

Field Experience Report – Multimodal Literacy

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Research Question

How are multimodal literacies used in the school context and how does it affect student engagement?

Literacy and language learning strategies are a constantly evolving and adapting practice, responding to the environment, technology, students, and purpose of learning. In recent years our society has changed drastically, specifically in the world of media and technology. It only makes sense that education would follow suit. As future educators, it is important to understand the benefits of embracing technology and implementing multimodal literacy practices in the classroom. Wiltse (2015) mentions previous research supporting an approach of ‘hybridity’, or multimodality, and how it facilitates literacy learning for students of a minority language. I believe that this applies to students of all languages. The topic of student engagement is also very important as “student engagement has long been recognized as the core of effective schooling.” (Marzano & Pickering, 2011, p. 3). The following explores how teachers use multimodal literacies and strategies to reach and engage the highest possible number of students.

Research Context and Data Collection

The data used was collected from two different locations:

School A is a K-6 Calgary Board of Education Public School with 619 students and is home to one of the CBE’s Bridges Program for Division 2 students. This program is an embodiment of the school’s inclusivity and belief that an effective learning environment is built on positive relationships. The school is in a North-West Calgary community with good socioeconomic status, made up primarily of single-family dwellings with above average economic family

income and more immigrant status families than average (City of Calgary, 2014). The School Council and Parent Society are very involved and active in the school and community, and the school administration puts an emphasis on community involvement.

School B is a new Grade 10-12 Highschool that was part of the Alberta Highschool Re-Design, opening in 2013. They have 1,286 students from seven high socioeconomic status communities in North-West Calgary. Looking at these communities the average family income was well above the city average, but statistics surrounding single family homes, and immigrant status families were average (City of Calgary, 2014). The progressive nature of the high school puts an emphasis on teachers connecting with and getting to know the students, and in doing so can personalize learning activities and assessments to best suit to the students, allowing them to thrive. This Highschool is rich in its CTF and CTS courses and promotes student choice. They also are very active in their extracurricular activities which are very important to the students and staff.

Data Source	Description
Informal Conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Conversation with Highschool English Teacher (School B), about her “Where Are We Going Project” -Conversation with Highschool English Teacher (school B) “People of New York” adapted project
Maps and Diagrams	-use of images and visual in a classroom, how it influences engagement
Field Notes/Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Use of technology (tablets/computers) to assist with Art project in grade 5 classroom -Use of smartboard in Grade 4 Math Lesson -Use of Powerpoint presentations in Highschool. These presentations often included text, photos, links to websites that were then used, and videos - every classroom in both School A and B had either a permanent or portable SmartBoard (or interactive Whiteboard) set-up
Artefacts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -100s Chart example, Appendix A -Fast Facts about the prairies, written text and illustration of understanding by students, Appendix B -Humans of New York Example, Appendix C

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Theme 1: The use of SMART Technology is widespread across classrooms to increase student engagement.

SMART boards are an important tool when it comes to multimodal literacies as they offer a vessel for images, videos, music, and text to be shared to an entire class. This contrasts with the traditional classes composed of only text and the teacher talking. Technology can make classrooms more interactive, and in turn more engaging for the students. “SMART board displays help teachers bring lessons to life and encourage students to participate” (SMART Education, n.d.). Every classroom or homeroom that I observed had either a portable, or permanently set-up SMART board. The boards were put to good use as I observed teachers using them in their classrooms daily. In school B, all lessons of new content I observed utilized the SMART board to share a PowerPoint presentation. These presentations allowed the teacher to provide talking points accentuated with bullet points, photos, video clips to watch, and websites to interact with. In one Social 20-2 class, all these modalities were included in one lesson! The teacher started with a quick summary of previous lessons and proceeded with new content on the topic of economics. His presentation started with a link to a website that the class went through together, and after a facilitated discussion they continued onto a video clip, which was also discussed as a class. The SMART board offered these opportunities to include a variety of modalities in his lesson, and as shown by Wankel (2013, p. 3) multimodal technologies offer “innovative ways to create more interesting and enjoyable academic environments and offer more meaningful and authentic ways to better engage the senses of learners”.

SMART technology was also used in a variety of ways in School A; some of these uses included sharing websites, word documents, photos, and videos that supplemented the lesson.

The teachers also use them for demonstrations by having a blank template on the board and filling in the blanks with the SMART pens. I saw an example of this during a Grade 4 Math lesson where they had started with a blank 100's chart (see Appendix A). The teacher began by filling in certain squares, asking questions of the students as she did. Once enough information was up, she began asking them about visible patterns and if they knew what numbers would be coming next. If the student knew the answer, they were to raise their hand, and if called upon, they would get to come write the answer on the board. This was very interactive, and the students were so excited to be participating, and so hopeful to get to go write on the board. The high engagement level created during this portion of the lesson carried over to when the students were back working at their desks.

In School A I also saw the SMART board being used in ways I had not expected. For example, to play relaxing music after recess, as a timer so students knew how much longer they had to work, and as way to show a video used as a classroom movement break. These events may make up small portions of the day, but these acts can go a long way in helping keep students engaged and focused during instructional time.

The primary modalities I observed through the SMART technology were: print, images, websites, and videos. As Bainbridge and Heydon (2013, p. 6) point out, "the idea of literacy as related only to print text (reading and writing), was perhaps limiting". The use of SMART technology in Schools A and B helped teachers advance past those limitations and use multimodalities as an instructional tool across all areas of learning.

Theme 2: Allowing Differentiated Instruction and assessments open to a variety of mediums engages students with multiple learning styles and ways of self expression.

The classrooms in Schools A and B were incredibly diverse. There were students of many different cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Many students were immigrants, born to immigrant families, or did not speak English as their first language. Within this diverse group of students there were also social, physical, mental, and behavioural needs to consider. As a teacher, how do we work with such diverse groups of students and allow each of them to feel supported and successful? One strategy I observed was differentiated instruction practices. Alberta Education considers differentiated instruction to be a strategy to maximize learning by recognizing that all students have their own individual and cultural learning styles, and to provide students with ways to explore the curriculum and demonstrate learning according to their individual needs, abilities and interests (Alberta Education, 2005).

I saw an example of this at School A during a Grade 5 Art class. After the assignment had been explained to the class, the students were given the time to work at their desks, talk amongst their desk groups, and share creativity. Some students had ideas of what they wanted to draw but did not know how to draw the desired object, they were able to use the classroom computer or iPads to search instructional images or videos to help them draw their object. Only a handful of students used the technology, but those that did re-watched the video many times and paused it at certain spots to help them complete their drawing. This allowed them to draw what they really wanted to and offered the flexibility to do so at their own pace. When the students completed their project, they were eager to share, and were very proud of their work. Upon talking to the teacher, he explained that during working time in his classroom the students have the freedom to use technology as a resource to their learning if they need it.

Another example was explained to me during a conversation with one of the English Language Arts (ELA) teachers at School B. One of her classes was all English Language

Learners (ELL) or children with a Code. To get to know the students they completed the ‘Where Are We Going’ project, where the students were to express where they thought they would be or what would be important to them in the future. There were no restrictions to how far in the future, or through what modes they were to express themselves. She showed us some of the finished work, and the pieces ranged from text only to drawings, paintings, online collages, and combinations of the previously listed. This example of differentiated instruction demonstrated how “modes other than language provide enhanced opportunities for individuals to tell stories about their own lives, experiences, and ways of knowing” (Johnson & Kendrick, 2017, p.667).

Theme 3: Incorporating the use of visuals as an instructional tool and into student work increases student engagement and the depth of understanding they can achieve and share.

In both Schools visuals were used for many different purposes, which was noticeable before even stepping into a classroom. In Schools A and B, they displayed student work in the hallways, had photos of previous classes and students, and posters with text and visuals relaying information about student health and safety. This carried on into the classrooms, with each teacher having their own array of motivational, instructional, and personal visuals and posters on the walls of their classroom. Having a bright, warm, positive environment has been shown to increase a sense of community and engagement (Church, n.d.).

The teachers I observed in Schools A and B used visuals in their classes on a seemingly daily basis. We have already discussed how visuals are used in Theme 1 using SMART boards. Outside of these virtual visuals, I saw other effective uses of visuals in both schools. One example was a high school Social Studies 20 class that had magnets of politicians faces, party symbols, and other commonly used symbols on the whiteboard. The class was discussing

different economic theories and the teacher had drawn a spectrum on the board. The class talked about where different politicians would go on the spectrum, and the teacher would place the magnets based on student recommendations. If the teacher had only talked about the different theories, it would not be as memorable as it was with the politicians faces as the visual representation, and the movement on the spectrum. This use of visual made the learning more tangible for the students.

In School A I saw an example of allowing students to express themselves with both visuals and print in a Grade 2 Social lesson on the Prairies (see Appendix B). The lesson began with the teacher reading aloud to the students, who followed along in their copies of the book using finger tracing. She then read the section aloud to the students asking them to close their eyes. Finally, she had them read the section once on their own before beginning the handout. The handout had three rows and two columns that the students were to fill in. The left column was to be written in using dot-n-jots of the key points in the reading, and in the right column they were to draw what they thought the prairies would look like. This allowed the students to synthesize and express their understanding of what they had read and written.

In school B I had an informal conversation with one of the English Language Arts teachers regarding a project her students completed. The project was a school-wide personalized adaptation of the 'Humans Of New York' (see Appendix C) called 'Humans of School B', where the students were to take a picture and add a quote to it. She showed me some of the student work and I was shocked at how many of the images and quotes touched upon topics that were very mature, and I was impressed by how much they students were able to portray through their images and corresponding quotes. This supports Mills, Bellocchi, Patulny, & Dooley (2017) who proposed "that having students compose still, digital images to represent affect is a useful

approach to developing emotional knowledge and multimodal language” (p.104) and Johnson and Kendrick (2017) who demonstrate how non-linguistic approaches allow opportunities for students to explore and show parts of their lives and identities, particularly related to difficult past experiences.

Implications and Recommendations

During my field experience I learned the extent to which literacy practices have changed since I was a student. The former methods of teaching where teachers talked, used text, worksheets, and the occasional photo has transformed, becoming multimodal with the use of images, videos, websites, and even music. This is important as “in present-day society, the literacy demands made on people are greater than ever and require *all* of the language arts.” (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2013, p.5). I saw very broad usage of multimodalities in the classrooms, however I did not see them being used to the extent I would have expected. For example, I saw teachers allowing students to express themselves through various modes in Social Studies and English, but not in subjects such as Mathematics or Science. I also saw many modalities being used as an instructional tool in lesson delivery, but I expected to see more student interaction with these modalities and the content.

These observations combined with the literature have led to these three recommendations:

- Explore the use of SMART technologies as more than a vessel to show Powerpoint presentations. Use the technology to allow students hands-on interaction with the content in Schools A and B.

- Continue the use of varying modes, including technology, to assist Differentiated Instruction in School A, and increase the use of differentiated instruction strategies in School B. In both schools, work on allowing multiple ways of expression in student work.
- Provide teachers with knowledge of multimodal resources that increase student interaction with content, and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge, for example implement the use of Kahoot in School B.

In conclusion, multimodal literacy strategies were evident across the classrooms and subjects that I observed, but as the world around us continues to evolve, so must education continue to grow and adapt with it.

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Appendix A

Blank 100s Chart – filled in with student example

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11						17			
21						27			
31						37			
41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50
51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60
61						67			
71						77			
81						87			
91						97			

Appendix B

Fast Facts of the Prairies Sheet

Left column for dot-n-jots, or bullet points, right column for children illustration of what they thought that would look like in the prairies.

Fast Facts About the Prairies

Name _____

Land:	
Bodies of Water:	
Climate	

Appendix C

Humans of New York examples

Photos retrieved from <http://www.humansofnewyork.com/tagged/refugee-stories>

KOS, GREECE

“But what could I do? I had no choice. Then two weeks later she called with even worse news.”



KOS, GREECE

“In the ocean we hit a rock, but the captain told us not to worry.”