

Review of: Multimodality, Learning and Communication:

A Social Semiotic Frame

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What does learning mean outside traditional institutions? How do we engage with different multimodal resources when communicating with others in this contemporary social world? These questions are fundamental inquiries of the book, which distinguish its multimodal analysis from other approaches with an aim of understanding better the conceptualisation of learning and communication. Bezemer, a Professor of Communication at UCL Institute of Education, and Kress, a former Professor of Semiotics and Education at University of London, expand the social semiotic theory and provide various terminology that are applicable to understanding communication and learning within hugely diverse societies and unpredictable multimodal communicational tasks. This book is essential, not only for researchers in the field of multimodality, semiotics, applied linguistics and education, but also practitioners with an interest in improving their strategies for communication and learning. It goes beyond the education theories based on the assumption of a homogenous society, to investigate learning and communication of a heterogeneous contemporary society based on signs and meaning-making. The book follows more than two decades of extensive research conducted by the authors in an attempt to outline a social semiotic theory of multimodal learning and communication that can be applied to any field. They suggest the interrelation between learning and communication, not only in schools but also in other environments, such as hospitals. By providing examples from empirical studies, they illustrate how meaning is expressed through different multimodal resources based on various sign-making principles. Ranging from homes and restaurants to schools and operating theatres, the authors draw attention to signs of learning, and argue that learning and communication are interconnected.

Bezemer and Kress arrange their work in seven chapters. The book begins by highlighting the importance of recognising all methods of meaning-making (Chapter 1), followed by a social semiotic theory of communication (Chapter 2) before a discussion of learning as transformative engagement (Chapter 3). Next, the authors discuss the design of multimodal learning environments (Chapter 4), followed by the assessment and evaluation of learning (Chapter 5). The authors then represent semiotic changes over time (Chapter 6) and conclude with how to apply the proposed framework to different fields and situations (Chapter 7).

In the first chapter, the authors emphasise the significance of recognising all methods of meaning-making for learning and communication. They draw on an example of surgeons- medical students' communication in which the surgeon uses all possible visual and verbal communicative resources i.e. speaking, using a snapshot, a gesture to teach students. The authors aim to develop the social semiotic theory by demonstrating how recognition of social semiotics is fundamental to learning and communication.

Chapter 2 explains the social semiotic model of communication and focuses on sign-making. Bezemer and Kress explain the multimodal sign-making by comparing three examples from different sites: a job interview, a Facebook status update and a surgical operation in an operating theatre. Through these examples, they introduce a social semiotic lexicon (e.g. mode, sign, and resources), which could be used to describe all multimodal configurations. Furthermore, one of the important aspects they discuss and introduce in this chapter is the interpretation of the audience as a sign re-maker.

In Chapter 3, the authors challenge the traditional concept of learning that views learning as an expert-novice transition of knowledge. Moreover, they argue that it is, 'transformative engagement, no matter by whom or how that engagement has been or is shaped' (p.38). To illustrate this concept, various examples are provided, such as the analysis of body language of a silent student in a classroom, drawings by a child and blog posts by museum visitors. These examples indicate that as long as the learners are engaged, communication and learning occur, regardless of whether the learners. This new concept of learning as engagement with the world is applicable to our contemporary diver's society. Moreover, it could have pedagogical implications and provide more flexibility for both teachers and learners.

The design of the learning environment is discussed in Chapter 4 by exploring the differences among science textbooks. The authors focus primarily on the interaction between text and image to illustrate how the design of textbooks with particular semiotic resources could influence the learning experience: in other words, determining what is to be learnt and how. Similarly, the concept of ‘shaping agents’ can be applied to tutorials on YouTube and furniture assembly instructions, as discussed by the authors to demonstrate the wide range of shaping agent-learner relationships.

Chapter 5 discusses issues pertaining to learning assessment based on the view of learning as a transformative engagement. The authors argue for multimodal assessment, which counts for all modes of meaning-making. However, in many educational settings, learners are assessed based on the use of language despite some learners potentially preferring to communicate by means other than language, such as drawing.

To investigate social and technological changes in communication and learning, in Chapter 6 the authors analyse poetry albums, guidebooks and textbooks over time. By tracking changes of the ways of meaning-making and the ‘gains and losses’ of the semiotic resources, the authors claim we can hypothesize the characteristics of a society. This social semiotic historical perspective could offer insights into the implications for learning. The authors assert the importance of choosing appropriate semiotic resources when designing a learning environment in our contemporary society. The authors conclude the book by reflecting on the examples discussed and provide an agenda of application based on their proposed social semiotic framework, which could be applied to different domains.

Although it is a slim book (approximately 150 pages), it raises deep theoretical questions and provides insights from a wide range of social contexts regarding the nature of learning and communication. These empirical examples facilitate understanding the concepts of learning and communication whether they occur in actual social sites such as schools, or in virtual social world such as Facebook and YouTube. The authors also discuss some social semiotic lexicons throughout the book to offer terminology that can be applicable to all multimodal analysis approaches. These concepts are well explained and demonstrated through the use of different examples; however, I found it inconvenient to return to previous chapters each time I encountered

a new terminology and wanted to compare it with those mentioned previously. Thus, it would be helpful if there was a glossary for the terminology discussed in the book. Furthermore, I would suggest novice readers in social semiotics to not start with this book. Although it is a short volume supported by various examples and figures, its concepts are grounded in various social-cultural disciplines, such as discourse studies and ethnography, which require a background knowledge as well as social semiotic terminologies. In brief, the book summarizes the knowledge of the authors after more than two decades of investigating multimodality and social interaction. It encourages the reader to consider the overarching meanings of learning and communication that occur in different situations. Nevertheless, more research must be undertaken to apply and develop the proposed social semiotic theory, not only in educational contexts, but also in virtual sites that offer many opportunities for learning and communication within unpredictable communicational tasks and innovative semiotic resources.

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