CHAPTER 11

Children’s Writing as Design: An Examination of Children’s Multimodal Texts

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1 Introduction

The chapter examines multimodal texts produced by children from preschool to 6th grade. It studies the different modes children use both in free writing and in school assignments, especially in science. The texts are all part of the regular class work and were collected from various pre-school and school classes over the last four years (2010–2014). Some of the scientific texts were taken from a similar study completed in 2002, which observed the work of a 6th grade science class for a period of three months. I chose texts that are part of the routine class work because they shed light on the nature of prompts given at school and on children’s interpretation of these prompts. They also attest to students’ interests, to their semiotic decisions and to their learning. The chapter focuses on three main issues in children’s multimodal texts: 1) the division of labor between the verbal and the visual, 2) children’s multimodal paths to scientific literacy, 3) the question of assessment and teachers’ recognition of children’s semiotic work. The chapter shows that children’s literacy develops multimodally. It argues that multimodal texts must be read as whole semiotic units in order to grasp their full meaning, and suggests that curtailing the multimodal development of text production by requiring verbal texts only may weaken children’s capacity to express their ideas fully and engagingly.

Theoretical Background: A Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Analysis

The multimodal analysis of the texts in this chapter follows the principles of social semiotic inquiry, which is the most convenient for the task because, as Van Leeuwen explains, it is not a pure theory or a self-contained field [...] it does not offer ready-made answers but rather provides ideas to formulate questions about human meaning making through sign making. [...] Social Semiotics only comes in to its own when it is applied to specific instances and specific problems and it always requires immersing oneself not just in semiotic concepts and methods as such but also in some other fields [...] interdisciplinarity is an absolutely essential feature for a social semiotic analysis. (2005, p. 2)

The basic assumption of social semiotics is that meanings are made in signs or sign-complexes in distinct ways, in specific modes, none of which is arbitrary (Kress, 1993). This point is crucial, “as the concept of arbitrariness goes directly against the core notion of sign-making (rather than sign-use) and against the sign- and concept- maker's agentive and ‘interested’ role in the making of meaning, sign and concept” (Kress, 2009, p. 21). The difference between these two views—text production as sign-use or as sign-making is also crucial for teaching and studying literacy because each of these views determines the way children are taught or allowed to create texts and the ways their texts are evaluated.

Social semiotics treats every sign as motivated by interests, perspectives, values and positions of the sign maker regarding the message and its recipients (Kress, 2003). Reading and interpretation also reflect the interests and beliefs of the interpreter within a certain culture and history and so does teachers' assessment (Kress, 2009). In all societies there are 'semiotic regimes' (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 53)—differential kinds of rules for the use of semiotic resources. Children learn to obey these unwritten rules as they develop their text production, be it written, oral or visual. As we shall see, for example, topics that are not likely to be talked or written about at school may be represented metaphorically in images (see also Sidiropoulous, chapter 8 this volume).

Social semiotics insists that meaning is not made in one mode alone but in a multiplicity of modes, or rather in 'ensembles' of modes that interact and create signs whose meanings are different from those of each mode by itself