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## Multiliteracies, Multimodalities, and Social Studies Education

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## Multiliteracies, Multimodalities, and Social Studies Education

### Erratum

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# Multiliteracies, Multimodalities, and Social Studies Education

Laurie Tricamo

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## ABSTRACT

This project explores multiliteracies, multimodal education, and its use in designing social studies curriculum. Specifically, multiliteracies provides a framework for understanding and productively using multiple modes in social studies education. Supported by a survey of literature, and an analysis of current pedagogical practices, an example of multimodal social studies curriculum will be provided.

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Educational theory and pedagogy are constantly developing, as evident by the changing trends and supporting research from throughout the last century in the United States. Since the 1990s, literacy research and practices have taken a social turn, in comparison to previous pedagogy with a more behaviorist or cognitive approach. Current pedagogical research supports the development of literacy practices and the reading of “text” that goes beyond traditional print-based forms to include digital and multimodal forms of reading. This shift also emphasizes the idea of connecting literacy learning from inside school to students’ everyday experiences outside of school. Additionally, there is a strong movement to include disciplinary literacy practices as a form of teaching and learning within adolescent classrooms.

This project advances the current field of educational scholarship by arguing that social studies is multimodal by nature and therefore would be a beneficial way to design the curriculum to enhance the accessibility and relatability of learning within social studies lessons. This paper explores the theories of multiliteracies, multimodal education, and its use in designing social studies curriculum. Specifically, multiliteracies not only provide a framework for understanding these multiple modes but also how to productively use these multiple modes in social studies education. Supported by a survey of literature and an analysis of current pedagogical practices, an example of multimodal social studies curriculum is described. This proposed curriculum demonstrates the possibilities and benefits of teaching social studies through a multimodal lens.

## SURVEY OF LITERATURE

When analyzing the current literature surrounding the topics of multiliteracies, multimodalities, and literacy in social studies, there have been clear trends developing in recent years. These trends provide a framework for proper implementation of this theory into practice. Most broadly, the theory of multiliteracies, introduced by The New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996), raises the point that learning should go beyond traditional language-based approaches to support the multiplicity of communication methods and the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the world. Current educational scholarship has built on this seminal work to reveal other trends related to the use of digital technologies, interactive activities, supporting multilingual learners, and making connections between school learning and the modern world.

### Major Themes

As teaching methods over the last few decades have been developed to address the idea of learning beyond school, the learning structure has developed to include multimedia and other elements relatable to students in their broader lives. Scholarship in this field argues that using a multiliteracies approach increases digital literacy skills and also emphasizes the connection between school learning and outside learning. Several seminal works and research-based studies argue that students can translate their skills from school and apply them to the world around them, not just within the classroom (Al-Hazza, 2017; Chisholm & Whitmore, 2016; Cloonan, 2011; Cole & Pullen, 2010; Dalton, 2015; Dingler, 2017; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Education Queensland, 2003; and Cazden et al., 1996). To address the multiple communication channels of learners in modern society, teaching must adapt to teach students growing abilities and diversifying interests. Creating a more accessible version of learning allows students to make meaningful connections between school and their lives, translating their content and skill knowledge into their actions in the world around them.

Additionally, the importance of connecting classroom learning to a modern multimodal society has been emphasized in a variety of scholarly works. These studies argue that education must adapt to meet the needs of the current society (Al-Hazza, 2017; Dalton, 2015; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Cazden et al., 1996). This explores the aforementioned idea that learning must be transferable to life beyond school and that it must use tools that students can then bring into their communities. The pioneering research of the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) indicates that the modern shift in teaching literacy must consider the multiplicity of discourses, especially in an increasingly diverse, globalizing, multimedia engaged world. Teaching with multiliteracies addresses this local and global interconnectedness.

Another major theme is the promotion of inquiry-based learning or creative and interactive activities. Scholarship encourages the use of multimodalities to enhance the educational experience for students. This is most frequently revealed through the idea of inquiry (Al-Hazza, 2017; Chisholm & Whitmore, 2016; Dalton, 2015; Miller, 2018; Education Queensland, 2003). Since social studies is a discipline focused on in-

quiry, designing a curriculum with multimodalities aligns well with the goal of making education more accessible to students' motivation and increasing the relevance of historical content by exploring the past with historical literacy skills.

## Sub Themes

Seminal research of Gee (1989) and The New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996) promote the idea of making learning more accessible, addressing supporting the needs of multilingual learners. It is argued by both works of scholarship that it is essential to consider the variety of discourses students use and to build upon their socially accepted communication methods within classroom learning. Gee (1989) specifically analyzes the significance of discourse in literacy and introduces the definitions of acquisition as subconscious learning, and learning as knowledge that is actively taught. In a growing globalizing society, it is imperative that our education system support the language demands of all learners, and to recognize that there is no longer a single form of canonical English that should be taught anymore (Cazden et al., 1996). Schools must plan to support success for all students, regardless of linguistic or socioeconomic boundaries.

Using multiple modes also makes content more transferrable to students, giving them the tools to lead civically engaged lives. Several scholars address that by using multimodalities in social studies learning, students can build up the skills necessary to be active and informed participants in the civic, economic, and personal aspects of our modern society (Al-Hazza, 2017; Chisholm & Whitmore, 2016; Dinger, 2017; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Cazden et al., 1996). The nature of learning has changed, and the New London Group argues that there is a need for literacy teachers and students to see themselves as the designers of social futures (Cazden et al., 1996). New discourses are emerging through different ways of thinking and acting, which must be recognized to be active civic participants and advocates.

Lastly, adolescence education scholarship highlights that encouraging student choice in learning and providing various project opportunities leads to increased investment in-class tasks. Chisholm & Whitmore (2016) and Dalton (2015) point out that increasing the modes that students can use for class activities, leads to motivation for participating and taking a more active role in their learning. Dalton particularly determined that using digital tools for project design enhanced students' goals, processes, and projects (2015). A connection is made here to students outside of school, as he argues that teaching with these tools and multimodalities must explicitly connect the skills from the projects to the world beyond school, indicating that students are social designers (Dalton, 2015). Art and project-based learning also embrace multiliteracies, as students engage themselves gesturally and emotionally, learning them to opportunities to make meaning from complex historical narratives (Chisholm & Whitmore, 2016).

## MODES OF MEANING MAKING

The modes of meaning making are derived from the theories of multiliteracies, which provides a framework for understanding how to teach productively with multimodalities. Multiliteracies is a broader view of literacy that overcomes traditional language-based approaches (Cazden et al., 1996). It makes literacy more accessible by considering how linguistic and cultural differences contribute to the lives of students inside and outside of the classroom. Literacy incorporates more than one mode to communicate ideas, express perspective, and evoke emotion. Thus, multiliteracies demonstrate that all meaning making is multimodal. Multimodalities, or the multiple modes to make meaning, are a natural part of social studies since students can access, interpret, and interact with the past in a variety of ways. Multimodal texts and other sources do not necessarily have to be digital but do need to include more than one of the five modes. These modes are linguistic design, audio design, spatial design, gestural design, and visual design (Cazden et al., 1996).

Each of these modes highlights a different method of meaning making. Linguistic design means to make meaning from spoken or written language. In social studies, linguistic design includes elements like text features, word choice, and debates. Audio design means making meaning from sound or noises. In social studies this may be in the form of videos, speeches, oral histories, lectures, music, tone, and accent. Spatial design, which is making meaning from an organization of objects in a space, would be visible in social studies through the use of maps, physical classroom layout, placement of information on a page, positioning of historical figures in a primary source. Gestural design is meaning making from movements of the body. Social studies may feature this mode in facial expressions, Socratic seminars, theatre, role play, debate. Lastly, is visual design, which is making meaning from images. Social studies visual design includes political cartoons, photographs, maps, logos, blueprints, text, transcriptions, books, newspaper articles, advertisements, perspective, and color.

All of these modes can occur simultaneously to make meaning, but cannot function independently to be considered a multimodality. Many social studies teachers already use multimodalities in their daily pedagogy, due to the multimodal nature of the topic, but understanding the purpose and function of each modality is significant to supporting students' accessibility to the texts and their development of disciplinary literacy skills. Although digital tools are not necessary for multimodality learning, the multimedia component would likely enhance the amount of modes accessible to the learners, since digital sources may introduce elements beyond traditional text-based sources.

In social studies, some examples of sources for multimodal meaning making are historical photographs, Google Earth digital mapping, graphic novels, oral histories, portrait studies, blogs, music, sound bites, video clips, debates, political cartoons, quote analysis, simulation activities, project and arts-based learning approaches, and classroom set-up. These types of sources, activities, and assessment must be approached cautiously, to ensure that they are meaningful, education-enhancing tools, and not

random or put together without deeper significance. Introducing different elements into social studies instruction also requires the instructor to explicitly teach students how to use these tools or methods and introduce how they support students' use of meaning making through the specific modes.

## IMPLICATIONS

A sociocultural lens is necessary for understanding the significance of the multiliteracies framework, as it describes learning as relevant to the unique social, cultural, and linguistic experiences of each student and how it influences their education. Although social studies is arguably one of the most valuable school subjects, it is often the case that students find these courses to be dry or unengaging. Teaching with multiple modes, or multimedia, allows students to draw connections between their learning in school and the world around them. Social studies is multimodal by nature, involving the critical analysis of a variety of primary or secondary sources to draw conclusions on historical phenomena. With this approach, students actively engage with historical inquiry and think creatively about the past, motivating them to create a synthesis of ideas and projects that are modern and relevant. By incorporating multimodalities into social studies instruction, learning is scaffolded to be accessible to all learners through multiple modes, whether visual, gestural, audio, spatial, or linguistic. All classrooms have the potential to become multimodal, whether it be with the layout of the physical space, the inclusion of a variety of sources, or the way lessons are presented to the class.

## SAMPLE OF CURRICULUM

### Context

This sample curriculum is designed for the course of eighth grade United States History in New York State. The multimodal lesson ideas focus around the unit of *Industrialization and Urbanization*. Specifically, it aligns with the New York State Social Studies Standard: 8.2, “A Changing Society: Industrialization and immigration contributed to the urbanization of America. Problems resulting from these changes sparked the Progressive movement and increased calls for reform” (Standards: 1, 2, 4; Themes: MOV, SOC, TECH, EXCH). This unit typically takes place in the beginning, or fall semester, of eighth grade, if teaching history chronologically.

Prior knowledge that is needed in preparation of this unit is about Reconstruction. Details such as the migration patterns of freed African Americans, and labor shifts from a predominantly agricultural-based economy to a more industry-based economic system set the stage for urban development. This unit of the Gilded Age includes topics like technological advancement, monopolies, the immigrant experience, the development of cities, working conditions, and the formation of labor unions. Learning about this American Industrial Revolution prepares students to critique the

growth of industry, immigration policy, and labor conditions, leading their learning into the Progressive Era.

### **Activity 1: Argumentative Writing**

Argumentative and critical writing is a major component of social studies curriculum. Using disciplinary analysis skills to interpret historical primary and secondary source documents, identify perspective and bias, and then cohesively synthesize ideas is the main focus for social studies writing. In order to support the skills needed to develop their own argumentative writing, multiple modes should be emphasized to increase their understanding of different elements within a historical writing piece. To do so, a text-coding activity, designed to build up discipline-specific writing skills, activates multiple modes in a student's learning of the content to enhance their understanding of writing structure and to build historical writing skills.

For the text-coding activity, students create a key with a partner, highlighting what they see, what it means, and what the overall section of text means based on their coding system (Dingler, 2017). By doing so, the color-coordinated text identification process supports the students comprehension of the text as a whole and the specific components that are within it. This strategy can be modified to be for persuasive writing pieces as well, demonstrating to students how to write their own arguments, based on the structure and academic language they identify from their model text. It can also be used with the goal of pointing out key ideas and information in a historical document. This activity involves the linguistic, visual, and spatial meaning making modes.

Using a digitized book, such as Jacob Riis's 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*, contributes to this unit by activating multiple modes of meaning making, and emphasizing a multiliteracies and New literacies approach to teaching pedagogy. This well known primary source describes tenement life, working conditions, and immigration from a bottom-up perspective. By engaging readers directly into the source with the text-coding activity, students develop a closer understanding of Jacob Riis's perspective, his written language, and his photographs, sparking inquiry and presenting a framework for argumentative writing.

### **Activity 2: Interpreting Speeches**

A prominent resource used in many history units are popular historical speeches. Typically, lessons may be designed to include a written version of a speech, an audio recording, or a video, depending on the historical era and the available technology at the time. A beneficial way to teach with a speech in social studies is to encourage students to make meaning through many modes, taking the analysis further than by only activating a singular mode, such as a speech transcript.

For this activity, students are first given a written transcript of a speech and are tasked with reading it to identify key elements such as the speaker, context, audience, tone, and purpose. It is important to design this lesson with key speech elements in mind



that align with the broader content of the unit and the skills being developed in the course. After drawing conclusions from the transcript, an audio recording of the original speech is played for the class. The goal of this is to support students in further identifying how the information was portrayed and how rhetoric influences the quality and impact of speech. The modes of meaning making in this activity are linguistic, spatial, visual, and audio.

For this unit, it may be challenging to activate all of these modes, as video and audio recordings were not popularized until after this era. However, it is necessary to think like a historian and to draw from sources beyond the typical content, to include people or events that are significant to history in their own way. A speech resource fitting for this unit is William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, given on July 9, 1896, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. At a time when prosperity took on different forms, this speech is noted as one of the most famous of its time. Although the speech was not recorded by Bryan until years later, listening to his voice while reading the transcript allows students to make meaning of it in a variety of ways.

### **Activity 3: Digital Inquiry Stations**

The National Council for the Social Studies embraces the C3 Framework, encouraging a focus on inquiry, which is at the core of social studies learning. Modern pedagogical shifts towards participation within the disciplines and an inquiry-based learning structure align with the inquisitive nature of historians and the many ways to interpret the past. Station activities expose students to a variety of source types and historical documents, allowing them to make inquiries and interpretations based on the evidence they see, and also from what is missing.

For this activity, the teacher will develop a lesson that encourages students to take the lead on their learning, by providing them with ample historical resources to explore significant topics to this unit. Industrialization and urbanization within the United States has so many different types of sources available, focusing on topics like child labor, regulations in the workplace, factory conditions, and city planning. For this structured digital inquiry, students would need access to 1:1, or 1:2 computer or tablet technology, since it can be done independently, or collaboratively with a partner. The stations would be organized on Google Slides, each correlating with a question on the inquiry packet students making their observations on. The students answer scaffolded questions, by analyzing documents to reveal elements of history that stand out to them. This inquiry allows students to work at their own pace, self-monitoring, or collaboratively with a partner, sharing their analysis or questions related to the historical documents. The modes of meaning making emphasized by this activity are linguistic, spatial, audio, visual, and gestural.

For this activity, many teachers may already have an ample amount of primary or secondary source documents related to this historical era. However, to add to their teaching resources, the Library of Congress has a primary source collection titled "The Industrial Revolution in the United States." This database includes digitized

maps, infrastructure blueprints, advertisements, telegrams, political cartoons, images, and primary source video clips of working conditions and urban development. All of these documents can be used to create teacher-designed themed stations or to allow students to explore the collection in their inquiry, choosing areas that interest them to develop their historical understanding.

### **Additional Multimodal Activities**

In addition to the activities described in this sample curriculum, there are many other ways to teach industrialization and urbanization in a multimodal way. Other examples of prospective activities that can be designed with a multimodalities and multiliteracies framework are political cartoon analysis, a Captain of Industry vs. Robber Baron debate, a manager vs. laborer contract meeting simulation, an interactive mapping project via Google Maps for the growth of cities and industry, and a Salad Bowl vs. Melting Pot demonstration with props. These activities support the use of multiple modes by including design elements that go beyond the traditional text-based approach to learning. They each include more than one of the following modes: visual, linguistic, audio, spatial, or gestural, and enhance learning from lecture-based to interactive, inquiry-based learning experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

Multiliteracies and multimodalities are a natural enhancement to social studies instruction, as the discipline is multimodal by nature. Within the themes of social studies, including culture, economics, geography, government, and historical perspective, educators have the opportunity to enhance students' content understandings by designing instruction with multiple modes. Social studies is an irreplaceable school subject, revealing the trends, perspectives, injustices, and triumphs of the past, locally and globally. By teaching social studies with a mindfulness of multiliteracies and multimodalities, students can be supported to engage with complex ideas through a variety of modes. With this approach, students actively collaborate with historical inquiries and think creatively about the past, creating a synthesis of ideas and projects that are modern and relevant. Teaching with multiple modes also allows for students to draw connections between their learning in school and the world around them, acknowledging their role as designers of the social future. Moving forward, educational scholarship should address multiliteracies within the content areas and provide additional framework to support learners with multiple modes, per discipline-specific goals and ideology. Continuing on a path of modernity, educators must be adaptable, global-minded, and informed, understanding the influence that they, and their students, have on the interconnected society around them.

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