Text as Design, Writers as Designers

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Abstract

Acknowledging the changing nature of writing in the 21st century, particularly the increasing significance of visual characteristics in written texts, this paper explores the implications of multimodality for the pedagogy of writing. It considers the potential disjunction between children's life experiences of written texts and the demands of the writing curriculum, particularly in the secondary phase, and whilst arguing for greater recognition of the role of the visual, the paper also notes the importance of ensuring all children also have access to powerful verbal texts. Drawing on two separate research studies, the paper demonstrates how visual characteristics of written texts influence readers' responses to texts, but also how writers are aware of some of the choices they make in shaping verbal texts. The paper argues for a reconceptualisation of the writing process as a design process, and for a pedagogy of writing which encourages, supports and enables writers to become confident and effective designers of texts.

Key words

In the 21st century knowledge economy, writing remains a powerful and dominant mode of communication, though the nature and varieties of writing have changed rapidly as a consequence of near-universal access to computer-supported writing, the prevalence of texts which combine visual and verbal modes of expression, and the blurring of speech and writing boundaries in e-mail and text-messaging communications. Despite these changing patterns of public and private written communication, traditional continuous prose retains its dominance in high status spheres: academic writing, legal written discourse, and OFSTED reports, for example, remain predominantly continuous prose. Arguably, there is a tension implicit here between the popular and the powerful. This, in turn, transmutes into a parallel tension in the teaching of writing. At the same time as concerns about standards in writing have translated into National Strategy initiatives to improve writing (DfEE 2000; DfES 2003), elsewhere there are concerns that school writing has divorced itself from the realities of writing in the public sphere (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Wyatt-Smith and Murphy, 2001). Children's out-of-school experience of texts and thus the prior knowledge they bring to the reading and writing of texts includes understanding of multimodal composition and this needs to be integrated into their school experiences of writing: but they also need access to and control of predominantly verbal written discourse or school writing simply becomes a means of reproducing social inequalities. This article argues that these dichotomies can be positively and equitably resolved by conceptualizing the text as an outcome of a design process, and thinking of writers as designers.

The research studies

The material in this article draws on two discrete research studies. The first is an investigation of AS Level French students' perceptions of text difficulty in the target language, and involved asking twenty students to rate the level of difficulty of a range of authentic texts in French, followed by interviews which sought to elicit the thinking behind their difficulty ratings. The second research study, funded by the ESRC, is exploring the composing processes of secondary age writers. Thirty six children, representing a balanced sample of year 9 and year 11 students, stratified by gender and ability, were observed undertaking writing

in the classroom, and then interviewed immediately afterwards in an attempt to understand their awareness of their own composing processes and any textual or linguistic choices they made during the writing. That two such apparently different research studies, with such distinct research focuses, should have any overlaps was something of a surprise to us, but both studies offer illuminating perspectives on the idea of text as design.

Semiotic theory: the science of making meaning

Semiotic theory, through its articulation of how signs communicate meanings, has already provided a partial foundation for such a reconceptualisation. By looking beyond the word to other communicative forms such as art, images and music, semiotic theory, as Saussure described it, is a science which studies the life of signs at the heart of social life (Saussure 1971: 33). In essence, Saussure argues that signs are arbitrary and ambiguous in how they convey meaning, and his notion of a sign being composed of *signifier* and a *signified* is now commonplace terminology in semiotic theory, cultural studies and media studies. But it has some relevance to writing too. The signifier is the form which a sign takes, and the signified is the concept it expresses; a word or an image can be signifiers, thus:

Signifier	the word LADIES outside the entrance to public toilets
Signified	that there are public toilets there for females to use
Signifiera	a √ besides a mathematical calculation
Signified	that the calculation was correct

However, Kress critiques the Saussurean emphasis on the *intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the signified* because it pays insufficient attention to *the act of sign-making* (Kress 1996: 7). In terms of teaching writing, we are principally interested in the writers and their ability to create meaningful texts, not simply the signs that compose those texts. Nonetheless, although semiotics encompasses linguistic theory and includes verbal communication within it, its application in contemporary settings tends to be very much aligned to the visual and the interpretation of how images convey meaning. Indeed, the title of Kress's book *The Grammar of Visual Design i*ndicates the appropriation of a linguistic paradigm to visual communication.

The verbal and the visual in writing

This emphasis on the visual mirrors the increasing significance of visual forms of communication in Western culture, a trend which has been developing over several decades but which has been intensified by mass communication and technology. Ausburn and Ausburn (1978) note that we live in an age of visual culture, dominated by images and Kress, in similar vein, argues that there has been an *incursion of the visual into many domains of public communication where formerly language was the sole and dominant mode* (Kress 1996:13). We have only to think of how long-standing visual modes such as film and television have been supplemented by computer games, DVDs and mobile phones with camera facilities, or how PowerPoint has become *de rigueur* for presentations, to see how oral and written language have been displaced by the image. One consequence of this has been the recognition, common to all Western cultures, of the importance of visual literacy, a term coined by Debes and defined by him as *a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing, and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences* (Debes 1969: 27). We would suggest, however, that visual literacy is probably more simply interpreted as the ability to read and understand how visual images convey meaning, what Kazmierczak calls the *system of representation and signification that allows us to produce and communicate thoughts and images about reality* (Kazmierczak 2001: 181). And, of course, that signification through visual language is not a universal, transparent signification but is both *culturally specific* (Kress 1996: 3) and socially determined.

More specific to the thrust of this article, however, is the way writing has become increasingly multimodal, and how many written texts commonly integrate visual and verbal modes of communication. Texts which would once have been continuous written prose, printed in black print, with limited variety in font now *involve a complex interplay of written text, images and other graphic elements* (Kress 1996: 15). Arguably, however, writing has always been multimodal, from mediaeval illustrated manuscripts, to gilt lettering on expensive leather-bound books, and love letters on scented papers with pressed flowers. Moreover, the distinction between verbal and visual is blurred when features such as font style, size, line-spacing and colour are considered. The

relationship of the verbal text to the visual text is indeed complex: Barthes argues that visual images on their own were too arbitrary to communicate effectively and that words, *the linguistic message*, were one way to anchor the meaning and *to counter the terror of uncertain signs* (Barthes 1977: 39). What is certain is that children encounter these verbal-visual written texts both in home and social contexts, and in school:

> *Much learning in the curriculum is presented through images, often in the double-page spreads of books, which are designed to use layout, font size and shape and colour to add to the information or stories contained in the words. Such designed double-page spreads, whether in picture or information book, make use of spatial arrangements to convey ideas.* (QCA 2004: 5)

The changing nature of written texts influences how children approach constructing meaning in both reading and writing. Spinillo and Dyson (2002) investigated how children read graphic text and found that when reading procedural pictorial sequences they used the left-to-right directionality of reading written text, but when the graphic material was presented in an unfamiliar format, the reading was more strongly influenced by pictorial content, than by conventional directionality. Looking at very young writers' developing understanding of punctuation, Hall and Holden-Sim (1996) found that initially children used 'graphic punctuation': they saw the punctuation simply as a *visual* feature, a mark on the page, and not as a *linguistic* feature, indicated by a visual mark, which marks meaning. In writing, children's prior knowledge of how texts combine the verbal and the visual is evident in the writing they produce (Myhill 2005). In the example below, taken from a year 5 class who were working on the genre features of instructional texts, the writer demonstrates understanding of these typical features of instructional texts, with its numbered list of instructions, its use of imperative verbs, and short, clear sentences. It draws on the combination of visual and verbal in the use of small pictures to illustrate the utensils. But the choice to present the recipe within an apple shape is a strong visual message to the reader and blurs effectively the boundary between instruction and persuasion in a recipe. This writer is not merely giving instructions on how to make an apple crumble: she is trying to persuade her readers that they want to make an apple crumble, not just by the visual apple outline but also by the

persuasive sentence *This mouthwatering crumble is excellent with a spot of custard!!!*
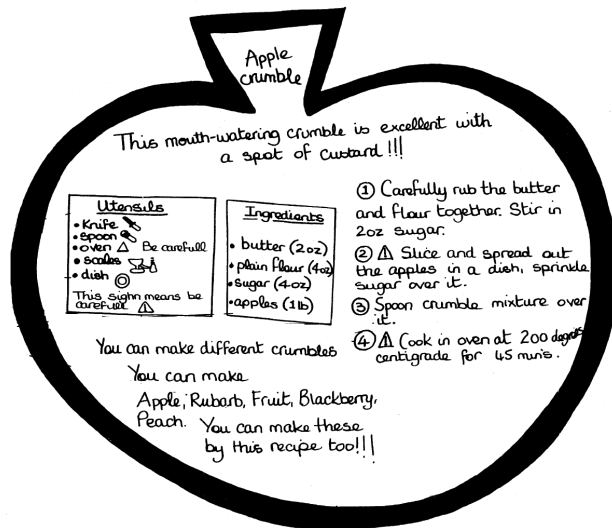
This writer is a designer, and her text is a design.

Text as design

The notion of text being a design is not wholly new, though perhaps as a concept it has not been foregrounded. Kress talks of *visual designs* (1996: 15) and the QCA booklet referred to above talks of designed double-page spreads, which make use of *spatial arrangements to convey ideas.* Tonfoni (1994), describing writing as a visual art, refers to the page as a canvas throughout her book and emphasizes the material and spatial aspects of writing from a strong design angle. From a psychological perspective, Tolchinsky describes texts as *artifacts that convey information through linguistic forms and graphemic conventions* (2001: 81). Whereas the focus in all these is on the text itself as a design outcome, with a particular emphasis on the visual, Sharples (1999) directs attention to text-making as a design process. Drawing on both cognitive psychology and socio-cultural theory, he argues that writers are engaged in a creative problem-solving activity, in which the writer is constrained by the demands of the task, including the

form, the purpose and the audience for the writing. That writing is a process bounded by constraints is a familiar one in psychology - Hayes and Flower (1980) describe this as a rhetorical problem for writers because whatever they *choose to say must ultimately conform to the structures posed by their **purpose** in writing, their sense of the **audience**, and their **projected** selves or **imagined** roles* (Hayes and Flower 1980:40). But Sharples argues that, given these constraints, writing is a design task, shaping meaning not just through visual forms, but through semantic and linguistic choices at micro and macro levels, or in the phraseology of the National Strategies (DfEE 1998 and DfES 2001a), at word, sentence and text level. In the context of this article, there are two significant elements to Sharples' proposition. Firstly, he shifts attention from the text as design to the writers as designers, which has stronger pedagogical implications. Secondly, his conception of design encompasses not only the idea of visual design and spatial layout, but also the idea of semantic and linguistic choices being intrinsic to the design process. If we are to support the development of writers who are confident and articulate in as wide a range of writing as possible, from the predominantly visual to the exclusively verbal, then it is important that the notion of designing embraces not only visual and presentational choices, but linguistic choices too.

Curriculum opportunities for writing as design

Explicit curriculum opportunities for approaching writing as a design process appear limited, particularly with reference to the integration of the visual and the verbal. There seems to be a distinction between the skill of reading image-based texts, which is part of the National Curriculum Attainment Target for Reading, and the parallel skill of creating these kinds of texts. Elsewhere in the English-speaking western world, the same appears to be true. The Australian First Steps (1997) description of progression in writing in the Early Years makes no reference at all to visual elements in writing, other than that one of the first markers of development is understanding the difference between writing and drawing. In the US, the National Commission on Writing (2003) is concerned that its sixteen year olds are producing *relatively immature and unsophisticated writing* (NCW 2003: 17), but has nothing to say about the sophisticated maturity of effective visual-verbal writing. It does note the significance of ICT in changing writing, but

appears to regard this wholly in terms of the improved ease of editing. In the UK, at GCSE, there is no recognition of the relationship between the visual and the verbal in writing and the examination focuses exclusively upon the demands of verbal text. So, for example, the AQA (Specification A) GCSE English syllabus states as its aims for writing:

> *The ability to construct and convey meaning in written standard English, including:*
>
> *the use of compositional skills to develop ideas and communicate meaning to a reader; the development of a wide range of vocabulary and an effective style; organising and structuring sentences grammatically and whole texts coherently; the development of essential presentational skills which include accurate punctuation, correct spelling and legible handwriting; and showing a wide variety of forms for different purposes.*
>
> <div align="right">(AQA 2004:12)</div>

Indeed, students preparing for the writing sections of the examination are advised not to concern themselves with layout aspects, such as the use of columns, or images, or indeed any of those features which might make their texts seem authentic. Landow (1997) criticizes this *purely verbal conception of writing* because it suggests *first, that only verbal information has value … second, that visual information has less value.* This devaluing of the visual, he argues, *reduces the status of the writer, making him or her less of a real writer* (Landow 1997: 62). Not acknowledging the role of the visual undoubtedly has an impact on school writing at secondary level. In our ESRC study of writing we have observed year 9 and year 11 writers, who have frequently been engaged in preparation for the Key Stage 3 tests or for GCSE which do not value visual aspects of writing: this might account for the fact that in not one of the writing episodes observed did these writers incorporate any visual or layout features into their writing. The absence of visual elements in these writing samples would appear to underline Kress's concern that although outside school *images continue to play a very important role, and not just in texts for children… the skill of producing texts of this kind, however important their role in contemporary society, is not taught in schools* (Kress 1996: 15).

However, this is not an entirely balanced presentation of the situation, at least in England. The QCA publication, *More than Words*, acknowledges that *new forms of communication, and the knowledge of texts brought to the classroom by even the very youngest readers and writers, pose new questions for teaching and learning* (QCA 2004:5) and demonstrates, through real examples of primary children's writing, how the teaching of writing can successfully address the design features of text-making. It also demonstrates that existing assessment criteria for writing are not incompatible with the assessment of multi-modal texts.   The booklet effectively addresses Bearne's (2003) concern that, until assessment of literacy allows for multi-modal 'writing', some children's literacy knowledge is excluded from school contexts. At the secondary phase, the National Strategy folder, *Literacy across the Curriculum* (DfES 2001b) includes a section on non-fiction texts which encompasses visual and spatial elements in the descriptions of different text types. So the description of an Explanation text includes the observation that it *often contains step-by-step diagrams/illustrations to clarify or even replace text* (though, of course, sometimes the prose clarifies the diagram). Nonetheless, it would seem that the older one gets, and the richer one's own personal experience of reading multimodal texts, the fewer explicit curriculum opportunities there are for creating multimodal writing.

The impact of the visual on students' perceptions of text

The impact of text design on students' reactions to printed texts indicates the significance of multimodal communication, and was a surprise outcome of our study investigating A Level French students' perceptions of text difficulty. In making judgements about the reading difficulty of authentic texts in the target language, it was the design of the text rather than the language of the text which appeared to shape their responses. The students made affective responses to authentic texts, as well as making cognitive judgments about linguistic difficulty. Adjectives such as *daunting, scary, intimidating, hard* typified their responses to those texts which had the higher levels of text density and continuous prose, whilst the texts using more integrated visual and verbal characteristics were deemed easier and more amenable. One girl claimed that it was daunting *if you are confronted with just a page of text with no breaks. Although it isn't, it looks longer.*

In other words, their perception of text difficulty was heavily influenced by the affective responses they made to the texts, which were in turn heavily influenced by visual design features. The interviewees' reactions are not always directly connected with understanding language, but relate instead to visual aspects of the text, in particular to what Sharples (1999) calls the 'elements' (shapes and styles) and 'principles' (how the elements are composed to create meaning) of design.

It seems that the visual appearance of the text acts as a gatekeeper to the text, conveying messages of accessibility or inaccessibility, and affecting readers' motivation to engage with the text: in other words, there is an integral link between the appearance of a text and the degree to which readers can engage in an intellectual way with it. The following two interview extracts reveal the negative affective responses provoked by visual layouts which were textually dense and unbroken:

Student 1	*I think it's very boring.*
Interviewer	*Can you explain 'boring'?*
Student 1	*It's just a lot of black letters, words, all in one column, on a white page, and a bit of colour, but it doesn't really make sense.*
Interviewer	*OK, so a lot of black text on white paper is boring what counts as 'interesting' for you?*
Student 1	*Well, bits of colour!*

* * * * * *

Student 2	*... it can look a bit daunting when you've got a whole sheet of text.*
Interviewer	*Right. Tell me a bit about the word 'daunting'. Why would you feel daunted in front of a whole sheet of text?*
Student 2	*I suppose it's quite easy just to get bogged down by it, really, and if you see one sentence that you don't understand, it just throws you, and you just think you can't understand any of it, really.*

In contrast, when the textual design was visually divided in some way, through images, colour, different fonts, columns, or

subheadings, for example, students felt more able to approach the text:

Student 4   *I looked at that and saw three sub-sections and thought, 'That's fine. I can cope with that.' But if it was a normal newspaper page, I'd look at it and I'd think, 'No way. I can't do that.'*

Student 5   *I think what kind of made it a bit easier is it's in small sections, 'cause if you have a big text, you tend to be overwhelmed by the whole thing, whereas this was in small manageable chunks.*

Although Davies, for example, observes that reading *gives rise to affective responses to text as the reader interacts with the writer* (Davies, 1995: 5) and Devitt (1997) argues that reading comprises cognitive, metacognitive and visual processes, there has been little consideration of this inter-relationship between visual text design and affective responses. The relative difficulty of texts for readers of a second language have tended to be predominantly considered in terms of cognitive responses to linguistic characteristics (Maun 2005). But for these readers, an essential aspect of the reader-writer relationship relates to the visual design; for writers as designers of texts for implied readers, this is an important understanding.

It is worth noting at this juncture that students' perceptions of the significance of the visual elements in text can be a distraction from the process of creating and communicating effectively in writing. The visual appearance of a piece of writing in terms of its neatness remains surprisingly significant, even in year 11. In our ESRC study, students were often concerned about the neatness of their handwriting and sometimes rewrote paragraphs simply b*ecause I messed up so many times* without making any substantive alterations to their text. In one case, one girl told us that *sometimes I don't like the look of what I've written and if I write more neatly it will come out better.* A reluctance to alter the text through crossing out words or moving chunks around with arrows was sometimes attributable to this unwillingness to make the text appear visually untidy: in these circumstances, the effect of attention to the visual elements is to reduce the writer's impetus to *design* a text in favour of simply producing a text.

Similarly, the ease with which word-processors and desktop publishing permit the combination of verbal and visual can be a distraction as well as a virtue. Morris (2005) records a dialogue where year 9 writers acknowledge that they can be diverted from paying attention to the purpose and communication of their writing to playing around with electronic facilities:

Leah: *And like if you're writing with pen and paper, but with the computer's always doing things so you get distracted. Like you can't get into typing a story.*
Kayleigh: *It's very tempting to find a pretty border.*
Nigel: *Pictures, a bit of ClipArt…*
Leah: *… that always goes in the wrong place.*
Nigel: *You like put pictures in and you think 'Don't like that', go and look for another one and then you get rid of them 'cause you don't think they really go with them and you'll be like for ages going on like that'.'*

Choosing appropriate borders and clip art can of course be a central part of the design of the writing, a way of enhancing the meaning-making potential of the text through a range of semiotic resources. But it is not always so. It can very easily be about decorative ornamentation, and if we are serious about teaching writers to be designers, we need to be prepared to challenge this and discuss how visuals such as clip art contribute to the meaning and purpose of the writing.

Designing text: the power of the written word

In conceptualizing text as design and writers as designers, it is important to acknowledge that not all writing requires visual elements, and that some writing remains predominantly continuous prose, including many of the creative forms, highly valued by English teachers. As noted in the introduction, many forms of powerful and privileged written discourses are strongly verbal and it would be an impoverished pedagogy of writing which denied students opportunities to master these written discourses. Lankshear has argued strongly (in continuous verbal text!) that educational efforts to raise standards in literacy can be a hegemonic force, reproducing cultural capital, and that capitalism and economic imperatives mean that it remains the role of education to broker *different educational learning achievement*

outcomes (Lankshear 1997: 5). This echoes Foucault's claim that *every educational system is a political means of maintaining or modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and power it carries with it* (Foucault 1972: 227). Supporting students in understanding how all written texts are shaped and constructed, including those without visual elements, is one way to offer *empowerment through appropriation* (Morgan 1997: 59), helping developing writers to appreciate that writing is not *solely an individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process* but is a consequence of *preferred ways of creating and communicating knowledge within particular communities* (Swales 1990: 4).

One implication of this is that writers need to develop confidence and discernment in the design choices they make, including decisions about the appropriacy of visual features in their writing. In the primary context, QCA advocate helping children *to make appropriate choices to suit their purposes for communication. At times writing (or images) alone can be the best way to get a message across. A useful question might be: For this message, what can best be expressed in words and what in images?* (QCA 2004: 18). A similar emphasis upon informed discernment is needed for secondary school writers. A further implication, however, is that a pedagogy of writing founded upon a notion of writers as designers must teach about design at the level of semantic, linguistic and textual choices, as Sharples suggested, as well as teaching about visual semiotics. In this way learning about designing written texts supports students in accessing the power that effective writers can access: to use Czerniewska's words, *in order to have freedom and power over language, children need guidance about how meanings can be shaped through language* (Czerniewska 1992: 146).

Writers as designers

Interviewing the Year 9 and Year 11 writers about their composing, or designing, processes immediately after they had undertaken a written task confirmed that the task of designing a written text is governed by two principal concerns: what to write and how to write it. This dualism is evident in Lena's reflection that *I had, like, an idea but I was just thinking, like, how should I write it.* The extent to which an individual writer can engage with these design 'problems' is affected by the individual's mental

representation of the writing task and how much they know and understand about it. Swales's (1990) complementary concepts of *content* schemata (mental maps of ideas related to the writing topic) and *formal* schemata (mental maps of the particular text type's characteristic features) are useful here because the writer has to design the text within the bounds of what he or she knows about that text-type. The design issues raised by what to write are largely concerned with the generation of ideas, either through the imagination or use of personal experience, or through prior knowledge of the topic of the writing. In tandem with this, the design issues surrounding how to write involve shaping and managing the content to suit the audience and purpose, and potentially include linguistic choices at word and sentence level, and choices about the shape, structure and organization of the whole text.

The design challenge posed by what to write is one which understandably commands a lot of writers' thinking time (and one with which we sympathise as we write this article). For some students just getting started was a problem, or in Mike's words, *it's starting that's the trouble.* Many shared Jan's view that finding 'a starting point' was often difficult, but once she had written the opening paragraph, *it usually goes from there.* Others, like Helen resolve this particular problem by writing to find out what to write: *I didn't know what I was going to write about and then I just decided that, start and see if I got any ideas when I started writing.* But it is evident that the design problem of what to write is not merely a problem of the initial phase of writing. The pauses that these writers made during writing were frequently concerned with resolving questions and uncertainties about where the content of the text was going and where it might conclude:

Jess   I'm thinking about what's, like, actually going into the scene and like what they were actually doing. Like, if he was answering the phone, like how he would answer it and how it would ring. I was thinking like, with the window, I wrote that in the beginning of the piece. *I looked through the window in the room…* and I was thinking about how I was going to continue it because I didn't know whether to go on to, like, further in the story, because I didn't know how I would finish it.

Jan   Just getting it so it makes sense and it's flowing and really getting what I want to say as well clear in my own head as well. And sometimes it's just one sentence or two, and sometimes it's a whole new area; How do I start this? How do I get going? How does it link in with the rest of the essay, whether it's even relevant to what I'm supposed to be doing with it, and sometimes just checking I know what I'm doing right, that I know what the task is. But quite often I find myself just jamming halfway through sentences, because I'm not really sure if that's what I want to say.

Mark By the time I started writing, I still hadn't sorted it out in my mind, so, yeah, it's mainly pauses for words, but I did pause a few times to think, 'where am I going to go now?'

The design issues posed by how to write a particular text are essentially about the means of communicating the *message* of the piece: the same message, for example, an argument against animal testing, can be conveyed through different means. Firstly, at the text level, different forms could be used, such as a local newspaper editorial, a school argument essay, a letter to the local MP, a narrative, a campaign website and so on. Below text level, the means would include the possibility of using visual elements, but also organisational choices about paragraphing and overall text structure, about how sentences convey the appropriate emphasis, and about words and phrases chosen clarify the message. This would need to include the affective responses that readers may have to particular visual formats. It is a highly complex design task. One might suppose that such a complex task would require plans of some form, but one striking finding from our study is how rarely students plan before writing in the classroom. Many argued they found it easier just to write, partly it seemed because writing helped to solve the design problem of what to write - they discovered what to write by writing. But many also dismissed planning as *too much effort*, in Joe's words, and clearly felt that planning had little to offer them in supporting their writing. We do not have space in this article to explore their responses to planning in detail, but the fact that these writers largely saw planning as a burdensome, teacher-oriented, pre-writing requirement, rather than a potential design tool has real implications for an effective pedagogy for writing.

However, at the level of words and phrases, students seemed very aware of the design choices they were making, and the most able writers could articulate some of the thinking underlining their choices.

David   I remember up here, where it says *for a large amount of exclusive hand-crafted diamonds* I was trying to think of a word that could make the diamonds seem like strange, mysterious, like their so exclusive no one else in the world has them, so they're very precious or something.

Interviewer   So which was the word or the words that you were particularly thinking of, that you knew were in your mind somewhere?

David   *Exclusive* and *hand-crafted* because 'hand-crafted' suggests that, like, somebody has taken time over them, so they must be special and exclusive as well, not many people have got them.

Carly   *The north coast is known for its stunning scenery and stretches of beaches that appeal to many even on the coldest of days.* I changed that slightly from yesterday.

Interviewer   What did you put today?

Carly   I crossed out… I put *long, sandy stretches of beaches* but I thought that sounded really clichéd, so I thought it would probably be better to try and get away from the travel brochure thing again because I think I've done that far too much here.

Interviewer   Did you leave it like that or have you changed it?

Carly   It's just *stunning scenery and stretches of beaches*, not *long, sandy stretches of beaches* which isn't a big change, but I think it just makes it slightly more sophisticated because you haven't got, kind of, loads of descriptive words in it.

For less confident writers, it appears they are aware that words offered design possibilities but were less sure about applying this in practice. Instead, they appear to attribute intrinsic value to *long words or adjectives*, and many weaker writers felt the way to improve their writing in was as Harry put it, to *put adjectives in*.

Far fewer writers in the study were conscious of design choices made at sentence or supra-sentence level: there was strong and repeated evidence that finding the right word or phrase is a more conscious design option than shaping the sentence or sequence of sentences for best effect. But several writers did comment on some of their thinking about sentence design.

Jess   I was trying to think about whether I should maybe plan my sentences, like, in my head, maybe before instead of just writing them down, because a lot of the time I started writing a sentence and then I changed all the words and then I had to scribble it out.

Jane   If I were going to change some of it, I would probably shorten it to make it more concise, to get all my ideas perhaps clearer and not so lengthy sentences. I tend to use quite long sentences, so to cut it down a bit would be probably the main change I would make and I might, if I don't feel happy with a sentence, I will rearrange it, concentrate on it for quite a while.

It was noticeable that a significant number of writers responded to the question about how they might improve their writing by saying they should use more complex sentences. But when probed to explain why this might improve their writing, or indeed to identify a complex sentence in their text, they were unable to do so. The same was true of weaker writers who felt more adjectives would improve their writing. Throughout the interviews, the impact of teaching on these writers' prior knowledge of task demands is evident: not only were grammatical terms such as complex sentences and adjectives used, but also other parallel terminology such as rhetorical questions, emotive language, and metaphor. The key pedagogical implication of this is that these terms have power when writers understood how the feature can have an effect on the implied reader, and the relationship between form and meaning, but they are meaningless without this understanding.

Conclusion

This article has made limited use of the word 'multimodal', a deliberate design choice on our part. We would argue that in the

context of teaching writing, multimodality is a less helpful concept than design, partly because it tends to give greater emphasis to the visual, and partly because it deals insufficiently with the design elements within the verbal mode. Moreover, the word 'design', by implication, draws attention to the role of the writer as designer, and the process of writing as a creative, generative process. Arguing for a social semiotic stance, which adapts the ideas of Saussure and Barthes to take account of writing as a social communicative act, Kress (1997: 11) maintains that signmakers make choices and selections which is a *transformative, productive* enterprise. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) describe how novice writers progress from a knowledge-telling stage, where the writer writes down all he or she knows about a topic, to a knowledge-transforming stage, where the writer is able to structure and shape the text to suit different audiences and purposes. However, children do not become confident designers simply through exposure, and an effective pedagogy of writing should support children in acquiring the design skills and understanding they need to be adept text designers. By framing writing as a design activity, drawing on a range of semiotic meaning-making resources, including the verbal, the visual, and the technological (e.g. hypertext), we can help developing writers to understand the possibilities and choices available to them and access both powerful and popular written discourses.

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