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Book Review: Literacy in the New Media Age

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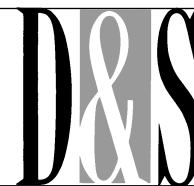
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Book reviews



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GUNTHER KRESS, *Literacy in the New Media Age*. London: Routledge, 2003. xiii + 186 pp.

This book is about the semiotics of new literacy as it examines the modes of representation and the interactive principles behind multimodal literacy. The learning implication goes beyond literacy as all subjects in school may come in various learning modes. Audio-visual teaching aids, e-learning, and interactive teaching techniques such as those advocated in Multiple Intelligences are some of the learning approaches educators use to engage learning. Meaning making processes afforded by each medium are a concern. Since learning is meaning making, each medium of learning becomes a sign of meaning and learning (p. 11).

We want to encourage and trigger interest of continued learning in education and literacy education. In order to attain a high level of learning interest we need to exploit the learning media to induce the relevant imagination in learning. The concept of *imagination* is raised by Kress as follows:

Imagination in the sense that it was produced by engagement with the written text was a move towards an inner world; imagination in the sense that is required by the demands of design – the imposition of order on the representational world – is a move towards action in the outer world. One was the move towards contemplation; the other is a move towards outward action (pp. 59–60).

Educators need to understand the *function mode* of their learning material in engaging effective learning. The print media is insufficient to engage learning. The advance of information technology and the understanding of human cognition suggest that a more integrated approach is required, either in the skills of delivery or the production of content material for an effective learning. Effective learning begets engaged-imagination of both the inner and outer sense, as quoted above.

As a reflection from reading *Literacy and multimodality* in this book, I use the notion of *photosynthesis* to show the many levels of imagination involved in learning (Sew, 2004). The external order of the real state of affairs needs to be mapped onto the conventional learning material in a two-dimensional representation as print form by means of language through a sequential order of water and carbon dioxide in relation with light and chlorophyll to form glucose and oxygen within the chain of the food-making process. The new age imagination of this process can be further simulated on a website with the animation of water seeping into the plant to the green leaves under the sun and reacting with the carbon dioxide in air to form sugar and oxygen as its by product. The learning imagination has been manipulated vividly in new media inbuilt with visual and animate *affordances*.

The notion of transmediation in learning and communication (see Semadi, 2003) can foster semiotic correlation in learning–meaning manipulation. Kress uses the term *transformation*, i.e. the rearrangement and expansion of the present knowledge in the brain through assimilation and integration (pp. 39, 47). This view can be supported by parallel processing in the brain where knowledge is not acquired as absolutely new but through the basis of existing knowledge (Goldblum, 2001). The transmediation of the learning in a science lesson like *photosynthesis* involves the use of e-learning through a spectrum of representations, which include color, luminosity, physical movement simulating atomic representation, images of familiar tree-parts, a change of various combinations showing a transformation of chemical outcomes in the process of food making coupled with audio effect.

(Literacy) education involves more than print, as there is the inclusion of other signs and meaning markers. That current literacy education is a *reading path* involving different modes of representation and various forms of texts requires the understanding of the relevance of order in representation such as top versus bottom, left versus right, the layout, architectural arrangement, and other forms of spatial logic, or, in short, the visual grammar (pp. 65–9). Problematic semiotics in the designing of on-line learning material begs investigation. The notion *architecture of the pages* was used in Derewianka (2003: 45) to refer to the three-dimensional consideration of height, width and depth of web page designing.

Through this book, Kress examines the learning genres and the (re)presentation of these genres in the current world of literacy. There are 10 chapters, followed by a bibliography and an index. Some of the topics in the book include: *The future of literacy*, *Literacy and multimodality*, *A social theory of text*, *Meaning and frames*, and *Reading as semiosis*. Various aspects of semiotics are examined, which means specific terms like *affordance*, *functional load*, *function mode*, *learning*, *reading*, *reading path*, *text*, *materiality*, and *transformation* are necessary for the new age literacy.

The book identifies new writing and reading complexes afforded by technology to create sophisticated learning material production. The use of an

all-encompassing medium as the new literacy foundation has pushed the conventional learning theories, derived solely from print and oracy, nearer to the brink of antiquity. The points put forth in this book are to be noted as learning progresses.

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ANNA DE FINA, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003. ix + 251 pp.

This book aims to explain how identity is constructed, displayed and negotiated in the narratives of Mexican undocumented migrants in the United States. After pointing out the merits of multidisciplinary in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 goes on to discuss the social phenomenon of undocumented migration, paying attention to methodological issues, and the political and public discourses about migration. In Chapter 3 De Fina shows how her group of migrants prefer pronominal choices that downplay narrators' roles while emphasizing collective identity. I found this chapter slightly problematic insofar as my lack of knowledge about how Spanish pronouns can be derived based on morphology made it difficult to initially evaluate De Fina's evidence. I feel that a couple of examples of how this works would have solved this problem. In Chapter 4 De Fina innovatively shows how Searle's (1979) speech act theory can be productively combined with the work of Bahktin (1981), Goffman (1981), and Tannen (1989) to demonstrate how agency increases when requests and offers are reported as being done by a group rather than an individual. In Chapters 5 and 6 De Fina goes on to show the situated and historical nature of identity categories. In particular she shows how narrators increase their repertoire and use of ethnic categories over time by increasingly defining themselves in relation to ethnic categories found in political and public discourses about undocumented migrants.