; examinations; practical demonstrations; submitting a portfolio of work'

Universities Scotland (2016 p5)

'Higher education is an essential part of the education continuum. Access to higher education serves as a strong incentive for students to continue and complete their studies at the primary and secondary levels. Higher education also contributes to solutions and post-conflict reconstruction, promotes social, economic and gender equality, and empowers refugee communities.'

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2015 p1)

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2015). Higher education considerations for Refugees in countries affected by the Syria and Iraq crises. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/protection/operations/568bc5279/higher-education-considerations-refugees-countries-affected-syria-iraq.html?query=higher%20education>
Universities Scotland (2016). Guidance for Universities on Providing Asylum Seekers and Refugees with Access to Higher Education. Available at: <http://www.universities-scotland.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Guidance-on-Providing-Asylum-Seekers-and-Refugees-with-Access-to-Higher-Education-Nov-2016.pdf>

ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

It can be fruitful to think about these ideas in relation to some of the public statements around refugees and forced migrants. In 2016, Universities Scotland published its *Refugees Welcome* report, which sought to 'ensure that there is an understanding across the HE sector of entitlements and that any displaced person living in Scotland that wants to access higher education is not discouraged by the administrative procedures required to gain entry into higher education.' Pointing to the transformative nature of higher education, the report called for flexibility in how admission tutors look to evaluate the talent of refugee applicants. There is a recognition here that educational histories, digital literacies and meaning-making practices vary across different groups of learners. This is also seen where the *Refugees Welcome* report suggests that students should be entitled to submit a 'portfolio of work', a tacit acknowledgement that students construct and communicate knowledge in different ways: and potentially in ways other than we might have conventionally privileged within higher education.

Clearly, there is a parallel here between Universities Scotland's call for sensitivity around admissions processes, and themes from the stories I have described, where assessment has been designed to allow the life situations, digital literacies and talents of learners. Therefore if we can apply a nuanced approach to recognise talent at the point of application, can we similarly do so when evaluating understanding and ability at the point of assessment? I am certain this must already be happening. Indeed, I have already described how in some programmes multimodal pedagogy is the norm. Multimodality poses the biggest questions for those disciplines that depend heavily on the authority of the printed word.

CERTAINTIES AND CHANGE

'At the moment, too often new givens are met by recourse to old practices. New demands are countered by old certainties. In this context, we argue that in the rapidly changing global context in which the world of work, as much as our social and private world, is being re-configured, we need to re-think the nature of knowledge, of the school curriculum and pedagogy, and in particular we need to focus on the forms and—the concern of this issue—on the representational modes, the literacy aspects of assessment.'

Johnson & Kress (2003 p.8)

'By nature, schools and universities, as they developed in the 19th century, belong to another, more formal, less multimodal age. The question is, are they being colonized by the corporate interests that pervade the media and the Internet? Should they perhaps do the kind of things the media and the entertainment (and "edutainment") industries do not do? Can that still be done? It is a dilemma which forces many of us into precarious balancing acts.'

Van Leeuwen (2015 p.583)

Johnson, D., & Kress, G. (2003). Globalisation, Literacy and Society: Redesigning pedagogy and assessment. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 10(1), 5-14.
Van Leeuwen, T. (2015). Multimodality in Education: Some Directions and Some Questions. *TESOL Quarterly*, 49(3), 582-589.

CERTAINTIES AND CHANGE

In this presentation I have used three stories of transformative assessment to ask whether a greater attention to the multimodal character of communication within assessment might present ways of supporting the learning of refugees, whilst providing them with alternative ways of demonstrating their understanding and ability.

This does not suggest however that this would be appropriate in every situation or that the conventional essay is obsolete. On the contrary, the message in each of the case studies is about aligning assessment with the subject matter and the student body's circumstances.

At the same time, I know from my own research, and from experience of teaching on Masters-levels courses that emphasise the multimodal character of meaning-making, that a range of potential barriers mean that the developing assessment in the ways described in the case studies won't necessarily be straightforward. These include but are not limited to issues around resources, staff expertise, pressures of performativity and beyond.

Nevertheless, the increasingly digital nature of society and education, combined with the evolving digital literacy practices of our students, presents us with some important questions that are relevant to refugee and forced migrant learners, but also I think, to higher education students in general.

I am going to end, then, by drawing attention by repeating questions asked by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen who are widely understood to have conceived multimodality as a field of research in itself.

Alluding to the significance of thinking about assessment in a changing digital and global context, Johnson and Kress make clear that our challenge is not simply redesigning assessment tasks, but instead more to think more fundamentally about the changing nature of knowledge.

Approaching the issue of multimodal assessment from a different position, Van Leeuwen cautions against losing sight of the purpose of teaching, assessment and of the university more generally. Counter to the suggestion elsewhere that assessment should evolve to mirror the technologies and meaning-making practices that take place outside the classroom, Van Leeuwen instead asks whether our work in universities shouldn't instead be about nurturing the talents that cannot otherwise develop autonomously in social settings.

We might distil this to a question of whether the tried-and-trusted pedagogies - what Johnston and Kress might see as the 'old certainties' - that have helped to establish our universities and make them attractive to refugee, migrants and other learners - should be shaped by changes driven by globalisation, digital technologies and the extra-curricular practices of students.

What would seem to be at stake then is not simply assessment, but how we conceptualise higher education itself, when learning is less bound to the practices that take place inside the confines of the lecture theatre and within the perimeter of the university campus.

I wish to thank Elisabetta Adami from the Centre for Translation Studies at the University of Leeds for kindly offering feedback on an earlier version of this script.