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EXPERIENCE OF DEVELOPING STUDENTS' MULTIMODAL LITERACY IN THE DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Abstract. The paper presents a theoretical overview of the notion "multimodal literacy" in the context of the multiliteracies pedagogy focusing on the research relevant to developing notions of literacy for twenty-first century higher education standards. The relevance of the topic is explained by the fact that the modern world is becoming more and more pluralist and increasingly dependent on new technologies and different modes of communication, students require new transdisciplinary skills and methods of learning. The author examines the changing pattern of literacy as broad, multidimensional knowledge, skills and attitudes. Literacy is viewed as a personal sociocultural capacity the development of which provides every student with the rules how to solve problems, to relate to others and survive in diverse social settings, and creates numerous opportunities for enhancing critical thinking and reflection as well. The foundation for students' multimodal literacy in the digital learning environment of a higher education institution through theoretical and applied frameworks of visual, media, information and multicultural literacy is considered. The diverse affordance of digital tools and range of multimodal genres offer engaging new avenues for students' creative expression on the basis of developing multimodal literacy. It is emphasized that successful life in a world of multimodal information requires fluency in a broad range of literacies to consume and create texts in visual, audio, and written formats, to evaluate messages in a variety of mediums, and to gain sociocultural awareness and the ability to communicate and live in a global diverse society. Pedagogic techniques across disciplines (multimodal essay, digital mapping project) are highlighted in view of their effectiveness in developing multicultural literacy of undergraduate students. It is an empowering practice for modern educators to incorporate multimodal tasks into a diverse learning environment, which teaches critical thinking and multimodal skills, enhances audio-visual rhetoric, develops writing and oral communication skills, and aids in self-expression and self-reflection.

Keywords: literacy; multimodal literacy; multiliteracies pedagogy; digital learning environment; multimodal essay; digital mapping project; undergraduate students.

1. INTRODUCTION

Problem statement. The global diversification and complexity of communication channels, and booming sociocultural diversity in the world call for a much broader view of the fundamental purpose of modern higher education. Students are expected to benefit from learning in ways that allow successful participating in community and private spheres of their lives. The efficiency of students' skills and knowledge acquired depends on the ability to practically exploit them in life, that is, on the development of multimodal literacy as a personal quality. As far as the higher education of Ukraine is concerned, in the current process of reforming the national higher education and its integrating in the world educational environment there is the necessity to correlate it with the world experience, in the sphere of developing students' multimodal literacy in particular. The implementation of the stated into practice in Ukraine presupposes not only the wide use of the latest IT-technologies in teaching process but working out methodological materials as well.

Analysis of recent studies and publications. The content of the notion "literacy" is determined by historical and sociocultural aspects, undergoing changes in accordance with the requirements of the society at the certain stage of its development. Mackey [1] rightly describes it as "historically contingent" notion [p. 236].

Literacy has always been considered in the context of personal growth as well. In the last century literacy was associated with the level of education of a person, which was provided for the ability to read, write and calculate at the appropriate level of fluency [2, p. 89]. Nowadays, the advance of technology has led to a proliferation of the notion “literacy” which is often used to mean having sound knowledge of something and being generally competent at something. With the increasing volume of information in various formats and sources, and sophistication of forms and channels of communication, the notion of literacy means: firstly, the ability to understand and use different types of information in the everyday, professional and social spheres of life; and secondly, as a process of acquiring basic cognitive skills and exploiting them in ways that contribute to socioeconomic development, enhancing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and sociocultural changes [3, p. 147].

Given the above mentioned, in the international academic circles intensive processes of differentiation and integration in the field of attributing different life-related literacies are taking place considering the most important objective parameters of the development of modern society and a personality as well. These processes are likely to contribute to “fostering the critical engagement necessary for young people to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment” [4, p. 60]. And a crucial role in accomplishing the mission in question is assigned to the multiliteracies pedagogy which, in its turn, ensures the development of metacognitive and social awareness [4], [5].

The theoretical analysis of contemporary pedagogical theory [2], [4], [5] has shown that literacy is considered within the four discrete areas which are as follows: 1) literacy as an autonomous set of cognitive skills; 2) literacy as acquired practical experience; 3) literacy as a result of the learning process; 4) literacy as the use of acquired knowledge in a text format.

Therefore, the notion of literacy is quite polymorphic and dynamic: it constantly acquires sophistication due to the challenges of the sociocultural environment throughout the world and expands its typological classification (cultural literacy, information literacy, media literacy, intercultural literacy, environmental literacy, etc.). Different terms have been employed over the past years to show how literacy has been changing in today’s world due to the new technologies and ways of communication as well, e.g. new literacies, multiliteracies, digital literacy, visual literacy, etc. [5] – [7]. In this paper the term “multimodal literacy” is used to indicate the ability to coherently combine reading, writing, talking, listening and viewing within various modes of communication and across various modalities (e.g. visual, aural, somatic) [8], [9].

Moreover, understanding the existence of multimodal literacy within multiliteracies as defined by the New London Group in [4] has encouraged a natural shift toward developing a multimodal learning process. Lankshear and Knobel [7] claim that the pedagogy of multiliteracies deals with “cultural and linguistic diversity and the burgeoning impact of new communications and technologies are changing demands on learners in terms of what we have identified here as the operational and cultural dimensions of literacies” [p. 16].

In the multiliteracies pedagogy, with its focus on meaning making resources, “all forms of representation should be regarded as dynamic processes of transformation rather than processes of reproduction. ...The logic of multiliteracies is one which recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and diversity” [5, p. 173].

As noted by Cope and Kalantzis [5] the pedagogy in question on the ground of developing literacies allows for divergent learning orientations (preferences, for instance, for particular emphasis on knowledge making and patterns of engagement) and for different modalities in meaning making, embracing alternative expressive potentials of different learners and promoting synesthesia as a learning strategy [p. 183].

The purpose of the article is to give a deeper insight into the problem of multimodal literacy as an ability to understand the manifold ways of knowledge representations and meaning making; to highlight some pedagogic techniques which provide the development of students’ multimodal literacy.

2. THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

The scholars [9], [10] have substantiated the necessity of developing in students the multimodal literacy as both one's own ability to construct and comprehend meaning in a variety of modes constructed by sociocultural environment, and the ways in which people understand the world at large. The modern world is characterized by polylogy and polymodality. In view of this, there is an urgent need for a new communicative discourse: students of the twenty first century must be capable of turning quickly and efficiently from one sign system to another. Nowadays, information is created, sent, and received in multimodal ways steeped in the employment of different new technologies. Multimodality, in its turn, implies meaning making created through the arranged configurations across the image, look, body signs, sound, writing, speech, etc. referred to as organized sets of semiotic resources to make meaning.

As stated by Cordes [9], the professor at the University of West Illinois, today's multimodal world requires a person to possess a number of skills and abilities, methods of knowledge representations and meaning-making, and ways of communicating in all spheres of life in the process of individual or team activities. This academic's view is embodied in the concept of "multimodal literacy" which induces the self-responsibility of the individual in acquiring and applying knowledge in a flexible, constructive, moral and ethical way [9, p. 4].

Cordes [9] argues that multimodal literacy is formed by a combination of four literacies, namely: 1) information literacy (the ability to isolate, synthesize and effectively use information from different sources, using the latest information technology); 2) visual literacy (ability to analyze, create and use visual images in order to develop critical thinking, skills of effective communication and constructive decision making); 3) multicultural literacy (the ability to perceive, compare and evaluate the similarities and differences of human behavior, beliefs, values in the sociocultural environment within one country or more countries); 4) media literacy (the ability to process, analyze and evaluate various sources of information in a wide range of genres and forms of media) [9, p. 2-3].

The multimodal literacy as a set of mentioned above literacies contributes to effective lifelong education of students, as well as their successful life in the community [11]. The modern world of multimodal information requires young people to deal with and create audio, visual or written texts as well as multiformat texts, to gain social awareness and to develop the ability to interact in diverse global society.

As contemporary scholars [12], [13] point out, multimodal communication involves multiple communicative forms (digital, visual, spatial, musical, etc.) within various sign systems that convey meanings. In a multimodal text, e.g. a web-page, all the modes interplay with each other "making the whole far greater than the simple sum of its parts" [13, p. 284].

According to the multimodal theory [10], [12] there are four main aspects of meaning representation in creating any text:

- 1) material actualization (embraces the materials and resources employed to represent meaning – still images, music, as well as ideas, concepts, etc., – and their potential to deliver messages in various ways);
- 2) framing (presupposes visual elements which operate together);
- 3) design (refers to how people make use of the materials and resources while creating their meaning representation which are available to them at a particular time);
- 4) production (relates to the process of constructing the meaning representation).

Furthermore, within the framework of multimodality there is a critical view on considering which materials to use, how those materials are framed and designed, and how such decisions are made due to the creator's intentions.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research paradigm was interpretive, which placed emphasis on a complex of complementary theoretical methods: critical analysis of philosophical, psychological and pedagogical sources on the research issue; conceptualization of the notion “students’ multimodal literacy”; analysis of the impact of pedagogic techniques on developing students’ multimodal literacy; study of the pedagogical experience and generalization on the research problem; monographic method – to interpret the results obtained in a coherent logical perspective.

The study was underpinned by the theories of the situated learning [14] and the communities of practice [14], [15] which emerged in the field of education at the end of the twentieth century providing the understanding of multiliteracies from a sociocultural perspective. These theories reflect the view that a process of sociocultural learning occurs when people, who have a common interest in a subject or an area of study, collaborate over a certain period of time, sharing ideas and determining solutions. Additionally, the research exploited the genre theory, according to which genres for practical purposes are considered as “staged goal-oriented social processes” [16, p. 13]. Central to this understanding of genre in education is the idea that students from all sociocultural backgrounds need to be trained into a deeper understanding of institutional genres in order to succeed in different spheres of their lives – ranging from higher education institution to a workplace.

4. THE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Conceptualizing multimodal essay across academic disciplines

Today, it is a common practice for educators to incorporate multimodal tasks (e. g. composing multimodal texts, digital mapping projects) into a diverse learning environment as they teach both face-to-face and in digital environment. Various modalities are conducive to providing students with firsthand knowledge and skills necessary to be literate in the twenty-first century. Students are actively concerned with sharing ideas and team-working to complete multimodal tasks based on social media, such as Twitter, Instagram, etc., which often provide texts in visual, verbal, and aural modes. In its turn dealing with social media updates or argumentative essays with the help of digital tools encourages the development of multimodal literacy in students.

As the twenty-first century students are effectively interacting in technologically advanced environment, many scholars [17], [18] have recognized the value of composing multimodal texts (not just in writing courses, but also across disciplines) in developing students’ multimodal literacy in the modern multimodal classroom. “The more channels students have to select from in the course of composing and exchanging meaning, the more resources they have at their disposal for being successful communicators” [19, p. 3].

In a broad sense, multimodal text is “any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code” [12, p. 177]. Those texts encourage greater understanding of the human condition and expand on existing ideas and thoughts. Commonly based on the merging of technologies, they use easily manipulated five modes of communication: linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, audio. Podcasts, blogs, collages, video or audio essays, and storyboards fall under the category of multimodal texts. Multimodal texts can be delivered via different media or technologies. They may be live, paper, or digital.

Selfe and Takayoshi [19] consider five main aspects of turning to composing multimodal texts on regular basis in the learning process of a higher education institution:

1. In modern ever-more digital world, it is of paramount importance for students not only to “consume” multiple texts, but also to “compose” texts in multiple modalities.
2. There is a need for multimodal composition to keep pace with this volatile world, and to reflect peoples’ literacy practices as well.

3. Multimodal composition can be engaging and fun, and an effective means of enhancing rhetoric skills as well.

4. Multimodal essay requires fluency and a good command of rhetorical skills, and that audio/video work can sometimes require an even better grasp of these skills than traditional texts.

5. Learning process on the basis of multimodal essays contributes to creating a mutually respectful environment where students have more than a little say in the course of their undergraduate education.

Finding a balance between technology innovations and effective ways of academic interaction modern educators [20] – [22] resort to assigning such type of multimodal tasks as composing Life Place Essays. They emphasize the epistemological possibilities of a place as “a way of understanding the world” [20, p. 11] and creating knowledge. This type of essays shape students’ perception of the world at large, mode of critical thinking and attitudes. Place is considered an important impact and topic in the writing sessions because it provides students with better understanding notions of context, personal identity through composing multimodal texts for particular situations. As Jacobs [21] argues, such “place-based writing is grounded in reflection, observation, and personal histories... It requires a balance between narrative and landscape – the story and the space share the spotlight” [21, p. 50].

Life Place Essay assists in achieving the students’ learning outcomes for college written communication [22], particularly in:

- Genre – students gain familiarity with composing texts in different genres (brochures, pamphlets, flyers, PowerPoint or Prezi, reports, videos and podcasts, emails, letters, memos, blog, ebook, etc.).
- Rhetoric – students learn main techniques of rhetoric, such as arrangement, framing, point of view, and symbolism.
- Purpose – students explore how shifted mediums can influence their approach to engaging the audience.
- Collaboration – students practice different types of collaborative work as they view and respond to each other’s multimodal texts.
- Technologies – students are engaged in using new technologies, including audio & video software, file-sharing websites, etc., and develop awareness of how these technologies change their composing processes.
- Conventions – students are involved in work aimed at understanding conventions of a wide range of multimedia genres.

4.2. Mapping technologies in the learning process of a higher education institution

With the view to achieving the above stated students’ learning outcomes Koh [23], Associate Professor of Digital Humanities at Stockton University, has encouraged educators to integrate Google Maps service – the most common geo-service in the world – into digital humanities in the classroom, emphasizing on the easiness of navigating this tool in the learning process. More than 800,000 websites have been created with Google Maps API. This powerful platform provides satellite imagery, Street View technology, terrain maps, driver routes, stylized maps, analytical data, as well as a huge address base. As many students are already familiar with the Google interface, this familiarity helps them to get to the gist of the assignments more quickly. Furthermore, the tool in question is handy for instructors interested in mapping projects.

In order to track this pedagogic strategy down, we have studied the teaching experience of Fenton [24], an educator and Director of the Writing Center at Fordham University (Lincoln Center) and a specialist in research and education software. He uses digital mapping projects to do historical research in literature courses with the aim of connecting students closer to each other, to the higher education institution, to the community and to the world at large. Fenton incorporates mapping technologies (Google Earth or Google Maps) as a platform for learning. As an example,

students are assigned to annotate certain features of different geographical points on Google Earth or Google Maps through visualizing data spatially and post their annotations to the course websites.

The practice of answering questions about place makes students start thinking about the various ways people consider a single site over time. This might also involve writing creative essays about place, mapping the geographical trajectory of a character in a novel, or doing historical research and presenting that information as annotated map points (e.g. an interactive exhibition) [24].

At the same time, advocating Open Access, foreign educators prioritize open-source projects curating tools which are free for educational use. The Web-based platform *VisualEyes*, a part of the Sciences, Humanities & Arts Network of Technological Initiatives (SHANTI) suite of Virginia University, is an example. Through this Web-based platform academics can create historical visualizations using data, maps, charts, images, and video. The HTML5 version is attractive because it works well on smartphones and tablets.

Another example of an open-source project is Stanford University's Mapping the Republic of Letters which foregrounds case studies on the correspondence of the enlightenment thinkers. While some of the original epistolary maps are no longer available, the synopses are useful for anyone teaching a class – historical or literary. The events of the early Republic serve as an illustration: one case study highlights the interlocutors, community associations, and nationalities with which Ben Franklin kept correspondence.

Additionally, the project "Mapping Texts" is collaboration between the University of North Texas and Stanford University focused on experimenting with new methods for finding and analyzing meaningful patterns embedded within massive collections of historical newspapers [25]. Drawing from nearly a quarter-million pages of digitized Texas newspapers, teams at the two universities have developed two interactive interfaces through which learners can explore newsprint. *Assessing Newspaper Quality* visualizes both the quantity and quality of the digitized collection. Users can either click on individual newspaper titles to perform "close" readings, or scan by time period or location for "distant" readings. Using a timeframe, location, or newspaper title, learners can view the most common words (word counts), entities (individuals, locations, organizations), and correlated words (topic models). Together, the tools equip learners with simple, visual tools for posting queries of large datasets.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In view of the above, we can conclude that the use of digital technologies in the learning process makes it possible to rethink traditional approaches to teaching many aspects of different academic disciplines, and contributes to developing students' multimodal literacy. The latter one, in its turn, presupposes fluency in consuming and creating texts in visual, audio, and written formats, evaluating messages in a variety of mediums, and gaining sociocultural awareness and the ability to communicate and live in a diverse global society.

Moreover, multimodal literacy pedagogic techniques exploited by foreign educators encourage undergraduate students as both consumers and producers of texts in a digital learning environment via a combination of modalities equipping students with the necessary skills and fluencies needed to succeed in a rapidly-transforming world, such as interpretation and communication of data in order to solve real-world problems; application of computational and analytical methods with a view to organizing, summarizing, evaluating information and gaining sociocultural experience.

In the context of the problem under study, the scope of further research envisages exploring the experience of Ukrainian educators in the sphere of developing multimodal literacy of undergraduate students.

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ДОСВІД РОЗВИТКУ МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНОЇ ГРАМОТНОСТІ СТУДЕНТІВ В УМОВАХ ЦИФРОВОГО ОСВІТЬОГО СЕРЕДОВИЩА ЗАКЛАДІВ ВИЩОЇ ОСВІТИ

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Анотація. У статті представлено теоретичний огляд наукових підходів зарубіжних дослідників до визначення сутності поняття “мультимодальна грамотність” у контексті педагогіки мультиграмотностей, яка орієнтована на розроблення стандартів вищої освіти XXI століття. Окреслено зміст поняття “грамотність”, що визначається культурно-історичним аспектом, змінюючись відповідно до соціокультурних вимог. Грамотність розглянуто як програмне забезпечення культури в процесі особистісного зростання, що сприяє розв’язанню проблем у різних сферах життєдіяльності студентів. Зазначено, що поняття грамотності є досить поліморфним і динамічним: воно постійно набуває уточнень відповідно до викликів сьогодення та розширює свою типологічну класифікацію. З’ясовано, що мультимодальна природа сучасного світу, який характеризується полілогічністю й полісеміотичністю та все більше залежить від нових технологій, призвела до нагальної потреби в новому освітньому дискурсі – студенти XXI століття мають бути здатними до швидкого переходу від однієї знакової системи до іншої. Різноманітність цифрових інструментів та мультимодальних жанрів пропонує нові можливості для творчого самовираження студентів на основі розвитку в них мультимодальної грамотності. Схарактеризовано зміст та структуру мультимодальної грамотності студентів, яку утворює сукупність чотирьох грамотностей – візуальної, медійної, інформаційної та мультикультурної. Автор наголошує, що сьогодні успішна життєдіяльність людини вимагає сформованості різних грамотностей для споживання та створення текстів у візуальному, аудіо та письмовому форматі, для оцінки повідомлень у різних засобах масової інформації, а також для набуття соціокультурного досвіду та вміння спілкуватися й взаємодіяти в глобалізованому інформаційному суспільстві. Розвиток у студентів мультимодальної грамотності в умовах цифрового освітнього середовища надає численні можливості для критичного мислення та сприяє реалізації творчого потенціалу. Висвітлено особливості застосування педагогічних технологій (мультимодальне есе, метод проекту на основі цифрових мап) з досвіду зарубіжної вищої школи з огляду на їхню ефективність у розвитку мультикультурної грамотності студентів у процесі вивчення різних дисциплін.

Ключові слова: грамотність; мультимодальна грамотність; педагогіка мультиграмотностей; цифрове освітнє середовище; мультимодальне есе; метод проекту на основі цифрових мап; студенти бакалаврату.

ОПЫТ РАЗВИТИЯ МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНОЙ ГРАМОТНОСТИ СТУДЕНТОВ В УСЛОВИЯХ ЦИФРОВОЙ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ СРЕДЫ ВЫСШИХ УЧЕБНЫХ ЗАВЕДЕНИЙ

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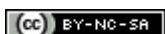
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Аннотация. В статье представлен теоретический обзор научных подходов зарубежных исследователей к определению сущности понятия “мультимодальная грамотность” в контексте педагогики мультиграмотностей, которая ориентирована на разработку стандартов высшего образования XXI века. Подано содержание понятия “грамотность”, которое определяется культурно-историческим аспектом, изменяясь в соответствии с социокультурными требованиями. Грамотность рассмотрена как программное обеспечение культуры в процессе личностного развития, которое способствует решению проблем в различных сферах жизнедеятельности студентов. Указано, что понятие грамотности является достаточно полиморфным и динамичным:

оно постоянно уточняется в соответствии с вызовами современности и расширяет свою типологическую классификацию. Выяснено, что мультимодальная природа современного мира, который характеризуется полилогичностью и полисемиотичностью и все больше зависит от новых технологий, привела к новому образовательному дискурсу – студенты XXI века должны быть способными к быстрому переходу с одной знаковой системы на другую. Разнообразие цифровых инструментов и мультимодальных жанров предлагает новые возможности для творческого самовыражения студентов на основе развития у них мультимодальной грамотности. Охарактеризованы содержание и структура мультимодальной грамотности студентов, которую образует совокупность четырех грамотностей – визуальной, медийной, информационной и мультикультурной. Автор отмечает, что сегодня успешная жизнедеятельность человека требует сформированности различных грамотностей для потребления и создания текстов в визуальном, аудио и письменном формате, для оценки сообщений в разных средствах массовой информации, а также для приобретения социокультурного опыта и умения общаться и взаимодействовать в глобальном информационном обществе. Развитие у студентов мультимодальной грамотности в условиях цифровой образовательной среды создает многочисленные возможности для критического мышления и реализации их творческого потенциала. Освещены особенности применения педагогических технологий (мультимодальное эссе, метод проекта на основе цифровых карт) из опыта зарубежной высшей школы с учетом их эффективности в развитии мультикультурной грамотности студентов в процессе изучения различных дисциплин.

Ключевые слова: грамотность; мультимодальная грамотность; педагогика мультиграмотностей; цифровая образовательная среда; мультимодальное эссе; метод проекта на основе цифровых карт; студенты бакалавриата.



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