Contrasting Systemic Functional Linguistic and Situated Literacies Approaches to Multimodality in Literacy and Writing Studies

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Abstract
Against the backdrop of proliferating research on multimodality in the fields of literacy and writing studies, this article considers the contributions of two prominent theoretical perspectives—Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Situated Literacies—and the methodological tensions they raise for the study of multimodality. To delineate these two perspectives’ methodological tensions, I present an analysis of selected recent literature from both approaches and then analyze these tensions further as they emerge in two empirical studies published in this journal illustrating each approach. Despite the fact that SFL and Situated Literacies share some underlying theoretical assumptions and are sometimes drawn upon in concert by scholars, I illustrate how they differ in their treatment of multimodal texts and practices—as well as their methodologies—research design, data collected, analytic methods, and possible implications. This article thus seeks to outline the respective contributions of SFL and Situated Literacies.

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to ongoing research on multimodality in literacy and writing studies and to encourage a conversation across theoretical and methodological borders.

**Keywords**
methodology, multimodal analysis, opportunity to learn, research design, social context

Multimodality has become a prevalent topic in research on literacy and writing studies (e.g., Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Gilje, 2010; Nelson, Hull, & Roche-Smith, 2008; Ranker, 2008; Vasudevan, Schultz, & Bateman, 2010). In its simplest sense, multimodality entails making meaning through more than one mode (e.g., printed word, speech, image, music) and acknowledging that language is just one of many possible modes that serve as resources for meaning making. An increased interest in multimodality has paralleled movements over the past few decades that focus on “new” forms of communication practice (e.g., New Literacy Studies, Multiliteracies). In part, these movements have pointed to changes in the communication landscape due to the increased availability of technological tools and more globalized contexts (e.g., New London Group, 1996), greater interest in embodied and spatial literacy practices (e.g., Leander & Sheehy, 2004), and mediated, situated practices of learning and knowing (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Although learners have authored multimodally (i.e., written essays, book reports, science fair posters) for decades, the degree and kind of meaning making at learners’ disposal have arguably expanded, especially with regard to the potential audience and interactivity surrounding the texts they author (for discussions of these changes and their effects, see Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Rowsell & Walsh, 2011). Multimodality has gained prevalence not simply because of these changes in the communication landscape, however, but also because of the social turn of the past 30 years and ensuing theoretical and methodological perspectives on literacy, discourse, and social semiotics.

**Framing the Two Approaches to Multimodality in Literacy and Writing Studies**

Much of the research in literacy and writing studies that deals with multimodality draws from two dominant theoretical perspectives—Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Situated Literacies. These two approaches
are informed, respectively, by the work of M. A. K. Halliday (SFL) and by the work of Brian Street, David Barton, and others in literacy studies (Situated Literacies). As Kress (2011) points out, multimodality is not a theory; it is a domain or topic. Therefore, studies examining multimodality in literacy and writing studies must populate their accounts with theoretical and methodological perspectives that are not predetermined simply by their common interest in multimodality.

A defining methodological tension between SFL and Situated Literacies lies in the aspects of multimodality on which they focus and the claims and implications drawn from their analyses. As such, they are useful for complementary purposes. This methodological tension has not been discussed in any detail as it pertains to literacy and writing studies. By systematically examining the different methodological choices that characterize these two perspectives, a better understanding of the aspects of multimodality they reveal, and those that they obscure, can inform future research from either perspective.

Despite the methodological distinctions between the two approaches, their theoretical influences draw from similar discussions, particularly the work of the New London Group (1996) (e.g., that all meaning making is social, semiotic, and textual). The distinctions I draw throughout the remainder of this article, however, lie not in the theoretical underpinnings but in the methodological instantiations. With the goal of framing these methodological tensions, I closely examine methodological choices and research design in recent studies from each approach within literacy and writing studies. After a brief description of the origins of SFL and Situated Literacies, I then present a methodological analysis of recent literature followed by a focused analysis of two articles published in Written Communication, each illustrating one approach.

**Background of Each Approach**

Discipline, theoretical framework and audience influence how we refer to the different types of research on multimodality. Further complicating this rhetorical issue of naming is the fact that there is overlap among some of the core underpinnings to multimodal research in literacy and writing studies. For example, SFL and Situated Literacies examine meaning making across multiple modes in light of social context (although context is defined and bounded differently in each, which I discuss later). I have chosen the names “SFL” and “Situated Literacies” here because they are the most useful and least problematic for the purpose of unearthing methodological tensions between what in fact are empirically different projects associated with the study of multimodality in literacy and writing studies.
Situated Literacies falls under the umbrellas of New Literacy Studies, the latter of which is overbroad for the present discussion because its take-up has been so wide and cross-pollinating that many scholars using SFL draw explicitly on the social semiotic aspects of New Literacy Studies and vice versa. In short, I use SFL to refer to studies that draw primarily on Halliday’s (1973, 1994) Systemic Functional approach and are primarily concerned with available resources and opportunities to mean (e.g., metafunctions, representations, modal affordances). In turn, I use Situated Literacies to demarcate a substrand of New Literacy Studies that draws heavily on Brian Street’s (1984) ideological literacies model and examines opportunities to learn understood via literacy practices. I now discuss the theoretical underpinnings to each of these approaches in more detail.

**SFL**

SFL, as the name implies, is an approach to meaning making coming from the field of linguistics that is primarily concerned with the functional aspect of language use—that is, what language accomplishes and how. SFL began with the work of M. A. K. Halliday (1973) whose systemic functional approach (referred to over the years as functional grammar, systemic grammar, systemic functional grammar, and systemic functional linguistics) grew out of dissatisfaction with structural approaches in theoretical linguistics that did not consider meaning or social context as central to the study of language. Principally, SFL examines how language is used, the purposes it serves, how we achieve those purposes, and how form has evolved to serve function (Halliday, 1973). Language is seen as a resource for meaning making comprising a set of potentials to mean; these sets of potentials, or options, make up systems—SFL’s organizing concept (Halliday, 1994).

The centrality of system to SFL stems from the “paradigmatic” approach whereby any feature of language is always related back to the “system of the language as a whole” (Halliday, 1994, p. 29). System in SFL is thus is a way to describe potential and relate the actual to it. SFL includes three overarching functional components, or metafunctions, that explain the main purposes underlying all language use. These are (a) ideational (understand the environment), (b) interpersonal (act on others in that environment), and (c) textual (“breathes life into the other two”; Halliday, 1994, p. xiii). These generalized functions correspond to the sets of options empirically realized in the grammar and are essential to social functioning of language and thus SFL’s understanding of language as a system. Halliday (1973) states clearly that the usefulness in studying the functions of language is primarily to establish “general principles relating to the use of language” (p. 22).
Situated Literacies

Situated Literacies is a strand of literacy studies that takes a broad dissatisfaction with traditional views of literacy in which learning to read and write are seen as essentialized skills or types of knowledge apart from the culturally varied practices of which they are a part (e.g., Barton, 2004; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). In using the term Situated Literacies to describe a major segment of research on multimodality, I draw together studies informed by sociocultural and situative theories of learning (e.g., Gee, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991) with a focus on culturally embedded practices and the interactions, texts, and artifacts that mediate these practices.

Street’s (1984) ideological model is the underlying theoretical basis for what I refer to here as Situated Literacies. Put simply, the ideological model stipulates that literacies are multiple, shaped by cultural institutions and their values (especially educational ones), cannot be separated from political and ideological definitions in a given context, and are shaped by the specific uses to which they are put (Street, 1984). Methodologically, the ideological model calls for examining a particular form of literacy “in its own right” and the ideology and culture in which it’s embedded in order to make sense of the complex overlapping of literacies and what literacy means for those learning and using it (Street, 1984, p. 130).

A major defining methodological feature of Situated Literacies is detailed case study of everyday activities that show the “range and social patterning of practices” (Barton, 2004, p. 94). As mentioned above, I use the label Situated Literacies here to distinguish a theoretical framework that examines literacies as practices used by real people in specific situations where interactions, texts, ideologies, and contexts are methodologically primary.

Now that I have defined the two main approaches to studying multimodality in literacy and writing studies and framed the need to explore the methodological tension between them, I now examine research design and methodology across recent studies from both approaches. I first present an analysis of selected recent literature to help ground some of the methodological tensions inherent to the respective contributions to research SFL and Situated Literacies are poised to make. Following that I detail a focused analysis of two exemplar studies published in this journal, one from each approach.

Analysis of Selected Recent Literature

This section draws on recently published empirical studies of multimodality in literacy and writing studies in order to explicate some of the methodological tensions between SFL and Situated Literacies. Specifically, the sections
that follow outline the research design, objects of analysis, data sources, and analytic methods of recently published studies so as to give a representative snapshot of both approaches’ methodologies. This focused methodological reading complements the in-depth analysis of the two exemplar studies that follow in the second half of the article. Table 1 details the articles included in this analysis.

I focused the literature search in this analysis on peer-reviewed articles published between 2009 and 2012, so as to strike a balance among breadth, depth, and timeliness to the field. I included empirical articles that focused centrally on multimodality as it pertains to literacy/ies and written communication in their broadest sense. This search initially yielded 26 articles. Upon closer examination, I narrowed the list of articles by excluding those focusing on teacher training, learning technologies, or foreign language/science/math/social studies and articles only tangentially concerned with studies of literacy or writing. I also excluded articles that were not empirical and hence had no methodological elements to speak of.

To be considered an SFL study, an article had to align explicitly with SFL (in the title, abstract, keywords) or centrally incorporate SFL theory in its analyses (e.g., discussion of metafunctions, potentials to mean, relating features of texts to social semiotic language systems as a whole). Articles included as Situated Literacies studies either overtly aligned with Literacy Studies/Situated Literacies and/or claimed a central focus on practices (i.e., literacy practices or the like) and learners’ opportunities to author, engage with, or make meaning through multimodal texts. The parameters of this final, focused review yielded 14 articles—7 representing each approach. This search also yielded 1 article (Gilje, 2010) that draws on both SFL and Situated Literacies, which I discuss in the conclusions. In analyzing these articles, I organized my notes according to categories I saw as central to their methodology—research design (e.g., overall study infrastructure, goals, claims), object of analysis (e.g., epistemological unit), data sources, and analytic methods. From these notes I compiled a table, distilling narratively inscribed notes into more discrete descriptions. Throughout this reductive process, I kept intact key quotes from each study to retain some of the authors’ ways of talking about their methods and framing.

**Research Design**

Unifying the designs of the seven SFL studies is their close analysis of a few texts (ranging from 1 to 17) in order to draw generalizable principles for: assessment (Archer, 2010; Bearne, 2009; Walker, 2010), genre modeling (Chen, 2010; Martin, 2009), or developing pedagogies (Archer, 2010; El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010; Walker, 2010) to increase access to or better
### Table 1. Articles Included in the Analysis of Recent Literature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archer, A.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Multimodal texts in higher education and the implications for writing pedagogy</td>
<td><em>English in Education</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bearne, E.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Multimodality, literacy, and texts: Developing a discourse</td>
<td><em>Journal of Early Childhood Literacy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chen, Y.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Exploring dialogic engagement with readers in multimodal EFL textbooks in China</td>
<td><em>Visual Communication</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Granly, A., &amp; Maagerø, E.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Multimodal texts in kindergarten rooms</td>
<td><em>Education Inquiry</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Refaie, E., &amp; Hörschelmann, K.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Young people’s readings of a political cartoon and the concept of multimodal literacy</td>
<td><em>Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin, J. R.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Genre and language learning: A social semiotic perspective</td>
<td><em>Linguistics and Education</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker, E.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>A systemic functional contribution to planning academic genre teaching in a bilingual education context</td>
<td><em>Language Awareness</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flewitt, R., Nind, M., &amp; Payler, J.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>“If she’s left with books she’ll just eat them”: Considering inclusive multimodal literacy practices</td>
<td><em>Journal of Early Childhood Literacy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pahl, K.</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Interactions, intersections, and improvisations: Studying the multimodal texts and classroom talk of six- to seven-year olds</td>
<td><em>Journal of Early Childhood Literacy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghiso, M. P., &amp; Low, D.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Students using multimodal literacies to surface micronarratives of United States immigration</td>
<td><em>Literacy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mills, K.</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>“Filming in progress”: New spaces for multimodal designing</td>
<td><em>Linguistics and Education</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turner, K. C. N.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Multimodal hip hop productions as media literacies</td>
<td><em>Educational Forum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winters, K.-L., &amp; Vratulis, V.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Authored assemblages in a digital world: Illustrations of a child’s online social, critical, and semiotic meaning-making</td>
<td><em>Journal of Early Childhood Literacy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wissman, K., Costello, S., &amp; Hamilton, D.</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>“You’re like yourself”: Multimodal literacies in a reading support class</td>
<td><em>Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
understand multimodal literacies. These studies’ designs aim to extrapolate principles for improving teaching and learning from analyses of texts’ features, functions, and affordances.

The Situated Literacies studies’ designs center on a joint consideration of texts and interactions surrounding their use or production, with different degrees of methodological emphasis placed on (a) the text(s) being authored (Ghiso & Low, 2012; Winters & Vratulis, 2012), (b) the interactions (Flewitt, Nind, & Payler, 2009; Pahl, 2009), or (c) equal attention to both texts and interactions (Mills, 2010; Turner, 2012; Wissman, Costello, & Hamilton, 2012). Unifying these studies’ designs is their close analysis of a few, in-depth, ethnographic cases (ranging from one learner to two classes) studied over time in order to characterize the localized influence of sociocultural context, the affordances and functions of multimodal texts, and opportunities afforded to develop literacies, identities, and new ways of being through the confluence of local space, modes, and texts.

**Objects of Analysis**

In the SFL studies, the objects of analysis include features of multimodal artifacts or learning outcomes associated with the use or creation of multimodal texts considered in micro-detail—i.e. the resulting meaning functions from children’s choices of multimodal resources (Bearne, 2009), multimodal features of textbooks or student-produced texts (Chen, 2010; Walker, 2010), genre and the multimodal literacies needed to understand it (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010; Martin, 2009), and rooms as multimodal texts (Granly & Maagerø, 2012).

In the Situated Literacies studies, the objects of analysis include actions, events, or practices considered alongside texts and their authoring. These comprised the literacy events and practices across three settings (Flewitt et al., 2009), autobiographical comics and attendant opportunities for authorship (Ghiso & Low, 2012), the relationship between multimodal designing and social production of classroom spaces (Mills, 2010), classroom talk surrounding multimodal composition (Pahl, 2009), the meaning making and literacy development surrounding multimodal productions (Turner, 2012), the assembling of a story in an online digital world (Winters & Vratulis, 2012), and experiences with literacy instruction and practices of authoring of a conventional script and multimodal composition (Wissman et al., 2012).

**Data Sources**

The data sources for the SFL studies are all multimodal texts, which I break down into three subgroups: (a) student-generated texts (Archer, 2010; Bearne,
2009), (b) adult-generated texts (Chen 2010; Martin, 2009), and (c) a combination of student- and adult-generated texts (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010; Granly & Maagerø, 2012; Walker, 2010). The students’ texts were all produced for class assignments (primary and university), while the adult-generated texts included textbooks (Chen, 2010) and an excerpt from Nelson Mandela’s autobiography (Martin, 2009) illustratively deconstructed to show genre’s usefulness as a pedagogical tool. The last group of texts includes teenagers’ discourse around a political cartoon (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010), texts comprising the walls, floors, and décor of kindergarten classrooms (Granly & Maagerø, 2012), and an expert and a student response to an English language proficiency test item (Walker, 2010), all of which combine student- and adult-generated multimodal texts as the sources of data.

In keeping with the Situated Literacies focus on processes, data sources for these studies include ethnographic data considered alongside learners’ multimodal authoring and texts. The ethnographic data generated across these studies involve some combination of observations, field notes, video recordings, interviews, and artifacts (e.g., student work, curricular and policy documents, meeting notes, video stills). Alongside ethnographic data, these Situated Literacies studies also considered the multimodal texts that students authored—i.e. autobiographical comics (Ghiso & Low, 2012), digital hip-hop productions (Turner, 2012), digitally produced claymation movies, (Mills, 2010), panorama boxes (Pahl, 2009), a story authored in an online world (Winters & Vratulis, 2012), and a digital comic and conventionally written script (Wissman et al., 2012). The one exception to this focus on student-produced texts is Flewitt et al. (2009), who narratively analyze three different early-years educational settings and one child’s literacy events that took place there.

Analytic Method

The analytic methods used in the SFL studies examine completed texts for how multimodal resources had been used according to a central SFL concept of meta-function (ideational, interpersonal, and textual). These analyses consider how semiotic resources inherent to the texts could be used by learners to achieve different meta-functions through semiotic weighting of modes (Archer, 2010), build textual coherence (Bearne, 2009), open up or shut down potential textbook readers’ negotiation of meaning (Chen, 2010), make sense of a political cartoon (El Refaie & Hörschelmann, 2010), create a welcoming environment for kindergarten students (Granly & Maagerø, 2012), build genre (Martin, 2009), and author a more or less expert response to a test item (Walker, 2010). In five of these studies, the texts were considered at a
remove from the contexts of their authoring. The two exceptions were El Refaie and Hörschelmann’s (2010) study, which drew on interview discourse with teenagers while they made sense of political cartoons, and Granly and Maagerø’s (2012) considerations of kindergarten classrooms as multimodal texts in which they drew on interview and observational data. However, in these two studies drawing on interactional data, findings centered on already-produced texts with implications for defining future analyses of texts, assessments of texts, or pedagogical principles.

The Situated Literacies studies, on the other hand, considered interactional data alongside representational data to form multiscalar analyses that integrated ethnographic with textual analyses. They used various forms of narrative, discursive, and semiotic analysis (and were less uniform than their SFL counterparts in this regard). Flewitt and colleagues (2009) analyzed how the multimodal embodiment and organization of space, body, and gaze shaped meaning across one special-needs learner’s multisite literacy events, contributing to the construction of inclusive spaces and her status as a competent participant. Their analysis drew on a key episode of a whole-group book reading (using verbal and multimodal transcripts) as well as researcher-generated portraits of each learning space. Ghiso and Low (2012) analyzed their data thematically for topics of students’ autobiographical comics, multimodal features, and design elements and how texts functioned ideologically in the classroom and amidst national discourses about immigration. Mills (2010) drew on transcripts of groups’ collaborative authoring activities and one vignette to analyze five aspects of how multimodal design with new technologies transformed a classroom space: (a) dialogically—multivoiced student interactions around collaborative authoring, (b) bodily—displays of orientation to artifacts and others during authoring, (c) embodied—in the identities and experiences in the design of claymation characters, (d) architectonically—transformation of the classroom space’s reshaping of students’ roles and relationships, and (e) via screen spaces—as a site of meaning making and working through power relations.

Pahl (2009) traced links across ethnographic data sources according to three analytic forms—description, interpretation, and analysis—in order to situate multimodal texts in light of talk surrounding them to highlight children’s ways of being and doing. Turner (2012) analyzed interactional data and two multimodal hip-hop productions by first coding for development of critical literacies related to social justice, Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) literacies, and math literacies, considered alongside an intertextual transcription interpreting modal effects, choices to combine modes, and student positioning in the local and broader sociocultural context. Winters and Vratulis (2012) composed a narrated case illustration of a 6-year-old’s authoring in an online virtual world, which they further broke down into
meaning making, orchestration of semiotic resources, social interaction, and positioning of the author. By focusing their analysis on discourse events, they made sense of the sociocultural world and positions within it the author constructed. Finally Wissman et al.’s (2012) narrative analysis included vignettes of multiple ethnographic data sources illustrating one boy’s different literacy practices—script writing and multimodal comic production—to highlight his vastly different participation in these two practices due to the opportunities and authorial affiliations they afforded.

Table 2 outlines the main methodological tensions between SFL and Situated Literacies that this analysis of recent literature yielded, laid out according to the organizational categories used above: research design, object of analysis, data sources, and analytic methods.

Delving Deeper: Focused Analysis of Two Illustrative Studies

To further unpack the methodological tensions between SFL and Situated Literacies, I now draw on two articles published in this journal as recent examples—Jeff Bezemer and Gunther Kress’s (2008) study of multimodal writing in learning materials (SFL perspective)2 and Lalitha Vasudevan, Kathy Schultz, and Jennifer Bateman’s (2010) study of multimodal composing processes in a yearlong multimedia storytelling project (Situated Literacies perspective). These two articles represent recent empirical studies in this journal that contribute to the ongoing dialogue (here and elsewhere) from the two perspectives on multimodality as a topic and way of seeing literacies and writing. A third recent and relevant article mentioned briefly above—Gilje (2010)—draws on both SFL and Situated Literacies, which I discuss in the conclusions. I organize the present discussion around the categories of goals, claims, implications, and treatment of multimodality in order to highlight the basis for methodological tensions and to examine their influences on research in more depth than the analysis of selected recent literature allowed.

SFL (Bezemer & Kress, 2008)

Goals. The goals that Bezemer and Kress (2008; hereafter B&K) articulate early in their article are to elucidate social semiotic principles underlying the design of multimodal ensembles in light of their potential epistemological and pedagogical effects (p. 166). In order to generate these principles, they draw on learning resources published between 1930 and 2005 (print textbooks, online materials, and CD-ROM) for math and science on the topics of angles and digestion. The examples they used in this study include two
different representations of protractor use, two different representations of compass use, and three different representations of the digestive system.

B&K analyze how the different affordances of modes and media manifested in these representational resources changed across the decades. Their overarching research question is, “What exactly is the relation between the semiotic designs of multimodal learning resources and their potentials for learning?” (p. 168). In short, B&K’s study aims to show how semiotic resources used in the design of learning materials has changed over more than 70 years, thus shaping learning practices. They are very clear that their goals are” “to provid[e] means for describing and understanding ‘what is being used,’” and “to draw attention to the potentials and constraints of the ‘stuff’ that is being used, to the agency of sign makers and to the significance of all actions in the process of sign making” (p. 171).

**Claims.** In order to systematically examine the changes in learning resources’ designs over many decades, B&K analyze shifting affordances when *transducing* (moving meaning, from one mode/group of modes to another) and *recontextualizing* (how meaning material crosses social and semiotic contexts).
B&K claim that modes (singly or in ensembles) offer distinct epistemological and pedagogical affordances (p. 187). For example, writing arranges a linear, designer-determined reading path and foregrounds primarily through syntactic order. Image, on the other hand, has a more open, reader-determined, reading path and foregrounds through layout.

To arrive at these claims, B&K examine three transductions—(a) artifact to image (protractor example), (b) action to image/writing (compass example), and (c) action to moving image/speech (compass example). They claim that these transductions from artifact (compass, protractor) to multimodal representations afford different available resources for meaning making (p. 182). These affordances include relative generality versus specificity, arrangement of meaning constituents, and social relations between designer and learner (e.g., the image of a protractor alongside text depicts an idealized sort of protractor well suited for didactic, curricular use). They also present four principles for understanding recontextualization across pedagogic contexts—(a) selection (of materials and modes), (b) arrangement (ordering of materials such as reading path or layout), (c) foregrounding (relative salience of different elements), and (d) social relations (such as interactivity and social repositioning among teacher, learner, designer, or who is represented).

Implications. B&K suggest that their analysis of the use of semiotic resources in learning materials can shape the future design of learning resources. For instance, decisions about use of modes (and their aptness) can now be better understood in terms of their affordances for engagement and learning—for example, generality versus specificity, commands, position of actors, reading paths. They also comment that the general framework they put forward here has the potential to lead to an inclusive semiotic framework—“a set of principles of rhetoric of multimodal communication, in all settings, with any technology and all forms of mediation, in any social environment” (p. 190). This more inclusive framework, they stipulate, has implications for multimodal writing and technologies of communication.

B&K also state that their framework can sensitize designers, educators, and learners to conditions of learning environments and their features and effects on potentials for learning. Some examples they provide for these forms of sensitization include practical implications such as developing assessments for multimodal representations that are considered signs of learning and articulating principles for developing learning environments/materials. They also cite more abstract semiotic/theoretical implications. These include a means for better understanding functional issues in text production and analysis (e.g., functional load, specialization, differentiation), explaining links between social conditions and take-up (or lack thereof) of
modal/medial affordances, and grounding for debates on the impact of modal choices in designs for learning that are better founded on theory.

Treatment of Multimodality. The key concepts from multimodality that B&K leverage include sign, mode, medium, frame, and site of display (p. 169). Design and interest also feature prominently in their analysis. They define mode as “a socially and culturally shaped resource for making meaning” (p. 171), and the particular modes included in their examples include image, writing, layout, speech, moving image, and artifact. Drawing on Halliday (1994) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), their theoretical approach to multimodality is soundly within the social semiotic approach associated with Kress’s earlier work, which draws explicitly on SFL.

In their analysis, B&K focus on modal resources (e.g., image can convey position, size, color, shape, spatial relations) and modal affordances (e.g., potentials and constraints) to get at social and epistemological changes accompanying composition changes when moving meaning material from one mode or context to another. B&K acknowledge the importance of considering texts’ semiotic potentials and effects as well as their social origins. In addition, they “acknowledge the significance of studies of the situated use of texts and the production of users’ accounts of their usages of texts” (p. 171). However, as illustrated above, their goals and claims in this study center on texts, not practices. Forecasting potential interactions—that led to both texts’ production and how they will be taken up, or consumed—sits well within their theoretical perspective; but methodologically, their analysis concerns texts as a beginning and end point in order to “formulate hypotheses, more or less securely founded” (p. 171). I now turn to Vasudevan et al.’s (2010) Situated Literacies study before returning to discuss both studies in concert below.

Situated Literacies (Vasudevan et al., 2010)

Goals. Vasudevan et al.’s (2010; hereafter VSB) stated goals are to understand how multimodal composing practices shaped two fifth-graders’ development of literate identities in their language arts classroom over the course of a school year. Specifically, they examine how the inclusion of “digital modalities” and opportunities to “bridge home and classroom worlds” might lead to increases in student engagement (p. 448). Their research questions further elaborate this overarching goal: “What is the range and variation of literacy practices in this classroom?”; “What literate identities do students develop and perform within the context of a yearlong multimodal storytelling project?”; and “How does multimodality help us rethink and reimagine composing processes?” (p. 443).
Against the backdrop of a 1-year ethnographic case study VSB examine students’ multimodal composing processes and the stories they authored while crossing home and school contexts. Toward these ends, they examine interactional processes leading up to the final stories (e.g., walks, retellings, recordings, artifacts, bridging contexts) with as much weight as the stories themselves. By examining where and how students produced artifacts as well as how those led to completed stories, they position their analysis as an examination of students’ opportunities for developing new types of literate identities, or authorial stances, throughout the composition process.

Claims. By considering students’ compositions in light of the varied social processes that led to their creation, VSB claim that these processes and practices shaped the development of new literate identities and that multimodality allowed these two students to draw on different funds of knowledge, leading to new ways to construct identities (p. 452). Central to the emergence of students’ new, literate identities were the circulation of literacy practices and increased and new ways to participate in the classroom. In short, VSB claim that these youth developed a stronger sense of engagement in their classroom community by shifting their types and patterns of participation and sense of themselves as students. To these ends, multimodal tools were resources that enabled students to draw on knowledge and experience from outside school, with multimodal storytelling ultimately serving as a link between school and home. Methodologically central to their claims are aspects of out-of-school life that enable them to situate their ethnographic data and the artifacts that came out of it across boundaries of school and home.

Implications. VSB’s chief implication is that multimodality illuminates some of the ways that composing needs to be redefined in classrooms. They argue that opportunities for multimodal composition, especially in ways that link school practices to those that students engage in outside of school, can lead to increased participation, engagement, and more accessible curricula. In part, these shifts can occur because multimodal composing practices make it easier to reshape how students might identify with school (e.g., assignments can become more personally meaningful, students can see increased possibilities for how to identify with school practices). VSB conclude by restating the need to “rethink authorship and textual authority,” such as what it means to compose and what counts as a worthy text (p. 464), which they suggest can also add a critical dimension to composition theory.

Treatment of Multimodality. VSB orient to multimodality as a “theoretical lens” that affords the rethinking of composing process and practices (p. 444).
They use multimodality throughout the article as an adjective describing composing practices, tools, artifacts, texts, stories, projects, and even walks. In this way, they position multimodality as a feature of the practices that they are studying, not the object of study itself. Multimodal affordances are of interest to VSB in that they “open up new ways to think about and engage in teaching and learning relationships” (p. 448). Aligned with a Situated Literacies approach, they define the multimodal storytelling that is the focus of their analysis as “a discrete literacy event and a composing practice that occurs across space, time, and modes” (p. 448). “Multimodal engagement” is therefore the methodological lever by which they make claims about how students’ composing practices and the stories that grew out of them were changed, thus leading to new ways of being and doing in the classroom.

Multimodality for VSB is both the storytelling landscape and a platform for new kinds of engagement in school literacy practices. They analyze how the two students used a range of digital modes (e.g., photos, video, audio, video editing) to compose stories in order to understand new ways to compose and participate and identify (p. 445). VSB thus build on a trajectory of scholarship that expands text analysis of written products to ethnographic analyses that examine individual and collaborative writing processes.

To consolidate the findings of the analysis above, Table 3 outlines the methodological tensions that demarcate SFL and Situated Literacies studies of multimodality as illuminated in the focused analysis of two illustrative examples.

**Discussion of Focused Analysis**

To summarize the analysis of these two articles’ methodological tensions, B&K aim to arrive at a set of principles from a careful analysis of three sets of completed texts’ documented potentials to shape learning. They ground their claims about the texts themselves in a relationship that they construct between designer and user—understood as idealized animators of the texts. The principles they present are meant to apply in all settings, forms, and environments—in other words, to generalize widely from the study of this set of texts.

VSB’s goals are to understand the ways that including digital multimodal storytelling changed ways to participate and compose in one fifth grade classroom. They make claims about what is possible, and indeed actualized for two students in that classroom, but they do not seek to extract generalizable principles. Instead, VSB consider students’ stories as part of trajectories that were shaped by “the movement of stories across contexts and modes” (p. 453). Their implications highlight processes and capacities for change in
participation and definitions of learning based on the documentation of realized potentials in these two cases.

Two important parallels emerge from the exposition of methodological tensions between SFL and Situated Literacies, as illustrated in the two illustrative studies: (a) the analysis of crossing modes and contexts and (b) framing opportunities to learn.

**Table 3. Methodological Tensions Manifest in illustrative Studies’ Goals, Claims, Implications, and Treatment of Multimodality.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bezemer and Kress (2008)/Systemic Functional Linguistics</th>
<th>Vasudevan et al. (2010)/Situated Literacies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals</strong></td>
<td>Frame relationship between semiotic resources in design and potentials for learning</td>
<td>Understand authorial stances in bouts of multimodal composing practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Claims</strong></td>
<td>“Securely founded” (p. 171) hypotheses (not use or effects)</td>
<td>Cases of how multimodal affordances opportunities to participate and develop literate identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications</strong></td>
<td>Generalizable principles for developing and understanding opportunities of learning materials</td>
<td>Rethink authorship, authority, what happens in classrooms, and what it means to compose texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of multimodality</strong></td>
<td>Understand how social conditions and uptake of modal affordances mutually inform each other</td>
<td>Highlight areas for expanding the focus in composing classrooms on texts and authoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Crossing Modes and Contexts**

B&K’s analysis of recontextualization, or different realizations of the same “content” on the digestive system across various learning materials, highlights how semiotic change across different modes and media entails a change in “social context” (of a text’s potential engagement). Their analysis of context entails the selection, arrangement, foregrounding, and social relations made available through the different instantiations of learning materials, which afford different social positions for learners/users and different levels of engagement. This notion of a changing social context accompanying change in semiotic representation is an abstract one in which types of or idealized learners are likely to respond to the texts in certain ways. Their claims
are based on what they extrapolate from the texts—their layout and implied social relations between designer and user.

In SFL, social context is seen to shape the available options for representing in light of the system—what is expressed in light of what might have been said but was not (Halliday, 1973, p. 64). Social context is therefore seen as a “generalized type of situation” where the options to mean are a realized in terms of relevant theoretical categories (e.g., socialization, roles, power structures, symbolic systems of values, social control; Halliday, 1973, p. 63). This notion of abstractable context and generalizability is central to the distinction between how SFL and Situated Literacies deal with context in their research design.

In Situated Literacies, context embeds the specific negotiations of authoring and the values that circulate and are attributed to such processes. In fact, one of the defining features of the ideological model of literacy that underpins Situated Literacies is the assertion that literacy is always in a context, that there is no meaning without a context to frame its practices’ use (Street, 1984). In other words, texts, their meaning, and the practices that make them possible cannot be understood with complexity when extracted from context.

Accordingly, in VSB, context is the point of departure through which youths’ authoring is understood. Their analysis considers the social and multimodal components of texts’ development in order to understand different available ways to be authors of those texts and how they were taken up by the youth across school and home/community spaces. In other words, they examine students’ authored texts and their surrounding processes in order to understand the available opportunities to learn.

**Opportunity to Learn**

The second parallel between SFL and Situated Literacies lies in the analysis of what is or becomes available to learners in a given environment. In SFL, opportunities are seen primarily to be afforded by texts, and only indirectly through the social contexts that constrain those texts’ production and take-up with idealized others. In Situated Literacies, opportunities are primarily understood as ways to be with texts and actualized others. Unpacking this further, in SFL language is seen in terms of potentials. Cultural context is where the total set of potential options resides, and a particular selection from these options is shaped by the environment or situation of use (Halliday, 1973, p. 49). Thus, for SFL the environment is located mainly in the text, and opportunities entail possible ways to make sense or meaning in accordance
with a given text’s modal affordances and constraints and the available/implied roles for designers and users.

In Situated Literacies, the learning environment, or context, is distributed across various scales of social life and locations with different ways to be with texts (as authors or consumers), understood in light of a purposely complicated sense of context. The analytic focus centers on social practices and processes, with claims grounded in the situated use of texts and spaces and the processes and practices that mediate them (e.g., physical and metaphorical space, screens, identities, circulating ideologies).

While B&K acknowledge that modes’ meaning potentials are shaped by their social use over time, their analysis focuses on how meanings are realized within each text, which they then relate to the encompassing system, in line with the SFL and social semiotic perspective that informs their study. VSB discuss opportunities in light of how individuals identify with practices or seeing themselves as an author, rather than potentials for meaning within the mode/media complex. Their analysis begins and ends with social actors, tools, and contexts in light of specific practices and events. Both of these approaches have merit, but for quite different purposes, which I now discuss further.

**Conclusions**

SFL and Situated Literacies are two approaches to multimodality in literacy and writing studies, as well as educational research more broadly. Each approach takes as part of its mandate the rethinking of what it means to create and engage with texts, understood very broadly. However, their common focus on expanded ways to imagine what counts as a text or authoring and new ways to identify with both of these is also a point of departure from which each approach pursues different methodological tacks. SFL analytically prioritizes what is being used (e.g., modes, media, semiotic resources), and Situated Literacies prioritizes what gets done (e.g., practices, texts, identities). As such, SFL draws conclusions about texts’ meaning potentials an idealized others, Situated Literacies on ways to be with texts and what counts here and now with actualized others.

SFL prioritizes artifact and thus product in its methodology, and Situated Literacies prioritizes interaction and, by extension, process (but these difference are matters of degree, not kind). In SFL, the system is the point of departure for understanding modes, choices, skills, and learning, which allows for prediction and frameworks for analyzing texts and their potentials to mean, *in general*. In Situated Literacies, the point of departure is the contextual features that produce particular instances of possibility for specific people,
understood as mediated by sociocultural, political, historical, and ideological factors.

SFL and Situated Literacies therefore have different foci and aims, which often remain implicit and can lead to confusion when shaping educational practice in light of research based on either type. The methodological tensions between the two approaches illustrated in this article challenge research that builds upon either type, because their goals and priorities may be incommensurate with the implications interpreted from research. Explicating these methodological tensions is especially important when guiding emerging scholars’ and practitioner-researchers’ critical consumption of research literature as well as their own research designs. What appear to be nuanced differences often obscured by a shared grounding in social semiotics and shared goals of literacy reform can lead to a misappropriation of implications for practice and research. For example, the objects of analysis of SFL (i.e., texts) are of a finer grain size than those of Situated Literacies (i.e., practices), while the implications of Situated Literacies are more constrained in scope than those of SFL, in line with the ethnographic nature of Situated Literacies and the generative nature of SFL studies.

What is most compelling about SFL is its ability to make neat and reduced models of what are messy systems and contexts. Therefore, SFL, by nature of its methodological treatment, allows for generalizable claims, which, in turn, can attract a wide audience interested in “best practices” by appealing to what we know of how multimodality works. Situated Literacies is most useful for examining everyday aspects and all of their messiness and complexity. By nature of its methodological program, the “what” of literacy practices is complemented by a “how”, connected to circulating ideologies and values shaping those practices. At the heart of these tensions is a grain-size distinction. SFL looks at a particular text to understand its links to an increasingly generalized “what” rooted in a systemwide heuristic. Situated Literacies looks at a particular set of practices to understand the increasingly situated layers of context shaping it.

Illuminating some of the workable margins between these methodological tensions, a recent example of research bridging SFL and Situated Literacies recently appeared in this journal—Øystein Gilje’s (2010) analysis of three students’ filmmaking trajectories across one high school class project. In this study, Gilje constructs a two-tiered analysis incorporating different but complementary approaches—sociocultural and multimodal, which I see as very similar to Situated Literacies and SFL, respectively. He situates the two styles of research on digital media production based on their slightly different foci with regard to technology and writing: the sociocultural approach considers how technology affords resources that are tools for thinking differently, and
the multimodal approach considers how technology affords different semiotic and material resources for composition. Both consider tools, practices, and semiosis, but they begin and end with different points of departure—sociocultural with practice (akin to Situated Literacies), and multimodal with artifact (akin to SFL). Gilje highlights that multimodal analysis focuses on crystallized snapshots of semiosis in the form of texts, which he acknowledges is a common critique of SFL. His study incorporates an interactional analysis of mediated chains of activity over time in order to understand semiosis at both macro-social and micro-genetic timescales. Gilje’s sociocultural analysis focuses on students’ use of cultural tools and practices in creating multimodal texts. The multimodal analysis traces specific modal choices across the trajectory of the project based on one scene.

Gilje’s (2010) study thus exemplifies how different scales of analysis can complement one another by bringing together SFL- and Situated Literacies-informed analyses. However, Gilje also implicitly surfaces tensions between the methodological commitments associated with either approach. While he does not critique multimodal analysis (SFL), he espouses a sociocultural approach and its methodological priorities, as evidenced by the depth and breadth of his exposition of this component to his study. The affordances of each approach can be combined in a multitiered analysis as Gilje has done, however, the methodological differences necessitate a careful balancing of tools and scope so that one approach drives the analysis (Situated Literacies) and the other (SFL) is used to flesh out certain aspects of analysis.

Continuing to gloss over the methodological tensions between SFL and Situated Literacies approaches to multimodality and their implications for research design could lead to a misinterpretation of the assumptions and priorities underlying a particular research study, which can become problematic when findings are uncritically adapted from studies whose underlying premises are not commensurate with educators’ own beliefs about learning and authoring, or when a focus on product is conflated with an interest in process. Explicating the differences between SFL and Situated Literacies thus sheds light on productive tensions surrounding the analysis of and design for learners’ opportunities to be with texts differently than is possible with traditional print literacies, which is the heart of both programs’ considerations of multimodality.

Based on the analyses of recent studies presented above, I do not advocate staunchly adopting one position over the other across the board, nor would I recommend picking and choosing aspects of each without a keen appreciation for how their different methodological programs shape what we might find and how we draw on each to influence research on literacy and writing studies. As such, I hope that this article can spark needed dialogue not just
about methodologies, but also about implications of research on multimodal-ity and how we engage in epistemologically informed discussion with our colleagues and students.

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**Notes**

1. For example, earlier versions of this article referred to what I now call SFL as “Multimodal Discourse Analysis” and “Social Semiotics.” What I now refer to as Situated Literacies, had been called “New Literacy Studies “Applied Approaches,” and “Ethnographic Approaches.”

2. Despite Kress’s inclusion in the New London Group and central influence on certain theoretical bases for the New Literacy Studies, as well as the wide take-up of his work across SFL and Situated Literacies, the methodologies used and primary framing of Bezemer and Kress’s article are firmly rooted in SFL, as the discussion that follows illustrates. Kress’s straddling of SFL and Situated Literacies, however, is a useful reminder that the theoretical underpinnings of these two approaches share many assumptions and priorities, although their methodological manifestations are quite different, hence the need for their distinction in the present article.

**References**


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