

## Chapter 2

# Multimodal Opportunities with Digital Tools: The Example of Narrated Photographs

K.M. Crook and C.K. Crook

**Abstract** This chapter explores recent encouragement to cultivate in students a sensitivity towards the “multimodal” nature of human communication. We consider what this means for educational practice and, in particular, how such an imperative might be addressed with digital tools. In particular we report a field study of secondary school students creating narrated photographs to characterise their local community and to construct sequences in the style of graphic novels. Although students were well engaged by this activity, many were hesitant in using their voice expressively. This variation in voicing confidence reminds us that education creates few opportunities for students to think about their speech in instrumental terms. Yet, we did see in some students a willingness and ability to do this. Adapting speech-for-purpose is a fundamental social skill. Thus, there is a need to take oracy more seriously and to see digital tools as one opening to do so in a practical way. Likewise, this project revealed disparities in students’ confidence with visual expression: differences that implied a lack of experience in seeing the semiotic potential of the image. These observations suggest that educators should help students read (and compose) in these modalities as carefully as they help students to acquire more familiar text literacy.

**Keywords** Creation • Multimodal opportunities • Digital tools • Multimodal communication • Narrated photos • Multimodal digital expression • Curriculum • Mobile phones • Lens • Educational practice • Digital tools • Student awareness

This chapter explores recent encouragement to cultivate in students a sensitivity towards the “multimodal” nature of human communication. We consider what this means for educational practice and, in particular, how such an imperative might be addressed with digital tools. In discussing these issues, a neglected format for multimodal digital expression will be introduced: namely, narrated images or “sound

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photos". Observations on multimodal expression are then offered as they were prompted from an intervention requiring students to create such artefacts with digital tools. Taken together, these observations highlight both the potential of extending multimodality more firmly into the curriculum but also the challenges that can arise from doing so.

The chapter starts with an outline of what is entailed in the concept of "multimodality". It then considers how digital tools relate to this notion, and the format of a narrated photograph is introduced. A practical exercise within the realm of mobile learning is described and its implications for addressing issues of visual literacy and oracy are discussed.

## The Multimodal Nature of Human Communication

Kress and colleagues have famously declared that "... the English classroom is about meaning" (Kress et al., 2005, p. 3) and they illustrate how the multiple resources available for making meaning transcend speech and writing. They even suggest that the word "language" is no longer satisfactory within communication research, given the range of those resources beyond words that have meaning-making potential.

In the last 10–15 years, "modes" has become an increasingly popular term for such varied resources (Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress, 2005; Kress et al., 2005). Defined as a "socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning", a mode is any single resource that has been selected while communicating within our social world (Kress, 2010, p. 79). Speech and writing are obvious hosts for modes, but gesture, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects are just as valid resources for making meaning (Kress, 2010, p. 79). Moreover, Kress would argue that in many forms of communication the coming together of different modal solutions is necessary, because different modes offer different potentials and affordances. For example, grammar, syntax, font, size and colour are some of the resources that shape the potential of a piece of writing. Meanwhile, an image might deploy size, colour, line and space. The act of bringing together more than one mode to communicate has been termed "multimodality".

A useful classroom example of multimodality in action is the process of oral storytelling. Grishakova and Ryan (2010) identify "face-to-face communication: sound, gestures and facial expression" (2010, p. 4) as highly functional modes in the act of communicating stories, reminding us that acts of communication are often far more multimodal than we might suppose. In the digital domain, websites and social networking facilitate communication through a plethora of modes, drawing upon written text, image, video, sound and speech (Spalter & van Dam, 2008).

Such contexts demand "multimodal analysis". This has been described by Jewitt as an approach towards "... representation, communication and interaction as something more than language" (2009, p. 1). Even when language is the seemingly primary mode of communication, it is often "... inseparably related to other modes of meaning" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 38). Analysing the practice of communica-

tion requires appreciation of every resource used in this process (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 2). Indeed Kress, a pioneer of multimodality, argues that interacting with the world using more than one resource, or mode is “... the normal state of human communication” (2010, p. 1) and that modes rarely occur alone. Thus, to focus solely on the most commonly acknowledged modes of speech and writing is “confused and contradictory” (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 2).

Although analysts urge that “... all modes of communication drawn on in the making of meaning are given equally serious attention” (Stein, 2008, p. 1), that need not suggest that all modes are equally useful all of the time. Different modes carry different affordances and different potentials (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, p. 3). Indeed limiting a person’s choice of resources, or modes, is thereby limiting their communication potential.

A multimodal approach to analysis of communication requires a shift in theorising. While the analysis of written text is grounded in theories of linguistics, multimodal analysis draws from social semiotics, a form of enquiry that considers the meaning potential of different resources, within a specific social context (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 4). The key to this theoretical approach is that it places social actors “... at the centre of meaning making” (Stein, 2008, p. 2) and considers communication as “... a product of how people work with, use and transform the semiotic resources available to them in specific moments in history” (Stein, 2008, p. 2). In an educational context, viewing communication and composition through this theoretical lens identifies a need to consider fresh pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning, approaches that are context-sensitive. To be used effectively, the affordances of different modes and their communication potential must be better understood by learners—and educators must recognise their role in this (Metros, 2008). In particular, students need to be aware of the shifting and fluid nature of modes, as well as recognising those with well-established significance. Thus, the following section will address the arguments for cultivating multimodal pedagogies in classroom teaching.

## Multimodal Pedagogies

In school, written language is a primary form of communication and representation. However, many argue that such a focus has come at the expense of other resources for making meaning (Cope & Kalantzis, 2006; Stein, 2008; Wulf, 2013). Of course, without teaching children the written mode of communication, their power as actors within society would be limited. However, an almost exclusive concern in schools with this particular mode of *writing* creates obstacles for certain students—whose strengths may not lie there. Yet disparities in people’s communication access is not the only reason that the focus on written language is sometimes challenged. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) cite shifting cultural practices. They propose that “language is moving from its former unchallenged role as *the* medium of communication to a role as *one* communication” (1996, p. 38).

Practitioners of multimodal pedagogies recognise that different modes offer different affordances. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the choice of mode is based on the sign-maker's interests, as well as what happens to be available to them (Jewitt, 2006; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Stein, 2008). So if written language is prioritised such that it is the *only* available resource on offer, then educators are limiting the sign-maker's resources and potentially denying their interests.

Stein (2008) argues that in order to create a democratic and versatile classroom, educators must encourage expression through a variety of modes, building on the vast range of resources that students bring (Stein, 2008, p. 3). Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) suggest that for young people to compose in a way that reflects contemporary society's definition of a text, they must acquire knowledge of media, art, technology, digitalisation, colour etc.: semiotic modes that reflect society's prevailing resources. In sum, for educators to truly prepare their students for active involvement in their sociocultural environments, schools should move away from the idea that speech and writing are the *only* "... essential ingredients in the life of social man" (Halliday, 1978, p. 16).

Research into multimodal composition in schools demonstrates positive outcomes. For example, Cercone (2012) worked with a teacher and his class of 12th grade English Arts students, investigating the impact of a multimodal composition project. Students produced personal writing, based on songs that were meaningful to them and, from this writing, developed music videos. This encouraged students to draw from their own personal experience, participate in collaborative learning, and produce purposeful texts. Cercone argues that whilst this project offered students the chance to draw from new classroom resources and their outside literacies, it also served to engage students "... more deeply as readers and writers than their previous traditional English courses" (2012, p. 76). One reason being that it challenged them to draft and redraft, working in multiple modes and through a variety of media.

There have been numerous other studies of students' multimodal composition that reveal positive influences on reading and writing (e.g. Bailey, 2009; Blondell & Miller, 2012; Kajder, 2004; Mills, 2010). Furthermore, other research shows how multimodal composition also promotes opportunities for students to develop their social identities (e.g. Alvermann, 2001; Vasudevan et al., 2010; Wissman, 2008). These outcomes imply that multimodal composing practices could contribute significantly to young people's expressive and representational development.

From the perspective being developed here, students should be allowed to engage not just in single acts of multimodal composition but in multiple acts of composition, and deploying multiple modalities. Multimodality should become a comfortable way of thinking and communicating. Arguably, for students to fully participate in contemporary society, multimodality must become embedded in their learning. Acts of multimodal composition thereby contribute to effective *literacy* development.

Yet in Education research, the reach of this term "literacy" has always been a contested matter. Many commentators therefore retreat to "new literacies", a phrase which signals the ever changing malleability of the concept. However, even this is up for debate. To some, new literacies are new *social practices* (Street, 1995), others refer to them as the strategies and approaches to new tools of communication

(Castek, 2008; Coiro, 2003; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004) while Gee (1996) sees them in relation to new “Discourses”. Moreover, others have opted to develop still further terminologies to locate the “new literacies”. These include “metamedia literacy” (Lemke, 1998) and “multiliteracies” (Cazden, Cope, Fairclough, Gee et al., 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Snyder, 2002). Lankshear and Knobel (2007) propose a synthesis in which new literacies are “... socially recognised ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or, as members of Discourses)” (2007, p. 64).

It may be helpful to invoke the notion of a “literacy” to capture resourceful and effective deployment of some *family* of communication modes. However, untangling this higher level concept is not a priority for the present chapter. Higher order conceptions that are of greater concern here are those that arise in the exercise and development of original *multimodal* constructions. We turn to this in the next section: considering particular forms of the multimodal that might arise in classroom activity.

## Formats for Multimodal Exploration

In discussing the enrichment of communication experience, most authors cited so far readily accept that digital tools are increasingly important. However, the present discussion is highlighting a rather particular form of communication and a rather more particular interest in digital tools. That interest is one of identifying how digitally mediated practices can offer students opportunities for constructing communication designs that are *multimodal* in nature. This means that we are interested here in how digital tools allow discrete communication modes to be creatively *interwoven*.

As has already been stressed, everyday communication is saturated with multimodality and so we can assume that most young people enjoy a degree of competence in their engagement with it. However, receptive confidence is one thing, productive confidence is another. Our comments above have urged that educational practice embraces multimodality—but as a *productive* achievement, not just a receptive one. This gives rise to a concern about current practice. One part of this concern is widely shared. Namely, the idea that current practice could do more to encourage in students a rich repertoire of expressive modes: resources that prepare them for versatile communication. Where there is effort towards this goal it tends to be concentrated in the domain of written language. This is proper and unsurprising but it is also an effort that could be widened to other modalities.

However, a deeper concern we have here is that educational practice should also consider a form of versatility that is realised within effective *multimodal* expression. That is, competence in *simultaneously* recruiting communication modes that complement each other: reflecting on the possible dynamics that this interweaving allows. Established research into multimodal compositional practice suggests that combining modes is something that both strengthens the existing meaning of a text, whilst forming new meanings beyond the capabilities of a single mode (e.g. Hull &

Nelson, 2005; Kress, 2003). Hull and Nelson (2005) propose that "... a multimodal text can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of its constituent parts" (2005, p. 225). Vasudevan et al.'s (2010) research on developing students' "literate identities" through multimodal composition concluded that their student participants' authorial voices "grew in volume and depth" (2010, p. 462) when layering different modes to create texts.

The two prominent modalities of text and image readily complement each other and are the natural candidates for any such ventures in expressive development. Text and image composition is a well-developed multimodal format and its potentials are widely acknowledged within educational research. Graphic novels are one form of such composition. For example, they can support EAL students with language and communication skills development (e.g. Chun, 2009; Danzak, 2011; Jewell, 2009), they can be used to explore personal identity (e.g. Cary, 2004; De Fina, 2006; Hughes, King, Perkins, & Fuke, 2011; Sfard & Prusak, 2005), and they can engage students in multiliteracy development (e.g. Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006; Seglem & Witte, 2009; Wilhelm, 2004). However, writing is not the only way in which we know language. We also know it through speech.

Voice is one of the most commonly utilised modes of expression. Evidently it is most encountered in the everyday flow of conversation. But vocal expression is becoming more part of performance in the online world. Websites have made it possible to compose and upload speech as easily as text. Moreover, network communication tools and online participative gaming sites make live speech interaction a natural and far-reaching communication possibility. LaBelle (2008) notes how voice offers a strongly personalised communication practice: "The voice comes to us as an expressive signal announcing the presence of a body and an individual" (LaBelle, 2008, p. 149). He suggests that when we listen to a voice we automatically attach it to a person in a way that does not seem to occur with writing. Likewise, Neumark (2010) suggests that a performative human voice is able to call another into "... an intimate relationship ... through vocal qualities and vocal performance" (Neumark, 2010, p. 96), again signalling something deeply personal about the spoken word.

Yet the importance of voice is often found to be neglected in educational contexts. The UK standards authority for schools, "Ofsted", sees speech for communication as an area requiring serious attention. Their concern is expressed in "Moving English Forward" (Ofsted, 2012), a report of English inspections in 2010–2011. They note that: "Previous subject inspections have identified a lack of emphasis on explicit, planned teaching of speaking and listening. This remains the case." (2012, p. 48).

Nevertheless, outside of school it is very common for visual modes of representation to be encountered in conjunction with speech—most obviously in film and television. However, a method of multimodal meaning making that is far less familiar is the amalgamation of speech and *still image*. Despite the ubiquity of narrated *moving* images, the idea of a discrete artefact in the form of an isolated narrated image is a rarity. Although it shares similarities with film, a "sound-photo" approach to meaning-making might encourage students to focus solely on the affordances of image and speech, promising new insights on multimodal composition.

Only Frohlich has been really active in pursuit of the sound and image composition, although his work lies outside of formal education. His “Audiophotography” (Frohlich & Tallyn, 1999) suggests that “sounds of the moment” can add meaning and impact to photographic images.<sup>1</sup> Closer to education is Frohlich’s recent work on digital storytelling using mobile phones in poor, rural Indian communities: the StoryBank Project (Frohlich, 2007). His findings document increased involvement in the creation of content, as well as increased culturally based knowledge-building activity (Frohlich et al., 2009). Moreover, the removal of barriers to composition tools and to written literacy gave many people within the community a “... new voice by which to express themselves and their place in the world” (Frohlich et al., 2009, p. 34).

However, if multimodality of this kind is to be constructed by students—what are the tools that may support their ambitions? We turn to this question next.

## Multimodal Digital Tools

Another member of the “literacy family” to acknowledge is “digital literacy”. The earlier term “computer literacy” was primarily concerned with an ability to operate the technology, often with an emphasis on coding (Molnar, 1978). Currently, it is more natural to view technology as tools that facilitate “... social and cultural processes, rather than primarily technical ones” (Buckingham, 2010, p. viii). Accordingly, commentators such as Rheingold (2008) highlight a corresponding shift from print culture to more participatory media, a shift which could “shape the cognitive and social environments in which twenty-first century life will take place” (2008, p. 99). Schools and educators are thereby urged to recognise their responsibility as facilitators in the development of young people’s digital literacy, in order to empower them as active participants in a changing society.

Yet for some time, research observers have warned that the culture of the classroom is becoming increasingly removed from young people’s experiences outside of school (Levin, Arafeh, Lenhart, & Rainie, 2002), particularly in relation to the use of digital technology. Therefore, in a society increasingly fuelled by digital communication, it seems that schools should seek to embrace these new practices in order to integrate “... what [students] know and do out of school with what they do in school” (Thompson, 2008, p. 145). In doing this, educators can draw on students’ knowledge and personal interest in digital communication tools.

Personal and mobile digital platforms such as tablets and smartphones readily facilitate constructing the kind of layered speech and image composition that has been proposed above. Developing communication confidence in this way is timely. Many commentators declare that the versatility of smartphones and tablets could redefine the way educators approach their craft, enabling more one-to-one support, learning in context and the seamless integration of different learning spaces: formal and informal, shared and personal (Philip & Garcia, 2013). So, Seow and Looi

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Marker’s film “La Jetee” is a rare (but admired) cinematic example.



(2009) echo these points, advocating a fresh “... continuity of the learning experience” (So et al., 2009, p. 368) made possible by the mobility of these digital tools.

Moreover, multimodal composition is an obvious affordance of this personal toolkit, and Kress (2003) argues that it is not just made “possible” using mobile technology, but also “... easy, usual, ‘natural’ ...” (2003, p. 5).

In the remainder of this chapter we outline how familiar digital tools (personal, networked and mobile) might be deployed from the classroom to support multimodal exploration. The narrated photograph was chosen as the multimodal artefact for the case study that follows. As acknowledged above, this format is relatively unusual. However, it is this very unfamiliarity that made it attractive. By working with a design that was easily understood and yet novel, it was expected that student attention to issues of effective communication would be more finely focussed and that the difficult topic of modalities might be more comfortably introduced. The case study involved secondary school students constructing these sound photos around two accessible themes. We reflect on their work and note how they responded to the exercise through their reactions as shared in focus group discussions.

## **The Narrated Photograph: Case Study Procedure**

The work took place in an inner-city London secondary school. It was a mixed comprehensive establishment, educating around 1200 students from the age of 11–18, and situated in a multicultural community. The participants were volunteers from a group of 26 Year 7 English Language students of mixed ability. The project was conducted over a period of approximately 14 weeks. These students were chosen because the class had a good track record for homework completion and the project relied heavily on students composing outside of the classroom. Full details of procedure are in Crook (2015). It was apparent that although the students were in many ways adept with mobile technology, their “digital literacy”, in the modern sense, was limited. “Logging on”, setting up accounts and passwords, instant messaging and social networking were evidently second nature. However, acts such as connecting with Wi-Fi, diagnosing technical issues and responding to error messages sat far less comfortably.

To begin, the class were invited to evaluate a collection of neighbourhood sound-photos made by an adult. They were then given the title of their own topic: namely, “Our Local Area”. The students were told that they were going to produce a gallery of sound-photos, sharing points of neighbourhood interest. It was stressed that these items could be anything from shops, to monuments, to the students’ favourite outside spaces. The exercise was organised in four groups of four students. Most students used their own smartphones—which were mainly Android, a small number used iOS devices, and three android phones were lent by the teacher. The topic was chosen for several reasons. First, it was broad enough to offer the students flexibility in their interpretations—encouraging students to take ownership over their composition choices, rather than limit their options with a rigid and narrow framework.



Second, it was designed to be logistically sympathetic, encouraging students to focus on resources readily available to them. Finally, it aimed to provoke a personal response from the students, offering them the space to blend of in and out of school experiences and draw from their own experiences.

Drawing from the format of graphic novels, which—like sound-photos—blend two modes to create meaning, four of the student participants were invited to create a story in a sound-photo sequence. These were chosen (from volunteers) to reflect the gender, ability and ethnicity mix of the class. The aim of this further task was to put the composition process into a very different context, giving the students yet more freedom in terms of their topic foci. For this task, each student was challenged to collect six photos which, in sequence, could tell a story. They were permitted to obtain these images from anywhere they wanted, either using their own photography or by sourcing photos online. The device app was connected to a website service which allowed sharing of materials. Stories composed from collected material were uploaded by the researcher to a dedicated webpage.

## The Narrated Photograph: Student Products and Reflections

When asked about the nature of their own photo sharing practices, students referred to “selfies” and “memes”. “Selfie” is the familiar term for a photograph taken by the photographer *of* the photographer. While memes are typically humorous photos where the content resonates with some topical and shared idea. To analyse the students’ activity, Stein’s (2008) research on multimodal pedagogies is helpful. Those ideas are suggested through two approaches that the students reveal in relation to artefact composition: narrative and conceptual. Memes (pictures with the purpose of sharing an amusing idea) fit more into the narrative category, described by Stein as “... representing the world in terms of ‘doing’ and ‘happening’” (2008, p. 67). Selfies, however, seem to be more about conceptual representations, “... representing participants in terms of their classification, their generalised states of being or essences” (2008, p. 67).

Materials were evaluated in class, using an interactive whiteboard to look at examples as a whole group, as well as to focus on what was thought to make an engaging image and what makes engaging speech/sound (vocal qualities such as pitch, pace, volume and tone). Following this the students looked at each others’ work in teams. Students were given a set of questions to evaluate photos, such as “How engaging is the image?” “How effective is the sound?” “Do the sound and image link?” “Does one sound photo link to the next?” In their group reflections, the class first focused on the photo image. Students were eager to give feedback and engage with their classmates’ compositions. However, very few were able to justify their opinions in any detail and seemed to lack the relevant vocabulary to articulate their evaluations. It was evident from these sessions that students’ sensitivity to visual composition was relatively underdeveloped and they showed limited inclination to use visual structure as a platform for “reading” what was depicted.

Yet with minimal prompting, students still proved to be highly engaged with the process of evaluating these multimodal compositions. Whilst some student feedback focused on one mode at a time, a number of examples considered the sound and photo elements as two parts of a whole and reflected on the impact of that “whole” production. Throughout the viewing session that was organised, students played their peers’ sound clips repeatedly. There was a definite focus on the sound mode of the compositions, over the image mode.

Madsen and Potts (2010) note how an uncertainty about recorded speech can reflect the very exposing and intimate form of this representation. So they note how in the podcast listening experience: “The acousmatic voice is poured into the ears without disruptions from the exterior world, enveloping the listener with the intimate expression of its character—its grain ...” (2010, p. 45). They suggest that even when detached from its physical body, the voice remains unique and personal to the speaker. When used as a stand-alone mode of communication, speech offers nothing for the producer to hide behind, with listeners often concentrating on the qualities and sounds of the words spoken “... before the content is even considered” (2010, p. 45).

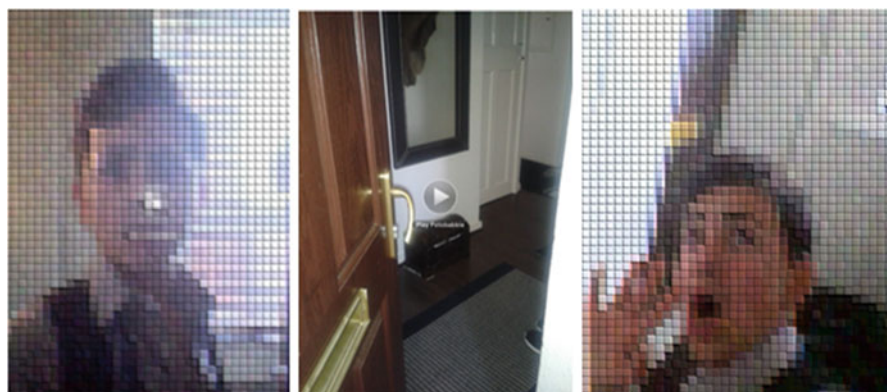
Moreover, individual students seem to be particularly concerned about the qualities of their voice and how listeners would “judge” the way it sounds, rather than the content of the speech they delivered. For example, Raven (names are anonymised) chose an inspiring subject matter for one composition: an ice cream parlour that uses liquid nitrogen to create its product. However, the opportunity to capture unusual chemical process behind the ice cream is neglected, offering instead just an image of the shop sign (Fig. 2.1). The image offers only a label or a headline for what is spoken to accompany it. This was a common approach to opening up an idea.

A multimodal “object” equates to more than the sum of its parts. A sound-photo composition would thereby communicate meaning through the intersection of sound

**Fig. 2.1** Image from sound photograph



**Fig. 2.2** Image from sound photograph



**Fig. 2.3** Section of sound-photo narrative

and image; one influencing the other. Yet very few examples of students' compositions demonstrate a tight integration of these two modalities. Most of the photos taken were self-explanatory, omitting opportunities for further viewer reading. With nothing provocative to draw from, it is then unsurprising that students' struggled to intersect their images with speech. So Meher's recording simply describes the contents of their image (Fig. 2.2) in an expository manner. It fails to communicate beyond the information available through listing material details depicted in the photograph.

Although students were uniformly engaged, the creative exercise of multimodality was limited for most of them. There were, however, some students who rose to the challenge in an inventive manner. Altin's sound-photo narrative revealed a

sophisticated understanding of shot type and camera angle. He effectively employs close ups to focus on the fear in his victim's face, POV (point of view) shots to give the impression that the reader was looking at the crime scene from characters' perspectives and a high angle shot to highlight his victim's weakness.

Through this understanding of what the photo image can achieve, student Altin produced a series of images that invited speech (and even sounds) that could enrich meaning, rather than reiterate it. Characters voices, a narrator, the sound of the door opening and even music could all intersect with these images to alter and enrich their representations.

Compositions such as those in Figs. 2.1 and 2.2 show that with limited appreciation of the image as a semiotic resource, students can struggle to exploit its potential and use it in conjunction with other modalities, such as speech. Meanwhile, Altin's composition (Fig. 2.3) shows that with developed visual confidence, students can use image and sound together to create sophisticated, multimodal texts.

Through sound-photo composition, students were challenged to adopt an instrumental use of voice, exploiting its unique semiotic resources, e.g. pace, pitch, tone, volume, rhythm and emphasis. A semiotic reading of compositions revealed great disparities in students' access to these affordances. However, they also revealed new learning opportunities made possible through working in this mode. Some students proved quite resistant to the mode of speech, producing sound-photo compositions that were far more limited than their written classwork. Some offered no speech at all whilst others employed other people's voices, or even alternative sounds. Cavarero (2005) discusses the performative nature of recorded speech and claims that through this mode of representation, there is "... a communication of one's own uniqueness that is, at the same time, a relation with another unique existent." (Cavarero, 2005, p. 5). It is this "uniqueness" that some of the students seemed to fear, both in terms of the unique qualities of their own voices, as well as the unique experience that an audience would have, listening to their voice.

Whilst most compositions adopted a style fairly similar to natural, conversational speech, several examples attempted more complex, sophisticated speech registers. Two students chose registers similar to that of a television advertisement, seducing their audiences with persuasive language and tone. One demonstrated multiple examples of the persuasive register in describing the local food market, referring to the "rich and fine aroma from the food stalls" and the "strong scent of spices", freely using alliteration. Another used endearing adjectives such as "spectacular" in a sound-photo about his local park, encouraging his audience to "relax on the hills".

Such examples demonstrated that students' confidence with speech registers varied greatly. Although the Drama curriculum does focus on speaking skills, it is not a compulsory subject. As a result, many students may leave school with limited oracy confidence. The variation observed suggests the need for more explicit focus on speaking-for-purpose in the English classroom. Wissman argues that "There is a value in co-constructing a student-centred space where the texts of students' lives become the texts of the class" (Wissman, 2008, p. 41) as it empowers and engages, promoting "the learner as interpreter" (Kress, 2009, p. 26).

## Discussion

Through encountering new modes of meaning-making, students may be able to represent in ways that would not be possible through writing alone. The case study outlined above illustrates how such opportunities might play out at the present time. So the sound-photo composition activities enabled these students to employ new speech registers to engage their audiences in different ways, adding meaning to their words. This variation in voicing reminds us that education creates few opportunities for students to think about their speech in instrumental terms. Yet we saw in some of these students a willingness and ability to do this. Adapting speech for purpose is a fundamental social skill. Thus, there is a need to take oracy more seriously and to see digital tools as one opening to do so in a practical way.

Likewise, this project revealed disparities in students' confidence with visual expression: differences that implied a lack of experience in seeing the semiotic potential of the image. These observations suggest that educators should help students read (and compose) in this visual modality as carefully as they are helped to read and write.

The responses of students referred to here make it evident that multimodal composition is not something they associate with English lessons: their concept of the subject is firmly anchored into communication through the single mode of writing. Yet despite the students' limited ability to imagine the role of sound-photo composition in the formal context of "English lessons", they were able to express the benefits it offered to acts of meaning-making. In particular, they observed that all modes carry with them different semiotic resources and some modes may be a more effective in certain contexts than others. For example, student Altin argued that activity in a park is more vividly conveyed through a sound recording, and written words cannot capture the same atmosphere:

Like, if you're in the park and you can hear laughter and people having fun, then you like, like, you can imagine it in your mind and how it feels like. But, like, in writing, you wouldn't really feel like, um, like you can really imagine it in your mind and try and focus on it.

Moreover, these students agreed that layered modes can strengthen meaning making (Millar & McVee, 2012). This is demonstrated in Altin's suggestion that layering speech with sound allows the speaker to direct the audience's attention to particular foci within the image:

... if you can hear it and look at it then you like know, ah, this person's talking about this and this and this. But, like, in writing, you don't really know what position they're in, like, where they are, you don't know what to focus on ...

Finally, in addressing these pedagogical issues, it is also necessary to consider how this experience informs best practice for future projects on multimodal learning. One issue is the provision of more guidance but also a more prescriptive task to establish confidence. A second issue is how it should be assessed? The sound-photos illustrated in the case study here cannot be easily mapped onto the traditional reading/writing assessment criteria. Jacobs (2013) proposes a need for change in assessment to align with changes in communication practices, claiming that "... it is not enough to pro-

vide opportunities for youths to engage in multi-literacies; assessment of multi-literacies must also be meaningfully integrated into the classroom” (2013, p. 623).

Seigal (2012) attempts to address the complex nature of multimodal assessment, stressing that the ultimate factor in designing assessment should be that there are multiple ways to make meaning. With this point in mind, she states “It is critical, therefore, that teachers and students become skilled readers of multimodal designs in all their variety” (2012, p. 676). She also suggests that for multimodality to be taken seriously in education there needs to be more open discussion that raises questions and considers the nature of multimodal classroom practices. We hope that we are contributing to that debate.

## Conclusion

We have described a project design for engaging secondary school students with multimodal interpretation and expression. This is achieved through the curation of a distinctive artefact—the narrated photograph. This unusual artefact emerges as a challenging yet effective way of capturing interest and imagination. It echoes very familiar digital formats and yet it is sufficiently unfamiliar to stimulate curiosity and engagement. The project was shared with the students’ tutors and a presentation was made for other members of the subject department. There are good grounds for supposing that multimodal projects designed around the principle of narrating images can be attractive to students and a rich vehicle for teachers.

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