

EMPLOYING MULTI-MODALITY IN A HEALTH COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM: TOWARDS A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO LEARNING

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Abstract

Informed by social constructivism, this paper explores how an eclectic framework, participatory communication and multimodality can be utilized in a health communication classroom. This methodological approach engages a socio-semiotic framework that enables investigation of multimodal resources that are utilized in the design of health promotion texts. It does this through a critical analysis of a poster from a private hospital as an exemplar text, and Vygotsky's scaffolding to initiate motivation, critical thinking and peer collaboration in a health communication classroom. Following the analysis, the paper recommends employment of pedagogical processes to facilitate empowerment of students, effective working relationships and effective team and interpersonal skills.

Key Words: multi-modality, representational, communication, critical learners, participatory approach

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed a shift and development of “communicational landscapes which emanate from emerging knowledge economy that is shaped by societal and technological forces of late capitalism, which have reconfigured representational and communicational resources of image, action and sound in new multimodal ensembles” (Jewitt, 2008:241) therefore, it is no longer possible to think of literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors (Kress quoted in Jewitt, 2008: 41). The Botswana government has embarked on selling the knowledge economy concept to the entire nation and particularly to the education sector; hence introducing a paradigm shift that aims at influencing the teaching and learning environment. A communication classroom provides opportunities to utilize multimodal resources to facilitate critical, problem-solving and creative learning by exposing learners to representational potential of knowledge through the various modes and media at our disposal. The “ways in which something is represented shape both what is to be learned (curriculum content), and how it is to be learned; the focus being on multimodality on the representation and the learning potentials of teaching materials and the ways in which teachers and students activate these through their interactions in classrooms (Jewitt, 2008: 241). Students learn better when they are challenged and multimodal resources provide the motivational potential for such. Based on these theoretical pronouncements, this paper uses an exemplar text to illustrate how

multimodality could be utilized in a health communication classroom to develop critical literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving skills for health sciences students.

Conceptual Framework

The overarching theory informing this paper is social constructivism. Social constructivism's main tenet is that; learning takes place in a social context that plays a pivotal role in the learning process, which dialogue between the learner and the subject becomes a crucial social act (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky, the pioneer of social constructivism, posits that human development is inherently a socially situated activity (see Storch, 2005). The shift from students being passive learners to active participants in class, joining in interactive language learning tasks and becoming autonomous learners are the main concern of the social constructivist scholarship (Yang and Wilson, 2006). Involving students in critiquing a text and drawing from its multimodal processes, follows the social constructivist view that learners are just not passive and empty vessels. This is also a view that is held by Freire's pedagogical approach (discussed briefly in a later section) that lends itself to critical consciousness. Learning as a dialogic measure enables students to interact with sources of ideas/knowledge in social settings, as well as taking part in reconstructing ideas/knowledge within their minds (Yang & Wilson; 2006: 365).

Using a text as a learning resource is what Vygotsky (1978) metaphorically refers to as scaffolding. The exemplar text, the poster which this paper uses to illustrate how it could elicit students' motivation, provides support for the students. Yang and Wilson (2006) argue that to enable students to achieve tasks set out for them, support measures need to be provided by teachers to make it possible for them to perform at optimum levels. A text as an exemplar, and a lecturer as a facilitator of learning together provide an environment for interaction, that would be "achieved through classroom discussions, provision of mechanisms for enhancing higher order thinking as they facilitate rather than direct knowledge enhancement" (Palincsar, 1998: 357).

The paper illuminates the participatory communication paradigm within the social constructivist scholarship to demonstrate how the two approaches could benefit a health communication classroom. Health communication has increasingly used development communication paradigms to develop health promotion texts. One such paradigm, particularly viewed to be useful for developing countries, is the participatory communication approach (Servaes, 2002). Participatory competence is viewed as enabling voices to be heard: recognizing, promoting and enhancing abilities to meet the needs, solve own problems, and mobilise necessary resources to feel in control (Servaes, 1985; 1986; 1989). Freire's (1974) critical pedagogy has informed curricula in education and health communication interventions. Freire's critical pedagogy perceives learners as capable and not empty vessels. The participatory approach puts the learner at the centre of the learning process. Just like social constructivism, learning takes place "in a socio-cultural environment and views learners as "active constructors of their own learning environment" (Mitchell & Myles, 1988: 162).

In the light of the possible positive interplay between social constructivism and participatory communication paradigms, this paper presents preliminary research on how multimodality can be used in a classroom in order to elicit motivation and awaken students' creativity and engagement (students would be involved in critiquing texts and use with various representational resources that can be considered for health promotion) to create their own. "Models of critique encourage students to be aware of the principles of dominant notions of literacy, to question the ideologies they represent, and to explore the production of innovation and change" (Jewitt,

2008:252). Multimodality, like multiliteracies, has emerged in response to the changing social and semiotic landscape (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn & Tsatsarelis, 2001; Kress & von Leeuwen, 2001). The key tenet of multimodality is that all communication is multimodal, and any communicative event entails simultaneous use of modes which may realize meanings that complement and/or contradict each other (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2004).

Methodology

This is a qualitative enquiry that utilizes discourse analysis, and socio-semiotics to analyse a poster from a private hospital in Botswana. The discourse and socio-semiotics analysis tools are informed by Kress and von Leeuwen's (2001). The discourse analysis and socio-semiotics examine textual codes to unpack sub-texts and representations underlain in the text. The key concepts in social semiotics are: sign, mode, frame, site of display and medium (Halliday, 1994; Hodge and Kress, 1998; Jewitt, 2005; Kress & von Leeuwen, 2001; 2006).

Socio-semiotics is the lens used to analyse texts under survey. Posters are multimodal ensembles of linguistic texts and images. Kress and van Leeuwen's multi-modal theory of communication offers an opportunity to look at a whole text as integrated during an analysis. Promotional materials often use various semiotic resources to ensure impact in meaning making of the text. This offers an opportunity for an analysis to look at a whole text as integrated. The analytical framework is used to identify the process of learning through which students are immersed in a communicative event that enables them to draw from their lives' experiences through engaging with a multi-modal text; interact with others in groups to share experiences; and to produce multi-modal texts which they would have enabled by experience of analysing texts.

The analysis tool plays a crucial role in evaluating both denotative and connotative meanings embedded in texts. This involves "identifying the operative principles of various signs together with the different orders of signification; exploring implications of the codes and conventions inherent in any text and developing some form of ideological analysis of the text role in contemporary public culture" (Deacon et al 1999: 143). Semiotics is important "as a science of the signs, since language in societies comprises of the sign system, whether it is verbal or non-verbal (this includes visual signs as in pictures (in art form, paintings or graffiti or pencilled and murals) photographs, billboards and banner images) (Deacon et al, 1999: 143).

Following Halliday's theory of meta-functions ((1994; 2004; Halliday and Matthiessen; 2004), where language is described as fulfilling three meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal and textual, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2006) adapted the three to representational, interactive and compositional, where the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several (communicational and representational) requirements in order to function as a full system of communication" (Kress and von Leeuwen, 2006: 41). In this framework, all semiotic resources, linguistic and visual are viewed as being connected to mediate a complete composite message; hence an analysis of health campaigns could benefit from employing the multi-modal framework.

The multimodal textual and visual analysis was guided by Kress and von Leeuwen's compositional meaning framework and interactive resources, which connect or disconnect elements.

- **Compositional; Salience:** constitutes part of compositional meaning, where elements in the text; verbal and imagery may be made more prominent than others by considering the relative importance of a sign in the context of others. Salience can also be achieved through imagery framing: capitals, font, word choice, numerals and colour;
- **Interactive; Perspective:** considers positioning of the text v/s the viewer; proximity which builds a strong relationship with the rhetoric and viewer; that is, how close or distant the viewer is to the image, and whether or not it is interactive; also, proximal/time indicators can be analysed for urgency of a particular issue; Further, framing of two objects together/ juxtaposition in the same image can reveal implication of connection between them. Perspective framing can also reveal a type of image act, point of view and modality. Deictic pronouns: you and your (possessive pronoun) to indicate point of view

Fig. 1: Computer mouse; Source: photographed at Bokamoso Private Hospital by researcher



Compositional/Salience

The caption '**Act Today**' evokes the same effect. Capital letters and red colour draws attention to the viewer. The aim is to bring out a sense of urgency in order to give agency through transfer of power to the viewer

Textual Analysis

- **“Three times more germs than a toilet seat”**: impersonal, no personal deixis; does not have possessive pronoun
- Salient numerical figure used to induce panic/ fear
- The text is juxtaposed with the image to give salience
- As in Fig. 1, instructions on ‘proper washing’ of hands is juxtaposed to visuals, and are step by step explicitly stated.

Visual Analysis

The image is speckled with green, blue, seaweed-like, black and white spots

Salience is given to both the visual and verbal text **“Three times more germs than a toilet seat”** and word choice.

Step 1: Wash hands; Step 2: Soap; Step 3: Wash for 20 seconds; Step 4: Rinse; Step 5: Dry; Step 6: Turn off water with paper towel

Visual analysis

- Framed/bordered
- Capital letters used to give salience
- bold red used to signals danger
- **Background**: green, signifies: renewal; colour of life; harmony; freshness; safety; serenity; “green thumb” revitalization; used in health to connotatively signify safety
- Phone image speckled with blue, black and grey spots: contrasted with foggy screen

Perspective

- Main text is positioned closer to the viewer to form a strong relationship with the viewer
- Close relationship calls for consideration of information that is given to equip the viewer with knowledge, since knowledge is power (Foucault, 1980). The viewer is empowered with agency to take charge of his/her own health

Taking Health Campaigns to the Classroom

This paper follows Neuhauser and Kreps (2010;13) pronouncement that social semiotics can play a critical role in situating an individual within the complex personal and social contexts. Also important to note is their argument that social semiotics “could help us rethink the classic communication strategy in which expert-designed generic messages are “broadcast to people... and that the theory emphasizes that messages have an impact only if receivers find them understandable, engaging and motivating” They quote Neuhauser, 2001; Hesse and Schneiderman, 2007 remarks that social semiotics help explain the rationale of the ‘participatory design’ movement that has begun to influence health communication approaches. It is to this end that a participatory approach that employs a participatory development communication paradigm, the Communication for Participatory Development Model (CFPD) as an “alternative to the modernization approach” (Lubombo, 2011:103) is recommended for the health communication module for Health Sciences students at the University of Botswana (UB).

Nair and White (1993:51) perceive participatory communication as an interaction between ‘sources’ and ‘receivers’: “opening of dialogue, source and receiver interacting continuously... identifying developmental needs and problems, deciding on what is needed to improve the situation, and acting upon it”. The participatory approach puts more emphasis on interpersonal channels, where people are viewed as the nucleus of development and encourages the subject to be participator, a people- centred and bottom-up or horizontal approach (Freire, 1970).

Participation is primarily linked to Paulo Freire’s liberation pedagogy (Kincaid and Figueroa, 2009). Freire sees communication ‘as a dialogue and participation for the purpose of creating... ‘empowerment’ (Lubombo, 2011:103). Freire’s critical pedagogy’s key main elements are critical consciousness, problem solving, conscientization and dialogue. Freire (1970), who used to be teacher in Brazil, advocated a liberating approach that is self-reflexive and that empowers the learner, by putting them at the centre of the learning process. Opposed to the banking approach, Freire conceived an approach that aimed at critical consciousness, which enabled participatory competence that recognizes, promotes and enhances people’s abilities to meet their own needs, and solve their own problems (Servaes, 1985; 1986; 1989). Freire’s writing became more influential in the field of development communication since the 1970s and it has influenced health communication approaches. One such example of his methodology is the adaptation into theatrical practice by Augusto Boal (1995) also known as forum theatre (Servaes, 1989).

Freire’s pedagogy has been criticized as critics contend that it may not fit in all circumstances, Freire is reported to have acknowledge that himself (Thomas, 1996; McKee, Manoncourt, Yoon and Carnegie (yr). However, this paper argues that the critical pedagogy methodology may be useful in the health communication classroom as the benefits of critical thinking and problem solving would develop and enhance the creativity of learners who are themselves not ‘empty vessels’, but who bring into the communication context lived experiences and prior knowledge. Freire believes that individuals have the capacity for reflection, for conceptualization, for critical thinking, for making decisions, for planning and for social change (Servaes, 1996; 79).

Posters Used as Exemplar Texts

- Students introduced to critical analysis of multimodal texts
- Portfolio development
 - ✓ Step 1: reading, critiquing, evaluating analysis with guiding questions
 - ✓ Step 2: interpretation
 - ✓ Step 3: field observations to determine current health issues
 - ✓ Step 4: brainstorming of topics
 - ✓ Step 5: selection of topic
 - ✓ Step 6: employing participatory approach: needs analysis with target audience for content in campaign design: popular culture/ language: campaign design and content determined by findings from target audience
 - ✓ Step 7: students act on comments from lecturer
 - ✓ Step 8: Plenary presentation including formative assessment and grading
 - ✓ Step 9: Summative assessment and grading at final submission
- Group management

- ✓ Students develop memorandum of understanding (MOU). Each contributes rules to be followed when engaging in group work
- ✓ Students edit the MOU, do a final draft
- ✓ Students sign the MOU
- ✓ Lecturer facilitates process
- ✓ A progress form is designed by the students with guidance from the lecturer. The MOU and progress form facilitate peer collaboration, peer learning, peer feedback and peer monitoring.

Conclusion

The merging of social semiotics and teaching of health communication campaigns informed by the participatory communication approach would build a model that would benefit the health communication course. Kress and von Leeuwen's proposed model is applicable to domains such as promotion, websites, teaching material... and/or cultural aspects of non-verbal communication as it can help students and researchers to understand better visual communication in order to convey information and persuade more successfully (Stoian; 2015:29). Pritchard and Woollard (2013) assert that case studies and vignettes demonstrating best practice are used throughout the text, and they illustrate how monitored collaboration between learners can result in an effective learning environment where targets are met. The benefits derived from this approach would entail: students developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills and innovative skills. Moreover, students would be engaged in interpersonal exchanges. Furthermore, Freire's pedagogy would be enacted through praxis, conscientization and dialogue. Finally, the proposed pedagogic methods have the potential to develop effective working relationships and effective team and interpersonal skills.

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