

Walking the Walk of Multiliteracies

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The multiliteracies project has been instrumental in expanding our theoretical understanding of the meaning-making process. The “talk” of multiliteracies is a persuasive call for researchers and educators to validate and enhance the multimodal meaning-making capabilities of our students. For years the pedagogical and theoretical field has been dominated by studies of print literacy skills. Now, however, there is an increasing understanding that linguistic design is only part of the meaning-making process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) and that multimodality warrants increased attention in pedagogical design (New London Group, 2000). As a result of what Stein (2008:148) has called the “multimodal turn”, there is a pressing need for researchers and educators to consider how to walk the walk of the multiliteracies talk. For example, Vaish and Towndrow (2010) include in their goals for multimodal literacy research the analysis of multimodal texts and the promotion of a pluralized notion of literacy. Multiliteracy researchers such as Stein (2008) and Janks (2009) draw on Halliday (1985) for an approach to analyzing linguistic design and Kress & van Leeuwen (1990) for visual design. However, analyses of other modes, including the gestural, still present major methodological and analytical complexities beyond what our conventional analytic tools can handle. This paper points to some of the challenges and possibilities presented in multimodal research that attempts to validate and incorporate the gestural mode of embodied literacy. I draw on data from an ongoing case study that uses video-ethnographic methodology to explore the meaning-making processes of Jovin¹, a seventeen year old dancer, as he freestyles, designs, performs and reflects upon a piece of choreography for his school’s dance competition. The ongoing analysis uses a developing multimodal conversational analysis approach. Early findings underscore the pressing need to continue to work through the methodological and analytic challenges of validating the gestural mode as it has particular affordances and identity opportunities that our students are drawing upon as they read and write their world through movement. This paper, then, is a first step in an attempt to explore the gestural mode in theory, practice, pedagogy, and analysis: an attempt to really walk the walk of multiliteracies.

The ‘why’ and the ‘what’ of multiliteracies: Talking the Talk

In *Multiliteracies*, the New London Group (2000) lay out their argument for and description of multimodal literacies and pedagogy. As a result of global migration patterns, our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of cultural, linguistic, and other meaning-making resources. In addition, as a result of the technology revolution, texts are becoming increasingly multimodal. Computers allow text-producers to combine words, images, video, and sound in increasingly complex ways. The New London Group argue that because the meaning-making landscape of our students’ lives has changed, new literacies beyond the printed word are more needed than ever before. However, our classrooms have always been diverse and meaning-making has always been multimodal. Thus while the impetus for the New London Group’s work may have been globalization and computerization, the frameworks, tools, and pedagogical approaches they describe are applicable to the reception and production of all diverse texts by all diverse learners. The multiliteracies authors include a diagram (p. 26) that lists some design elements for six modes of meaning. These modalities include linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and sound as well as the multimodal, which describes how the various modalities work together to

¹ Pseudonym chosen by the participant.

create the overall meaning of the text. While most of the examples used by the authors are related to the production of online multimedia text, as a dance teacher and researcher, I have found the theories of the New London Group to be particularly applicable to the meaning-making processes of youth dancers as they work across all six modalities to create their meanings. As they choreograph, dancers use *sound* as they select and mix the songs that suit their intentions and consider the sounds that can be created for specific meaning-making purposes as their feet hit the floor or as their hands hit their thighs. Dancers use *language* as they interpret the lyrics and transmediate the meaning of these words into their embodied actions. In addition to their physical movements, *gesture* includes the facial expression and the feelings and affect in their bodies as they perform. *Space* is utilized as dancers consider how to move through the stage to create different meanings. The *visual* mode is used as these designers take into account how their moves will appear from the perspective of their audience and work to foreground or background different moments. Finally, *multimodality* is used as designers make decisions about the interrelation of the previous five modalities, such as when to pause their movements in order to draw attention to the sound of the music or when to cut the music in order to draw attention to the movement.

The “how” of multiliteracies: Walking the walk

However, in order to validate these multiple modalities of meaning making, they need to be more fully understood. Impeding this understanding are challenges in the collection, recording, and analysis of modalities beyond the printed word. Linguistic utterances are routinely collected in printed artefacts and recorded audio; visual images are collected as drawings or photographs; sound is audio-recorded; and spatial relations are at least partially captured using photo imaging. However, gestural design is technically challenging to “capture.” Video is our current best means of capturing gestural design; however, video is not without uniquely complicating challenges including ethical considerations related to its use in schools, especially where confidentiality must be ensured.² In addition, the comfort level of participants with the act of being video-recorded is of paramount concern. In this study, video was used sparingly over the time spent with the participant, limited to the times when either he requested to be filmed (for example when he wanted to see how a move would look on video, or when he had an insight about the dance or the choreographic process that he wanted to record and not forget) or when a particular topic came up in conversation that the researcher requested to be filmed (for example, the camera was off when the participant began to talk about the emotional journey of the piece. I then indicated that this was a topic of interest and asked him if he wouldn’t mind filming it.) The exception to these short pieces of footage is the one longer piece where both the participant and researcher appear on film together. It is as section of this film that is examined here.

In addition to the challenges in capturing the gestural mode, there are impediments to its analysis. Whereas Halliday has outlined key elements of language to help researchers make sense of the design of linguistic utterances and Kress and van Leeuwen have done the same for images, there are few theorists focusing on gesture. In *Multimodal Pedagogies: Representations, Rights, and Resources* Pippa Stein (2008) works through these barriers as she analyzes the design work of students who draw, speak, and write the same story. While Stein works effectively across the linguistic and visual modes, she pays particular attention to gesture in ways that make her work a uniquely valuable to this study. Indeed, she argues that multimodality is “inseparable from bodies” as the semiotic modes are related to the sensory possibilities of the bodies. She conceptualizes

² In the case of this study, the student assented and his parents consented to the use of his image so that his identity can be associated with his creative works and their production.

bodies as “repositories of knowledge” that is “not always knowable in and through language” (p. 151). Her work explores the limits of language through children’s use of drawings to express meanings inexpressible in language, such as pain, loss, violation and adolescent sexuality; the present case study finds that this designer is expressing meanings in gesture that are inexpressible in words.

In this study, in order to understand the meaning-making processes of this particular youth dancer several sources of data were collected. Because this designer uses video as part of his own choreographic processes (he records himself freestyling and talking/dancing through ideas and concepts), self-recorded videos were a primary source. In addition, peer-recorded and researcher-recorded videos were collected of the freestyling, designing, and performance process. However, in each of these cases, the physical is transmediated to the visual as the actual embodied experience of movement is not transmitted. To delve deeper into the kinesthetic, I created the opportunity for a participant-researcher teaching video in which the designer walks the researcher through the entire dance, “teaching” the movements and explaining and constructing their meanings. In this particular “interview”, the roles played by each participant are significantly more complex than “interviewer” and “interviewee.” The “interviewer” is also “teacher”, “researcher”, “dancer” and “dance student.” The “interviewee” is also “student”, “participant”, “dancer”, and “dance teacher.” Our first initials index these complex identities in play. Indeed, the “interview” itself is also “dance lesson”, “choreography session”, and at times “counseling session.” The analysis in this paper focuses on an excerpt from this process. This interview is theorized as “active” not only in the sense that meaning is understood to be co-constructed with both the interviewer and interviewee taking an active role in its construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Talmy, 2010), but also “active” in the sense of physical activity: I am standing beside Jovin and am attempting to follow his movements and to clarify his verbal and gestural utterances as he talks and walks me through his choreography. This “active active interview” is a process to explore both physical and linguistic meanings.

The next obstacle in the walk of multiliteracies comes in the transcription phase. For the purpose of this paper, I have had to transcribe the visual trace of the gestural mode into a linguistic trace of a trace. To do so, I confront all of the limitations multiliteracy researchers are faced with as they strive to acknowledge the value of multiple modes while often falling back into traditional transcription of words alone. Here I draw on the conventions developed by Stein (2008) as she transcribed the oral story-telling performances of children in South Africa to attempt to capture some of the significant physical utterances. Stein used *italics* to set off a rich physical description of gestures from the linguistic transcription and added screen shots of key moment of gestural meaning-making. What makes the transcription that follows different from Stein’s is that I am looking at a more interactional discourse in which there are two participants speaking and gesturing: the participant and the researchers. Thus I combine Stein’s approach with a conversation analytic conventions transcription that allow the analyst to draw attention to how turn-taking functions between participants. For this reason, gestures appear in the same position as words would, sometimes being incorporated into the flow of the turn, and other times standing as the turn itself. Building on a common convention of using square brackets ([]) when two speakers’ talk overlaps, I use curly brackets ({} in the many cases where a single speaker’s talk and gesture overlap. I also expand the use of several linguistic transcription conventions so that they apply cross-modally (such as underlining not only emphasized words, but also emphasized movements) and use “L” to indicate “left” and “R” to indicate “right.” (See Appendix A for a complete description of transcription conventions).

We see the limits of language particularly in the following exchange as Jovin walks and talks the researcher through a section of his choreography (or more accurately, we walk and talk each

other through the choreography). The section chosen for analysis is one in which Jovin and I explore the choreography of two movement phrases that coincide with the following lyrics of Eminem's *Lose Yourself*: "I'm choking now, everybody's joking now."

1 J: Oh yeah, it goes like {"Choking now... {everybody's"-
2 Facing K. {Hands out and back to throat, body rocking forwards and back. [{Stepping on
3 each syllable and bringing arms out and pushing away from his body as he turns to face front.
4 K: [Mimicking an
5 approximation of the movements.
6 J: -so like, I'm away from ↑them.
7 K: {You're away from them?
8 {Facing front, arms still extended from pushing movement.
9 J: Yeah. {Like I don't want to (threaten) myself
10 {Repeats steps and pushing movement to face front. ((Words affected by the beat of his movements.))
11 K: Yeah?
12 J: Looks away, upwards to his L. ° Arms drop. ° [Body turns to face K.
13 K: [Arms drop. Head turns to face J.
14 J: {That's so funny because like the past, I always do moves that {cover my face.
15 {L hand scratching forehead. {Both arms cover face.
16 K: {Yeah.
17 {Nods.
18 J: Drops hands away from face, cradles L elbow in R hand at waist.
19 K: Crouches facing away from J to do ((a move from his earlier choreography)) covering the face.
20 J: Heh heh. {And still now, which is funny.
21 {Gestures L hand palm up towards camera. Scratches L ear with L hand.
22 K: What does that mean to you, hiding your face? Pauses in stillness, hands by side, feet shoulder width apart,
23 body facing camera and head and posture towards J during J's next turn.
24 J: (8.0). Scratching L ear with L hand. Purses lips. Smiles. °Well, (inaudible). 'Cause it's just like um-° (2.0).
25 Lowering L hand. R arm to back of head. °Gestures L hand towards front. °
26 {I know, but I just can't explain it.
27 {°Gestures L hand towards front° on "know" and "can't".
28 K: {Yeah, I understand.
29 {Nods, steps L foot towards J, °swings arms loosely away from J stepping on R foot°.
30 J: {Yeah.
31 {L hand behind his back. Scratches his back.
32 K: {I know you know, and I know you can't explain.
33 {Steps L foot back towards J, placing L arm on his R shoulder. Smiling.
34 J: Heh heh.
35 K: Turns away from J. Hand back to throat. Looks over shoulder at J. Kay. {But this is like pushing-
36 awa::y.
37 {Repeats pushing movement.
38 J: Yeah

In lines 1-11, Jovin presents the movements that correspond to the word "everybody's-" in the lyrics of the song. He glosses the meaning of the step, which involves a circular pushing

pattern combined with a circular step pattern, as “I’m away from them” (l. 6) (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: “So like- I’m away from them” (l. 6)

He expands this gloss with “Like I don’t want to (threaten) myself” (l. 9). Lines 12 and 13 are accomplished in silence. In a conventional transcript, they would appear as (2) to mark the two seconds that pass in silence. However, in this transcript they are filled with subtle movements. Jovin responds to the rising intonation of my “yeah?” in line 11 by looking away in thought. By dropping his hands to his side, he indicates that he is no longer “dancing”, and by turning towards me, he opens up a more reflective space. These gestures serve as markers to index a shift in the topic of conversation from the choreography to something else. I accommodate this non-verbal utterance by also dropping my arms and turning to face Jovin, ready to listen. In lines 14-15, Jovin contrasts the open pushing move in his present choreography with moves that he used to do that often involved covering his face: “That’s so funny because like the past, I always do moves that

cover my face" (l. 14). He illustrates this by covering his face with both arms (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: "In the past, I always do movements that cover my face" (l. 14)

I respond with a simple "yeah" and a nod, both verbally and physically returning the turn back to him in expectation of further elaboration. He responds physically by lowering his arms, but says nothing, passing the turn back to me. I try to physically confirm my comprehension of his statement by doing a move from his choreography six months prior that involves bending at the knees and waist and covering the face (l. 19). To this, Jovin laughs and says "and still now, which is funny," (fig. 3) indicating that I have accidentally challenged him on his statement that he used to cover his face "in the past". While it is not clear, my understanding at the time was that he was suggesting that he used to hide from people, but now he is stronger and stays open but actively pushes against situations that he experiences as negative. In order to explore this interpretation, I ask a direct, arguably unanswerable question: "what does that mean to you, covering your face?" (l. 22). Whereas the rest of the discussion has been physically and linguistically co-constructed between us as I mostly follow his movements and paraphrase his statements, at this point I physically face him square-on, adding to the formality and directness of the inquiry. Jovin responds with a full eight seconds of verbal silence in which his right hand moves to the back of his neck self-consciously and he alternatively looks at me and upwards to the right, as though seeking to understand both the question and his own thoughts. He then begins "well", but then trails off into an inaudible mumbled utterance (though I seemed to understand it in the moment, nodding encouragingly perhaps relieved that he is at least "speaking"). Finally, his voice is loud and clear when he says "I know, but I just can't explain it" (l. 26) (fig. 3), punctuated by open hand gestures. He smiles as he says this and draws out the last syllable, as though seeking confirmation that his response is acceptable. I respond by placing a hand on his shoulder (l. 33) and saying "I know you know, and I know you can't explain" (l. 32), hoping to express that his response is completely

acceptable and he need not stress about not being able to find the words (fig. 3). I then shift the communication back to the choreography in lines 35-37, back to paraphrasing his words and movements. Through his silence, his mumbled responses, his uncertain gestures and finally his words, Jovin explains that there are some things we “know” but “can’t explain.”



Fig. 3: “I know you know and I know you can’t explain” (l. 32)

Shortly thereafter, we come up against another wall at the limits of language as we negotiate the meaning of the movements corresponding to the lyrics “joking now”:

- 38 J: Yeah. Repeats circular pushing motion to face front again. Yeah. Pushing people away and-. Stands facing
39 front, hands in front ending pushing motion. Looks up to the L ((as though thinking)).
40 {“Everybody’s {joking - {-now
41 {Clenches fists. {Step back on R, swings L arm, looks R {Step back L, swings R arm, looks L.
42 K: {Kay. [I remember you playing with that. Yeah.
43 {steps back L, °swings L arm°; steps back R, °swings R arm.° [Steps forward again.
44 J: [Steps forward again
45 [Repeats movement
46 K: [Looks over shoulder and watches. Repeats movement ((still on wrong leg)).
47 J: {I guess it’s just like yeah. {Taking it back. (2.0) Like-
48 {Steps forward again. [{Repeats movement. [Turns to watch K. Scratches forehead.
49 K: [{Swings R arm. [Swings R arm. {Pauses in punching stance.
50 {So you’re not punching.
51 J: You’re not punching. {But just like- kind of like-
52 {Steps forward. Repeats movements without arms, emphasizing head and torso.
53 K: Repeats movement without arms or legs, < turns head & torso > L. So it’s a bit like- Turns torso and body R, L.
54 J: [Yeah. And you just-

55 K: [*Right hand pushes away toward camera as though PUSHING something away.*
 56 J: {-<TWISTS TORSO BACK AND FORTH>.
 57 {-aa-a-a-a-argh.
 58 K: [Ye:ah. *Twists torso back and forth.*
 59 J: [Yeah it's just like- yeah.
 60 K: Yeah.
 61 J: *Steps forward.*
 62 K: Okay. *Steps forward. Fixing hair looking up to the left.* {What is that?
 63 {Hands to side, palms open and up.
 64 J: *Smiles.*
 65 K: {<I can't think of the word either, but I know that feeling.>
 66 {Lunges and gestures L hand openly towards J.
 67 J: {Maybe- Yeah.
 68 {L hand to back of head again.
 69 K: Just {Ugh.
 70 {<Twists torso back and forth strongly, arms loose.>
 71 J: {Yeah. Heh heh. Like-
 72 {Raises L hand palm up
 73 K: UGH.
 74 J: Yeah, *Lowers hand.*
 75 K: {Ugh!
 76 {Turns torso L, pivoting body away from "audience". [*Pushes hand away, turns fully away, walking back.*
 77 J: [Like you don't want to do it. {Or like I'm just-
 78 {L hand open upwards.
 79 K: *Returns to neutral stance, body facing front, head turned to J listening.*
 80 J: Yeah- It looks like you're being {slapped.
 81 {°L hand towards face. Then lowers hand. R hand still behind head.°
 82 K: Oh, okay. {Yeah, it is.
 83 {Repeats torso toss to the L, emphasizing head.
 84 J: {"Joking now," yeah, "everybody's joking now"
 85 {L hand palm up. *Lowers hand.*
 86 K: O::h. So it's like being {slapped-
 87 {Slaps R cheek with R hand.
 88 J: Yeah.
 89 K: - in the face. *Slaps L cheek with L hand.*
 90 J. But {°they're joking. Which is not funny. (.) Jokes aren't funny. (.) They hurt.°
 91 {L arm wraps around stomach to scratch R side. °Arm stills and stays holding across front.°
 92 K: {I hear ya.
 93 {Opens both arms out to side.
 94 J: Yeah.

As we negotiate the meaning of the movement of stepping backwards and swinging our arms while turning our heads back and forth, we both use variations of the phrase "it's just like... yeah" (l. 59). Much of this conversation would be meaningless in a conventional transcription as it would lose its multimodal connection to the physical expression of our bodies. The repeats use of "yeah" indicates that we are both fully understanding each other's meaning-making in that moment, even though a conventional transcript would not show what there is to understand. We are physically and linguistically co-constructing the meaning of both the words "Everybody's joking now" and the movement of stepping backwards and swinging our arms, negotiating possible meanings across both modes (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: "Everybody's joking now"

The physicality is shown as we both twist our torsos back and forth in different ways, seeking a consensus on how to describe that feeling. I repeat his movements, but am often unsure and on the wrong foot. We are not only moving, but are also watching each other move. This watching leads to a shift in line 77, as Jovin changes the topic of the sentence from "I" to "you" in response to what he is seeing in my movements: "Like you don't want to do it." Still watching me repeat the movement, he adds "Or like I'm just" (l. 77). At this point, I stop moving and give him my full attention with stillness and silence. It is at this point that he finishes his thought: "Yeah- It looks like you're being slapped" (l. 80). He accompanies this statement with a subtle gesture towards his cheek, which I then take up and paraphrase as "so it's like being slapped... in the face" (ll. 86-89), reiterating his subtle gesture as a clear slapping motion across my face to either side.



Fig. 4: "It looks like you're being slapped" (l. 80)

Where he cannot find the words to express what he is feeling kinesthetically as he swings his body and arms back and forth, seeing me mimic the same movement triggers in the visual mode an image that helps him construct a plausible meaning in the linguistic mode. When he finally finds these words, they come as a simile, working around the limitations of the literal. In his next turn, he connects this newly constructed meaning to the linguistic utterance in the song: "Joking now," yeah, "everybody's joking now" (l. 33). Here, as in many points in the process, it is important to acknowledge that meaning is being constructed- rather than searching for the original intent of the choreography, Jovin is using the process of the "interview" to re- and co-construct using all of the meaning making resources at hand, including the lyrics, my words, his words, my movements, and his movements. Finally, the meaning that he layers on top of the unspeakability of the moment becomes an expression of unspoken past hurts in the paradoxical "But °they're joking. Which is not funny. (.) Jokes aren't funny. (.) They hurt." (l. 90). He speaks this softly and wraps one arm around himself as he says it, as though protecting himself (fig. 5).



Fig. 5 "Jokes aren't funny. They hurt". (l. 90)

I respond with an open gesture of support, opening my arms out to the side and simply saying "I hear ya." He accepts this with "yeah" and then moves on to the next step in the choreography. It is as though moving meaning across modalities opens up a space in which pain, loss, and violation lie.

In addition to providing a model of a gesture-based analysis, Stein's (2008) research highlights the reasons why it is imperative that researchers continue to seek ways to examine multiple modes. She looks at both affordances and limitations of each modality and shows how designers have different relationships to each mode and how drawing on different resources creates and represents different identities for the designer. The gestural mode opens up identities such as "dancer" and "choreographer" in productive ways for Jovin. In contrast, his relationship to the printed word (as noted in other interviews and observations beyond the scope of this paper) seems to be one of frustration. While some may label Jovin a "struggling reader", by taking Stein's multimodal view of meaning making and of pedagogy, this learner is instead positioned as an agentive, resourceful, and creative meaning-maker who communicates using the full communicative potential of his body and his environment. Stein argues that such a perspective respects and enhances students' multiple identities and makes diversity of expression a resource for the practice of freedom in a democratic classroom. Finally, she calls on educators to reshape assessment criteria and practices in the context of what she calls the "multimodal turn" (2008: 148) in order to avoid the tendency to assess only the written work of our students.

Although there are many challenges to the study of multimodal texts, there are also many strategies that make such work possible. The use of video, getting active during "active" interviews, and innovations in transcription all contribute to validating gesture as a significant modality in the overall meaning making process. This is especially important when seeking the

draw upon the diverse signifying practices of our youth who identify as “dancers.” Gesture offers designers identities and affordances that can push beyond the limitations of language and can create openings in discourse to speak the unspeakable. By following the talk of multimodality to push the methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical bounds of literacy, we can find innovative ways to truly walk the walk of multiliteracies.

Appendix A

Transcription Conventions

K:	Kim (adult researcher)
J:	Jovin (youth dancer)
<i>steps right</i>	gesture
(threaten)	unclear words spoken or unclear movements, best guess or description
(inaudible)	unclear words spoken, inaudible; unclear movements unseen (e.g. too dark to distinguish)
((O))	transcriber's description
[two speakers' talk or gestures overlaps at this point
[
=	no interval between turns ('latching')
?	interrogative intonation
(2.0)	pause (silence and/or stillness) timed in seconds
(.)	small untimed pause
awa::y	prolonged syllable, sound, or movement
<u>why</u>	emphasis or stressed word or syllable or gesture
REALLY	word/gesture noticeably stronger than surrounding talk/gestures
°yes°	word/gesture noticeably softer than surrounding talk/gestures
<I have to>	words/gestures noticeably faster than surrounding talk/gestures
heh heh	laughter syllables
fun(h)ny	words spoken laughingly
.hhh	in-breath
hhh.	out-breath
↑	upward rise in intonation
↓	downward fall in intonation
R	right
L	left

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