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Title: *Multimodal text and assessment practices - renegotiated qualities of academic expression and recognition*

Abstract

This paper will outline a pilot study that is part of my ongoing doctoral research into assessment of students' multimodal text-making in Swedish higher education. In digital environments in higher education students increasingly work with various digital formats, creating multimodal texts that combine *modes* such as still and moving *image, colour, layout, writing, speech* and *gesture*. Changing possibilities for students to represent knowledge in multimodal texts also entail changes in how teachers understand and assess knowledge, activities which in turn are reflections of teaching qualities. This presentation aims to describe data, methods and preliminary results from a pilot study from a Swedish university which offers online and campus-based education. Three teachers, teaching business or English courses, have been interviewed focusing on how they recognize and assess students' learning and knowledge. Data consists of five students' digital material, documents and teacher feedback in the Learning Management Platform, and audio recordings of teacher interviews. Through this fieldwork conducted in a Swedish university, the pilot study offers insights into changing patterns of meaning making and assessment in a digital learning environment. A multimodal social semiotic framework provides tools for studying students' multimodal texts (written, spoken, visual, gestural). Such multimodal texts are complex representations of knowledge and learning. Improved methods and tools for analyses of these complex multimodal texts would be profitable. To this end, the possibility of designing and developing new analytic tools for multimodal transcription is under consideration. In addition to the contribution to understandings of multimodal assessment, this pilot project also therefore seeks to develop multimodal methods for studying complex digital representations of knowledge, to improve teaching quality by facilitating recognition of learning and knowledge in multimodal texts.

Extended summary

Digital learning environments are changing educational landscapes (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018). This raises questions about (new) teaching qualities and how knowledge is represented, recognised and assessed in digital learning environments (Jewitt, 2014a; Kress, 2009, 2013; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2008). Students increasingly represent learning and knowledge in various digital formats where they combine writing, still and moving images and sound, in formats such as essays, PowerPoint presentations and film. Using an extended notion of text to include modes beyond, but not excluding, writing (Kress, 2010; New London Group, 1996) such student representations can be understood and studied as multimodal digital texts, which in turn will shed light on teaching qualities in digital environments. Such multimodal and digital forms of expression could prove advantageous for students with different linguistic backgrounds, and for students who come

from communities without traditions of higher education (Archer, 2014a, 2014b; Wyatt-Smith & Kimber, 2008). This is relevant for any systems of higher education that have goals for inclusive teaching and diversity and where students come from increasingly diverse cultural backgrounds (Nussbaum, 2002).

The changing possibilities for students to represent knowledge also entail changes and challenges for how teachers should understand and assess representations of knowledge. It is here assumed that assessment practices are a reflection of pedagogy and teaching quality. As a consequence, educational practices are being re-negotiated as the *modes* and means for representing knowledge expand to include new digital *modes* and media (Kress, 2010). It is increasingly argued that assessment needs to be better aligned with the new ways that students use to communicate what they learn and know (Archer, 2011; Kress, 2013). There is a need for further research into multimodal assessment and for developing reliable means for recognizing knowledge and learning when represented in the form of multimodal text such as PowerPoint presentations, film, images et cetera.

This paper aims to describe data, methods and (preliminary) results from an ongoing pilot study. The pilot study, which is part of my doctoral research, from a Swedish university which offers online and campus-based education, seeks to describe and understand four university students' digital multimodal representations of knowledge, and how knowledge when represented in multimodal digital representations is recognized and assessed by their two teachers. Assessment is here seen as interconnected with pedagogy. For this purpose, two research questions have been formulated where a concept of text as more than writing on paper or on a screen is assumed (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996/2021; the New London Group, 1996) (1) *How do university students make meaning and represent knowledge in texts;* and (2) *How do teachers in higher education in Sweden recognise and assess students' text?*

A multimodal social semiotic framework (Halliday, 1978; Kress, 2010) is adopted to provide tools for studying multimodal texts (written, spoken, visual, gestural) with a focus on representation. It is here assumed that human processes of knowledge and learning are interdependent, context dependent and context specific phenomena (Jewitt, 2014b; Kress, 2010). The main theoretical function will be to supply analytical frameworks for explaining and understanding how meaning is made using different modes, where the concept mode refers to a 'channel' for communication or representation which has both affordances and constraints (Jewitt, 2014b, 2014c; Kress, 2010, 2017).

A multimodal methodology is used to focus on how students, using different modes with different affordances, make meaning and represent knowledge, and how these representations of knowledge are recognized and assessed. Data for a pilot study was collected from three different courses in different subjects (English and Business) from the Learning Management System (LMS) at a Swedish university and is the result of authentic course activities. The selection (sampling) is purposive. The courses have been selected across a continuum of available courses and subjects where there is at least one assessed activity where students represent knowledge in multimodal text. Together these courses and assignments offer several layers of multimodal texts to study and analyze. Participants have given informed consent and information and data has been de-identified according to legal and ethical guidelines and regulations (Rücker & Kugler, 2018; Swedish Research Council, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). The dimension of assessment of the students' representations of knowledge and multimodal texts was investigated using open-ended interviews with the teachers who have taught and assessed the students, and through analyses of the teachers' feedback on the students' multimodal texts. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and feedback has been retrieved from the LMS or obtained from other teacher documentation.

Multimodal texts (written, spoken, visual, gestural) are complex representations of knowledge and learning where students can use multiple *modes* in one material representation. As the tools, *modes* and means for expression and communication are changing rapidly, the methodological frameworks for studying these changing landscapes also develop and evolve to keep pace with the changing objects and areas of study. The increasing levels of modal complexity in multimodal texts requires increasingly complex multimodal transcription which is time consuming and with is a risk of over-focusing on description. Improved methods and tools for facilitating multimodal transcription and analyses are needed. In the process of this ongoing doctoral research the design and development of new analytic tools for multimodal transcription is being explored. In addition to the contribution to understandings of multimodal assessment, this pilot project therefore also seeks to develop multimodal methods for studying complex digital representations of knowledge, and to contribute frameworks for facilitating recognition of learning and knowledge in multimodal texts. This research offers insights into changing qualities of teaching and representation of learning, knowledge and assessment.

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