

## **‘Academic literacies’ as moving beyond writing: Investigating multimodal approaches to academic argument**

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Research on academic literacies has predominately focused on writing practices in higher education. To account for writing practices in the digital age, this paper emphasizes the importance of extending the focus of academic literacies beyond writing to include multimodal composition. Drawing on social semiotics, we put forward a framework for understanding and analysing multimodal academic argument. This framework views argument in relation to features that make up text, namely mode, genre, discourse, and medium. We also look at ways in which multimodal resources are appropriated into argument through citation. Becoming more explicit about the ways in which academic argument is constructed is important for enabling student access into the discourses and practices of academia.

**Keywords:** multimodal argument; mode; discourse; genre; medium

### **Introduction**

This paper takes a multimodal perspective (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010) to look again at the key concerns of an ‘academic literacies’ approach to teaching and research (Lillis and Scott, 2007). Broadly speaking, an academic literacies approach focuses on student identity, institutional relationships of discourse and power, and the contested nature of writing practices. Crucial to this approach is a concern with agency and power and how to provide diverse students access to academic practices in ways that utilize and value their resources. The norms and conventions around constructing multimodal texts in higher education are no more ‘transparent’ than the norms around writing.

Writing practices in the academy are changing, in part due to digital technology, making it easier to mix and match different modes of communication. Scholars have begun to note and investigate the changing nature of the doctoral thesis (Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Björkvall, 2016; Fransman, 2012; Kress, 2012; Ravelli *et al.*, 2013). The tasks set for students’ assignments often require competence in integrating modes, and written assignments also take design and layout into consideration. Students need to select and integrate different semiotic resources according to their principles of organization. The use of digital media and the increasing importance of image as a carrier of meaning in text, raise questions about the function and forms of writing in academia.

In response to this changing communication landscape, researchers have explored multimodal approaches to academic argument. Huang (2015), for instance, interrogates the affordances of adopting a multimodal approach to academic argument using comics, digital video, and PowerPoint. She argues for making explicit the potentials and the limitations of academic argument and the overlaps between academic conventions and other text-making practices.

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Archer (2016) investigates how argument can be realized through the complexities of writing–image interaction. She looks at underlying ways of organizing knowledge, showing how argument can be constructed through narrative, contrast, induction, and classification for comparison. Conversely, Gourlay (2016) argues that written language may remain the most appropriate mode for realizing academic argument, as it is capable of developing complex propositional content, and levels of precision and critique that are required in academic argument. As a field of research that is concerned with access to academic literacy practices in higher education, it is no longer plausible to confine research within ‘academic literacies’ to writing alone. Drawing on social semiotics, this paper investigates a multimodal approach to academic argument. In this approach, meaning is seen to be context-dependent and meaning-making is viewed as a social practice (Jewitt, 2009; Kress, 2010; Martinec and Van Leeuwen, 2008; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001). Meaning is also understood to be made through the selection and configuration of modes in texts and through the interest of the sign-maker in a particular context (Jewitt, 2009: 15; Bezemer and Kress, 2016). In adopting a multimodal academic literacies approach to argument, we propose the usefulness of looking at argument as a cultural textual form for establishing difference. We adopt a view of argument that understands it in relation to mode, genre, discourse, and medium. We discuss each of these features in relation to argument and consider the implications for academic literacies. We begin by defining the way in which we view argument.

### **What defines argument?**

Argument, along with other symbolic forms such as narrative and explanation, is a way of representing human understanding (Wenzel, 1987). Kress (1989) uses the term ‘cultural textual form’ to describe both argument and narrative. According to Kress (1989), argument and narrative provide a means of ‘dealing with the same – fundamental – social cultural issues: how to accommodate difference’ (Kress, 1989: 11). Argument accommodates difference by opening up issues for discussion. By providing the means for not only foregrounding but also preserving and accepting difference, argument has the function of producing ‘new cultural values and knowledge’ (Kress, 1989: 12). Narrative, on the other hand, by tending to resolve difference, has the function of ‘reproducing, in an uncontentious way, the forms and meanings of a culture’ and in doing so, it is ‘a major means of the reproduction of social and cultural forms and values’ (Kress, 1989: 12). In this way, argument can be said to be more productive of change, while narrative is more productive of stability. Despite making a distinction between narrative and argument here, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between the two is complex. Andrews (2010: 35), for example, notes that narrative can convey argument (as in fables and parables) or narrative can function as evidence to support an abstract argument (as in anecdotes). He characterizes the relationship between narrative and argument as ‘symbiotic’, remarking that:

argument could be seen to operate at a level of generalization that is directly accessible from the narrative level (the level of particularities). It both informs by giving paradigmatic shape to a narrative, and is informed by the syntagmatic drive and direction of narrative.

(Andrews, 1989: 3)

The notion of argument as difference is at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic, which presupposes that synthesis is produced from a tension between the thesis and antithesis. In argument, there are always at least two entities (thesis and antithesis) engaged in a dialogue. The dialogue, as Lillis points out, ‘is not the process of meaning making, but is rather the goal; difference always kept in play’ (Lillis, 2003: 199). In this respect, Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’ is useful in considering argument as the interplay between two positions. Bakhtin’s dialogue/ism foregrounds

dialectic as ‘tension, struggle, difference’ (Lillis, 2003: 199). Andrews (2010) draws on Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism to explain how argument operates externally in relation to other arguments and internally within the argument itself. Externally, Andrews says, an argument can be prompted when the initiator of the argument adopts a position that is in conflict with the original position. The conflict may be ‘directly opposed to the original position or tangentially different (differences of position can be anything from 1 degree to 180 degrees away from the existing point of view or state of affairs)’ (Andrews, 2010: 13). In this way, by responding to the original argument, a dialogue is set up between the two positions. Internally, Andrews says, an argument can arise through how a statement is positioned in relation to the next statement and the statement after that. The degree of difference between the statements can, again, vary from 1 to 180 degrees:

For example, a sentence that begins ‘Furthermore ...’ may be arguing along the same lines as the previous sentence and may have hardly moved even one degree from the direction that the previous sentence was taking. Whereas ... a following sentence that begins ‘However ...’ or ‘Nevertheless ...’ indicates a contrary point.

(Andrews, 2010: 13–14)

Whether externally or internally, and whether the degree of difference is large or small, it is evident that ‘difference’ is a core aspect of argument. Thus, following Kress (1989), we understand argument to be a cultural textual form for establishing difference. There are particular theoretical and pedagogical implications in adopting this view of argument.

Mode, genre, discourse, and medium are aspects to consider in argument as a cultural textual form. Mode is the material form that is necessary to realize meaning in text. It is, for instance, the writing, the sound, the image, the substance of text. Genre is the social textual form of a text, a particular principle of organization that illustrates the social function or the social interaction of the text. Discourse is inextricably linked to the social context of the producer. It is the lens, the institutional point of view, that the producer adopts to look at the world. Medium is the element that provides text with a physical form, making it possible to produce and distribute the text. In what follows, we outline in more detail these features of text in relation to argument.

### **The role of ‘mode’ in an academic literacies approach to argument**

The term ‘mode’ is used in social semiotics to describe culturally and socially shaped resources for representation and communication, such as writing, image, and music (Jewitt, 2009). It is the material form through which knowledge and information can materialize (Kress, 2010). Studies of argument have most often focused on verbal argument. However, scholars of argument have recognized the need to expand the field to include visual argument (Blair, 1996; Birdsell and Groarke, 1996; Lake and Pickering, 1998) and, more recently, multimodal arguments (Andrews, 2010; Coffin, 2009; Whithaus, 2012). Although there is growing literature in multimodal argumentation, Kjeldsen (2015) observes that ‘[i]n general, the attitude is that argumentation is closely related to the explicit use of words and therefore [non-verbal argumentation] cannot be argumentation in any proper sense’ (Kjeldsen, 2015: 121). In order to render the study of argument relevant to contemporary practices, there is a need to explore the ways in which argument works within and across modes.

In investigating a multimodal approach to academic argument, questions that need to be asked include, what are the possibilities of various modes for realizing argument and how can ‘difference’ be established within and between modes? Various scholars have already begun to address these questions. For instance, in looking at three contemporary forms of educational argumentation (electronic essay, and asynchronous and synchronous online discussions), Coffin (2009) finds that ‘meanings made with language may be interwoven with meanings made in other

modes (such as visual images, space, colour and graphics) in an interdependent, dynamic process' (Coffin, 2009: 14–15).

Whithaus (2012) presents an adaptation of Toulmin's model to examine 'how claims and evidence work across linguistic, numeric, and visual modes' in environmental science writing (Whithaus, 2012: 105). His findings suggest that modes can affect the structuring of an argument and that some modes are better at representing certain aspects of an argument than others.

In Huang and Archer (forthcoming), we explore ways of realizing difference within the written mode and within the visual mode, and also across writing and images. In the written mode, conjunctions that show contrast (such as 'but', 'yet', and 'however') can evoke difference as they bring into conversation two contrasting positions. For example, in the utterance below where the speaker is discussing piracy, two contrasting positions are brought together through the conjunction 'but':

The popular conclusion about piracy has been that it is bad for the creator because it benefits the end user and not the creator. *But*, since musicians have become inventors of things, they have looked into online piracy with a different eye.

(Huang, 2015: 136)

As a conjunction, the 'but' has the function of connecting two contrasting ideas. In this way, it functions as a linking point, connecting ideas that exemplify contrast. Besides linking, it is also the 'contrary point' (Andrews, 2010: 14), the site where the shift in position, the 'difference', occurs. From this perspective, a contrasting conjunction can be seen not only acting as a connector, but also as a catalyst for igniting friction. In the visual mode, visual techniques such as juxtaposition (the placing of two images together) and superimposition (the overlapping of one image over another) are capable of establishing difference. These visual techniques can establish difference by bringing together two images of opposing ideational content. For example, Figure 1 is a parodic image posted on Twitter with a hashtag to 'Fees Must Fall', a South African student campaign against increases in higher education fees. The image shows a bag containing books and rocks. The exercise books are commonly found in student bags, but rocks do not normally have a place in college. They belong outdoors and can cause harm if thrown - and in this way they are associated with violence. The two objects carry different connotations. Such a juxtaposition creates tension and establishes difference, enabling the image to suggest that higher education could become a place of protest, resistance and even violence in South Africa.



**Figure 1:** Establishing difference through juxtaposition

Multimodally, difference can be established by bringing together modes that clash in ideational content. For example, in a video, the visual image can be employed at a conflict with the spoken mode. Difference can be established through the 'ideational divergence' (Unsworth, 2006) between the modes. We have looked at mode in relation to argument; we now look at genre and argument.

### **A multimodal approach to genre in academic literacies**

Genre is another aspect of textual organization – 'that which realises and allows us to understand the social relations of the participants in the making, the reception and the reading/interpretation of the text' (Kress, 2003: 94). As a textual category, it is concerned with the social relations of participants. This means that genre is oriented to social, cultural, and historical factors. Kress (2010) maintains that periods of stability can produce stable genres with clear generic forms. Over time, this results in conventional, canonical forms of genre. In periods of instability, these forms can become destabilized, resulting in more fluid genres with blurred genre boundaries. The essay, for example, has been accepted as a form for written arguments in some schooling for so long that it has come to be referred to as the 'default genre' for assessment (Andrews, 2003).

The long-standing tradition of using the essay to present argument in the humanities in higher education has led to somewhat fixed or more stable notions of the form of an academic argument. Huang (2015), for instance, observes how students had difficulty in conceiving academic argument in the genre of comics. She attributes the students' difficulty to their learned perceptions of the academic argument from the essay perspective, as that involving exposition and factual evidence. This clashed with their understandings of comics, which they took to be characterized by humour, fiction, and narrative. Huang's study echoes other studies that show that different genres have different orientations for producing different kinds of knowledge (see Archer, 2006; English, 2011).

A move towards a multimodal approach to academic literacies offers students the opportunity to experiment with a range of genres for presenting academic argument. It can also open up prospects for questioning and recognizing the purposes, uses, and affordances of particular genres for argumentation. Takayoshi and Selfe (2007), for instance, illustrate how teaching students to compose 30-second public announcements for radio provides them with specific strategies for focusing when writing essays. Tardy (2005) shows how PowerPoint presentations allow multilingual graduate students to express both their disciplinarity and individuality.

### **A multimodal approach to discourse and argument**

A key term in academic literacies is 'discourse'. Discourse shapes 'the organization of content/material from a particular institutional point of view' (Kress, 2003: 94). It is 'a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective' (Fairclough, 1995: 14). Among other conventions, the discourse practices of academic argument involve arranging knowledge in a logical or quasi-logical sequence supported by evidence (Andrews, 2010), and engaging in what Seligmann (2012) calls the 'honesty principle' through the practice of citation. Academic argument reflects the rationalist paradigm (Andrews, 2010), which has certain affordances. With its emphasis on logic, evidence, and citation, academic argument is able to render the rhetor accountable for an argument made. On the surface, the practice of constructing an academic argument may seem particular to the academic domain. However, Huang (2015) argues that in adopting a multimodal approach to academic argument, it is evident that there are similarities between academic argument and arguments in the social domain. She shows the parallels between

constructing an academic argument in video and investigative journalism or documentaries with political agendas. Because of shared human experiences, the idea of organizing material in a logical or quasi-logical sequence supported by evidence is not particular to argument in the academic context. Not only this, but the practice of citation and referencing is also practised in journalism. Expert opinions are often sought to back claims and it is the norm for information sourced from experts or different news agencies to be acknowledged. Citation and referencing may be perceived as academic practices but they are common in everyday texts – though they may not be recognized or described as such. Archer (2013), for instance, notes how citation can occur in music as ‘mixing’, in fine arts as ‘collage’, and in architecture as ‘tracing’.

Literacy researchers emphasize the need to be critical of the power of discourses and how they bring particular forms of understanding into being (Blommaert, 2005). Looking at discourse from a multimodal perspective encourages scholars to re-examine and rethink discursive practices in the academy (New London Group, 2000). For instance, consider the practice of text-making. Assemblage is a key composition principle of a multimodal approach to academic argument. The term ‘assemblage’ describes ‘text built primarily and explicitly from existing texts’ (Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 2007: 381). Assemblage, as a composition principle, points towards a cultural practice that values remixing. Although there are various theories that account for and justify assemblage as a composing principle, this notion is generally in contradiction with the teaching of writing practices in higher education. For example, the notion of intertextuality recognizes that, ‘[a]ll utterances depend on or call to the other utterances’, that ‘no utterance itself is singular’, but is always ‘shot through the other, competing and conflicting voices’ (Allen, 2000: 27). It calls attention to the ‘relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence’ involved in all text-making practices (Allen, 2000: 5). The notion that all text-making involves weaving the utterances of others has led to Barthes (1977) famously proclaiming that the author is dead. Yet, academia is a somewhat hypocritical world. Despite taking for granted intertextuality as a theory of text-making, in practice there is still an emphasis on ‘the author’ and ‘originality’. In general, students are expected to produce ‘thoroughly “original” texts – texts that make a clear distinction between invented and borrowed work, between that which is unique and that which is derivative or supportive’ (Johnson-Eilola and Selber, 2007: 375–6). Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2007) propose that it is this belief in originality that pushes students to hide citations, thus leading to plagiarism.

Largely due to digital textual practices, students’ conceptualization of authorship, ownership, and audience is often different to that of the academy. Moving towards a multimodal approach to academic argument may encourage us to critically re-evaluate discursive practices in the academy, including practices of citation and composition in relation to contemporary writing practices. Hafner (2015), for instance, proposes that teachers may leverage the notion of remix by drawing parallels to practices of citation and referencing in the academy. He maintains that through understanding remix practices and the ethical dimensions surrounding them, students may come to have a better understanding of citation and reference practices (Hafner, 2015: 506). The long-standing dominance of print-based practices in the academy has made certain practices taken for granted or invisible to the eye. Multimodality may press the re-assessment of discursive practices by providing a different angle to look at discursive practice in the academy.

## **Medium and argument**

‘Medium’ is perhaps less overtly considered in studies on academic literacies. Yet it is important to consider when interrogating argument, as different media have different constraints and possibilities. Medium is the material resource that gives text form. It comprises the ‘material



resources used in the production of semiotic products and events' and serves the purpose of recording and distributing the semiotic products and events produced (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001: 22). Different media have different affordances. For instance, paper-based comics are substantially different from online comics, as books and screens have different affordances. A book is a medium that works with paper and ink. Materiality, in this case, involves cost. Hardcover comics typically cost more than softcover comics. The textual materiality of the book (including the paper and the type of ink that is used to print the book) not only determines the cost of the comic, but also can be a means of value judgement. Comics and graphic novels, for instance, are similar in nature, but the difference in their materiality results in different naming and perceived value of the texts (Sabin, 1996). The book, as object, can also play a role in the narrative telling. In comics, page turning typically functions as a transition device. Materiality, in this way, is incorporated into the narrative. Most comics found online are produced for the page, which means that viewing them on the screen places particular constraints. For example, the page on screen cannot be viewed in full, but needs to be scrolled down in order to be read. This affects the flow in the reading. Online comics, nevertheless, have other affordances. For instance, they allow access to other volumes of work, connection to a community, and provide spaces/forums to comment on the work.

Choice of media affects the type of argument that is constructed. At the most basic, the choice of modes employed is largely dependent on the medium chosen for production and distribution. In a more complex manner, the choice of medium can affect the outcome of the product. Huang (2015) demonstrates this through the case of PowerPoint. She points out that in arguments distributed through paper and video, the final product is temporally fixed. In presentations, however, the argument is only fixed after the presentation. Even if a presentation is drafted beforehand and the argument planned already, aspects of the argument are open to change, subject to the audience's reaction to that which is said.

It is also important to highlight that media as technologies of communication are not 'neutral' entities but have social and cultural orientations. Van Leeuwen (2008), for instance, points out that the rule of use of a technology is often built into the technology. He observes that PowerPoint 'has a built-in semiotics of colour which provides rules for combining colours into colour schemes, as well as rules for the textual functionality of colour' (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 135). Rules built into media technologies in this way guide users to particular social norms of production.

It can be argued that notions of authorship, ownership, and audience are inextricably linked to the media of production and distribution that are employed in higher education. The tradition of using paper as the medium of production and distribution sets one up to produce text in particular ways. For instance, solo instead of collaborative work is encouraged because the tradition of using paper as the medium of production and distribution makes it more difficult for two individuals to work together. Collaboration is now made easier through the affordances of digital technology. It can also be argued that medium played a critical role in the valorization of argument as product in the academy. Lea (2013) notes how a reliance on hard copy, print-based texts encourages one to focus on the finished product and less on the generative part, the process of meaning-making. The medium of paper simply makes it too difficult to view the process of engagement. With digital technologies, however, it is now possible to 'shift in focus from the finished product towards explorations of practice' (Lea, 2013: 115). A critical reflection of how medium leads us to produce text in certain ways could enable us to reconsider certain discursual practices in the academy.

## Final comments

'Academic literacies' in the twenty-first century entails being able to navigate multiplicity, to critique representations in multiple modes, genres, and media and to use a range of technologies in composing texts. We need to make this range of processes and practices explicit in order to enable student access to higher education. In composing multimodal academic texts, students need to persuade readers about the relevance and validity of the argument. This involves encoding conceptual material (through mode, discourse, genre, and medium) and establishing relationships within the discourse community (through citation). We have argued the need to redefine academic literacies in higher education through the development of a framework that facilitates awareness and analysis of multimodal textual construction. 'Graduateness' is about being able to articulate a critical argument, yet this need not always be realized through the written mode. We have proposed a multimodal approach to look again at the key concept of 'argument' and have provided a meta-level language of description of how academic argument operates in image and writing in higher education. Students should be helped to understand that no act of meaning-making (analysis or composition) takes place in a social vacuum and we need an approach to academic literacies that will open up access to academia through making explicit how multimodal texts work.

## Notes on the contributors

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### *In this issue*

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- Ávila-Reyes, N. (2017) 'Postsecondary writing studies in Hispanic Latin America: Intertextual dynamics and intellectual influence'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (1), 21–37.
- Blommaert, J., and Horner, B. (2017) 'An epistolary interaction: Horner and Blommaert on academic literacies, mobility, and diversity'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (1), 2–20.
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