Using multimedia experiences to develop children's literacy

Caroline Mander
Summercroft Infant and Nursery School, Hertfordshire

Abstract

Caroline Mander graduated from the Herts. MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning in 2007. In this article, she describes how she worked with the teachers in her school to explore and promote children's speaking, narrative recounting and writing skills through the use of multimedia experiences.

As the Literacy Coordinator and Deputy Head of my school I am in an ideal position to take an overview of the trends and issues in the literacy and learning needs of our pupils. Discussions with colleagues and friends, observations and analysis of results all suggest that the literacy skills of our pupils are changing. I have a comic strip by my computer. On it is pictured a very perplexed little man who has clearly been driving around for quite some time. He finally finds a sign post but all it tells him is: 'If You Are Here You Are Lost'. I began to wonder how many of our children had that sense of being lost whilst in school and whether the advancements of the multimedia world in which they live impacts on their literacy skills in the classroom.

Much of my reading was suggesting a gap between pupils' multimedia experience at home and at school (Merchant, 2003; Millard, 2003). I began to wonder if the 'literacy journey' that our pupils were on before and outside school was significantly different to the learning opportunities in school. I kept returning to my cartoon which raised many questions for me. Significantly, I wondered how we could use multimedia experiences to develop our own approach as practitioners to supporting children's literacy learning. My own journey began with an exploration of the multimedia world of the child.

Exploring the multimodal world of the child

Children's experiences of narrative are now far more flexible than in the past. Narratives are interwoven across an ever increasing range of different commodities and these can be seen as impacting upon every aspect of children's lives (Stutz, 1996; New London Group, 1996; Millard, 2003; Lambirth, 2003). I found Marsh's diagram below very helpful in illustrating the extent of this interweaving.

Figure 1: Narrative interwoven across commodities
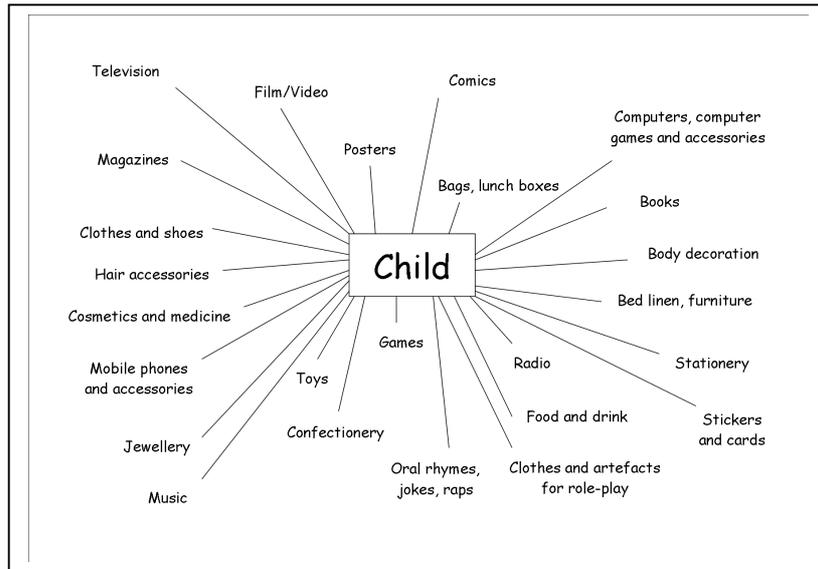
Source: (Marsh, 2003:114)

The world of digital technology reinforces skills which are very different from those of previous generations and therefore many of our children appear to struggle with traditional literacy skills. Popular culture can be very useful in pedagogy however. Haas Dyson's (1996) and Marsh and Millard's (2000) explorations of the valuable role popular culture plays in the narrative and role play of very young children was very influential for me. I felt that it was time to introduce some alternative routes to learning in school, to work with colleagues to develop strategies within the classroom which give our children the power to play with stories and respond through the different modes which are part of their life outside of the classroom. I began to see that a broad interpretation of literacy, which explores aspects of not just the written mode of 'meaning

making' but also the spoken, is vital to understand the world of today's child.

In choosing an area such as multimedia I am also conscious that I am focussing on a sensitive and judgement laden topic. These issues are particularly significant for me because I teach across the school and therefore my development work could not be focussed upon the impact of new media and multimodality on my own class of pupils. Instead, I wanted to work with staff across the school to develop collaboratively ways of using multimodal experiences in the classroom. I was interested in learning more about:

- the extent to which pupils within my school engage in a multimedia environment;
- teachers' perceptions of the impact of teaching strategies using a variety of media on speaking and narrative recounting skills;
- the degree to which such strategies are perceived as workable or positive by staff.

Our staff team is enthusiastic and forward thinking. They were keen to work with me to discover more about this.

The project begins

Reconnaissance was a vital starting point for my project. I intended to use this as a means of involving teachers in the development of my project, as well as to trial my data gathering tools. I therefore sent out initial information to staff, met with Governors and representatives from the Parent Teachers Association and began to draft the tool that would form the starting point in exploring pupil engagement in the multimedia and multimodal environment.

Christensen and James (2000) proved to be a useful source of advice as I worked on developing this tool. They used visual media, asking children to produce drawings of how they spent their week, allowing even the youngest children to express themselves. I therefore developed my own tool based on their experience. I was also keen to gain the parents' views. I wanted to use a questionnaire but, knowing how busy the parents in our school are, it was vital that this tool was as simple as possible. I therefore developed mostly multiple choice questions using guidance from Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) and MacBeath (2000). I then followed these up with interviews with some parents.

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Parents indicated that their children engage with media resources for much less time that the children themselves indicated. I wondered if the children were emphasising the highly motivational aspects of multimedia out of proportion to their actual experience or whether the parents were self-conscious of their child's viewing and providing what they felt were 'good' answers. Yet despite this confusing response, multimedia opportunities were much higher than I had anticipated. I had been expecting, for example, three out of four children to have some degree of Internet access (BBC 4, 2007) but our school results showed a significantly higher level.

Discussion around this data at our regular staff meetings was very useful. As the chair of the meeting, my role was to raise an interesting theme, provide any relevant data and then, as often as possible, allow the discussion to develop without input from myself. I was fortunate that the enthusiastic, professional and enquiring nature of our staff meant that this approach was extremely effective.

I now knew more about the extent of children's multimedia experience and needed to plan an intervention to see how we could use this experience in the classroom. The teachers in Years 2 and 3 were very interested in the concept of multimodality, aware that they were not employing such strategies in their classrooms and eager to be involved. We decided to focus the first intervention in Year 3. The teachers and I worked as a collaborative group to plan and develop a series of multimodal opportunities that would take place across one or two weeks. These were planned using the model from the New London Group (1996) with an emphasis on using new media and flexible opportunities for narrative. We aimed to link in to the children's geography project on Europe. Children would work in small groups and use the Internet, TV holiday programs, brochures, books and teacher-made resources to research a location; they would create a simple PowerPoint, a holiday brochure page, write a story about their holiday and video record a 2 minute slot for the class holiday programme. Once the ideas were generated we shared them at a whole staff discussion session. This was invaluable in keeping the staff team informed and in checking and validating our ideas to make sure we were achieving the multimodality and flexible narrative that we were striving for. One of the key areas that arose from this discussion was the suggestion of setting up role play areas to encourage the use of flexible narrative. As a result, one class created a travel agency and the other a TV studio for a holiday

show: all of the children had opportunities to explore and extend narrative through role play before, during and after the project.

At this stage I carried out a pre-intervention interview to gain a picture of both teachers' ideas and feelings at the start of the project. At the conclusion of the project I carried out a second interview with the Year 3 teachers who also led a staff discussion talking about their week. I also gained pupils' views through interviews and a questionnaire.

Developing multimodal strategies

Organisational issues had a big impact on teachers' views of multimodal strategies. Both teachers involved in the project described their experience as a rollercoaster ride. The first days were high with the excitement of a new project but then there was a definite dip before another positive high at the end. During this dip the teachers' comments were all based around the difficulties of group dynamics and how certain individuals reacted together. The same could be seen from pupil responses with 6 of the 21 children claiming that their group had not worked well. We realised that planning the groups was vital to the success of the project. In the first intervention, teachers chose to select groups by randomly pulling names out of a hat. Whilst this fairness appealed to both adults and children, in the second intervention with Year 2 we planned and selected groups, which reduced the impact of organisational issues and allowed us to focus on multimodality.

Another early issue that arose was that of differentiation. Teachers felt that less able, hard to motivate children and boys in general had achieved well. Issues arose however in terms of more able children who the teachers felt were given lots of opportunity to consolidate their skills but not the scope to make further progress or acquire new skills. This opinion was mirrored in the response of one of the most able boys who commented that he had lots of fun *'but I don't think I learned anything new'*. I realised that teachers would not perceive multimodal strategies as useful or beneficial if some groups were not making progress. This theme became a key area of discussion during planning and staff discussion meetings.

By this stage of the project many of my colleagues were very enthusiastic and eager to join in. At moments of panic it felt as if my project was running off in sixteen different directions at the same time and I was jogging behind desperately attempting to keep up. I

believed that I was facilitating democratic activity and participatory research (Grundy, 1987; Cohen *et al.,* 2000), but it was enormously stressful to keep track of what was going on.

Having already carried out an intervention successfully with Year 3, several of our early reflections and understandings influenced the planning stage of our new project with Year 2. Groups were designed carefully. One of the key areas that I felt had to be addressed within this project was differentiation and challenging more able pupils. Throughout the planning process a strong emphasis was placed upon providing challenges for every ability level to develop and learn new skills. To achieve this, a topic theme was devised around 'Pirates', with a strong emphasis on flexible narrative and encouraging vocabulary and empathy to enhance writing. Children investigated the topic using the Internet, films, books and teacher resources. They engaged in a wide range of practical activities including scrubbing the decks, tying knots, sewing sails; they watched video diaries and then worked individually and in groups to write, perform, evaluate and improve their own video diaries. Finally they used the pirate theme to write their own pirate adventure stories. Activities were linked to work on coordinates and map skills. As a result the children engaged in a full week of pirate based activities including dressing-up, treasure hunts and themed PE (Physical Education) and music lessons.

During the post-project interview the teachers and I analysed the writing and video diaries of children to evaluate whether multimodality had impacted at all levels. The analysis suggested that across all ability levels fifty one of the fifty nine children in Year 2 had produced writing that their teachers judged as showing satisfactory or significant progress. Of the remaining eight children a further five showed some influences from multimodal strategies. This is an extremely subjective analysis but what is significant here is the conclusion from both Year 2 teachers that significantly '*more progress was made in writing*' as a result of a week that was not based on '*formal strategies in improving writing'*. Moderation from the staff discussion session validated these conclusions on the quality of work particularly of more able pupils and generated comments such as '*sophisticated language'..., 'they put a lot more meat on it* (the story)*'...* and '*a more rounded view of it all – more options and it's showing in her writing.'*

Assessment was the other significant issue that had arisen from the previous intervention. After our first intervention both the teachers and I had been amazed by the range of multimodal skills that some children orchestrated. After the second intervention the teachers and I agreed that the video diaries were the area that had the most scope for demonstrating multimodality. Our initial aim was to identify multimodal references. We began by watching a selection of 6 video diaries that the teachers had identified from across the ability levels as demonstrating a good standard of work. We decided to keep a simple tally of multimodal references that we all agreed on.

I was delighted when we agreed that every diary showed multimodal influences as I felt that this reinforced the purpose and value of our project. However it was also evident that these multimodal designs varied widely in ability level and confidence of application. Assessment and acknowledgement of multimodal designs and strategies were areas that all those engaged in the project perceived as important and that we needed to return to and develop further.

Teachers confidently navigating new paths

I then moved into another stage of reflection. It is hardly surprising that teacher perceptions and the workability of multimodality were at the forefront of my mind when I considered how well the interventions had worked. Comparing and contrasting my journal notes from both phases I began to notice significant differences between the two projects. Perhaps the most demanding new issue that developed during the second intervention was that of pupil behaviour. One of the teachers in particular noted a marked deterioration in her class's behaviour and both teachers felt that children became very over excited and at times silly. When I reflected on the two projects I was very conscious that this second project was directly linked to popular culture; pirates were everywhere at the time, being a theme for current film releases and all of the associated intertextual marketing. This appeared to cause children difficulties in knowing which behaviour expectations applied – those from within the school or without. Interestingly, the two Year 2 teachers went on to plan additional multimodal projects independently and found that behaviour issues were not a factor with topics less focused on popular culture.

The second area I found of interest was teacher confidence. Whilst both teams of teachers were very enthusiastically involved, it had been much easier to plan the second intervention as teachers across

the school began to have a real understanding of the concept of multimodality and flexible narrative. I began to reflect upon teacher perceptions of the impact of these multimodal teaching strategies.

I felt very strongly that if teachers did not consider there to be value in using multimodal strategies for improving speaking and narrative recounting there would be little point in using them. In returning to my journal and interview transcripts, and reflecting on my data across discussions, conversations and interviews, the first thing that was apparent was a sense of enthusiasm and excitement. Teachers felt there was a real impact on speaking skills. In both year groups several children identified as reluctant to speak or contribute were described as far more involved than usual. Children were described as *'speaking clearly and really recognising their audience and I'm sure the video diaries helped with that'*... and also *'the video camera gave them a real sense of occasion ... their language was excellent'*. All of the teachers commented that they were pleased with the outcome of the travelogues and video diaries and that their classes had made satisfactory and in some cases significant progress. Teachers felt that children achieved similar success with narrative recounting skills; indeed after both of the story writing sessions I had teachers chasing after me to show me with great delight what children had achieved. In staff discussion sessions the general conclusion was that this was a positive way of improving children's speaking and narrative recounting and impacting upon their writing. This was particularly the case after the Year 2 intervention where the high number of practical activities helped children develop empathy and vocabulary. I am very conscious that the excitement and novelty of being engaged in significantly different activities could influence pupil responses in the short term. However, when year groups went on and developed additional independent interventions there was no lessening of response.

There were unexpected bonuses from multimodal projects. Teachers saw these activities as particularly motivating for boys and less able children.

> *those two really surprised me and I feel they got a lot out of it and did well*
>
> (Interview 15.4.07)

and also:

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> *L's group really surprised me, they're three very middle of the road children who, looking at them, you wouldn't have thought they'd do very much... I actually had to prise the work out of their hands they were so keen to keep going and their travelogue was really good.*
> (Interview 1.12.06)

One teacher was especially impressed with how the project motivated and challenged a very hard to inspire child with significant learning difficulties.

> *M has really surprised me. He had no help today* [Learning Support Assistant] *but he was so eager he just got on with his group and he was contributing and discussing ideas and he produced a fantastic piece of work for him.*
> (Interview 1.12.06)

Another was keen to share her view of the impact on a particular pupil.

> *H has had a fantastic week this week. I've never seen him so keen and the boys I think in general seem to have been very keen.*
> (Interview 1.12.06)

Of the sixty nine children surveyed, fifty eight felt positively about the activities and only four had not enjoyed them. Which leads me back once more to the issue of multimodality at home: are these children so keen and motivated because these experiences were based on familiar skills from home? In providing a multimodal environment had we enabled the children to spot a familiar point on the road to literacy?

Have we found a new road to follow?

In one short year I feel that as a school we have been on a momentous journey. What started out as a concern that we were losing our children in the new media environment has blossomed into huge changes for our school. The staff team has travelled a long road, exploring the extent to which our children embrace the new media world of intertextuality and how we could use this to support their speaking, narrative recounting and writing. We are now aware that our pupils engage regularly in a multimedia environment, and to varying degrees of ability, play with and demonstrate multimodality as part of their day to day life. For teachers in our school adopting these strategies, their experience was positive; children showed high levels of motivation and enthusiasm and teacher perceptions were

that these strategies directly benefited speaking, narrative recounting and writing. Overall teachers found the strategies both positive and workable. This is just a beginning but it is an exciting phase in our development and we are eager to see whether these new pathways take us nearer to our ultimate goal of improving writing across the school. This project has had a huge impact upon the life and development of the school and I am really excited to discover where multimodality will lead us to next.

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