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Interactions, intersections and improvisations: Studying the multimodal texts and classroom talk of six- to seven-year-olds

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Abstract  This article examines the relationship between children’s talk in the classroom and their multimodal texts. The article uses an analytic framework derived from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to examine how 6–7-year-old children’s regular ways of being and doing can be found in their multimodal texts together with their talk (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). The concept of pedagogic habitus is used to make sense of the teacher’s regular ways of being and doing within the classroom (Grenfell, 1996). Improvisations upon these ways of being and doing were considered with reference to data collected over two years. In this article, the term ‘multimodal text’ refers to panorama boxes created from shoe boxes to represent an environment such as the ocean or a jungle. The article concludes that it is important to pay attention to the interrelationship between the talk and the boxes to make sense of children’s multimodal texts. The concept of improvisations upon the habitus provides an important context for this understanding.

Keywords  classroom ethnography; creativity; model-making; multimodality; talk

Introduction

This article argues that when considering children’s meaning making in the classroom, attention needs to be focused on the relationship between their talk and their multimodal texts. The particular relationship I examine between the talk and the multimodal text is when collaborative talk is extended through the making of multimodal texts into what I describe as an ‘improvisation’ on the text-making. This kind of talk could be inventive or narrative talk. The article uses an analytic framework derived from
Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to look at iterative practices within the classroom (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

The term ‘multimodal text’ refers specifically to panorama boxes created from shoe boxes to represent an environment such as the ocean or a jungle that included the animals that inhabited those spaces. These were constructed from a multiplicity of ‘stuff’ such as glitter, glue, cardboard, paint, felt and other materials to create a representation of an environment and its associated animals. The activity was first initiated by the classroom teacher because she was interested in developing art activities in the classroom and set up an action research project to evaluate their effect on children’s collaborative talk. This was as a result of a project that introduced a group of artists into school, to work with a group of teachers in an infants’ school over a long period of time, funded by Creative Partnerships, in the UK.

The study

I examined the making of environmental boxes in one classroom over a two-year period, focusing on the same activity in the spring term of two consecutive years. The teacher and the activity remained the same; however, a different group of children was observed in the second year, as the first group had left the school. The boxes could be of a particular environment, such as the ocean, the jungle, the desert and the arctic, and children would fill these boxes with animals appropriate to those environments. The children were encouraged to research what kinds of animals inhabited these environments. They took shoeboxes from home to turn into the environmental spaces. They then visited the Internet and read books to find out about the qualities of each animal. They made a plan on paper of their chosen environment and decided how they would make their animals, from clay or from other media. They were offered choices at every stage of the process about what they could make their animals from and how they could make the environments. As they planned how they would create the environment, the teacher, whom I will call Mrs B, aimed to take a back seat role, and did not interfere. Mrs B was herself researching whether this activity offered opportunities for creative talk within the classroom. Her aim in setting up this activity was to promote collaborative talk within the classroom, and enhance opportunities for children to make decisions about their meaning-making in small groups. The choice of environment, the way the boxes were constructed and the type of animals placed within the boxes, were to be left to the groups of children to decide. The box-making sessions took place every week over the period of one term (eight weeks).
My aim in researching the same activity over two years was to gain a deep understanding of the interaction between the teacher’s concepts of the task and the interactions and intersections between children’s talk and multimodal texts. A longitudinal dataset enabled comparisons to be made that could illuminate this issue.

The setting and history of the research

The school was situated on the outskirts of a predominately white working-class town in the north of England. The school had been involved in a collaborative project between a group of artists and the school teachers funded by the UK initiative Creative Partnerships, which was a large-scale initiative designed to provide creative opportunities in particular areas within the UK. In this school, the artists worked with the teachers to widen the children’s experience of learning. They focused on areas such as the children’s agency within their learning and the school’s relationship to the community. Such initiatives as a ‘Capturing the community’ project, which involved children going out and taking photographs of their community and describing it in words and images, were the subject of the wider project. My study looked at the artists’ interventions in the school, focusing on a number of themes. This particular study emerged in the course of this research, and focused on the work of one teacher, Mrs B, and her creation of an opportunity to collaboratively make environment boxes as part of art activities in her classroom.

Theoretical and analytical framework

Previous work on children’s multimodal text-making has used the expression ‘multimodal literacies’ to describe how meaning can be expressed through different modes of representation, including gestures, images, sound, words and so on (Flewitt, 2008). Researchers have explored how children’s meaning-making can be stretched by engagement with different modes (Kress, 1997; Pahl, 2003; Stein, 2003). Kress used the term ‘transduction’ to describe the movement of ideas across modes (Kress, 1997: 64). I suggest the word ‘transformation’ to describe this process. These creative transformations across modes can lead to new meanings being created (Pahl, 1999). I take from the New Literacy Studies a focus on literacy events and literacy practices, that is, an interest in the moment in which texts are made, and then an interest in the shaping practices that produced that text (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 2000). I use the idea of ‘multimodal events and practices’ as a way forward to considering
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the construction of multimodal texts (Pahl, 2007; Street, 2008). I was inter-
ested in the multimodal events and practices that I observed over the period
of the research together with habitual talk within the classroom. This
analytic focus then moves the framework towards practice theory, such as
that of Bourdieu who looked at repeated everyday practices and ways of
being, acquired dispositions in homes, originally in the Kabyle, in Algeria.
These practices could be identified with specific ways of doing and being
that I described, from Bourdieu, as habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

In this article, I see habitus as a set of embodied dispositions, observed
within lived realities of life (Bourdieu, 1977), and acting as structuring
structures that, in this case, children lived out through procedures and prac-
tices. Embodyment is about the historical experience of movement, and they
are attentive to gestures and postures that make up adults’ ways of being
and doing (Bourdieu, 1977: 87). These acquired dispositions are ‘open’ and
govern practice, but also generate practices (Bourdieu and Wacquant,
1992). Habitus can also be seen as a set of ‘regulated improvisations’
(Bourdieu, 1977: 78). By using the word ‘improvisation’, Bourdieu was
hinting that habitus could be transformed or modified, an insight I draw
upon here. Habitus structures the embodied experience of life; the children
in the study referred to examples of everyday life such as lining up outside
school. Habitus interacts with the ‘field of play’ – in this situation, the field
was the space within the classroom. The children brought in their everyday
experience from outside, and replicated some of these experiences in their
classroom interactions. The teacher too interacted with this space as she set
up the activity. Grenfell (1996) described how student teachers expressed
their ways of doing and being in the classroom as being their ‘pedagogic
habitus’,

Students’ pedagogic (habitus) personality is continually created and modified
by a dialectic between it and the field: pedagogic understanding (theory) and
school action (practice). Both habitus and field are structuring and structured,
differentiating and differential structures. But structure is a process, is located
in time and space, and in the mundane and particular, not abstracted into reified
theoretical concepts. Becoming a teacher means ‘restructuring’ pedagogic
habitus, as a kind of play-off of the new against the old. (Grenfell, 1996: 299)

Mrs B was trying to create a new kind of classroom, where children held
agency and shaped their meaning-making. I had watched her practice in
the classroom over a period of time, and it too, fell into a set of disposi-
tions and structures. I present the data within an understanding of the
pedagogic habitus of the teacher and the embodied habitus of the children
as manifested in the talk and model-making I recorded (Bourdieu, 1990;
Grenfell, 1996). I make the distinction between the ‘pedagogic habitus’ of the teacher, which I take from Grenfell as being an interaction between her acquired dispositions, acquired over a period of time, and shaped through interactions with the artists and their ways of being, in connection with the classroom, and the ‘embodied habitus’ of the children, who encounter habitus often through the body, much as Bourdieu described the Kabyle child as doing, in repeated rituals such as getting up in the morning and lining up outside the classroom (Bourdieu, 1977).

Here, I attempt to bring together an account of the embodied habitus, as instantiated within the talk and multimodal texts, of the children, situated within the pedagogic habitus of the teacher. The focus of this analysis is the children’s talk in the classroom together with their multimodal texts.

Many researchers have focused on children’s talk in the classroom and how this talk, often drawing on home ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 2005) opens up ‘third spaces’ where new kinds of knowledge can be articulated and explored (e.g. Christ and Wang, 2008; Gutierrez et al., 1999; Kamberelis, 2001). The multimodal text lets in different kinds of meanings. Some studies (e.g. Kendrick and McKay, 2004; Millard, 2003) have focused on children’s drawings and how these allow different kinds of meanings to be let in. Others (e.g. Jewitt, 2003; Mavers, 2003) have looked at the affordances of multimodal communicative practices such as mind maps or computer mediated learning in stretching and developing meanings made by children. I focus here on children’s three-dimensional (3D) model-making. Scholars considering children’s animated work (e.g. Kress, 1997; Stein, 2003) have argued that a 3D model has a different quality that enables more transformative meaning-making to be created.

In order to consider talk in relation to this model-making I draw together classroom ethnographies of children’s talk (Floriani, 1993; Kamberelis, 2001; Maybin, 2006) together with studies of children making multimodal texts (e.g. Mavers, 2003; Stein, 2003), to look at the relationship between children’s talk and their multimodal texts in the context of repeated iterative practice, the habitus of the teacher and the children’s improvisations on that habitus.

**Methodology**

Mrs B let me observe for a session every week, for two terms, both spring terms, over a two-year period, to see how the activity she had constructed enabled children’s collaborative talk to be strengthened. The two year groups were different, in that each year had a different group of children.
In the first year she herself researched her own practice alongside me. We would switch on our tape recorders at the same time. I also placed cameras on every table and encouraged the children to record their making.

I followed the same activity in the second year with a new year group, and again, audiotaped each table that made an environment and also followed the children as they drew their plans, began to make the boxes, made animals to put in the box and finally, finished the boxes and reflected on that process to me. I encouraged the children to talk about the environment as it was being made. I focused on processes and practices, and moments of meaning-making, capturing these with audio and visual media as described later.

As part of the wider study of the impact of the artists on the school, I interviewed all the teachers and a selected group of children who experienced the project, a group of parents, and the artists about the process. I conducted in-depth interviews at the end of the project with the artists. I followed several projects into the classroom and through a number of stages. The data presented here, therefore, is a small slice of a larger study that has been written up elsewhere (see Pahl, 2007).

The dataset (Table 1) consisted of audiotapes collected while the children were making the boxes together with the teacher’s audiotapes and field notes, and my field notes. This dataset consisted of about 4 two-hour box-making sessions from year 1 and 4 similar sessions from year 2, together with photographic evidence amounting to 100 photos. In addition, I conducted interviews with three groups of children, each time, amounting to six longer interviews, which were reflective discussions about the boxes once they were made. These interviews did not reflect the actual process so much as the generation of data connected to the boxes (Baker, 1997). They were conducted about a week after the boxes were made and consisted of the children describing the boxes to me. The talk collected during the box-making tended to be more fragmentary and obscured by background noise and the movement of the children. As children were often placed in charge of the tape recorder, for ethical reasons, they could be switched off during the making of the boxes. Therefore, I used the reflective interviews conducted after the boxes were made as a source of information about the boxes and their meaning, accepting that this process did not accurately reflect the moment-by-moment processes of box-making. The children captured these moments using cameras placed on their tables and this process can be observed in the images (see Figures 1–5).
### Table 1 The dataset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Spring Term Feb.–April 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audiotape of teacher’s talk at the beginning of each session and in interaction with children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chart of dataset</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs of box-making episodes (6 groups) on a weekly basis for 2 hours per session</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldnotes of the episodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with up to 3 groups of children after event</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Spring Term Feb.–April 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher’s talk as before</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audiotape of box-making episodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographs of box-making episodes (59 photos)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldnotes of the episodes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with up to 3 groups of children after event</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethical issues

In both years, children were given an information sheet and a consent form to take home for their parents to sign. Children who were not able to provide this signed evidence were not included in the study although their number was very few. In addition, children were given tape recorders and digital cameras on each table. I used tape recorders as they were a visible reminder of the taping process and children could switch them on and off at will and were able to listen to their talk when they wanted to hear what was being collected. The children often switched these on and off as they wished, with the result that some data were lost. After the extended interviews at the end of the project, children listened to the tape of the talk they had produced and commented on it. I told them that their words would be used in written texts (such as books) after the event. The photographs were mostly taken by the children and my presence was frequently recorded by the children. In addition, the teacher conducted an action research project about the children’s collaborative talk and model-making in the first year that enabled interpretations to be checked and shared.

Data analysis

The transcribed audiotaped data together with contextual field notes were analysed using Wolcott’s three column system of description, interpretation and analysis (Wolcott, 1994). I would place the transcript or field notes alongside interpretative comments and subsequently, analytic coding. The transcripts were placed alongside the photographic images together with contextual information from field notes. This enabled the talk to be situated. The data analysis focused on the interrelationship between the children’s talk and the multimodal texts. Following that, the dataset was combed for emerging patterns in the data, relating to how the talk and the multimodal texts linked together. I was also interested in gaps or rich points in the data where something unexpected happened such as a new topic within the talk, or discussions about the meaning of a multimodal text (Agar, 1996). Instances of talk that was unexpected for the context provided a focus for the data analysis. At the beginning of the data analysis, I focused on ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou, 2007) within the children’s talk. I was interested in when the children represented shards of their out-of-school experiences within their talk. These were considered within the context of the classroom, of the meaning-making and from observations taken at the time. Following that, I looked at particular groups of children across the dataset, looking at how particular groups of two or three shaped the making of the
boxes. Finally, I became interested in how particular life experiences, articulated in talk, could be related to the three-dimensional environmental box models. Data analysis became a process of making connections across the dataset, with a particular focus on the multimodal texts and the surrounding discussions of these texts. I focused on particular instances where there was a dense amount of data, from the teacher’s notes, my field notes, the photographic evidence and the talk connected to the boxes both during the making and at the end of the making of the boxes. Certain moments emerged, which were very densely recorded, that enabled a process of crystallization, by which key moments in the data were brought to the fore (Richardson, 2000). The concept of improvisation on the habitus emerged as an analytic category in the course of doing the year 1 data analysis.

The analysis was informed by an understanding that all the meaning did not solely reside within the talk but within the boxes. The boxes were analysed in relation to their material qualities and material talk connected to the boxes. Words like ‘glitter’ and ‘glue’ were closely linked to phenomena within the boxes. This process tried to make sense of talk as construction of meaning within the classroom, drawing on ethnographies of children’s classroom talk (Maybin, 2006). From recent work on multimodal literacies and children’s meaning-making using multimodal texts, the analysis focused on when the multimodal literacies created had a quality of improvisation upon a way of being and doing within the classroom (Flewitt, 2008). The repeated, ethnographic-style observations used Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to look at practices within the classroom (Bourdieu, 1990).

Themes emerging from the data

I initially looked at the intersections between Mrs B’s vision of what she would like to achieve for the environment box project and how the children instantiated this vision. When Mrs B introduced the activity within her classroom, her focus was on decision-making as a way forward to develop creativity in the children. She also valued the children making decisions in material forms, within the boxes.

When I looked at Mrs B’s practice, built upon over two years of watching the artists in the classroom, and her comments on the way the artists asked the children what they wanted, I realized I was looking at a set of concepts, dispositions and practices that the artists had inculcated within her, together with her own beliefs through her research role and action research, that she was keen to carry through. I decided to identify these repeatedly held beliefs as the ‘pedagogic habitus’ that she had built up over time. Her belief
that asking the children to lead the process was important was something
she asserted time and time again as I followed her work, from an initial
interview in November 2005, to watching her project in the Spring of
2006, then re-interviewing her in the Autumn of 2006 and then spending
time in her classroom in the Spring of 2007. As she said to me of her
experience of working with the artists:

We said to the children right what do you want to put in this magazine, and
worked for the whole day solid and the ideas that came up from the children
were fantastic, and I think I learned from that you know it’s good for them to
make the decisions about what they want to learn. (interview Mrs B November
2005)

In the following examples this process is examined more closely.

**Year 1: Creative problem solving in the material world**
The initial focus of Mrs B’s work in the first year was giving the children
as many opportunities to decide about what they would do in relation to
the boxes as possible. She articulated that when reflecting on the impact of
the artists’ work on her practice:

It was a big eye opener for me, that they were so capable at deciding what they
wanted to learn and what they wanted to do in that session and in that project
(interview Mrs B November 2005)

In the first year, as I spoke to the children about the boxes, I heard her voice
echoed in their discussions, particularly in the phrase ‘we decided on’:

Timmy: We decided on the animals and the trees
Kate: And the trees?
Timmy: and leaves folding down
Carl: and we tried to make it look like with the glue there, painting green
(tape recording 8 March 2006)

The expression ‘we decided on’ was echoed in many of the conversations
I had with the children, and in recordings of Mrs B in her discussions with
the children. This seemed to me to be an instantiation within the talk, of
Mrs B’s dispositions and linguistic resources in the classroom that
amounted to her pedagogic habitus. However, as I watched the groups,
some decisions were more unusual than others:

Kate: tell me about the path
Timmy: we did it squiggly but then
Andrew: we did it in a line but on our environment sheet it’s all curvy so it’s
got bendy so we did it um so we did um when we looked in the
(room) we thought of doing it curvy but then I thought of doing it that way, so it goes out and in

Timmy: So you walking from there and you walk over that path – we could have put some shops in couldn’t we? (tape recording 8 March 2006)

In this extract, Timmy imagines walking within the desert environment and encountering a shop. He places himself within the box environment and personifies this. This ‘small story’ was characteristic of Timmy’s talk in relation to the box project and was a repeated feature in the data relating to him (Georgakopoulou, 2007). The notion of shops in the desert could be described as an unusual improvisation upon the theme that Mrs B had suggested. Mrs B was focused on the realization of the children’s ideas within the multimodal text. She highlighted Emma and Sophie to me when discussing the children’s ability to realize their ideas and to problem solve within the material world. They were trying to make seaweed stand up:

Emma: first we got a box and my partner was Sophie secondly we painted our box and then we added some things to it. My partner tried to make seaweed and we couldn’t we tried everything we could think of and then Mrs B had a bolt of lightening and she thought of something and we did it but we haven’t tried it yet but I think it will work. I hope so.

(later in the discussion)

Kate: So why didn’t it go well when it got to the seaweed?

Sophie: because we tried some see-through crunchy tissue paper, and that didn’t work, we wanted it to stand up and it didn’t (tape recording 20 February 2006)
Problem solving, difficulty and overcoming it were the achievements of this group. The material world offered challenges that they wrestled with, before overcoming them with new decisions and material solutions. Mrs B focused on problem solving in the material world as a key learning point of the box-making experience:

I have tried to get them to think and relate to past experiences and skills that they already have in overcoming any problems that they’ve got, and some of them have done that pretty well and then I have found that others have maybe tried things come to me for help and come a bit unstuck so I have had to intervene. (Discussion with Mrs B 6 March 2006)

The making of the boxes enabled different kinds of meaning to be articulated. One child, Carl, who was originally from the Philippines, described his King Cobra:

Carl: I have seen one in the zoo. I saw a real one in my cousin’s house in the Philippines. He has got a real King cobra in his house he has got it locked up in his cage. He’s in the Philippines.
Kate: What colours were it?
Carl: black at the top and steely and brown at the bottom.
Kate: Were you scared?
Carl: he went sss like that. (taped interview 8 February 2006)

While the instruction for finding out about the animals to put in the boxes had been very much about looking on the Internet and in books, the children’s own ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez et al., 2005) were also brought into the field of the classroom when thinking about the qualities of the animals they were researching. The decision to place a King Cobra in the box then led to talk that drew on home experiences.

The first year generated some key themes in relation to talk and children’s multimodal texts. One was in relation to the funds of knowledge that the box-making drew in from outside and the children’s ability to describe their experiences in relation to their animals. There were a number of examples of these in the data including that of Carl. Another theme was creative problem solving in the material world whereby the children thought of new and unexpected ways of solving difficult problems, such as seaweed that would not stand up, as well as other difficulties. The final focus from the themes emerging from the data was on ways in which new narratives emerged from the children’s text-making, such as the shops in the desert, which drew in other kinds of embodied experiences, in this case, of going shopping. From this first year, I became interested in the ways habitus, and everyday experiences, could be embodied within multimodal texts. It is this particular last theme that I explored more in the data I collected from the second year.
Year 2: The Dolphin School

In year two, Mrs B reported to me that she thought that the children were not as creative as last year, particularly with regard to the material quality of the boxes, in that they tended to copy the children's boxes from last year. I was starting to look at the interaction between the children's collaborative talk and their creation of the boxes in relation to the concept of improvisation upon the habitus. Following this thread, I watched three girls, Savannah, Taylor and Coral, who were creating an ocean environment, from the initial making of the box, through to the decoration of the box, until the final moment when the box was placed on the side of the classroom for display. I recorded conversations I had with the girls about the box. The very last conversation was recorded and then listened to by the girls as it was focused on the narrative surrounding the box.

Stage one of this process involved the making of the box. The girls painted the box blue and made a hill using rolled up paper and masking tape. One of the processes I watched was the slow construction of a hill at the back of the box, using masking tape. Figure 2 shows the box in the early stages of construction. The box has been painted blue and some masking tape has been placed over the ball of newspaper in the corner.

Slowly this box hill took shape. The making of the box involved a discussion about how the inhabitants of the box, the dolphins, would use it and how they could interact with the box in different ways. When I interviewed Taylor and Savannah about this as they were painting the hill (Coral was then off sick), Taylor’s plan was to use the hill as a place for the dolphins to come in before jumping over the water, as dolphins are observed doing.

Figure 2 First stages of box
Taylor: we are going to wrap some of the dolphins under.
Savannah: Yes we are going to try and get the dolphins to come in here so it looks like they are getting ready to jump up over the water! (taped interview 13 March 2007)

At this stage, the dolphins have dolphin-like characteristics. The girls then painted over the hill. Figure 3 shows the hill covered with paint.

As the hill was slowly built up, using paper, and then painted over, in a corner of the shoe box that was the box environment, the girls began to articulate the hill’s meaning in relation to the way it was built. One discussion was about the use of glitter. At week 3, the girls had placed glitter on the hill (Figure 4).

![Figure 3: Box with paint](image)

![Figure 4: Box with glitter](image)
In discussions, they talked about the meaning of the glitter:

Taylor: and then we put some glitter on the hill
Savannah: yes because it looks like the glitter has fallen on the hill like um the coral on there,
Taylor: Yeah
Savannah: and then we put some blue piece of paper to make the sea what’s on the bottom
Taylor: That’s the pond/
Savannah: /Yeah
Taylor: Only that bit’s the pond and that bit’s a bit more of the sea
Savannah: yes, because we put some glitter on the sea as well
Taylor: Yeah. And then the pond because it looks better in the book
Savannah: and then we/
Taylor: /it works better on the pond because it looks like
Savannah: Then we
Taylor: /the glitter’s going to the bottom (taped interview 13 March 2007)

The girls describe the way in which the glitter creates a background in which they can have a pond, a hill and the sea, and the glitter can move around, from the hill, to the sea and then at the bottom of the sea. The glitter moves across the box, giving the illusion of movement.

As it took shape, the creatures within it became animated. For example, the hill was a place where the dolphins could sleep:

Savannah: We built the hill because that’s going to be where every fish sleeps!
Kate: You said that about the dolphins peeking through, I like that
Savannah: Taylor, I am gonna put that shell there because it looks more nice in there I am going to bring this little light and I am going to stick it there because it can be light
Taylor: yes but the light will have to go there because it doesn’t look as bright in there
Kate: You have a little light
Savannah: We could put the dolphins we could put the dolphins.
Taylor: we could put the light in there because it makes it light
Savannah: Because the fish will swim into there anyway (higher pitch)
Taylor: no they could swim, the dolphins could be peeping through there couldn’t they (pause). It’s gonna have to be ripped a bit like that,
Savannah: No the dolphins sleep there, Taylor, it can’t be like that,
Taylor: Yes that’s where the dolphins sleeps. (taped interview 13 March 2007)

This discussion included some argument about how the hill will become a bedroom for the dolphins and has a light, also how these dolphins will
move through the environment and where they will go, and how they will peep through the hill from their bedroom at their world. Savannah is keen for the hill to be where the fish sleep at the start of the discussion, a point Taylor eventually concedes at the end. The hill becomes a bedroom for the dolphins, complete with light and somewhere to peep from. The dolphins, like the girls, peep out of their bedroom window and go out into the imaginary world the girls created for them. The girls had two slightly different visions of the box, whether the hill is somewhere to swim though and peep through (Taylor) or somewhere to sleep (Savannah) it carries these competing meanings. Further on in the discussion with the girls, they elaborated on the hill and its meanings:

Savannah: But the hill is where all of the animals sleep . . .
Taylor: The sea horse is going to sleep at the top.
Savannah: No the sea horse is going to go in there and it is going to come out there
Taylor: because it could go in there and it could shut it down and it could come back out, and go through there and back out of there.
Savannah: Yeah because this is a little bit of a play area for us
Taylor: yeah and they could be playing . . . /
Savannah: /so that the babies can play in the ocean and everything,
Taylor: and we have made a bit of a school up haven’t we?
Savannah: yeah well the school we should have made it up by now but we are going to make it now we are going to make it up over there. (taped interview 13 March 2007)

Savannah is still insisting on the hill’s use as a bedroom in line 1, (‘the hill is where all of the animals sleep’) but she is also beginning to elaborate on the hill as a place to go in and out of, (‘the sea horse is going to go in there’) and then the play space is developed outside the hill. Taylor introduces the concept of the school (we have made a bit of a school) as the dialogue continues. Savannah says of the school that, ‘we should have made it up by now but we are going to make it now’ thereby implying that the school is going to be realized within the material element of the box.

Within this bit of talk, the box is represented as meaning several things within the talk. First, it is an ocean, where fishes swim, and second, a dolphin school, and third, a home, where the dolphins sleep. It is also a play area for the dolphin babies.

I asked the girls about the finished box in a quiet moment during break time. This resulting tape, which came to over two pages of transcript, was listened to by the girls several times afterwards, itself becoming part of the process of meaning-making. The tape itself became a new site for the
construction of meanings connected to the box (Baker, 1997). Coral was now back, and her words echoed the narrative from Savannah and Taylor:

Savannah: That’s the mummy dolphin and that’s the baby dolphin!
Kate: Oh brilliant!
Savannah: We put them together because the baby has to follow the mummy
Coral: We made it out of clay
Taylor: Yeah.
Kate: Are you the ones that had a dolphin school?
Girls: yeah! A dolphin school
Coral: Because the mummy is going to take the baby to school
Kate: I love this
Taylor: Yes, that’s right, its really close. Because it only lives down here. (pause) We did the jellyfish, er one’s the sister, one’s the brother, one’s the baby and one’s the mum
Coral: that’s the baby,
Taylor: yeah and that’s the sister and that’s the brother and that’s the other big sister,
Kate: Oh!
Coral: No that’s the mummy
Taylor: Yes
Kate: So they are a family . . . so sweet!

Coral: Yes, and the same with the starfish.

Savannah: They all live together because that was the baby’s friend at school

Taylor: That’s the daddy

Savannah: /that’s the daddy’s face

Coral: That’s the dad that’s the baby

Taylor: that’s the baby

Coral: No that’s the baby ‘cos its really thin (taped discussion 17 April 07, opening section lines 21–48)

In this sequence of talk, which went on for some time, and takes up over two pages of transcript, the girls describe how the school is made up of a number of children, in an actively imagined space, where children learn using shells for pencils and live an ordered ‘play school’ environment. Within the home environment, the ordering of each child was a crucial part of the narrative:

Taylor: Because the dolphins are going first and then they are all going different ways

Savannah: and then the jellyfish, then,

Taylor: then the starfish

Savannah: No then, jellyfish, oct . . . er sea turtle, jell . . . er starfish

Taylor: We put . . .

Savannah: Because it was down here, because, because the (greater) is going to be the sea beds

Taylor: Because the starfish is going to come off because they are at end of the line

Coral: We did ’em all in different places so then one can be wi’ each baby (taped discussion 17 April 2007 discussion lines 65–76)

The children spent a lot of time determining the way in which the animals were to be ordered. Each of the animals is to go in line, and each has its own child attached. Savannah is uncertain as to which of the animals goes first.

The talk and the boxes considered together

When I analysed these sequences, finding patterns across the talk and the boxes as I saw them in the images, I found that in some cases, the talk was realized within the multimodal text. For example, in the earlier discussion, Taylor had said to Savannah:

Taylor: no they could swim, the dolphins could be peeping through there couldn’t they (pause). It’s gonna have to be ripped a bit like that, (talk 13 March 2007)
This decision to make the hill have a rip so that there was a door for the dolphins to go in created an affordance for the subsequent play. Shells were used not to denote the ocean but to lead the play back to the imaginary school.

Savannah: we did some shells so then they can pretend they are paper and pencils. (taped discussion 17 April 2007, line 91)

The material affordances of the box, for example, glitter placed on the box, enabled different kinds of meanings to be created in the narratives.

Savannah: Coral didn’t know we were going to put glitter on it yet because she was/
Coral: Taylor did as well
Kate: I love the glitter
Taylor: We made this school glittery because it’s gonna because we because, just because we just because we were going to draw some of the people to-
Savannah: /the pond is where they swim sometimes if they want to get cool and when it’s hot
Coral: yeah
Taylor: And the shallow bit is the sand to make it um (taped discussion 17 April 2007, lines 85–90)

Taylor tells Coral and myself why the glitter was necessary, but Savannah’s vision prevailed. Her point about the pond echoes Taylor’s but makes a mini world of glittery sea and sand which is hot, with people using the sea to get cool. At the same time, the box is a school and the children describe a world where the dolphins go to school and learn to read and write:

Taylor: Um the big shells are for writing on and the little ones are for the pencils
Kate: Oh for the pencils?
Coral: 24 shells on there (starts counting 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13)

Sound of coughing. Coral has been off sick.

Coral: 1234 (counting)
Savannah: /They don’t all go to school
Taylor: Yeah?
Savannah: The babies don’t (taped discussion 17 April 2007, lines 93–101)

While Taylor pursues the school idea, Savannah, whose initial vision involved the dolphins sleeping in the hill, continued to pursue the home theme of the babies, who obviously cannot go to school. The box then carries both home and school meanings within it in a way that is dialogic (Maybin, 2006).
The girls describe their scenario to me while at the same time, arguing about it:

Savannah: That’s the playground you come in/
Coral: /One jellyfish is the teacher
Savannah: no no no no no no no no no the dolphin is the teacher
Coral: Yeah and that’s the baby’s mummy was the teacher (pause) because she weren’t.
Taylor: Because she weren’t last
Coral: I know
Taylor: She was born first and then that then that then that then that then that then that then that then that then . . . that that that! (taped discussion 17 April 2007, lines 111–18)

This final discussion, which came a the end of the dolphin school discussion, was a focus for the girls, who listened to it over and over again, laughing at the interchange about whose turn it was to go first.

As I analysed the tape it was clear there were three different but interconnecting narratives associated with the box. One was Savannah’s vision of the dolphins sleeping in their bedrooms with a light, and their identity within the narrative talk as mummy dolphins and baby dolphins. Taylor focuses on the school and the pencils, paper and the way it will become a space to play in for the children, the procedural elements of school, lining up and who goes first and last. Coral, as the one off sick, mostly adds to and supports each girl, focusing on backing up statements about the stories. The box itself held traces of many of these discussions. The rip in the box enabled the dolphins to move in and out, much as children move in and out of the classroom and go out to play. At the same time, the dolphins could peep out from the hill into the world, much like girls do when they wake up in the morning and look out of the window. The box instantiates the ‘embodied habitus’ the girls experience, their ways of doing and being (Bourdieu, 1977). These actions, peeping out of bedroom curtains, walking to and from school, or lining up before school, are described in relation to the dolphins placed within the box.

Concluding analysis

Returning to the discussion presented at the opening of the article, it seems that in order to make sense of the multimodal text and the girls’ account, an understanding of the established procedures within the classroom, the pedagogic habitus, and then the deviations from the habitus, are necessary (Grenfell, 1996). An account of embodied habitus is also necessary (Bourdieu, 1977). The accounts of the actions of the dolphins in the box
are linked to everyday practice, in the everyday practices of waking up and peeping through, of going in and out of the classroom, of lining up and being asked to read and write. The multimodal text and the talk contained within it, is steeped with everyday meanings. Experiences such as going out to play, going in and out, sleeping, peeping and lining up are represented in the box. The dolphin school box represents shards of these experiences and echoes the movements the girls took during the day, including the anxiety about being first and last. By untangling the threads of talk, and linking these to the girls’ individual visions for the box, it is possible to make sense of each of their experiences in relation to the box. They do not so much create the box through collaborative talk but intertwine their vision and co-construct the box in the face of alternative visions of what it could be. By focusing on the production of meaning across the talk and the multimodal text it was possible to gain access to the social histories of the children. The children created a box environment that enabled them to carve out alternative spaces of practice for themselves (Kamberelis, 2001).

The process of analysing this data made me realize that it is important to identify when the meaning maker does something different with the expected text, within a set of structures and dispositions built up over time. The shaping of the talk as it was constructed around the box between Savannah, Taylor and Coral shifted according to the context the box created. This kind of research requires an attention both to the everyday worlds of childhood, to a longitudinal account of classrooms and classroom teachers and a focus on text production in different modalities (Kress, 1997). It is then possible to begin to put together an account of the identities of the meaning maker together with the production of the multimodal texts. It is also possible to highlight improvisations from an established set of discourses and practices that the teacher had set in motion. These were moments of transformation as the girls created imaginary worlds beyond the classroom and outside the ‘pedagogic habitus’ outlined and constructed by Mrs B (Grenfell, 1996). The material possibilities were stretched (the rip in the box) as the talk pushed the meanings within the box forward (the place for the dolphins to sleep). The box was a new context for talk and it was shifting in its meanings as much as the talk shifted. The box held echoes of home and school routines of practice.

Implications for practice
Studies like this can inform teachers’ understandings of where change happens in classrooms. The multimodal text can be a site for improvisation upon the habitus (Bartlett and Holland, 2002). The relationship between children’s talk and their text-making could become a focus for analysis as
the talk and the text can speak to each other in multiple ways. A multimodal approach to classroom talk includes the material object as a site for dialogic enquiry and discussion (Maybin, 2006). Conceptual understandings of multimodal texts have focused on the material affordances of the sign in relation to the sign-makers intentions at the time (Kress, 1997), and have looked at the collaborative construction of multimodal texts on screen (Jewitt, 2003). Attention has been paid to how multimodal texts let in wider meanings (Stein, 2003) and offer new possibilities for learning within the classroom (Mavers, 2003). Here I argue that it is important to understand how collaborative multimodal texts can be constructed in relation to the processes and practices that have gone before, including the talk. By focusing on the multimodal events together with practice, a more situated understanding of these practices can be developed. Children’s improvisations upon the habitus through text-making could be charted. In primary classrooms a project could be undertaken that charts deviations and digressions in these multimodal texts. This close examination can then pay dividends in terms of extended storytelling, narrative and an understanding of the social histories of children.

References


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