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Young people's readings of a political cartoon and the concept of multimodal literacy

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This article uses young people's responses to a newspaper cartoon as a way of exploring the concept of multimodal literacy. The discussion draws on data from a study which aimed to elicit the geopolitical views of 16–19-year-olds in a multi-ethnic British city by using cartoons as a way of encouraging them to talk about their thoughts and feelings towards recent political events. We argue that, contrary to popular perceptions, political cartoons are complex and polysemous and require a particular form of literacy. This not only encompasses the ability to read visual grammar, but also an understanding of the cartoon genre and how it is constructed, with a view to conveying particular meanings within a specific social and cultural context.

Keywords: critical geopolitics; metaphor; multimodal literacy; newspaper cartoons; systemic functional linguistics; youth politics

Introduction

In this article we use the example of young people's engagement with a British newspaper cartoon in order to understand better what skills are involved in the process of interpreting this multimodal genre. We also aim to contribute to the debate surrounding the calls for a programme of multimodal literacy education for young people (for example, Jewitt & Kress, 2003). The article draws on data from a study of the geopolitical views of young adults in Bradford, a multi-ethnic city in the North of England, in which we piloted the use of newspaper cartoons as a way of encouraging them to express their opinions.[1] Although we found this innovative methodology useful in that it allowed us to elicit qualitative interview data without having to rely exclusively on explicit questioning, we quickly realized that many of the respondents were not familiar with the cartoon genre and found it hard to make sense of the examples we showed them.

Newspaper cartoons are a good example of multimodal texts, since they typically combine the verbal and visual semiotic mode to create meaning. While some people believe that this makes cartoons easier to understand than purely verbal texts, there is growing evidence that reading cartoons is, in fact, a highly complex process that requires people to draw on a whole range of different literacies (El Refaie, 2009). Many educational theorists argue that reading should be thought of as more than a linguistic accomplishment and that there is an urgent need to develop young people's ability to understand how different semiotic resources can be used independently and

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interactively to construct various social and cultural meanings. The concept of multimodal literacy has been explored in many different contexts, including the science classroom (Kress, Jewitt, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2001), classroom work with children's literature (Unsworth, 2007), and second-language learning (Royce, 2007), but there is a lack of empirical research about how young readers make sense of cartoons (Dines, 1995).

This article aims to provide evidence of the multimodal literacy skills involved in making sense of the political cartoon genre. Section 1 outlines our reasons for choosing to use cartoons as triggers in interviews with young people about their geopolitical views. We suggest that the commonly cited lack of political engagement in the young generation is related to young people's uncertainties over what constitutes 'the political', and that cartoons can present a good way of finding out which issues they really care about. We then consider the newspaper cartoon as a particular socio-cultural form of communication.

In Section 2, we summarize some of the main arguments of the so-called 'new literacy' scholars, who are questioning traditional views of literacy as a collection of static and decontextualized skills, and are focusing instead on the social practices that enable people to make meaning out of different types of texts in specific contexts. Seen from this perspective, reading a political cartoon involves far more than just the ability to identify the real-life referents of visual representations.

Section 3 starts by describing the basic research design, data and methodologies used in our study of young people's readings of political cartoons. We then focus on the responses to a British cartoon on the subject of the US mid-term elections in November 2006. In contrast to the widespread assumption that cartoons are relatively easy to understand, we found that our participants had to draw on a broad range of interpretative skills in order to make sense of the cartoon. The interview data thus presents a good example of the sorts of issues which might be addressed by a multimodal literacy education programme.

1. Newspaper cartoons as a way of accessing young people's geopolitical views

Great concern has been voiced in academic literatures and political debates about the apparent lack of young people's interest in political issues, measured most frequently in terms of their knowledge of and support for political parties (Forbrig, 2005; Wallace, 2003). This ignores the fact that young people often express their political views through other means, such as music or participation in subcultural groups (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Such an overly narrow perspective on 'the political' tends to exclude not only the issues occurring in the spaces of everyday life but also, curiously, those that connect the local with the global, as is the case with geopolitical events such as the ongoing fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. The widespread youth protests against the war in Iraq showed that young people are prepared to act on political issues that seem significant to them. These are not always and necessarily the issues that are closest to hand, but may be those which could have serious consequences for their current and future lives (Hörschelmann, 2008a,b).

One of the main aims of our study was to uncover young people's understandings of international political events without restricting the diversity of their responses. For this reason, we decided to steer clear of overt discussions on 'politics', and instead to use political cartoons as a more indirect way of trying to find out which

issues they care strongly about and how they interpret their causes and consequences. Although ours was, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to use political cartoons as triggers in qualitative interviews with young people, educators have already discovered their potential as a way of getting students to engage with important social and political issues. Cartoons have been described as an excellent vehicle through which to develop 'an ability to identify bias and formulate opinions' (Kleeman, 2006, p. 62) and as 'an outstanding device for honing analytical skills' (Dougherty, 2002, p. 264). Matthews (2005) believes that the dearth of detailed and explicit text and the visual imagery, metaphor, and humour so typical of cartoons make them particularly amenable to the goals of the critical pedagogue, since they encourage students to move beyond conventional ways of seeing and to examine processes of truth and knowledge production.

In the UK, political cartoons are illustrations, published on the editorial or comments pages of a newspaper, which address a current political issue or a social trend from a critical point of view. Typically, they are contained within a single panel and include verbal elements in the form of labels, captions and/or speech balloons. Although political cartoons are not always humorous, they do generally contain an element of irony or at least something incongruous or surprising. As Edwards (1997) argues, most cartoons use an imaginary, make-believe scene to refer to real-life events and characters. This means that reading cartoons often requires a metaphorical processing, where features from the fictional scene are mapped onto the actual people and events in contemporary politics. A reader who understands a cartoon on the level of its fictional setting may fail to discern its real-life referents, since this kind of interpretation requires an interest in public affairs and a familiarity with the conventions of political cartooning. She may also identify the real-life referents, but struggle to grasp the metaphorical connections between the fictional and non-fictional worlds.

Mumford (2001, p. xi) suggests that the use of literary references in political cartoons is rapidly declining in Britain, and that cartoonists now generally rely on widely shared cultural symbols and metaphors from popular culture and sport. Of course, every cartoonist is likely to have a different concept of what constitutes cultural literacy, and this may not correspond with the actual cultural literacies of newspaper readers. Since our respondents had volunteered to participate in the study, we expected them to be on average more likely to read newspapers than others in their peer group. However, many of them were in fact not regular newspaper readers and did not seem to be very familiar with the political cartoon genre. The more time had passed between the events referred to in the cartoons and the interviews, the more students seemed to struggle to recognize personalities and contexts.

2. Multimodal literacy

Cartoons are sometimes regarded both by the general public and by some academic scholars as a reasonably simple and straightforward form of communication. Conners (1998, p. 97), for instance, believes that newspaper cartoons 'can often be understood across cultures, ages, and levels of intelligence', due to their common use of metaphors and symbols which 'simplify ideas' and thus enable readers to interpret the images 'quickly and easily' (p. 100). This view is apparently linked to the

widespread assumption that, at least on the level of basic recognition, reading images relies on people's ordinary, everyday visual perception and does not require any special competences (Messaris, 1994). Seen from this point of view, multimodal literacy would be something one acquires relatively easily once one has mastered literacy in the way it is interpreted more traditionally, namely the decontextualized ability to read and write.

In contrast to this, a growing number of literacy theorists and practitioners are convinced that multimodal texts require specific literacy skills. The concept of 'multimodal literacy' grew out of the concerns of the so-called 'new literacies' scholars, who have been drawing attention to the complex ways in which texts are read in different contexts, for different purposes, and by different groups of people (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1996). Challenging the traditional view of literacy as the decontextualised ability to read and write, these writers argue that literacy must be regarded instead as a dynamic process of 'shaping and reshaping' the socially and culturally available meaning resources with the aim of making representations match intentions as closely as possible (Kress et al., 2005, p. 3).

Another central concern of the 'new literacy' scholars is the effects on literacy practices of the increasing globalization and dramatic technological developments of the last few decades (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). One of the most striking of these effects has been the proliferation of novel types of multimodal, 'post-typographic' texts generated by the internet, which have made it increasingly difficult to ignore the fact that texts do not only consist of printed language, but also typically convey meaning through other visual components such as layout, typography, colour, and illustration (Goodman & Graddol, 1996; Jewitt, 2004; Tyner, 1998).

The distinct modes offer different possibilities for representation, both because of their specific cultural affordances, that is, what a culture has decided to do with a particular mode, and their functional potentials and limitations. For instance, images may be better able than words to express relations and matters of degree (Lemke, 2002), and to evoke an immediate emotional response (Hill, 2004), whereas words appear to be more suited to the task of conveying causality and temporal sequence (Messaris, 1994). If the different modes allow different meanings to be conveyed, then it follows that 'each mode must also require different "cognitive work" in order to be understood' (Kress et al., 2001, p. 26), which of course has important implications for literacy education.

The majority of multimodal literacy scholars draw on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a model for analysing non-linguistic modes, arguing that these have their own 'grammars' and are able to fulfil the same three 'metafunctions' as language, but in their own distinctive forms (for example, Royce, 2007; Stenglin & Iedema, 2001). The 'ideational' metafunction accounts for the ways in which sign makers can express their experiences of events and states and the entities involved in them, the 'interpersonal' metafunction deals with the relations between sign producers and their audiences, and the 'textual' metafunction pertains to the options available for creating a recognizable kind of text out of individual parts. The meaning of multimodal texts is not simply additive, but multiplicative, since 'meanings made with each functional resource in each semiotic modality can modulate meanings of each kind in each other semiotic modality, thus *multiplying* the set of possible meanings that can be made' (Lemke, 1998, p. 92).

What unites all these 'new literacy' scholars is their insistence on a view of literacy as a situated social and cultural practice. Multiliteracies education must thus engage with students' own experience, but it must also incorporate the teaching of metalanguages, and the investigation of the cultural context of particular designs (Matthews, 2005). Young people today are commonly considered to be much more visually and multimodally literate than their parents' generation, due to the fact that they are now typically regularly exposed to the internet, computer games, and other digital technology from an early age. However, in every genre the various semiotic resources are likely to be brought into meaning-making in very different ways, so that a familiarity with computer games, for instance, does not necessarily imply an enhanced ability to read cartoons.

3. Young British adults' readings of a political cartoon

3.1. Study data and methods

The interview data used in this article was collected in the course of a small-scale research project which, through the use of political cartoons, explored attitudes of young adults in Bradford towards geopolitics (see also Hörschelmann, 2008a,b). Altogether, we conducted both individual and focus group interviews with 37 school and college students between the ages of 16 and 19 years, of both genders and mixed ethnic and educational backgrounds. The interviews were conducted in three main phases, which allowed us to focus on different current events, including the 2004 US Presidential elections, the London terrorist bombings in July 2005, and the November 2006 mid-term elections in the USA.

The data discussed in this article is from the final phase, when we interviewed 12 students, six each at the Rhodesway Sixth Form College and Thornton Grammar School in Bradford. The interviews took place shortly after the US mid-term elections on 7 November 2006, in which all House of Representatives seats and one-third of the Senate seats were contested, as well as several state governorships, and state and territorial legislatures. The election resulted in a sweeping victory for the Democratic Party, which captured the House of Representatives, the Senate, and a majority of governorships and state legislatures from the Republican Party. The continued occupation of Iraq, where violence was escalating, was a central issue in the election campaigns and was believed by many observers to have contributed greatly to the weak election results of the Republican Party. We used a total of five newspaper cartoons in these interviews, of which the cartoon discussed in this article (Figure 1) was judged to be particularly suited to a debate about multimodal literacy, because it uses transparent cultural references and it does not appear to require very detailed political background knowledge or the recognition of obscure personalities, and might thus, on the face of it, be considered a reasonably 'simple' text.

The semi-structured, one-to-one interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each. After explaining that the cartoons were about the recent mid-term elections in the USA, the cartoons were discussed one by one, using the entire newspaper page in order to ensure that at least some of the context was preserved. We used the same basic interview schedule, which consisted of a number of open and non-leading questions such as: 'Can you describe what you see in this cartoon?', 'What do you think the cartoonist wanted to say with this cartoon?', 'What are your own thoughts

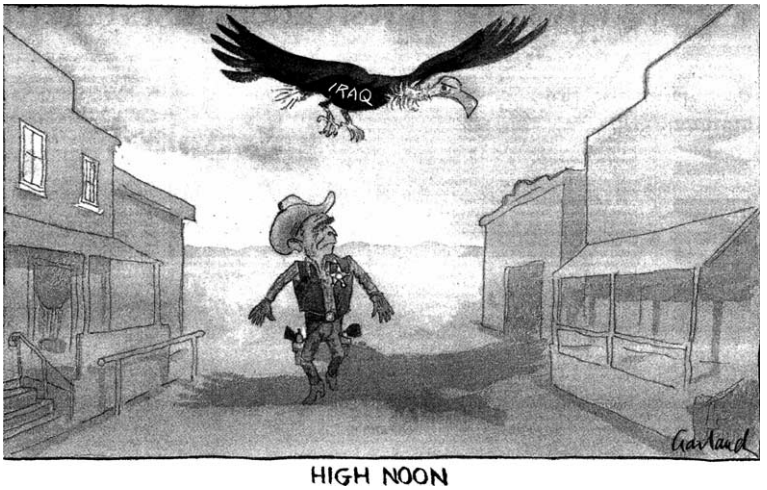


Figure 1. Nicholas Garland, *The Daily Telegraph*, 8 November 2006. Reprinted with permission.

and feelings when you look at it?' The questions were carefully organized to lead the conversation from general description and the establishment of reference to respondents' interpretation of and emotional responses to particular details (see also El Refaie, 2009).

3.2. Discussion: reading a political cartoon and multimodal literacy

Our analysis confirms that interpreting cartoons is a matter of drawing on many different types of literacy, which form the necessary preconditions for readers to be able to discover relevant connections between the fictional scene of a cartoon and a political argument. In this particular case, multimodal literacy included the ability (1) to establish the referents of a cartoon both on the level of the make-believe world and of the real-life world of current political events, (2) to impose a narrative on the cartoon image, and (3) to draw on intertextual references. As we will show at various points in the discussion, the whole reading process also required a familiarity with genre conventions and an understanding of common cultural symbols and the rhetorical figures of metonymy, metaphor, and irony.

3.2.1. Establishing the referents of a cartoon image on two levels of meaning

All our respondents were able to recognize the fictional setting in Figure 1 as that of the 'Wild West' or 'a cowboy town', and described the central characters in the cartoon as a cowboy or sheriff and a bird, although respondent L seemed a little unsure, talking of 'a city either Iraq or America (.) probably America (.) one of them cardboard houses'.[2] The reference to 'cardboard houses', in particular, makes it clear that the interviewees are here drawing on their awareness of cowboy film conventions rather than their real-life experiences. All the young people were also apparently aware of the genre convention that fictional settings in cartoons are

used as a way of saying something about personalities or events in the real world. In order to establish the real-world referents of cartoons, readers must generally be able to recognize the caricatured features of well-known politicians and personalities. Walker (1978) suggests that 'cartoonists quickly develop and fix a visual image of particular politicians', and that cartoonists tend to 'mine' each other's ideas (p. 8). As a result, readers who are not very well acquainted with the genre of political cartoons will probably struggle to recognize even some of the more commonly caricatured personalities. However, in our study the caricature of George Bush was recognized either immediately or in the course of the interview by almost all the participants, who mentioned the face in general and in particular the 'eyebrows' (seven), and the 'nose' (four) as identifying features. In some cases, the general context clearly played an important role in helping them to identify the US President:

Interviewer: So (.) is there anything that makes you specifically recognize George Bush?

K: [*laughs*] Erm it's the face it's definitely the face it's nothing to do with the body I think (.) it's just the fact that it's got Iraq written on the bird (.) I think that's what gives the game away (.) and it does look kind of like George Bush.

Only respondent D did not see the cowboy figure as representing George Bush, even though she thought it did look a bit like him. Instead of interpreting the cartoon as a representation of a particular character and a specific issue, this participant chose to interpret the two figures as general metonyms for the Iraqi and American people:

D: I think being a big bird it's not (.) it doesn't look friendly so it might be saying that Iraqis (.) Iraqians is that what they're called [*laughs*] erm they might be unfriendly and putting lots of pressure on the Americans (.) and he's trying to run away so he's escaping (.) and he might be representing the people in (.) the troops (.) a typical American or someone.

In the cartoon, the drawing of a vulture is supplemented by the verbal label 'Iraq', which here acts as a metonym for the invasion and occupation of the country by the US-led coalition. All the participants talked about a bird 'flying' or 'hovering' overhead, but only five of the 12 young people were able to recognize and name it specifically as a vulture. In this case, they were generally aware of the fact that vultures are scavengers and this fact tended to have a strong impact on the way they viewed the cartoon:

F: Well vultures (.) you know they go and pick off the dead bodies and things like that (.) so it's kind of like Iraq is gonna come back to get him (.) and it was a big mistake and the vulture's just gonna come (.) it's there it's circling his head and waiting for him to fall so it can come and get him.

H: A vulture is a big bird which eats dead carcasses and as he's the only one there (.) the vulture is encircling him and eventually it would start to peck away at him (.) it's Bush on his own with his weapons but still they may not help him against this huge vulture.

Five participants just talked about 'a bird' or 'a big bird', while two described it as a 'crow', and one as an 'eagle'. With some respondents, it was simply that they could not think of the right term, but in many other instances the students were apparently

not aware of the conventional meanings associated with this visual symbol. Clearly, this altered the meaning they attributed to the drawing:

> A: All of a sudden the eagle or whatever it is is there with Iraq on it (.) it's trying to attack George Bush because he's done a lot to him and he wants to get back at George Bush for what he's done to all the Iraqis dying.
>
> C: It looks like Iraq is the bird but it's like a burden (.) like 'cause it's a crow (.) is it a crow? (.) it's looked upon as evil (.) and it's just shadowing (.) is it George Bush? (.) like it just looks really overpowering and he looks really alone.

When the bird was not recognized as a vulture, the respondents sometimes seemed to find the whole image very confusing and struggled to understand what the connection between the bird and Iraq might be:

> D: well they've written Iraq over it so it's obviously representing Iraq (.) being a bird they are [*inaudible*] so it might be like Iraq is erm changing maybe or (.) moving (.) or I dunno something like that (.) and maybe it's showing that he wants to take control over the bird (.) or something like that [*laughs*].

The excerpts above show that the students came up with very different, even contrasting, readings of the same symbol, and that they tended to be unsure about their own interpretations, often suggesting several different possibilities and displaying a lot of uncertainty, hedging and sometimes embarrassed laughter in their discourse. In the case of political cartoons, multimodal literacy thus minimally includes a familiarity with the genre convention of two levels of reality and the ability to recognize and interpret common cultural symbols.

3.2.2. Imposing a narrative on the cartoon

The ability of single-panel images to evoke narrative meaning may seem surprising, since they apparently lack the ability to convey such central components of narrative as sequence and temporality. However, even one-panel cartoons can have narrative potential, because they encourage viewers to complete in their heads what is suggested by the depicted moment (Edwards, 1997, p. 43). Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 79) suggest that images can either be conceptual, in which case they represent participants in terms of their more generalized and timeless essences, or narrative, which means that they are about unfolding actions or events. In the latter case, the authors argue, the image is likely to contain one or more 'vectors', strong, often diagonal lines formed obliquely by depicted objects or people, which indicate the direction of an action (pp. 43–78). In fact, the 'visual grammar' of this image is – perhaps deliberately – quite ambivalent, as there is no strongly indicated vector, and therefore no clear directionality between the two main participants.

Although all 12 participants read the cartoon as involving some kind of conflict between the cowboy figure and the bird, there were differences regarding the ways in which this relationship was interpreted. Generally, the position of the bird above the George Bush figure was regarded as meaningful and interpreted as indicating an unequal power relationship between them:

> H: George Bush looks puzzled like he doesn't know what to do (.) the bird looks smug like I'm still in control over you (.) it's the one thing following him around that he can't quite get away from.
>
> Interviewer: What is their relationship to one another?

H: Not very good (.) the vulture is hanging over him and he's at the bottom which suggests a hierarchy (.) the vulture is black and it's casting a dark gloomy shadow over him.

A: He's [Bush] not looking happy but he's not looking down at all he's just like in the middle (.) he's probably assuming that he's not very high at the moment he's not really low but he's in the middle making his way up ... but I don't know why they've made him a cowboy because cowboys are supposed to be well and high.

This high level of agreement regarding the interpretation of 'up' and 'down' would indicate that there are certain orientational metaphors which are probably almost universally understood. According to conceptual metaphor theorists (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), our physical and cultural experience of the up–down orientation motivates a whole range of common metaphors, including

- High status is up/low status is down; and
- Having control or force is up/being subject to control is down.

Another powerful metaphor that seemed to evoke a common response was that of the vulture's shadow eclipsing the sun, which for several participants indicated a sense of danger and impending disaster. While some of the participants thus saw George Bush as frightened and threatened, others, by contrast, focused on his apparent insouciance in the face of danger and his willingness to use his guns to defend himself:

L: That bird (.) the way it's looking (.) it's like I know what you're gonna do.
Interviewer: Hmm (.) so how do you think George Bush is feeling?
L: Peed off (.) I just think he's about to pull his gun out.
Interviewer: Do you think he looks a bit sort of apprehensive?
L: Yeah I do, but (.) he's also looking as if you can't do anything because I have all the power.
Interviewer: So you think the guy looks =
J: =I don't know how he looks (.) like 'cos he's not scared (.) 'cos his hands are out (.) like he thinks he's hard (.) he's the sheriff [*laughs*]
Interviewer: So he's not really bothered about the bird?
J: No 'cos he's the sheriff I think he's like the president or something.

These two respondents clearly saw a lot of power attached to the position of sheriff/president. Only one young man seemed to be aware of the ironic meaning of showing Bush as the Sheriff, pointing out that the caricaturist had probably chosen this image because Bush comes from Texas. He also picked up on the negative connotations of the 'cowboy' image:

Interviewer: What do you think the cartoonist's attitude is towards the whole (.) topic?
I: That George Bush is just a cowboy who wants to carry on against Iraq (.) I think it's just sort of saying he's a cowboy and he doesn't like deserve to be president.

The responses to this thus indicate that multimodal literacy also involves being aware of the meaning potentials of certain visual design features. It may be helpful for educators to introduce some metalanguage, in order for instance for students to be able to distinguish between conceptual and narrative images and to describe the presence and directionality of any 'vectors'.

3.2.3. Finding relevant intertextual references

Generally, the interviewees did not seem to notice the caption to the cartoon ('High Noon'), and, when their attention was drawn to it by the interviewer, they often did not know how to interpret this at all, apart from referring to the time of day. *High Noon* is a 1952 western film directed by Fred Zinnemann and starring Gary Cooper and Grace Kelly. It tells the story of a newly-married marshal, past his prime and already retired, who is abandoned by the townspeople he had loyally protected for many years and is forced to confront a revenge-seeking killer and his gang on his own.

Two of the white male respondents did make some connection to the Western film genre, talking about the 'shoot out' (I) or 'gun slinging contest' (F) that generally seems to happen around noon in these movies. However, nobody seemed to know the specific film *High Noon*, or at least they did not explicitly make the connection. Perhaps partly as a consequence of this, the aspect of loneliness was only picked up by two respondents (H and C).

A young woman who was studying English Literature discovered another intertextual reference, which apparently resulted from her inexperience with the political cartoon genre and the perception that the content of cartoons is always linked to an accompanying article. In this case, the article immediately below the cartoon carried the headline: 'Of cows and men: or, how science let the genie out of the test tube', and respondent B immediately recognized the reference to the title of John Steinbeck's novella *Of Mice and Men* and applied what she knew about the novel to the content of the cartoon:

B: I don't really get the headline so I'd probably then read this [*reads*] summat about babies innit? How they create 'em (.) I think they've used this because like in *Of Mice and Men* one of the characters is a big killer but he doesn't do it purposely because he's disabled isn't he (.) so it's saying (.) is this meant to be Bush, yeah?

Interviewer: Aha.

B: Yeah I think it's saying [*laughs*] he's a bit disabled and all this stuff with the fertility and all this (.) he's just gonna kill people like he's done with Iraq [*laughs*].

While this student was led by the headline of the article below the cartoon to interpret it in relation to an unrelated text, we were equally surprised by the fact that few of our respondents made the link to the mid-term elections, despite being told at the outset that the cartoons were taken from around the time of those elections. Only one student suggested that Iraq was a key determinant of the elections:

F: and Iraq during this mid-term elections is (.) circling like a vulture (.) he's about to have a (.) like a gun slinging contest with the other person from the mid-term elections (.) and Iraq is just waiting for him to fall.

Thus, while participants brought their views on the war in Iraq to bear on their cartoon interpretations, they rarely made the link to more immediate political events. These findings indicate that multimodal literacy includes the ability to understand distinctive genre conventions, such as the degree to which cartoons are likely to relate to specific rather than general political events, and the ways in which they are able to reference other texts, including any accompanying articles.

If cartoons are to be used as part of a more general programme of literacy education, we would thus recommend that pedagogues start by getting students to consider cartoons in their socio-cultural context, including their communicative purposes and the power structures within which they operate. Typical features of persuasive texts such as metaphor and irony should perhaps be discussed in general terms before dealing with specific examples. It may also be helpful to incorporate the teaching of metalanguages, allowing students to become more aware of particular ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings and the multiplication of meanings through the combination of modes. Students may also need assistance with factual information, although this should not be seen as the most relevant aspect of literacy. Ideally, students could also be encouraged to create their own cartoons on a subject that reflects their perceptions of what constitutes 'the political'.

Conclusion

Our study suggests that political cartoons can provide a good way of overcoming some of the barriers to young people's engagement with political issues in an interview situation. Often, it is the perception that they do not know enough about 'politics', combined with their sense of lacking political power, that stops young people from engaging more actively as citizens, giving rise to the impression that they are politically apathetic. Discussing cartoons with the Bradford students showed us that even those who describe themselves explicitly as not interested in politics hold strong views on issues that go beyond national governance and party politics, like the war in Iraq.

However, we also discovered that many of the young people found it hard to make sense of the cartoons we were using as triggers. The example discussed in this article shows that reading cartoons seems to require a whole range of literacies, including a broad knowledge of past and current events, a familiarity with genre conventions and visual 'grammar', and experience of thinking analytically about real-world events and circumstances. Cartoonists also often use symbols, metaphors, and metonyms which they assume to be commonly understood, but which many of our respondents found difficult to grasp. The same is true of irony, which apparently requires sophisticated thought processes. Another feature of many cartoons which makes them particularly challenging is their tendency to use intertextual references, which presupposes a broad cultural literacy and an ability to discover unexpected connections.

Our findings offer support to the claim that interpreting multimodal texts is certainly no less, and often more complex than reading purely verbal texts. The fact that young people are typically exposed to a large quantity of digital materials does not necessarily mean that they will be more multimodally literate than their parents' generation. Every genre uses different modal resources in specific combinations, so that the skills acquired in relation to one type of text is not always directly transferable onto another. Perhaps the main aim of multimodal literacy education should thus be to increase the transferability of literacies by making students more aware of their own reading practices.

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Notes

1. Overall, we used a total of 10 cartoons for the individual interviews and a further eight cartoons for the focus groups.
2. The respondents were randomly allocated a letter in order to protect their anonymity. The symbol (.) in the transcriptions indicates a hesitation or pause in the respondents' delivery; underlined words are those which were emphasized; '?' indicates rising intonation rather than a grammatical question.

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