



The emergence of semiotic resource complexes in the composing processes of young students in a literacy classroom context



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ABSTRACT

In this article, I present examples from a case study of the multimodal composing processes of two young students (age 5) in a literacy classroom context. Drawing upon a social semiotic perspective, I identified various types of semiotic resource complexes as emerging at particular junctures in the students' composing processes. These resource complexes emerged during the course of composing, and were constituted both graphically and socially by social semiotic processes involving combinations of resources that centered on a particular node of meaning. I illustrate these semiotic resource complexes and describe their role in the students' multimodal composing processes. These findings offer conceptual development that can be used heuristically to contribute to the broader goal of understanding the social semiotic character of multimodal composing processes of students in classroom contexts.

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1. Introduction

Recently, literacy scholars working from a social semiotic perspective (Kress, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2005) have given increased attention to the concept of multimodality, which refers to the idea of simultaneously using more than one mode (such as visual, gestural, linguistic, and audio modes) in the process of representing and communicating meanings (Burn, 2009; Burn & Parker, 2003; Mavers, 2007; Mills, 2011; Pahl, 2003, 2009; Ranker, 2007, 2008; Van Leeuwen, 2000). This is due in part to the increasing role of digital technologies in composing processes, but is also the result of an increasing awareness that all communication is complexly multimodal—yet not well understood due to a historical focus on language at the expense of other modes. A central concern of this body of research has been to explore how multiple modes are combined, and the contextualized ways that these combinations produce new potentials for students to make meanings. For example, Hull and Nelson (2005), in their study of the video-making processes of a focal adolescent, noted that he made specific combinations between modes that created new semiotic potentials and meanings “that a viewer or listener experiences is qualitatively different, transcending what is possible via each mode separately” (p. 251). In addition, Ranker (2007) closely examined the multimodal composing processes of a young student who composed his own comic books, illustrating how he drew upon semiotic material from multiple media (video games, television programs, webpages, and comic books), integrating available designs from these media in the creation of new texts, thereby redesigning the meanings that these media made available to him. In another social semiotic study of multimodal composing processes, Burn and Parker (2003)

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examined the video making processes of young students with a similar aim of understanding “how the different modes are articulated: how they compliment, reiterate, anticipate, and contradict each other,” referring to groupings of semiotic material made between modes (p. 63).

These scholars of multimodality have worked toward qualitatively describing the ways that meanings are created when multiple modes are combined in multimodal composing processes. However, recent developments in social semiotics (Kress, 2010; Van Leeuwen, 2005) have provided new tools for understanding students’ multimodal composing and meaning making processes as they occur in classroom settings. In particular, the concept of a *multimodal ensemble* (Jewitt, 2007; Kress, 2010; Mavers, 2007, 2009a, 2009b) has emerged from a social semiotic approach to multimodality, and has much potential for adding to the understanding of students’ multimodal composing processes, since it describes how meaning and communication emerge from specific, contextualized ways that multiple modes are used simultaneously. The term multimodal ensemble most often refers to an ensemble or combination of modes, drawing attention to how meaning makers combine modes in the production of texts, meanings, and communications—as well as the ways in which these combinations produce new potentials for producing and communicating meanings. Ensembles have also been referred to as ensembles signs, (Kress, 2010, p. 58; Mavers, 2007, p. 156), meanings, (Mavers, 2009a, p. 145), and semiotic resources (Jewitt, 2007, p. 276). For example, Kress (2010) identified the airplane passenger safety demonstration presented to passengers at the beginning of airplane flights as an example of a multimodal ensemble that has been orchestrated into a coherent text that consists of the following elements: gestures (demonstrations of the seatbelts, air masks, pointing toward exits, etc.); spoken instructions; and written/visual explanations on the instruction card.

Mavers (2007, 2009a, 2009b) has examined semiotic processes and the formation of multimodal semiotic ensembles in classroom composing and meaning making contexts, specifically. The multimodal ensembles that emerge in classrooms can be student or teacher produced. For example, in her study of a child’s email exchanges as semiotic design, Mavers (2007) noted that “which signs are juxtaposed, integrated and interwoven creates an apt semiotic ensemble” (p. 156), considering emails as ensembles of semiotic resources such as syntax, punctuation, letter case, lexis, and spelling. Multimodal ensembles can also take on the form of lessons that teachers orchestrate from across multiple modes in order to demonstrate or represent complex ideas to students (Kress, 2010; Mavers, 2009a, 2009b). For example, Mavers (2009b) closely examined a teacher’s use of a visualizer (document camera or digital projector) with 10–11 year old students as they learned about making graphs. Mavers described how the teacher orchestrated multimodal ensembles of gesture, writing, image, and speech in her lessons, which the students then used as a demonstration or model for making their own graphs.

In developing the concept of a multimodal ensemble, Mavers (2009a) also investigated student text-making as semiotic work in a year three class with seven- and eight-year-old students. In this study, the teacher used a visualizer or digital projector to demonstrate the operations of magnets: her lesson-as-multimodal-ensemble was comprised of gestural moves with the magnets, visual representations on the screen, and spoken explanations about what was happening with the magnets. Mavers also described how students used whiteboards in response to the demonstration, drawing and writing about their own understanding of the teacher’s demonstration, and thus creating their own multimodal ensembles in response to the teacher’s lesson-as-prompt. It was the constantly changing character of these ensembles that led Mavers to develop the concept of a “fast-moving ensemble,” as noted below:

The semiotic work of learning entails interpreting the semiotic flow of the lesson as meanings are distributed within and between modes of representation and communication and combined in numerous variations of fast-moving ensembles across teaching and learning interactions and activities. Realized with different media and located in different signs of display, sign-making frequently shifts between the teacher’s and students’ bodies, the class screen and hand-made texts. (p. 144)

Though the concept of a multimodal ensemble has been developed and applied to a few educational contexts, it has not been applied to understanding early multimodal composing processes, specifically. In this article, I seek to build upon, apply, and extend the concept of a multimodal ensemble by describing how ensembles and other types of ensemble-like semiotic entities can emerge during multimodal composing processes. I do this by drawing upon examples from a case study of the multimodal composing of young students in a kindergarten classroom curricular unit that involved students in extensive research about animals, and the simultaneous production of a digital video about their work—thus offering many opportunities and materials for engaging in multimodal meaning-making processes. I approached the students’ composing processes (which involved reading, writing, drawing, discussing, and viewing) as particular types of situated, social semiotic processes. My research questions were: What types of multimodal ensembles emerge during the students’ multimodal composing processes? In what ways do the students draw upon and use semiotic resources from across various modes in the creation of these ensembles? How are these semiotic resources and ensembles used and assembled for print production?

As I analyzed the students’ multimodal composing processes, I identified various types of *semiotic resource complexes*, which I define as constellations of semiotic resources drawn from across modes and assembled around a particular node of meaning in the process of composing a completed multimodal text. Because I identified semiotic entities that emerged during the students’ composing processes that could not be fully captured by the concept of an ensemble, I searched for ways of describing these units as a way of building upon and extending the concept of a multimodal ensemble within the context of multimodal composing. This led to my development of the concept of a semiotic resource complex as ephemeral, temporary semiotic entities that serve as building blocks, of sorts, for ensembles-to-be. The semiotic resource complexes

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