NOW literacies – everyday classrooms reading, viewing and creating multimodal texts

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**Jon Callow:** For over 10 years now, leading educators have called on us to recognise that our culture has embraced visual and multimodal texts. It follows that classroom literacy learning should also reflect this cultural shift. Written texts still play a key role as they sit alongside of, as well as integrate with, visual images and electronic media. Everyday classroom literacy learning needs to thoughtfully integrate a variety of texts to support 21st century students.

While visual images have been part of school curriculums for many years, in the form of picture books, factual texts, magazine resources, video and more recently electronic resources, it’s both the prevalence and the sophistication of textual resources in more recent times that is significant. Web pages with embedded video, images with electronic tags, hyperlinked online encyclopedias, storybooks that use digitally manipulated pictures, an image-drenched popular culture – it’s no surprise that educators regularly speak about multiple literacies to describe the skills that all learners need.

**Teacher:** So let’s think about where this text should sit on the …

**Jon Callow:** For teachers, this means developing a deep understanding about how texts on page and screen make meaning so that they can help learners to read and view for enjoyment and information as well as develop appropriate critical skills.

Whatever resources teachers may have in their classroom, from books and posters to computers, mp3 players and electronic whiteboards, what is important is how the available resources are used, and how a teacher helps students to learn, that is, their pedagogy.

With this in mind, we will be visiting one teacher’s classroom to show how reading, writing, viewing and multimodal text-making are integrated into everyday literacy learning.

**Teacher:** What is salience, when we’re talking about pictures and images in visual literacies, Sebastian?

**Student:** Um, it’s the water buffalo.

**Teacher:** Okay, why is that salient, William?

**Student:** Because it takes up quite a lot of the page.

**Teacher:** Okay, in terms of that, are we talking foreground? Background? Mid-ground? Theo?

**Jon Callow:** Choosing purposeful and quality texts is important for any literacy learning experience. Quality children’s literature, a core element of any English curriculum, has the potential to give readers access to rich, multilayered narratives, where they encounter engaging characters and intriguing plotlines that allow them to think deeply about various themes and concepts.

Award-winning authors like Shaun Tan, Margaret Wild, Alison Lester and Bob Graham create picture books where image and text are juxtaposed and interwoven, giving teachers and children many opportunities to discuss various interpretations of the story. Using such texts will mean teachers will need to have a working knowledge of written narratives as well as images. This knowledge plays a key role in planning engaging and purposeful literacy learning.
To exemplify a knowledge of images, let’s consider this photograph of the Chrysler Building. We may know that it is part of New York City and, as such, bring our cultural knowledge and personal experience of the city to bear as we look at the photograph.

Our gaze is drawn upwards to the pinnacle of the building in the centre. The tower is framed by shorter structures, and the black and white nature of the shot gives it a more artistic and stylised feel. In fact, looking closely, we can see that the outer buildings have been slightly blurred, making the spire even more central and salient.

As the viewer looks up, the city seems powerful as it surrounds us. As part of a narrative, we might be seeing New York from a character’s point of view, perhaps visiting for the first time, alone and vulnerable. Or it may be part of a montage in an advertisement for a perfume, where this shot creates a sense of power and sophistication around New York, the city that never sleeps.

Whether a picture book, advertisement or artwork is studied in a classroom, a skilled teacher will draw on their professional knowledge to develop rich and meaningful discussion with their students.

**Student:** It's like you're looking down at something.

**Teacher:** Okay, so it could be perspective. If we’re put above it, who has the power? Nathaniel?

**Student:** The person that’s above.

**Teacher:** The person that’s above: so the viewer of the text or the reader of the text.

**Student:** Yeah.

**Teacher:** What other kinds of power can be created through an image? Max?

**Jon Callow:** Most teachers are familiar with planning a literacy session that includes modelled reading and writing, small group activities, as well as independent learning. This approach is appropriate for all types of texts, including multimodal texts. The pedagogy of initially scaffolding readers and viewers with the teacher taking the lead role in modelled reading is then modified to allow learners to participate in small group activities. Here, discussion and thinking is shared and practised as they develop their own reading and viewing skills.

Just as adults might describe a novel, using terms such as character development, themes, pointing out examples of metaphor or rich descriptive language, so we want children to have a beginning metalanguage, to talk about both the words and the images that they see.

**Teacher:** When I start planning to use multimodal texts, I make sure that, within my programs, they exist as another layer to the traditional print literacies that my students learn about. So they form part of, and they extend, the writing and reading practices of my students. So in any literacy program I will start with modelled, guided and independent opportunities to not only explore, but create multimodal texts and, within that, develop the skill sets, the metalanguage and the field of those knowledges to help students take part in those literacy repertoires.

**Jon Callow:** While authors choose words carefully, illustrators do the same with their choice of colour, line, angle, framing, point of view and page layout.

If we look back to the Chrysler Building photograph, we can see how our gaze is taken by the use of the central spire, viewed from a low angle and made salient by the dark framing of the other buildings. There are very strong lines from the surrounding buildings, as well as the tower itself, which draws our gaze upwards. The slight blurring of the outside elements suggests both the
importance of the Chrysler Building, as well as a sense of speed or movement as we view a busy metropolis.

In the same way that teachers currently draw students’ attention to words, sentences and paragraphs in written text, modelling how to decode and make meaning from them, so we need to provide a similar scaffold when viewing pictures and images.

**Teacher:** From the salient part of this image, where do the vectors go and how are they created. How do our eyes move around this image? Bella?

**Student:** It goes where his arm’s pointing.

**Teacher:** His arm is pointing. It creates a really strong vector. After we follow that vector, where are we taken to in this image? Zac?

**Student:** Where he’s looking.

**Teacher:** Okay, where is he looking, because his hand goes one way but his eye line goes another way? Nathaniel?

**Student:** He’s looking straight at us.

**Teacher:** He is looking straight at us. Where else …?

**Jon Callow:** In this way, we can build on the enjoyment and interest that is often intrinsic when students encounter visual texts.

Ensuring that all children have the opportunity to develop deep understandings of how texts work not only means choosing quality texts, but implementing a pedagogy that is intellectually rigorous, has cultural significance, connects to students’ lives and engages children in learning that is enjoyable and accessible. Working with words and text should include not only shared reading, viewing and discussion, but also activities that allow students to play with and create the types of texts they are engaging with.

**Teacher:** So why is that an offer, Leah?

**Student:** ‘Cause she’s not demanding at us, she’s not looking straight at us, she’s looking at something else, which is the creature.

**Teacher:** And what effect does that have on us?

**Student:** to show us where she’s looking.

**Teacher:** Okay, and what is she looking at? What’s happening in the story?

**Student:** The creature.

**Teacher:** The creature. Do you want to show us, with a vector, how her eye line makes us notice what she’s …

**Jon Callow:** Technology offers many opportunities for children to work with image and text: from projecting a page onto an electronic whiteboard for a class discussion, to the use of digital cameras and image presentation software.
Teacher: Is the creature offering us or demanding us his attention?

Student: Um, probably …

Student: He’s trying … he’s also demanding at us, sort of.

Teacher: Okay, so he’s looking at us. He’s not looking at her. So do you want to label that so we can see that in your image?

Jon Callow: Even a classroom with just a few computers can be used to engage all students when using multimodal texts. What is crucial is that technology is used regularly as a tool to enhance literacy learning in ways that is relevant for a 21st century classroom.

Teacher: So let’s think about where this text should sit on the page, Zac, for us to be able to see it effectively.

Student: Top?

Teacher: Okay, the top?

Students: Yeah.

Teacher: Middle?

Students: No.

Teacher: Bottom?

Students: No.

Student: Top, probably, because we could use a light colour.

Teacher: Okay, let’s try colours. If we edit it …

Jon Callow: Since technology is regularly used in our culture to create and distribute visual and multimodal texts, the use of similar technology in classrooms should be as common as books, pen and paper.

Teacher: I find technology a really important aspect of any learning because we can invest in the cultural capital of students and bring those digitally native skills into our classrooms. With literacy specifically, I start with the literacy pedagogies, so, the traditional print literacies and all the other skills related to language and I carefully select the ICTs and digital resources which will best enhance those.

You can choose whether your picture has text of the story on it or you can choose whether it has a narration and sound effects of the story on it. So it’s up to you what you choose.

So in terms of creating multimodal texts, there were key opportunities to, I guess, represent images through the use of technology, analyse images through the use of technology and then use things like cameras, image manipulation software, audio recording software and things like Photo Story, to create those multimodal texts. But for me, the focus is always handover and interactivity on the part of the students.

Student: … my visitor and friend was gone.
Jon Callow: By integrating it into our daily literacy sessions, using a variety of pedagogically sound teaching strategies and approaches, we can enhance students' viewing and text creation opportunities.

We’ve explored today how the prevalence and sophistication of visual and multimodal texts in our culture can inform our teaching. To assist our students to be confident and critical literacy learners, our classrooms need to be places where students are reading quality literature and engaging in meaningful discussion and activities. Teachers, having themselves developed a professional understanding about how these texts work and the type of metalanguage required to discuss them, can then do the job they do so well: create highly enjoyable and intellectually engaging learning experiences for all their students. These are certainly the ‘now’ literacies we should be seeing in every classroom.