

# Multimodality and children's participation in classrooms: Instances of research

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*This paper describes how language and literacy classrooms became more participatory, agentive spaces through addressing a central issue in teaching and learning: the forms of representation through which children make their meanings. It reconsiders pedagogic research in under-resourced Gauteng classrooms during the period 1994 – 2005, during the first decade of education in post-liberation South Africa. This research shows teachers using multimodality in productive, expressive and creative ways that work against deficit models of children, drawing on their everyday experiences and their existing representational resources. It outlines the theoretical framework supporting the pedagogical approach, that of multimodal social semiotics, known more widely as “multimodality”, and discusses three instances of children's multimodal practice, in Grades 1 and 2, 7 and 10 respectively. It sums up the role played by multimodality in participation, showing how multimodality enables cognitive, social and affective participation through expanding the semiotic space of the classroom and reconstituting the children as sign-makers.*

**Keywords:** participation; classrooms; multimodality; multimodal pedagogies; forms of representation; learning; semiosis; sign-makers; agency

## Introduction

This paper describes how language and literacy classrooms become more participatory, agentive spaces through addressing a central issue in teaching and learning: the forms of representation through which children make their meanings. It reports on three instances of pedagogic research in under-resourced Gauteng classrooms during the period 1994 - 2005, during the first decade of education in post-liberation South Africa. These instances show teachers using multimodality in productive, expressive and creative ways that work against deficit models of children, drawing on their everyday experiences and their existing but submerged capacities and genres of representation. The teachers encouraged children to draw on their local forms of knowledge and semiotic practices, and on their individual strengths in writing, oral and performance activities, in order to explore and share aspects of their everyday experiences. These were integrated with curricular topics, making the classroom a forum for exchange and mutual stimulation. Their creative ways of involving children resulted in positive educational outcomes and fostered excitement in relation to learning where there had often previously been disinterest, disengagement and alienation. They implemented what might be called participatory and democratic forms of educational process that build respect, dignity and excitement within classroom contexts, while developing and strengthening representational and communicative repertoires.

The focus of this special edition is on children's participation and its theorisation. Accordingly, the central questions of this paper revolve around the role of the forms of representation in children's participation, namely:

- What role did multimodality play in the learning activities described in the pedagogic instances?
- What are the links between multimodality and participation?

In order to address these questions, it is necessary to outline briefly the concept of participation that underlies this paper and the theoretical and pedagogic framework of the instances of classroom practice that form the core of the paper.

## Participation

A multifaceted, normative concept of participation in classrooms informs this paper. At the most basic level, it assumes that the participation of learners requires attendance and attention in class. It acknowledges that, in significant ways, learner participation depends on the way teachers present curricular content through appropriate pedagogic strategies. It considers the essential feature of learner participation to be engagement and interaction at cognitive and social levels with ideas and activities that form part of curricular content, as well as with teachers and peers. It includes the affective dimension of engagement: is the attitude of learners characterised by willingness, effort and enthusiasm, by half-heartedness, apathy, fear and resistance, or by different combinations of these?

Participation, however, is not seen from the individualist view of the progressive English teaching and learning that was influential in the 1970s and 1980s, in which children were considered to be creative “meaning-makers” and English was “for personal growth” (see, for example, Rosen, 1984; Wells, 1987). Although creativity and personal growth are important, the conception of participation at stake here is shaped in significant ways by the more critical and political pedagogy of Paulo Freire. Drawing on principles of *agency* and *voice* (Freire, 1987; Freire & Macedo 1987, 1998), it emphasises the learners’ assumption of desire and power – to think independently, dialogically and critically, to weigh up different viewpoints in order to determine their own; and, crucially, to articulate those ideas and feelings, to act and create.

Aligned also with post-colonialist and post-modern goals of bringing marginalised and subaltern voices out of the shadows, this paper situates participation in South African classrooms within the context of democratic ideals. In this respect it is informed by the idea of “communicative democracy” (Enslin, Pendlebury & Tjiattas, 2001; Young, 1997), which extends the strategies for democratic process from reasoned argument to a broader range of communicative practices in order to encourage the multi-perspectivity that is a prerequisite of the democratic process.

Finally, a normative, critical conception of participation in classrooms that informs this paper cannot be separated from dominant constructions of childhood and issues of social justice in relation to children’s rights in South Africa. Children’s misery under apartheid has been well documented by scholars such as Henderson (1999) and Jones (1993). These studies suggest that children be conceptualised as significant actors in families, communities, households and schools, and as active participants in culture. In spite of the provisions for children in the South African Constitution of 1996 (Section 28), much work remains to be done in protecting and caring for South African children, many of whom continue to live in conditions of extreme poverty and ill health. One of the aims of this paper is to draw attention to the texts and meaning-making practices of South African children whose voices are generally unrecognised or marginalised in mainstream classrooms. As Stein (2008:42) points out, “giving children equitable opportunities to represent their worlds – their voices, cultures, histories, feelings and opinions – in the modes and languages they choose and feel comfortable with is an educational right: it is part and parcel of how children’s rights to basic education needs to be reconceptualised”.

## Multimodality and multimodal pedagogies

Drawing on theorisations in the emerging field of multimodal communication, this paper is located within a shift that is taking place in relation to the representation and communication of meaning in learning environments. Adopting the terms put forward in the work of Hodge and Kress (1988), Kress (1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2003, 2009), Kress & van Leeuwen (2001), Kress, Jewitt, Bourne, Franks & Hardcastle, Jones & Reid (2005) and Jewitt (2008, 2009), the theorisations have been variously termed “social semiotics”, “multimodal social semiotics” or, more simply, “multimodality”. In their application to the domain of literacy education, they have been termed “multiliteracies” (New London Group 2000); in the domain of pedagogy, “multimodal pedagogies” (Stein 2008). They are motivated by two main issues: i) the “inadequacy” of current theories of meaning and communication to account for the increasingly complex contemporary communicational landscape, both inside and outside classrooms (Kress 2000a:153-4); and

ii) the role of the body and of the senses in semiosis (the process of meaning-making through signs) which “guarantees the multimodality of our semiotic world” (Kress 2000b: 184).

The multimodal pedagogies exemplified here are thus a move away from previous monomodal approaches to teaching and learning with their focus on language as the primary mode of learning and assessment, towards the inclusion of more concrete, material, sensory and bodily practices. They are founded upon the idea that meanings are made, disseminated and interpreted through many representational *resources* or *modes*, of which language is but one amongst others - image, sound, music, gesture, space, colour, facial expression, body posture and movement. The pedagogies consider communication beyond the linguistic, but by no means exclude it. Language is frequently orchestrated with other modes in the making of meaning, and modes are materialised through available material like clay, wood, stone, paper, sound, the body, cloth. All modes of communication are accorded equal status and hence equally serious attention.

The pedagogies assume that physical, material and social *affordances* associated with each mode generate a specific “logic” and provide different representational and communicational potentials, for example, writing tends to “name” or “narrate”, images tend to “depict” or “display”, and layout organises information (see Kress 2009b: 54-57). The assumption that modes materialise, realise and externalise meaning in different ways, enabling the expression of meanings in some modes which are inexpressible in others, is of particular significance for the question of participation.

Multimodal theories and pedagogies are not limited to questions of form. They are founded upon principles that foreground the role of human agency in semiosis, the making of meaning through signs. They assume that semiosis is infused with the sign-makers' interests, purposes, desires, motives, themselves shaped by social, cultural and historical circumstances, whether in divergent, convergent or resistant ways, and place the socially situated human being at the centre of meaning-making, which allows for changes and shifts to be initiated by human processes.

If meaning-making is “action”, meaning-makers are “remakers”, “transformers” and “re-shapers” of meaning, who choose “apt” semiotic resources that are “to hand” and redesign these according to their interests, capacities for creativity and invention, audiences and contexts (Kress 2009a, 2000a, 2000b, 1997). The socially situated human being is thus placed at the centre of meaning-making, which is a dynamic process, “fixed” through the production of signs and texts (Kress, 2009:64, 2003:40). Such texts, produced in classrooms as moments of “fixing” in the semiotic chain of learning, form the primary data of the research instances follow.

## Instances of multimodal research in classrooms

In this section of the paper, I describe three instances of multimodal classroom research used to focus on particular aspects of multimodal theory and practice.

### ‘How do I smile in writing?’: The affordances and constraints of modes

The affordances and constraints of mode are well illustrated in Stein's (2008) work. “How do I smile in writing?”, a case study discussion of the storytelling practices of a 13-year-old Zulu learner (Stein, 2008: 44-74) focuses on the way Lungile tells the “same” story in different modes - multimodal performance, writing and image. Lungile was in a Grade 7 class engaged in a storytelling project at Spruitview Primary School, east of Johannesburg, in 1994. Although she was called “the silent one” by her teachers, she turned out to be a gifted storyteller. Stein notes that Lungile's relationship to each mode in which she told the story was not the same; she inhabited each mode differently and used the affordances of each mode in different ways. For example, in the oral story, her body was a key instrument in the multimodal performance:

*[H]er smile, her use of hips and torso, her specific click sounds, her eye movements – all work together to animate her meanings. As she moves through her performances, she is clearly drawing on a repertoire of representational resources which are deeply familiar to her and which she chooses*

*to use. These resources can be loosely characterised within the performance conventions, genres and themes associated with African storytelling ... (Stein, 2008: 50).*

Stein (2008:59) points out that her use of these resources derives not only from exposure to oral storytelling practices within her community, but from cultural norms around what it means to be female and to inhabit a “female storyteller” identity: “She has been taught how to please her audience, to use her body as a charm. She pouts, she smiles, she disengages, she seduces”.

In shifting to the mode of writing to tell the same story, Lungile’s orientation to her body shifted dramatically from face-to-face multimodal interaction with a living, breathing audience to the solitary confrontation with a blank page where the body was still, all energy concentrated in the eyes and hands. Stein (2008:61) asks the probing questions, “what does she do with her smile, which is so central to her charming engagement with her audience? How does she smile in writing? What does she do with those special ‘ayi’ click sounds that kept her audience in her power?”. Stein (2008) concludes that the shift from performance to writing involves a profound loss, a movement from embodiment to disembodiment. The story is less descriptive, pared down; it simply recounts the main events of the plot. Each text has a different “take” on the story. Stein (2008) speculates that Lungile’s preferred semiotic mode is performance, whereas writing is the preferred and dominant mode for assessment at her school, evaluating whether learners pass or fail.

## **The Olifantsvlei dolls: Resources, resourcefulness and local semiotic practice**

The Fresh Stories Project undertaken during 2001 with Grade 1 and 2 teachers at Olifantsvlei Primary School in Eikenhof, south of Johannesburg, demonstrates the creativity and resourcefulness shown by the children to the material aspect of design, when the teachers’ plan failed. Most of the children at the school were from poor families living in informal settlements nearby, some in child-headed households with brothers and sisters and most suffering various forms of neglect and deprivation. The children were multilingual speakers of local and foreign languages in a school that followed a “straight for English” policy from Grade 1 onwards in their language and literacy classrooms (Stein, 2008:100).

The aim of the project was to encourage the foundation level learners to produce language (any language, as opposed to English only) and create stories about their neighbourhood. This would occur in a relatively free classroom environment, with much less direction from teachers than usual. As the first stage in this process, to develop an understanding of the concept of ‘character’ as opposed to ‘person’, learners were asked to think of people they knew who could become characters in a story and to act out, walk and talk like the character. They were then asked to draw the character and write something about it in any language they wished. In the next phase, they were to make puppet-like papier mâché figures of their characters. According to the children, the teachers’ mixture was too soft and their puppet characters turned into porridge. The children responded, “Don’t worry, we’ll make our own”. Over the next few days, they brought to class a strangely beautiful collection of doll-like figures which they had made at home and which represented characters in the neighbourhood. Among these were a matriarch wrapped sumptuously in a bubble-wrap garment with a ‘doek’ (material headdress) around her head; a timid lady in a striped outfit with skinny stick legs; a full breasted woman wrapped tightly in old stockings and a ghostly ‘gogo’ (grandmother) made from filthy, bloodied scraps of cloth gathered in the veld. The children used these figures in dialogues in their home languages, touching and holding them, moving them about and talking to them. Later they used them in plays which they improvised in class, in one case producing language and dramatic action for over twenty minutes. Finally, they wrote a story about their figures in a language of their choice.

Stein (2008:102-3) has analysed the doll-like figures as a transformation of semiotic forms with which the children were familiar, fertility doll figures, which have existed in the southern African region for hundreds of years. She demonstrates the structural similarities between the children’s figures and the fertility dolls – a cylindrical or conical shape produced through the use of a filled inner core, which is covered with layers of cloth and beads. In fertility dolls, the inner container is filled with talisman-like

powders and seeds; here the containers of the children's dolls (empty plastic cold drink bottles) were filled with sand and stones. Both the traditional dolls and those made by the children are not made in the likeness of children or babies, but of women, unlike typical western dolls. Lacking other resources, yet being resourceful, the children fashioned their dolls out of waste found mostly in the nearby veld and rubbish dumps. Their limited resources, however, proved to be generative: a discarded plastic bag became a 'doek', a nail an arm, a button an eye, and round stones became full breasts: 'that which cannot be eaten is fashioned into a doll' (Stein, 2008:111).

Stein (2008) shows how these dolls were the product of transformation of local cultural and semiotic practices around doll figures, and discusses how they demonstrate the relationship between multimodal pedagogies, resources for representation, creativity and literacy learning. When given a chance to create their own dolls at home, the children drew on "apt" resources from their own worlds in order to participate in the class project on "character", thus creating a valuable home-school synergy.

### **The Thebuwa Poetry Project: Semiosis as a multimodal journey**

The Thebuwa project was situated in a Grade 10, secondary school 'English' classroom at Lamula Jubilee High School, Meadowlands, Soweto from March 2002 to December 2005. English was officially a second language in the school, but actually a third, fourth or fifth language for the majority of learners, while isiXhosa, isiZulu, Xitsonga and Sepedi were the predominant first languages. Most of the 55 learners were disaffected, and a number of them hardly came to school, doubting its value in their lives: "Why should we come to school when the educated are unemployed and the criminals are driving around in posh cars?" one of them asked. They had little interest in literature and were reluctant users of English: "We can't speak English – we're afraid to say the wrong things". Robert Maungedzo, the teacher, felt responsible and began to examine his pedagogic practice which, in his own words, was "teacher-centred": "The teacher was perceived as an omniscient being who transmitted information and knowledge to the empty vessel or tabula rasa. Learners were drilled and indoctrinated because they were conceptualised as passive participants in the learning process ... [They] did not gain anything in terms of their thinking (pers. comm., 2006). He wanted to try something new: "My literature lessons were a bore. Learners did not even bother to read their setbooks" (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2005: x).

Robert, who had been exposed to multimodality and multiliteracies during his masters degree studies, decided to apply a pedagogy of multiliteracies to the teaching of literature. Although poetry had not been taught at the school for seven years, he would introduce it on account of its brevity. Poems could be photocopied so that learners would at least be in possession of the text under discussion. Robert photocopied two poems from an anthology he found in the school book room, *Poetry Quest* (Southey, 1987), and gave a copy to each group in the class, asking them to discuss the poems' meanings. He then asked individuals to 'respond' to one of the poems in a non-linguistic mode, such as drawing or sculpture, or by writing a story about its meaning. Encouraged by the learners' positive response to this task, he decided to move away from English poetry to local and indigenous poetry in the vernacular. He asked the learners to research their family or clan praises in order to recite them in class. To do this, most of the learners enlisted the help of their parents, grandparents or other senior members of the community, saying that since they had been born in the townships they did not know their family or clan praise poems. The occasion of the praise poem performance was exciting and affirming: learners felt validated by bringing their own semiotic forms into the classroom which became for the first time a space of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The process of "transmodal" meaning-making, as I have called it (Newfield, 2009), that is, designing meanings and ideas across different modes and languages, continued and diversified in unpredictable ways. Six weeks into the programme, Robert, who had been invited by the Wits Multiliteracies Research Group to attend an education conference in Beijing, asked the class whether they wanted to "send a message" to delegates at the conference. After initial scepticism regarding this trip and ignorance about conferences, the idea of sending a message across the world gripped the imaginations of the learners. After intense discussion and negotiation, they agreed to send a message, a "greeting to the world" from learners in South

Africa. They needed to decide what form the greeting would take and how would they identify themselves as senders of the greeting. In the reconstituted multimodal space of their classroom, they decided to use a map of South Africa. Each learner brought a piece of cloth of approximately 30-60 centimetres square on which they drew and then embroidered maps of the “new” South Africa, showing its reconfiguration from the four provinces of apartheid South Africa to the nine regions of liberated, post-1994 South Africa. Cloth was an apt medium, they said, since it was easily transportable and could be folded up inside a suitcase. They also said that it was a sign of identity, since cloth-making and embroidery were cultural practices in some of their ‘homes’ and communities, especially in the Northern province (see Becker, 2000: 108 on the embroidered minceka cloths of the Tsonga). As in the example of the dolls, those learners who were not able to source pieces of fabric brought old wiping cloths and maize bags, newly washed and pressed, to class. They painstakingly drew their maps on them and completed the embroidery – both boys and girls, with greater or lesser degrees of skill – and then inked their praise poems on the cloths, some them including English translations.

Their teacher then suggested that they write poems in English to send along with the cloth. Motivated to do so by the desire to represent themselves and their lives in yet another form, and by the prospect of having an overseas, international audience, they set themselves to work. A number of learners took to the writing of poetry in English with relative ease, enjoying the playfulness and stylistic freedom of the genre of poetry in comparison with standard prose genres in English classrooms. Some of them drew on, but transformed, the genre of praise poems, celebrating Ndofaya (Meadowlands) and its inhabitants, instead of clans. Phillipine paid warm tribute to his mother as an individual who had risen above adverse circumstances: “She is a queen in rags/ A sea without water/ An angel without wings/ A princess without a pony/ She is the queen/ Powerful like a scream/ One in a million/ Just like my favourite ice cream” (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2005: 12). Thando wrote an edgily sardonic tribute to Soweto, quite different in tone and style from the township poems of the 70s and 80s which focused on the suffering of the people. Soweto was a place for “young freaks” for Thando in 2002 (Newfield & Maungedzo 2005:3), not without hunger and crime, but also bursting with vital energy and fun, a place where you have to live by your wits. The poem moves seamlessly across English, Sepedi, isiZulu and street language, identifying Thando as a young urban “metrolingual” (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2009).

Nokwanda, an accomplished seamstress, took the individual cloths home and stitched them together, making a cloth composed of 22 panels measuring three 3 by 2.8 metres. The poems were placed in envelopes and pinned onto the cloth. Colour photographs of class members, taken expressly for the purpose, were attached. The cloth was named Thebuwa, (which means “to speak” and was coined from three of the languages in the class, isiXhosa, Xitsonga and Sepedi). It was sent with Robert to Beijing.

On Robert’s return, in addition to their continued writing of poetry, they shifted it to another mode, that of performance or “spoken word” (Eleveld, 2003) with its emphasis on the body, the “grain of the voice” (Barthes, 1992) and direct audience contact. Space prevents further discussion of their varied, creative, and ongoing engagement with poetry over the next two years, save to note that it culminated in the publication of an anthology of their work, *Thebuwa: Poems from Ndofaya* (Newfield & Maungedzo, 2005). Over the next few years, several poems were republished in school textbooks and the anthology still forms part of several university courses.

Many learners felt that this programme was the highlight of their English studies, or, even of their schooling. In her questionnaire, Precious commented, “This is the happiest thing I’ve done in English”, and Sonnyboy said, “I was fortified in knowledge and understanding ... I discovered my talents and gifts”. For their teacher, it was a journey of personal transformation: “I began at the Station of Reluctance, travelled to the Station of Uncertainty, and then arrived at the Station of Agency” (pers. comm., 2003).

What I wish to stress through this instance of multimodal classroom practice is the way a multimodal approach generated an ongoing process of semiosis in relation to poetry and identity, which lasted from Grade 10 to Grade 12. In the course of this multimodal and multi-sensorial journey, the learners designed and redesigned their multi-layered identities in conscious ways, exploiting the affordances of different modes and materials - maps and a cloth display their national identities, praise poems in the vernacular to

name their family and clan identities, and English poems to describe and critically explore their identities as contemporary, urban, township dwellers. Performing the poems involved a host of semiotic functions and gave them a live and present audience who applauded and jeered as they saw fit, and then discussed the poem's theme or argument. Regarding their school curriculum, broadening the base of representation and communication in the classroom returned them to English, the class subject and language of learning, which learners came to see as a resource rather than a barrier.

## Conclusion

The three instances demonstrate that multimodality was linked to improved cognitive, social and affective engagement in the learning activities of the three language and literacy classrooms. The question arises as to how and why this occurred.

The instances show that multimodality opened up the semiotic space of the classroom. A number of semiotic modes were used for representation and communication, moving beyond language to include visual, three-dimensional, sonic, vocal and bodily forms. This released existing inhibitions and resistance towards the use of English, unblocked the semiotic arteries, and allowed semiosis to flow. In all three cases – storytelling, the development of “characters” and the analysis and composition of poetry - semiotic performance increased in quantity and quality. An adaptable and flexible disposition towards meaning-making, that included language as a central form, developed.

The learners were constituted as *sign-makers*. They were no longer solely copiers and recipients, but *designers* - people capable of making their own signs to represent and communicate meaning. Designing was seen as a significant activity in the process of their learning and could utilise local or out-of-school semiotic resources, epistemologies and histories and integrate these with curricular material. This gave learners confidence, a sense of dignity and motivation, and encouraged them to take agency in relation to their learning.

The representational and communicational skills of sign-makers were developed. They selected “apt” modes and material that were “to hand”, orchestrating them and shaping them to express their “interests” (Kress 2003, 2000a, 2000b). Using a shifting set of semiotic tools, they explored the “affordances” and “logics” (Kress 2003) of different modes and materials. The oral performance of a story or poem had a different effect and purpose from a written one, and hence was seen to be more or less appropriate in different communicational contexts.

Since mode shapes meaning in different ways, multimodality led to the production of different meanings. This led to more complex understandings of the classroom topics. It also produced multi-perspectivity - different and differently positioned perspectives on a topic - which were seen in relation to one another. This helped to foster a democratic process in the classrooms. Multimodality encouraged both individual and collective making of signs and meanings, for individual and group audiences and readers, improving interaction and dialogue, as well as class spirit and solidarity.

In summing up the effect of a multimodal pedagogic approach in these classrooms, I am not claiming that multimodality was the sole factor that influenced increased participation. The attitudes, skills and understanding of the teachers were, undeniably, important factors as well. I am not suggesting either that multimodality can be a panacea for all existing ills. Furthermore, multimodality brings additional challenges to teachers: they need to be good readers in a wide repertoire of learner signs - to recognise their meanings and provenance; to be facilitators of effective semiotic design; and to consider the question of multimodal assessment. A further and critical challenge is how to extend learners' participation in classrooms into other domains of their lives. I remain troubled that only a handful of the talented Thebuwa poets went into higher education after matriculating, but that is the subject of another paper.

What I am claiming is that a multimodal approach to representation and communication played a role in turning the three classrooms into more participatory, agentive spaces. The expressive voices and bodies of the learners, and the ever-shifting variety of texts and artefacts, each one “fixing” meaning in its own unique way, and together forming textured and complex chains of semiosis, brought the classrooms to semiotic life. Each one is a sign of vivid participation.

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