



Reading and Understanding in the Digital Age

A look at the critical need for close reading of digital and multimodal texts

by Michael Manderino

More than 200 million users share 60 million photos per month on Instagram. Meanwhile, 100 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, with more than six billion hours of video content viewed every month. Clearly, the proliferation of available images and videos highlights the visual nature of communication in the digital age.

Digital texts are often referred to as multimodal because they make use of more than one mode of communication (e.g., text, image, sound, movement). Multimodal texts are also an integral part of classroom instruction. From picture books, maps, and photographs to newer practices such as 1:1 classroom environments and using instructional videos to “flip the classroom,” teachers and students interact with multimodal texts for learning as well as entertainment and social media sharing.

Concurrently, attention to close reading practices has catapulted to the forefront of instructional conversations. While much has been written about the importance of close reading of printed texts, it is important not to eschew the close reading of multimodal texts such as photographs, 3D models, videos, maps, audio, and any combination of multimedia texts found on and offline.

Close reading can be described as the reading and re-reading of a text or texts for multiple levels of meaning, including what the text states, how the text is constructed to communicate meaning, and the multiple meanings the text evokes. Close reading can be thought of as a means to more deeply learn, and thus should encompass digital and multimodal texts.

However, close reading of digital texts requires a certain language for talking about multimodal texts.

Speaking multimodal

In his book, *Reading the Visual: An Introduction to Teaching Multimodal Literacy* (Teachers College Press, 2013), Frank Serafini argues that students need a meta-language, or a way of talking about the unique “grammar” of multimodal texts. Elements of visual design can be used to describe and analyze the variety of modes that are used to communicate meaning in an image, for example. The language used to comprehend audio-visual texts is different than the comprehension of traditional texts. Serafini proposes a three-part framework for analyzing and making meaning from multimodal texts.

1. **Perceptual dimensions of the text.** Examples of these elements include color, lines, shapes, and size that all are critical to extrapolating the message.
2. **Structural dimensions of the text.** Examples of elements like point of view, gaze, framing, page orientation, and the positioning of individuals and objects within the text contribute to how the text was constructed.
3. **Ideological dimensions of the text.** Examples include an examination of the ideological construction of the text such as the history, context, production, and intended audience of those types of texts.

These levels help to structure close readings of digital and multimodal texts. A first reading could be for the contents; a second reading could focus on the ways the text was constructed; a third reading could be for deeper meaning, including the context of the multimodal representation and its production, such as the intended audience. Subsequent re-readings could be used to elucidate the relationship among the perceptual, structural, and ideological dimensions as well with other texts.

Classroom applications of close reading of multimodal texts extend beyond the reading of picture books, graphic novels, and media texts. Multimodal texts are essential representations that are used in all content areas, according to Amy Alexandra Wilson and Kathryn J. Chavez's book *Reading and Representing Across the Content Areas: A Classroom Guide* (Teachers College Press, 2014).

Content or disciplinary instruction should include the close and critical reading of the wide variety of texts that are essential for disciplinary learning. As a result, classroom instruction that strives to provide opportunities for close reading should regularly include the close reading of digital texts that include image, audio, and video in addition to nondigital resources.

From the margins to the foreground

While almost the entire body of recorded human knowledge is available online, it also comes in a variety of representations. Traditionally, students in school read predominantly written texts, with audio-visual texts treated as ancillaries. Reading online often involves reading written text along with flash-animation, videos, pictures, etc. Multimodal texts should stand alongside traditional texts and not simply be used as supplemental material.

The multimodal texts students interact with in digital and nondigital environments need to be examined closely to support learning. Opportunities to engage students in close reading include creating text pairings such as a video and a textual

reading, using artistic and photographic representations of the same topic or event, and analyzing multiple interpretations of the same concept or idea.

One example might be to have students do a Google image search of a concept such as the water cycle. On the first search results page alone, there are several different representations from governmental and scientific websites. A critical examination of the representation of the water cycle is needed to understand this scientific process. Comparing multiple representations provides opportunities that develop a more complete scientific explanation.

Close reading and multiple text synthesis of digital texts

Digital texts in online environments are positioned and linked with other texts. Online reading is then simultaneous rather than linear.

For example, there may be several hyperlinks on a webpage within the printed text as well as embedded images and videos. As a result, close reading of multimodal texts also requires the support of students' synthesis across multiple text types.

The close reading of digital and visual texts requires that we engage kids in specific strategies across multiple texts. Opportunities for comparative analysis and synthesis of combinations of multimodal texts are a profitable avenue for using close reading to deeply learn a subject.

Digital tools for close reading

Digital tools can be leveraged to enhance the close reading of multimodal texts. There are several for annotation of online texts that can support close reading such as diigo.com. Additionally, there are sites that allow the annotation of online videos including genius.com and ant.umn.edu.

Using digital tools to support close reading also means the remixing of those texts or the creation of new digital texts that create opportunities for students to examine their own design processes, thus recursively informing their analysis of digital and multimodal texts.

While digital environments are replete with multimodal texts, many are unauthored, unvetted, and unreliable. It is critical for students and teachers to not approach reading as merely an act of consumption or a routine of close reading, but as an act of critical analysis in order to read and write in today's world. ■



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