Being playful *with* multimodal literacies

Multimodal play allows children to learn more deeply by exploring and making meaning across a range of different modalities. **Professor Nicola Yelland** explores what multimodal play looks like in practice and how educators can use it to enrich children's knowledge.

A pedagogy of multiliteracies—an influential article published by the New London Group in 1996—enabled new ways of thinking about becoming literate and helped us to contemplate the impact of new technologies in our everyday lives. It also caused us to consider social diversity and the accepted conventions of communicating and making meaning vary according to different cultural, social or knowledge content-specific situations. Being able to communicate successfully requires knowing and understanding how to use the patterns of language in varying contexts. *A pedagogy of multiliteracies* acknowledges that because we make meaning in different modalities—linguistic (written), visual, spatial, tactile, gestural, audio and oral—literacy pedagogies need to go beyond print and oral communication to incorporate multimodal literacies. Meaning-making requires that learners be able to switch between these modalities.

This connects with the work of Kress (1997), who noted that:

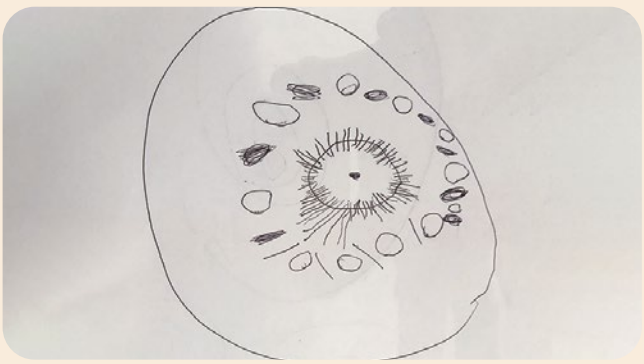
> *Children act multi-modally, both in the things they use, the objects they make; and in their engagement of their bodies: there is no separation of body and mind. The differing modes and materials which they employ offer differing potentials for the making of meaning; and therefore offer different affective, cognitive and conceptual possibilities* (p. 92).

Thus, preschool learning settings should incorporate opportunities for multimodal play so that children are able to make meaning in different modalities to enrich their understandings of their everyday lifeworlds (Yelland, 2015; 2018). The following case studies demonstrate children's multimodal play in action.

Charlotte's clay flowers

Charlotte (aged four) made a clay flower and laid the petals and leaves out on a plastic plate to dry. She then declared that she was going to 'draw it with a pencil'. The conversation that followed showed that Charlotte was able to negotiate the idea of three-dimensional and two-dimensional modalities with comments such as: 'I can pick up the clay petals … but they are hard because they are clay … On a flower they are soft … I can't pick up the flowers I drew.'

Figure 1: Charlotte's clay flower and flower drawing



Rosie's soundwaves

In another scenario, Rosie (aged four) was playing with an iPad and started to make a voice recording. As she was experimenting with making a wide variety of noises, she noticed something happening. Rosie then chose to use a pen and paper to create a series of wavy lines across the page (Figure 2). Initially, the educator thought that Rosie was attempting to produce some writing but in talking to her she realised they were the soundwaves of the voice recording.

Rosie declared, 'When it is bigger it is louder, when it is smaller it is quieter.'

As she talked, Rosie continued to draw and make noises of various tones and loudness so she could watch the soundwaves move on the iPad. Other children came to watch and she showed them what was happening and explained it to them by drawing the soundwaves as well as replaying the sound on the voice recording. The educators listened and talked with Rosie about her experiences, making time for them all to explore the ways in which the modality of soundwaves worked and connected with meaning-making.

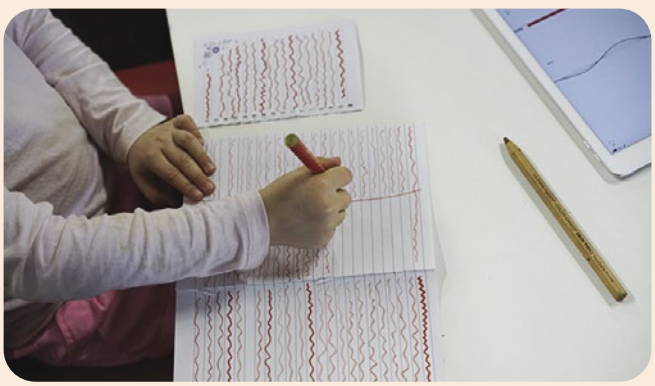
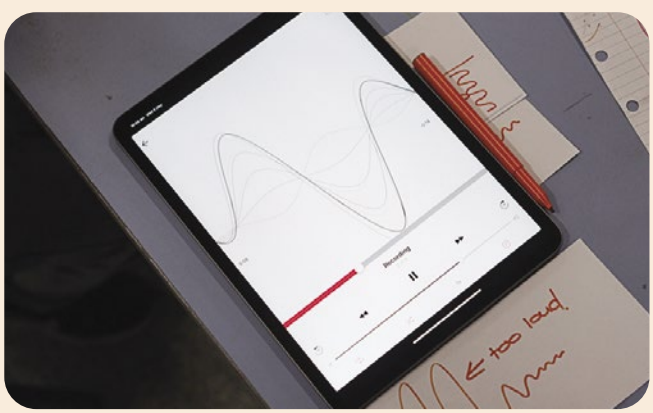


Figure 2: Rosie drawing the soundwaves



Building a stadium

Three boys were together in play because of their love of playing and talking about AFL football. They also enjoyed being outdoors and engaging in physical play. While they were doing this one day the educator started to talk to them about their passion and discovered that they went to watch games on a regular basis with their families, and their knowledge of the game and their favourite players was quite sophisticated. The educator invited the boys to share their knowledge and discussed how they might do this.

They immediately decided to design and construct a football stadium. They used blocks and constantly checked with each other to make sure they were doing it 'right'. The level of conversation was high and their use of everyday mathematical concepts of number and space was evident. This meant that they were able to solve a problem when it turned out the gradient of their steps was incorrect. The educator supported their learning by sharing a screenshot of a stadium grandstand so they could see and reflect on the arrangement of the seats and how the gradient worked.

One boy counted aloud and in doing so noticed there was a pattern in the design—one, two, three, four, five, six—and that it was getting higher each time so everyone could see the game. He then made adjustments to the wooden blocks and explained the processes to his co-collaborators (Figure 3).

In building the stadium and constructing the oval, the boys sought out different materials and modalities to recreate the scene at Adelaide Oval. Their knowledge of the stadium was detailed and they talked about it being by the river and that one part of it was called 'the hill': 'They made a hill so that people watch it at the oval and there is grass over it!' (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Building the steps

They used green paper to draw the oval with all the relevant markings and then explained how the goal posts needed to be arranged and how the scoring worked: 'So this is where they bounce and throw it. They always do this when they are centring'; 'The points posts are not the same as the goal posts.'

Later the boys transferred their learning from the challenges of their block-built stadium to constructing a larger stadium outside using milk crates. It was apparent from their conversations that they had transferred their initial understandings and meaning-making outside with the new materials. They displayed collaborative problem-solving and reasoning and, when it was finished, they were able to sit in their new, large-scale grandstand.

Figure 4: Adelaide Oval

The educators wanted to create a learning environment in which the boys had access to and choice of new and existing modalities and materials for exploring, creating and generating opportunities to extend their meaning-making. They also realised the importance of talking with the boys as they engaged in their play construction so that they were able to communicate and share their ideas and knowledge about AFL as well as figure out and problem-solve the seats issue with the blocks.

Educators can support multimodal play

In thinking about these learning experiences, it is useful to think about **the following questions:**

- What role do educators play in supporting all children to explore and represent their learning in a variety of modalities?
- How can the use of digital technologies complement existing materials and modalities and encourage communication through modes that may not be readily used or understood by educators and children?

Creating learning ecologies to encourage multimodal representations with varied intentional teaching strategies (DEEWR, 2009) enables young learners to experience rich learning opportunities as they work collaboratively to build their knowledge base, become multiliterate and extend their design, systems and computational thinking capacities.

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