

Teaching Multimodality

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We all learn in different ways, which are informed by the 'modes' through which we communicate with the world around us.

Dr George Cremona is researching the development and application of a multimodal approach to teaching. He speaks with **Jonathan Firbank** about his passion for this collaborative research project, as well as its impressive results.



How do you learn? Do you absorb information best in a quiet space, reading from a book? Or do you need to fuel your imagination with visual media? Perhaps you need to be in a busy space, interacting with others, or trying things yourself to get to grips with new ideas? Every person will have a different answer. These will sometimes be radically different, perhaps the difference between an organised classroom and a natural space. But those differences may also be as subtle as different temperatures, seating arrangements, or even lighting. People may need slightly more or slightly less effort to be productive or need to spend slightly more or slightly less time on a task to fully engage with it. The complexity of context is endless.

All these contexts – and many more besides – are ‘modes’ of learning. You have likely identified the modes through which you learn best; they may have even changed over time. But for many of you, and for this writer, these modes weren’t necessarily something you only found in school, even in cases where you had the best, hard-working teachers. Dr George Cremona is working to empower teachers, students, and policy-makers specifically, by raising awareness of how frequently we use ‘multimodal’ methods. Cremona aims to help them discover new modes in turn.

‘Explaining multimodality is part of my everyday challenge,’ says Cremona, especially as academic interest increases in the subject. ‘Gunter Kress, a linguist and semiotician, defines modes as a channel through which communication can happen. Sigrid Norris (a linguist and professor at the Auckland University of Technology) elaborates on the subject: superordinate modes such as the text of this article are the most obvious channel through which communication is happening,’ Cremona says. But there are also subordinate modes. He explains, ‘In this article, they may be the font, the font size, the layout, the images which accompany it. Even our language, reading from left to right, or where we read the article is in itself a text made

up of a variety of modes, therefore multimodal.’ Another superordinate mode such as spoken conversation is just as complex, in part due to intricate subordinate modes of tone and body language, accompanying gestures, gaze, or even the colours of our clothes while speaking.

DR GEORGE CREMONA

Since 2009, Cremona has been a member of UM’s Faculty of Education, which is concerned with teacher education, and he is currently a senior lecturer. He is the programme coordinator for German as a Foreign Language and is also the Media Literacy coordinator. ‘Before then, I was a secondary school teacher. To be honest, when I saw the post at UM, I had mixed feelings. Teaching at a secondary school level and learning from colleagues and students made me very happy.’ After starting the post at UM, ‘I was happily settled in but immediately missed being in schools. My theory is that as a teacher-educator, I cannot teach how to teach if I lose contact with the classrooms. Schools change so quickly; publications are important but need to



Dr George Cremona with linguist and semiotician Gunther Kress (right). Gunther Kress was the original proponent of multimodality.

be connected to the grassroots. To bridge my work at university with this belief, and to bridge it with my calling to teaching, I launched the Multimodal Encounters research project, which at its core, adopts a multimodal socio-semiotic theoretical framework.'

MULTIMODAL ENCOUNTERS

There are two aims for the Multimodal Encounters project. 'First, we want to ask what the benefits and challenges of educators and learners are when multimodal texts are used as pedagogical tools. Second, based on the outcome of the first question, what suggestions can we make?' This 'we' includes educators, learners, school administrators, policy-makers, and parents (and more besides), as Multimodal Encounters is a fundamentally collaborative effort. 'I do not go to schools to impose. Teachers are already doing sterling work and all they can to teach, with a very packed schedule. With limited time and the resources they have at hand, teachers are working miracles.' Instead, suggestions are built collectively, rather than being top-down advice, which respects and reflects the unique modes of each space. Then the suggestions can be implemented.

Multimodal Encounters will not add extra stuff to the already very intense syllabus, but instead

engages with existing academic necessities, tailoring teaching and activities to students' individual needs. Finally, another collaborative discussion will take place after the ideas have been tested in classes, leading to refined versions of multimodal activities which teachers may continue to

implement. 'I particularly love to see teachers taking over as we implement this approach. This is teacher empowerment!'

One example of a multimodal approach is to take a conventional students' textbook and engage with it via different modes. 'Students can draw rather than write about ➤



Multimodal activities in Maltese schools
Photo by Clint Scerri Harkins



Dr George Cremona brings multimodal activities to Filipino classrooms

Top: Dr George Cremona promoting his recent book *Bilkemm jitwemmnu!* on his weekly educational radio show airing on Calypso Radio 101.8

Bottom: The radio show was awarded best radio production in Malta by the National Institute of Journalism

the contents, they can roleplay the examples used in the textbook, changing their classroom's layout or their outfits to create a performance.' Popular interests, which might include football or Eurovision, can contribute interesting modes to lessons, which in this case, could include anything from visual aids to songs or physical activities. Something as dry as learning grammatical prepositions can be made accessible to many different ways of learning. Employing popular cartoons in younger classes has already resulted in massively increased engagement.

The same results were achieved in some older classes after it was discovered that students were interested in graffiti, which opened the door for self-expression through art. A yet more ambitious experiment involved engaging with Malta's beloved children's book, *Il-Ktieb tal-Fenek l-Aħmar* written by Trevor Zahra, with new modes largely suggested by students. This culminated in an inter-school musical play, a superordinate mode rich with subordinate modes that engaged a huge variety of different interests. 'We try to encourage students and teachers to recognise that they have potential, to see they can be proactive designers of modal "texts" such as these, instead of passive receptors of learning.'

MODES BEYOND MALTA

This project started in Malta and Gozo across all education levels, with the majority of schools reaching out to the project after hearing of it. After outreach via international conferences, blind peer-reviewed journals, and books, Multimodal Encounters began to receive invites from elsewhere. 'We have collaborated with schools and educational institutions across Europe: Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, and Ukraine.' In 2019, Cremona felt it was time to look further afield, beginning a collaboration with institutions in the Philippines. Multimodality has educational potential beyond conventional schooling, through the internet, television, and radio. 'Fortunately, I have a weekly educational radio program on Calypso Radio 101.8.





Various initiatives undertaken with educational institutions across Europe and Asia

This has become a multimodal show, with a production ethos that focuses not only on the superordinate mode of speech but on subordinate modes such as setting.' Apart from achieving the title of most-followed Sunday evening radio programme in Malta by the latest three consecutive Broadcasting Authority surveys, the show was also awarded the best radio production in Malta by the National Institute of Journalism on three separate years. Cremona sees this as more of an award for multimodality than an award for himself.

Multimodality is a new understanding of an old reality. In essence, it is a term for the incredibly nuanced way we each absorb information. Our 'communications' with the world are unique and subjective but, as Cremona stresses, are all the more valuable for it. As Gunter Kress frequently told him, any perspective based on reasoning which respects other perspectives is equally valid. Multimodal Encounters is proving that. In whichever mode this approach is applied, it's getting results. **T**

Dr Cremona's new Maltese-language book on this subject, *Bilkemm jitwemmnu!*, is now available.

Further Reading:

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