Multimodal Approaches to Non-Fiction Reading

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Abstract

More than a decade into the 21st century, education still approaches the incorporation of technology in the non-fiction curriculum as a tack-on, positioning print-based text hierarchically as the most valid learning tool. In situations of time-constraint, the lessons that get cut are generally multimodal, whereas print-based reading, as the reified medium, remains.

Methodologies that privilege print-based reading and learning no longer meet the needs of 21st century students. This paper examines theories of reading that both pre-date the internet as well as theories that emerged once technology changed information-gathering experiences. This paper also examines a 21st century middle school lesson plan on the Lascaux Caves which uses as its text the virtual tour of this paleolithic site created by the French government.

By highlighting the differences in pedagogy between the transmission model and the adaptive 21st century model, our question becomes: if we take what we know about theories of how students have historically developed a sense of non-fiction, and merge that understanding with an interactive relationship with technology, what does it mean for ways that students read non-fiction today?

Non-fiction Reading: History of 20th Century Text

In the United States, as in much of academia, print-based media, both online and in-hand, is hierarchically positioned as the text for academics and intellectuals. Luke and Freebody (1997) say,

The literacy education that was available in the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century was based on a two-stage model: "the basics," entailing word recognition, hand writing, spelling, and reading aloud, followed by "the classics," entailing exposure to a canon of valued literature. (p. 186)

In the 20th century, a shift in reading practices resulted in the "de-emphasis of oral reading practices and their replacement by methods that stressed silent reading and the individuated experience of the reader" (Luke and Freebody, 1997, p. 188). The role that silent reading plays socially is to place priority on a personal response to literature, a response that makes the relationship between the text creator and the reader feel very private and open to one single interpretation. We continue to see this in the current theory aimed at elementary and young adolescent American readers in the emphasis upon making text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world comparisons (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), all of which privileges a private reading. In light of the rise of multimodal texts, however, the reification of the emphasis on a singular interpretation of a text becomes problematic.

This problematic emphasis upon individual interpretation is compounded by the fact that the privileged position of print-based text is in flux. According to Alvermann (2008), "Until recently, language (speech and writing) went largely unchallenged as the communicative mode of choice among literate people" (p. 11). It is the "until recently" that stands out. Many academics, students, teachers, and employers no longer look at reading the same way. Even the makers of textbooks realize that they have to stay technologically relevant, now including "interactive CDs and linked websites to enhance learning and availability of information" (Hagood, 2003, p. 387). Texts are becoming increasingly multimodal, in part to reflect the general population's embrace of new communicative formats.

These shifts in the hierarchical positioning of multimodal texts when reading for information are hopeful. As we look to new methods to teach non-fiction, however, it is important that we continue to ground our practice in research.

A 21st Century Lascaux Cave Lesson

In this lesson, young adolescents take part in a virtual tour of the Lascaux Cave. As "visitors," the students move through the various rooms and galleries of the cave, exploring the different artworks as they appear in reality (or, in 'reality' as reality has been determined by the makers of the virtual tour). By scrolling over different images, students can access a variety of extenuating information, including short hyper-texted readings, related images, videos describing paleolithic artistic methods, as well as

a variety of other background information presented in a host of mediums. As students explore these myriad sources, they create individual understandings of the caves. These understandings are then shared in ongoing online debates that inform teams of students as they make a final determination as to whether the Cave, as an important human heritage site, should be closed to the general public. Student groups then present their findings publicly and share their results and opinions with their peers and with other student groups globally focused on this same topic.

Stage 1- Desired Results	
Established Goals: **Students will participate in a virtual tour of the Lascaux Cave, employing video, audio, and web resources to identify important non-fiction information in order to create meaning and display understanding of how the artwork of the cave displays evidence of an advanced civilization.**	
Understandings: Students will understand that….. - Civilizations are pre-defined by cultural markers including: access to a food surplus, common language, division of labor, and common belief system (politics, religion, etc.). - Civilizations use art to represent themselves and make meaning. - Knowledge acquisition is not just an individual activity, but a social one.	**Essential Questions:** - How did the prehistoric artists adapt to the different environments within the cave to create their art? - In what ways do the design elements used by the creators of the website impact the viewer? - What themes did the artists choose to depict and what might these themes suggest about their prehistoric culture? - How does the artwork of the Lascaux Cave reveal evidence of an advanced civilization? - What are the markers of an advanced civilization?
Student will know… - When different areas of the Lascaux Cave were decorated. - How artists used available materials to create illustrations. - How to use 21st century resources to create meaning and display understanding.	Student will be able to… - Identify cultural markers within the Lascaux Cave. - Identify themes within the artwork of the cave. - Use video and audio to derive non-fiction information. - Use video and audio to explain their understanding.
Stage 2- Assessment Evidence	
Performance Tasks: Regular video "journals" discussing proposed answers to the essential	**Other Evidence:** - Ongoing note taking. - Reflection upon others' work and reflection

questions.
- Final group 21st century PSA advocating/nullifying the closing of the Lascaux Cave to the public.

upon peer feedback.

Self-Assessments
- Reflection upon own video "journals," incorporation of others' feedback into "journals," and identification of maturation of understanding throughout the assignment.
- Group and self-reflection (using 3 R's of Retell, Relate, Reflect) at conclusion of unit.

Other Evidence, Summarized

Stage 3- Learning Plan

Learning Activities: Days 1-2
- Overview video http://youtu.be/n7WS1XkApNo produced by UNESCO providing information on the Cave and its extensive paleolithic art
- Teacher-created tutorial on how to navigate the official website of the Lascaux Cave (http://www.lascaux.culture.fr/?lng=en#/fr/00.xml)
- Webquest, with teacher-provided checklist
- On-going, individual 90-second video responses that synthesize gathered information and present initial answers to the four bulleted essential questions. Videos will be uploaded to a common account and viewed by peers, who will offer feedback in the way of extending questions, clarification, observations, and disagreements. From this feedback, individual students then generate questions for further exploration.

Learning Activities: Days 2-4
- On-going, individual 90-second video responses that synthesize gathered information and present initial answers to the four bulleted essential questions. Videos will be uploaded to a common account and

viewed by peers, who will offer feedback in the way of extending questions, clarification, observations, and disagreements. From this feedback, individual students would then generate questions for further exploration.

Learning Activities: Days 5-7
- Produce a 21st century Public Service Announcement (PSA)
- justifying or arguing against the choice to close the cave. PSAs may be presented in any one of a number of formats, including interactive presentations, documentary videos, and hyperlinked blogs, which incorporate writing, audio, video, and still images in making groups' collaborative arguments. Final products will be showcased, via the classroom web portal, with students within the class and across the grade level, with parents, other faculty, and with students globally via the student portal for the Lascaux Cave site.

Transmediation to Generate Knowledge in Multimodal Non-Fiction Texts

During the Lascaux Caves Lesson, students use video to interpret their non-fiction reading, creating video journal entries that propose answers to the essential questions, and then discussing them in an online blog that's open to the entire class. Students also work in groups to create a PSA, in a format of their choice, which advocates either for or against the closing of the Lascaux Caves to the public. Using video, commenting online, and creating a PSA are intended to provide an opportunity for students to transmediate, to analyze information from many sign systems (still image, moving image, text, etc.) through another sign system, video, with the aim of strengthening students' understanding. In 1995, Marjorie Siegel theorized why moving across modes (in our current dialogue, across media) generates understanding: Learners must rotate the content and expression planes of two different sign systems such that the expression plane of the new sign system conveys the content of the initial sign system. But because the expression plane is that of another sign system, the connection between the two sign systems must be invented, as it does not exist prior to the act of transmediation itself. (p. 463)In other words, students create new meaning when they gather information across different media and modalities because doing so requires inventing a connection that conveys an intended meaning. This occurs both individually and socially, and the process benefits from increased opportunities for the sharing of understanding. Experiences with transmediation are built into the Lascaux Cave lesson through video responses, an online blog, and PSA production. Students are also asked to transmediate through a traditional form of knowledge-making: taking notes. Educators could further promote students' transmediation by using a backchannel to aggregate inline notes and instant responses while students complete the webquest individually. Inline notes encourage re-reading individual responses as well as re-watching the video. Multiple repetitions of the non-fiction information presented and processed in this multimodal way explicitly improve retention and understanding. Educators could also provide explicit instruction in transmediation during group PSA production by asking students to reflect upon what information they choose to use in making their argument. Is it primarily video, audio, or text? How is the modality in which the information is presented significant? And how will reliance upon that type of modality be incorporated in the students' presentation in their PSA? All of these methods ask the students to reflect upon and use their transmediation to read, produce, and think multimodally.

Conclusion

At this point, the internet world has been an active domain for nearly twenty years. The teenagers who were pushing the boundaries of multimodalities in 1995 are now nearing their forties. Hagood (2003) says, "new media and online literacies can no longer be considered only what youth 'do' to the exclusion of what adults 'do' or as an 'add on' to the field of reading" (p. 387). It is necessary to make a shift in our hierarchical thinking about the role of different styles of texts. In the developing of the Lascaux Cave lessons, we approached creating unit and lesson plans from a stance that incorporates theory. What we created highlights that engaging in a variety of multimodal fashions is thoughtful, hard, investigative work for both students and teachers. The lessons dedicate time to the development of a metalanguage for students to use in discussing their work, a metalanguage that adds a deeper layer of understanding as students make meaning of their online interactions. It is important that educators, researchers, and students use this same depth of analysis as we continue the discussion about what it means to read non-fiction in a multimodal world.

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