Bringing forth worlds

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Abstract

Kress encourages us to understand writing as "transformative engagement in the world," and his emphasis on the materiality of modes draws our attention to the multiple possibilities offered by different materials and sensory channels. Writing involves the transformation of all aspects of the resources for meaning; thus writing is always an ethical act, and the worlds that different cultures and communities bring forth through their semiotic work offer different possibilities of being.
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Keywords: Affordances; Agency; Creativity; Materiality; Multimodal literacy; Semiotic resources; Social semiotics

Despite the numbers on the sections, which were inserted by the publisher, the sections that follow can be read in any order, including the order in which they are printed. They all point in the same direction, I believe.

1. Creativity

Kress states that he has "turned away from the enchantment of linguistics with abstraction which had dominated the twentieth century" (Kress, 2005, p. 10). Like other linguists working in the British tradition, he has the advantage of the legacy of Firth and Halliday, who assumed that language is fundamentally social. American scholars, in contrast, start with Chomskean assumptions about language as a competence acquired by children who, as Chomsky was wont to remark, operate like little linguists, deriving rules from data, testing them out, and revising them. Every child's linguistic competence is assumed to be the same, differing slightly from their elders' competence only because they pay more attention to their peers' language than to that of their parents and teachers. Creativity in language, according to Chomsky, derives from the recursivity of syntactic rules that allow users to create ever-longer sentences (this is the theory that underlies the practice of sentence combining that was supposed to enhance students' syntactic fluency that was considered an important part of writing competence that. . .).

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Kress' notion of creativity in language is quite different, and it inspires a radically different pedagogy. He sees children not as little linguists abstracting rules from data but as designers, or artists, who shape semiotic resources according to their interests in their particular rhetorical situations. As he says in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003):

> *creativity* is ordinary, normal; it is the everyday process of semiotic work as making meaning.. . . until now we have viewed human semiotic work in a way which is distorting: seen from the older perspective this now normal creative activity is classified as deviation or error; that which is most characteristically human is ruled out of court, not admissible. (p. 40)

Children's normal creativity in using semiotic resources is also observed by Scott McCloud (2000) who talks about how his 4- and 6-year-old daughters play with the tools on one of their art programs, finding ways to use them not explicitly built into the program. He says, "This ability to *play* with the new tools, to learn them from the *inside*, is our best hope of *understanding* them" (p. 145). If we see the creative use of semiotic resources as Kress (2003) does, as "normal and unremarkable in every instance of sign-making" (p. 169), we can understand writing, or composing in any medium, as a process of learning, as Kress says, a "dynamic active process, far removed from inert notions such as 'acquisition'" (p. 40), a process of "transformative engagement in the world, transformation constantly of the self in that engagement, transformation of the resources for representation outwardly and inwardly" (Kress, 2005, p. 20).

2. Affordances

Kress (2003) argues that in order to make the complex design decisions made necessary by the new technologies of communication we need "to understand the meaning-potentials of the resources as precisely and explicitly as we can" (p. 24), and to that end he describes some of the affordances of the modes of speech, writing, and image and some of the facilities of the page media and screen media. The notion that particular modes and media offer particular possibilities and limitations makes sense in a lot of ways. If, for example, you ask me where I keep the cereal in my kitchen, it is easier for me to show you the shelf or gesture to it than to explain that the cereal is on the top shelf of the lower cupboard next to the refrigerator. Even the somewhat counterintuitive idea that words are relatively empty of meaning and images are full of meaning makes sense with a little thought, especially when thought through the idea of epistemological commitments that words and images force upon us. If I say my friend Tom is wearing a hat, I have not told you and do not need to specify what hat, but if I draw a picture of him, I have to draw some specific hat, even if I make up something weird. Screens facilitate multimodality (especially the inclusion of sound and video) more easily than pages, which can accommodate still images but struggle with sound (those little chips that play songs) and occasionally with smell (scratch and sniff). Separating the effects of mode and media choices makes sense too: writing, after all, occurs on screens as well as pages, and it is clearly the traditional page that dictates a single entry point, and not writing, which though always linear in small bits can also, in larger bits, be arranged spatially in blocks.