

Educating the Young Child

Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice

Marilyn J. Narey *Editor*

# Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood

The Creative and Critical "Art" of Making  
Meaning



Springer

# **Educating the Young Child**

Advances in Theory and Research, Implications  
for Practice

Volume 12

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Marilyn J. Narey

Editor

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of Making Meaning

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*Editor*

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## Foreword

When it comes to learning, there is no “one size fits all.” While this assertion may seem to be common sense, the daily reality of children’s lives in schools frequently stands in stark contrast to this basic precept. In recent years, the divide between play-based approaches and didactic approaches to instruction during early childhood has, if anything, grown wider and deeper. The Alliance for Childhood (2009) found that, in US kindergartens, the time allocated to direct instruction in literacy with print and mathematics was six times the amount of time allocated for child-initiated and child-directed activity. The early childhood curriculum has narrowed considerably in the wake of the standards movement. To illustrate, an observational study of 450 pre-K through second grade students found that children spent approximately 40% of their school day listening and watching and a little over 27% of their time completing written assignments. Direct instruction by teachers was observed 55.2% of the time, and play-based learning activity was observed less than 1% of the total classroom day (Alford, Rollins, Padron & Waxman, 2015).

As a result, contemporary teachers are caught in a philosophy-reality conflict (Hatch & Freeman, 1988); in other words, there frequently is a discrepancy between educators’ beliefs about optimal learning conditions during early childhood and what young learners are expected to do (Cross & Conn-Powers, 2014). This dichotomy results in considerable consternation because, if teachers unquestioningly do as they are told, they fail to reach and teach diverse groups of young children. On the other hand, if teachers openly resist the mounting pressures to teach to the test, they risk the disapproval of administrators and policymakers. When educators assert a more child-centered philosophy, those in power frequently cite “evidence-based practice” as their claim to authority. These claims, however, are seldom founded on a thorough understanding of a complex body of research. The very fact that some stakeholders refer to evidence-based practice—as if there were only one, right pedagogy—underscores the flaws in this argument. As this book will so cogently argue, there are many paths to learning. Multimodal experiences, particularly those focused upon the development of children’s capacities to produce and interpret visual texts, are critical to twenty-first-century learning. Expert teachers

draw upon multiple modes—rather than blindly adhere to a single approach—because this is the way to ensure that all children experience success as learners.

As the authors of this volume amply demonstrate, there is a way to avoid the rocky shoals of polarization and find a place where teachers can deftly navigate the needs of young learners and, at the same time rely on a complex body of research. Stated plainly, it is possible to respect young children’s ways of knowing while meeting academic standards. Indeed, contemporary early childhood education reconciles theory, research, and practice. It can be defined as “a decision-making process that integrates the best available research evidence with family and professional wisdom and values” (Buisse, Wesley, Snyder, & Winton, 2006, p. 3).

The problem with unrelenting teacher-directed, overly didactic methods focused upon verbocentric views of language, literacy, and learning is that they gloss over individual differences in learners and undermine learner engagement in the process. If we define engagement as “the amount of time children spend interacting with adults, peers, and materials in a developmentally and contextually appropriate manner” (McWilliam & Casey, 2008, p. 3), then it is easy to understand why teachers cannot afford to sacrifice it. There is a large, consistent body of evidence to suggest that active engagement in learning yields more positive learner outcomes, including improved behavior, better social interactions, and higher student achievement (Brown & Mowry 2015; Kelly & Turner 2009; McWilliam & Casey 2008). Indeed, much of the power of multimodal approaches has to do with their capacity to more fully engage diverse groups of young learners. Respecting young learners exerts a positive effect on the three components of learner engagement, namely, (1) interest, (2) concentration, and (3) enjoyment (Shernoff, 2013). When children are regarded as meaning makers, they “see and feel the benefit of their teachers listening to them, collaborating with them,” and this “has a positive impact on their engagement, motivation, and personal development” (Quinn & Owen, 2014, p. 19).

In 2009, when the first book on multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning was published for the *Educating the Young Child* series, it was enthusiastically received by early childhood educators. Now, based on the success of that edited volume, the editor has worked with a distinguished group of educators from throughout the world to revisit the timely and important topic of young children as meaning makers. Multimodal approaches hold the greatest promise for reconciling the dichotomies that are divisive in the field of early childhood education: teacher directed vs. child directed, play based vs. standards based, and covering the curriculum vs. reaching and teaching all children. Meeting the needs of diverse groups of young learners calls upon early childhood educators worldwide to base decisions not on sound bites from empirical research or unexamined past practices but on a best evidence synthesis of current theory, research, and practice. The latter is what this book is all about.

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# Preface

In 2009, *Making Meaning: Constructing Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning Through Arts-Based Early Childhood Education* was published as the second title in the scholarly series, *Educating the Young Child*. The explicit focus upon multimodal language, literacy, and learning put forth in that original edition set it apart from other books on early childhood literacy and/or arts, and the book's unique "multimodal" frame continues to draw wide interest across the globe. The book's enduring appeal and persistent relevance to a broad international readership prompted the development of this second edition with a new title that underscores the emphasis on multimodal understandings of children's meaning-making through visual textual forms.

## **New Voices Expand Second Edition**

Expanding the innovative lens of multimodal meaning-making that distinguished the 2009 text, this second edition, entitled *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical "Art" of Making Meaning*, brings together additional voices from around the globe. New chapters by respected authors from Slovenia, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, and the United States, along with updated versions of several foundational chapters from the original volume, offer readers important insights into the role of visual textual forms in developing multimodal constructs of language, literacy, and learning. As in the first edition, this text offers a provocative sampling of perspectives constructed by talented authors whose fields of expertise include literacy, semiotics, the arts and arts education, child development, museum education, technology, psychology, creativity, and early childhood education. Informed by their years of professional experience as teachers, teacher educators, artists, administrators, and researchers, the authors bring authentic understandings of the children, adults, and contexts about which they write.

The new chapters were purposefully selected to build upon the ideas and contextual perspectives that were advanced in the first edition. From exploring how a young child from China engages in art making to make meaning of his immigrant experience in Australia to examining how teachers explicitly teach the process of multimodal meaning-making through dialogue and the analysis of YouTube videos and from engaging young children as coresearchers with their mother to providing insights into working with children in crisis, the new contributors to the second edition extend the range of contexts and topics that enriched the original volume. As readers seek to provide educational quality for all young children in our increasingly complex world, *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical “Art” of Making Meaning* presents the opportunity to examine the wide range of thought-provoking ideas that these distinguished authors have explored in a variety of early childhood contexts.

## **Purpose of the Book**

As articulated in the first edition, the purpose of this volume is threefold: (1) to provoke readers to examine their current understandings of language, literacy, and learning through a multimodal lens; (2) to provide a starting point for constructing broader, multimodal views of what it might mean to “make meaning”; and (3) to underscore the production and interpretation of visual texts as meaning-making processes that are especially critical to early childhood education in a twenty-first-century global society.

## **Primary Audience**

The focus of this book (from its title to the selection of issues examined in its chapters) is purposefully approached in a manner that will appeal to a broad and diverse audience. University-based educators will find this scholarly edition a valuable text for graduate coursework and an excellent supplement for advanced undergraduate courses. Like the first edition, this second edition is an important resource for students in a variety of teacher education programs, including early childhood, language/literacy, art, and museum education. Further, professional development providers, administrators, and professional learning networks (PLNs) will discover that *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical “Art” of Making Meaning* is a rich volume for in-service professional study. Additionally, the new edition offers researchers and scholars a diverse sampling of studies from across the globe and provides early childhood advocates and policymakers with critical insights into early childhood language, literacy, and learning.

## Unique Multimodal Perspective

Unlike some other texts that address art or literacy learning in early childhood, *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical “Art” of Making Meaning* is unique in that the volume’s multimodal lens:

- Challenges the early childhood education community to reexamine commonly-held beliefs about children’s visual texts (“art”) and traditional definitions of “literacy”
- Demonstrates how multimodal meaning-making processes are critical to children’s development, twenty-first-century education, and issues of social justice
- Presents a rich sampling of international perspectives by distinguished authors from varied disciplines who work in early childhood contexts across the globe
- Features authentic examples of research-based practices with toddlers and preschool- and elementary school-aged children in diverse environments
- Underscores the integral role of educators, parents, and policymakers in supporting young children’s multimodal meaning-making processes

Further, the concept of multimodal “meaning-making” presented in this book is not limited to the processes and products of children, but also encompasses ways adults across multiple fields of education work to make meaning, for example, co-constructing and evaluating curriculum, theorizing and developing research methodologies for studying children’s work, investigating contextual influences, or designing preservice teacher development.

## Organization of Book

This second edition begins with a new foreword by **Mary Renck Jalongo**, a distinguished scholar in early childhood education, the editor in chief of the *Early Childhood Education Journal*, and a co-editor of Springer International’s book series, *Educating the Young Child: Advances in Theory and Research, Implications for Practice*. Following the organizational structure of the original volume, the body of this new edition is arranged into three main parts: *Beyond Words, Contexts and Layered Texts*, and *Visions*. Extending the original format of the work, editor, **Marilyn J. Narey**, bookends these three parts with her new introductory chapter, “The Creative ‘Art’ of Making Meaning,” and adds a concluding chapter, “Multimodal Visions: Bringing ‘Sense’ to Our 21st Century Texts.” Dr. Narey’s introduction offers a starting point for constructing multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning, as she lays out the foundational understandings of the relevant constructs: meaning-making, multimodality, and creativity. Citing the disconnect between the proliferation of visual textual forms encountered within our twenty-first-century culture and the verbocentric orientation of many adults who

influence young children's learning, she supports the book's designated focus on visual textual forms (drawing, 3D models, photographs, sculpture, digital images). Her authentic examples of multimodal adult-child interactions during early phases of a toddler's drawing development offer informative insights for both early childhood professionals and parents and give practical form to the discussions of theory and research. In her concluding chapter Chap. 16, Dr. Narey draws attention to the challenges in undertaking a work that advocates for a multimodal view of teaching and learning, including the education community's seeming confusion surrounding the construct of multimodality, as well as the modal limitations of a traditional book format. She then underscores how the book's authors meet these challenges with their cogent descriptions and their thoughtfully selected images. Dr. Narey goes on to integrate these contributing authors' diverse and compelling accounts of children's experiences with visual texts into a synthesis of ideas that inspire further development of individual and collective multimodal visions. These new introductory and concluding pieces by the editor serve to adeptly frame the informative and insightful chapters that make up the body of the book in Parts One through Three: *Beyond Words, Contexts and Layered Texts, and Visions*.

### ***Part One: Beyond Words***

The chapters included in *Part One: Beyond Words* engage the reader in considering the diverse functions of children's multimodal meaning-making. Within these individual works, authors examine how children work to understand emerging problems encountered in their world, including explorations of identity, society, and the physical world. **Margaret Brooks'** Chap. 2, "Drawing to Learn" (reprinted from the first edition), demonstrates how multimodal approaches to learning promote children's higher mental functions as they explore common objects and pursue ideas generated through multimodal processes. Through her analysis of her 5-year-old students' evolving drawings of flashlights and light trap constructions, Dr. Brooks provides insights into how children's simple spontaneous concepts of the physical world give way to more complex and sophisticated understandings as they seek to make meaning through individual and collaborative multimodal investigations. Chapter 3 brings the distinguished voice and expertise of **James Haywood Rolling, Jr.**, to the scholarly discussion of multimodal meaning-making. Bridging children's outer and inner worlds, Dr. Rolling recounts his experiences as a teacher working to encourage young children's meaning-making in a New York City elementary school art studio. In his chapter, "Sacred Structures: Assembling Meaning, Constructing Self," Dr. Rolling demonstrates the critical role of a pedagogy of "structures supplanting structures," through poignant stories that reveal children's explorations of their own changing identities within shifting and evolving notions of the societies to which they belong and help to create. Chapter 4 is an updated version of "Creating a Critical Multiliteracies Curriculum: Repositioning Art in the Early Childhood Classroom" by **Linda K. Crafton, Penny Silvers, and Mary Brennan**. This powerful example of a multimodal, arts-based approach to teaching

critical literacy in a first grade classroom focuses upon a carefully constructed community of practice built on social justice and identity development. In Chap. 5, **Kristine Sunday** underscores the relational process of children's drawing. Dr. Sunday argues for the interconnectedness of modalities, underscoring that one modality cannot be addressed without the other. Through examples of children in kindergarten through grade three working in the collaborative space of a Saturday art program on a university campus, she demonstrates how the social practices of making meaning are highlighted and extended.

## ***Part Two: Contexts and Layered Texts***

*Part Two: Contexts and Layered Texts* includes chapters focused upon the authors' explorations into the diverse and often complex environments that influence children's multimodal meaning-making. This second part of the book begins with Chap. 6, in which **Susanna Kinnunen** and **Johanna Einarsdóttir** offer intimate insights into working with young children in the home, as the mother, a researcher, engages her young daughters as coresearchers of their drawings of their daily lives. Through rich examples drawn from Dr. Kinnunen's research diary, video, and other data, the authors share the evolving multimodal stories that surface in their ongoing research. In Chap. 7, "Young Children's Drawing and Storytelling: Multimodal Transformations that Help to Mediate Complex Sociocultural Worlds," **Rosemary Richards** presents her research of how a young boy from China engages in art making to make meaning of his immigrant experience in Australia. Dr. Richards contrasts the child's experiences at school and at home to offer insights into how children's visual texts can facilitate meaning-making in ways that support children's social identity. Next, an intergenerational art class for elders and young children in Canada provides the context for **Rachel Heydon's** and **Susan O'Neill's** presentation of their ongoing research in Chap. 8. In this work, "Children, Elders, and Multimodal Curricula: Semiotic Possibilities and the Imperative of Relationship," coauthors Heydon and O'Neill offer discussion surrounding the need to bring elders and preschool-aged children together and to provide opportunities for using communication technology as a means of expanding literacy options for both groups. In Chap. 9, **Brigita Strnad** focuses on the art museum as the context for multimodal meaning-making. Descriptions of educational activities at Maribor Art Gallery in Slovenia offer valuable understandings of how adults and children interact with the visual texts of contemporary artists. As senior curator and head of the museum's education department, she brings an exciting perspective that is relevant to parents and early childhood professionals, alike. In Chap. 10, "Children in Crisis: Transforming Fear into Hope Through Multimodal Literacy," **Donalyn Heise** focuses upon the critical subject of creating supportive learning contexts for children who are experiencing homelessness. Dr. Heise offers examples from years of research into a variety of settings where she worked with learners who were homeless to illustrate how multimodal meaning contributes to resilience and transformation of perspectives.

### ***Part Three: Visions***

In *Part Three: Visions*, the authors look to the future as they investigate strategies to develop early childhood teachers' understandings of how children's many languages, literacies, and learning may be developed through the arts. First, in Chap. 11, **Kimberly M. Sheridan** presents her updated chapter featuring the Studio Thinking Framework derived from research at Harvard University's Project Zero. Dr. Sheridan explains how eight studio habits of mind, typically developed in intensive high school art classes, can also be encouraged in the early childhood classroom. She describes how applying a Studio Thinking Framework to common activities, such as block building or drawing, contributes to young children's meaning-making as children become more observant, engaged, reflective on their work, and willing to explore and express ideas. In this updated chapter, Dr. Sheridan shares an example from her recent research in the MAKESHOP space at the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh to illustrate how the studio approach works in early childhood contexts. In Chap. 12, **Christina Davidson, Susan J. Danby, and Karen Thorpe** explore practices necessary for educators to support children's multimodal meaning-making during classroom use of digital technologies. In their chapter, "'Uh oh'—Multimodal Meaning Making During Viewing of YouTube Videos in Preschool," the authors demonstrate their use of conversation analysis to investigate the multimodal resources employed by the children and their teacher to accomplish individual and shared understandings of video events and extended opportunities for children's learning. Next, in their updated chapter from the first edition, **Kathy Danko-McGhee** and **Ruslan Slutsky** draw attention to the importance of providing stimulating classroom environments that support and promote children's meaning-making. They implement, examine, and compare two approaches to determine the greatest impact on the preservice teachers' abilities to plan environments and discuss the results. Chapter 14 offers insight into the crucial role of teacher educators as **Kelli Jo Kerry-Moran** reflects upon her 10-year journey striving to incorporate multimodal literacy into the teacher education classroom. Dr. Kerry-Moran's ongoing quest to understand multiliteracies and bring meaning-making into preservice education highlights challenges in changing prevailing teaching approaches and altering rigid curriculum paradigms. In Chap. 15, "'Struggling Learner'...or Struggling Teacher?," **Marilyn J. Narey** critiques current early childhood teacher preparation as she examines common "theories in use" regarding children's visual texts ("art") and poses the question: *does teacher education adequately prepare early childhood professionals with the substantive arts learning needed to support young children in multimodal language, literacy, and learning?* Flipping the problem frame to position the adult as "struggling," rather than the child, she suggests structures for critical review of early childhood teacher education programs and practices.

***Second Edition Continues to Encourage Multimodal Perspectives of Meaning Making***

From the introduction, through these chapters in *Beyond Words, Contexts and Layered Texts*, and *Visions*, to the final concluding chapter, this second edition work, *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical “Art” of Making Meaning*, evolves to reveal nuances of theory, research, and practice. As we continue forward in the new millennium, these diverse chapters, individually and collectively, offer starting points for each of us in our global early childhood education community to construct, and reconstruct, our multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning as we make meaning with our young children and with each other.

Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Marilyn J. Narey

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# Chapter 1

## The Creative “Art” of Making Meaning

Marilyn J. Narey

**Abstract** Visually rich digital and media-based texts feature prominently within the educational discourse on preparing learners for their twenty-first century global futures. In discussions of young children’s learning, many early literacy professionals now express familiarity with the term multimodality, although not necessarily a substantive understanding of its application to practice. In this introductory chapter, I offer a starting point for constructing multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning by focusing on the creative “art” of making meaning. Noting the dual use of the term “art,” I draw attention to the notion of making meaning as an “art” and, secondly, to the point that visual images (frequently synonymous with “art”) have become a particularly critical feature of engagement as we prepare children to navigate the changes and challenges of our millennium. I briefly explore relevant constructs: meaning-making, multimodality, and creativity and provide an overview of early phases of young children’s visual language development. Through an insightful description of the multimodal meaning-making processes that emerged in adult-child interactions surrounding a toddler’s early scribbles, I offer authentic illustration of theory in practice. Citing the disconnect between the proliferation of visual textual forms encountered within in our twenty-first century culture and the verbocentric orientation of many adults who influence young children’s learning, I purposefully highlight social justice concerns that problematize the issue of meaning-making in early childhood education relative to adults’ misperceptions of art and children’s image-making.

**Keywords** Textual form • Twenty-first century learning • Visual language • Multimodality • Multiliteracies • Sensemaking • Creativity • Scribbling • Stage theory • Art-based learning • Semiotic perspective • Synaesthesia • Social justice • Democratic societies • Difference • Digital literacy • Adult-child interactions • Toddler • Cognitive development • Critical thinking

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## A Starting Point for Making Meaning

Daniel leaps up from the floor where he has been sprawled among his papers and markers and races towards me, excitedly waving his latest drawing. “Mommy! Mommy! See pirate ship!” I pull him onto my lap as we look at the lines that my toddler has created and, now, named.

I begin this chapter by focusing upon a critical point in a child’s cognitive development: the child’s realization that marks have the potential to convey meaning. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Daniel did not intend to draw a pirate ship that day. Rather, he was making lines when, suddenly, he perceived within the marks something that he recognized as the essence of what he understood to be a pirate ship (Fig. 1.1). Contemplating that the basis for all language, literacy, and learning is making meaning from a rich array of signs, it is quite exciting when a child first comes to this understanding. Recognizing that marks convey meaning empowers children to engage in the world in new ways. Yet, controversies persist over how we support their development across textual forms in our twenty-first century.

**Fig. 1.1** Image created during Daniel’s milestone literacy event at age of 25 months. The toddler drew lines, then named the scribble “pirate ship”



## ***Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Perspectives***

The sense you make of a text does not depend first of all on the marks on the paper. It depends on the sense you bring to it. (Goodman, 1996, p. 1)

Ken Goodman (1996) inspired a generation of literacy professionals with his contention that the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding written language “exists largely because people have started in the wrong place, with letters, letter-sound relationships and words. We must begin instead by looking at reading in the real world, at how readers and writers try to make sense with each other” (p. 2–3). Goodman’s research focused upon reading verbal texts and his early work (see Goodman, 1967, 1986, 1993) triggered what has become known as the “reading wars,” a decades-long educational and political controversy between advocates for whole language approaches to reading (emphasizing meaning) and proponents for phonics-based instruction (focusing on decoding letters/sounds).

In this chapter, I extend Goodman’s argument to propose that we need to focus on “sensemaking” within and across all textual forms and, along with this, to “make sense” of the broad “texts” of our teaching and learning. Definitions put forth in the first edition of this book, reflect my ongoing stance:

- A language is a system of communication structured by its rules of signification, or “meaning-making.” Languages can be constructed in a variety of sensory modalities/representational modes, not limited to human speech and writing.
- Literacy describes a person’s ability to make/interpret meaningful signs in a particular representational mode/textual form (e.g., print, image, film, etc.).
- Learning is the process of making sense or creating meaning from experience. (Narey, 2009, p. 2)

To these, I add several other provisional definitions for terms that are relevant to foundational understandings of this chapter and to the overall perspective articulated in this second edition:

- Creativity is a theoretical construct for a human phenomenon of thought and action emerging from *seeing the need for change, generating ideas for change, and enacting change* (Narey, 2008; 2014).
- An “art” is the creative exploration of an idea and the communication of that idea through one or more textual forms (Narey, 2002).
- Texts are objects, actions, or events that can be created and interpreted. This definition broadens the construct to include dance, photographs, or web pages as textual forms. Further, within this definition, a classroom or a teaching episode also may be viewed as a “text.”

Consistent with my position regarding “sensemaking” within and across modes and modalities, the goal in this chapter (and the volume) is not to cover all possible textual forms, but rather, to examine the creative “art” of meaning-making. Employing a dual use of the term “art,” I imply that making meaning is an “art,” and, secondly, I signal my focus on the visual textual forms that are often associated with “art.” This focus on visual texts does not mean that the textual forms typically categorized within the performing arts (e.g., music, dance, film) offer less important opportunities for children’s production and interpretation. Multimodal perspectives

embrace language, literacy, and learning in and across all modes. However, in order to examine “sensemaking” as comprehensively as possible within a single volume, this book’s concentration on visual textual forms allows for a greater diversity among other important variables (e.g., purposes, contexts).

I further support my designated focus on visual textual forms (drawing, 3D models, photographs, sculpture, digital images) by citing the disconnect between the proliferation of images encountered within our twenty-first century culture and the verbocentric orientation of many adults who influence young children’s learning. Focusing discussions of multimodal meaning-making around visual textual forms and providing substantive understandings of visual language development and learning addresses the growing concern that the preparation of early childhood educators has been narrowly directed to written verbal modes (reading and writing), thus limiting these adults’ capacities for engaging in multimodal content and pedagogy that effectively support twenty-first century learning.

Therefore, this chapter, like the others in this volume, will deal with meaning-making surrounding children’s visual textual forms and the multiple modalities that contribute to these meaning-making processes. To this end, I begin with a brief overview of textual forms and multimodality. Then, following Ken Goodman’s aforementioned line of thinking regarding verbal texts, I note how confusion and misunderstanding in education are often the result of “starting in the wrong place.” As I discuss textual forms and modalities for meaning-making within the current cultural milieu, I specifically highlight adults’ frequently observed misperceptions: of art, of children’s image-making, and of multimodality, as an issue of social justice. Next, I provide a foundation for understanding children’s early meaning-making with visual texts and the adult’s role in supporting this making meaning process. Finally, I explore meaning-making as a creative thought and action to argue that preparing children to navigate the changes and challenges of our millennium requires us to construct multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning.

## **Textual Forms and Modalities for Making Meaning**

Throughout history, humans have drawn upon visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities to produce and consume varied forms of texts. From ancient storytelling traditions to modern web pages on the Internet, people have attempted to make meaning through image, sound, gesture, and touch. Cultural beliefs and values influence textual production and consumption as needs and purposes are set against resources, technologies, and access. Over time, inevitable cultural shifts precipitate changes in textual forms and functional modalities for making meaning. Most recently, advances in digital technology and widespread media use have triggered the latest cultural shift wherein graphic resources (e.g., photographs, video, charts) function as primary forms of communication (Kress, 1997/2005; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Not only have new technologies (e.g., computers, Internet) provoked questions regarding textual forms and functional modalities for learning, they also have brought forth issues of access frequently framed as the “digital

divide” (Cuban, 2001). Therefore, as we engage in discussions of education in early childhood, it is useful to explore the cultural milieu from which educational perspectives emerge, so that we do not become distracted by simplistic delineations of academic achievement in current practice or embroiled in arguments over an implied superiority of particular textual forms or modalities. Further, critical reflection on practice is necessary to ensure that we are focused on “sensemaking,” and not, as Goodman suggested with verbal literacy, “starting in the wrong place” as we develop our multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning surrounding children’s production and interpretation of visual texts.

### ***Language, Literacy, and Learning in the New Millennium***

In 1994, ten scholars came together in New London, New Hampshire, to discuss “what was happening in the world of communications and what was happening (or not happening but perhaps should happen) in the teaching of language and literacy in schools” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009a, p. 164). Two years later, this “New London Group” of scholars published the results of their collaboration, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* (New London Group, 1996), in which they presented “a theoretical overview of the connections between the changing social environment facing students and teachers and a new approach to literacy pedagogy that they call ‘multiliteracies’” (p. 60). Their manifesto initiated widespread attention to the increasing disconnect between education’s narrow monomodal emphasis on the written word and the impending rich, multimodal literacy landscape of the twenty-first century. Claiming that the “fundamental purpose” of education “is to ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life” (p. 60), the New London Group argued that multimodal literacy pedagogy is critical to full participation in twenty-first century global democratic societies. Yet, as they further noted, perspectives of literacy teaching and learning at the close of the twentieth century had grown increasingly monomodal, a view that they claimed “will characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian form of pedagogy” (p. 64), rather than embodying the participatory stance required for preparing a thriving democracy.

### **Framing Multimodal Literacy as a Social Justice Issue**

In a review of their original work, two members of the New London Group, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (2009a), clarified their position with further cautions:

Patterns of exclusion remain endemic. And even in the heart of the new economy...people who find their difference makes them an outsider, however subtle—find their aspirations to social mobility hitting “glass ceilings”. In this case, a pedagogy of multiliteracies may go one step further to help create conditions of critical understanding of the discourses of work and power,.... (p. 170–171)

If we, like the New London Group, believe that the purpose of education is to provide learning that will enable all students to fully participate in public, community, and economic life, then literacy pedagogy that privileges the written word is a social justice concern because (1) it leads to institutional practices that disenfranchise persons and cultural groups whose skills and knowledge are grounded in, or facilitated by, other modalities and (2) it generates curricula and instruction that fails to provide the general population of learners an effective means of critically responding to the powerful visual/media influences of contemporary culture (Narey, 2009). Within this problem frame, the concern goes beyond merely providing children with access to technologies or increased opportunities for “art-making.”

Noting the failure of verbocentric systems to support the powerful learning that can advance all students and our society in the twenty-first century, Cope and Kalantzis (2009a) argue, “the consequences of narrowing of representation and communication to the exclusive study of written language (sound-letter correspondences, parts of speech and the grammar of sentences, literary works and the like) are more serious” (p. 177) than just denying some learners access to the multiple modalities necessary for twenty-first century economies. Underscoring that synaesthesia, the process of shifting between modes to represent and re-represent the same thing, makes for powerful learning, they go on contend that schools continue to focus only on one mode and, thus, fail many learners:

...we have to take learner subjectivities into account, we encounter a panoply of human differences which we simply can't ignore any longer—material (class, locale), corporeal (race, gender, sexuality, dis/ability) and circumstantial (culture, religion, life experience, interest, affinity). In fact, not dealing with difference means exclusion of those who don't fit the norm. It means ineffectiveness, inefficiencies and thus wasted resources in a form of teaching which does not engage with each and every learner in a way that will optimise their performance outcomes. It even cheats the learners who happen to do well—those whose favoured orientation to learning the one-size-suits all curriculum appears to suit—by limiting their exposure to the cosmopolitan experience of cultural and epistemological differences so integral to the contemporary world. (p. 188)

Other scholars and researchers (e.g., Hanafin et al. 2002; Millard & Marsh, 2001; Narey, 2009; Olson, 1992; Siegel, 2006, 2012) express similar concerns and call attention to this failure to address learners' literacy differences. Further, multimodal texts exert a powerful influence upon children and adults not only in the promotion of products but also in the advancement of beliefs and values (Barrett, 2003; Chung, 2005; Kilbourne, 2000). Verbocentric literacy pedagogy is a discriminatory practice that does little to advance democracies in the twenty-first century. While there has been increasing attention to critical literacy development in secondary schools, such development must more fully take into account multimodal texts in both print (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and nonprint forms (e.g., film, video, and Internet websites), and as Crafton et al. (2009) argue, multimodal critical literacy development can and should begin in early childhood.

## **A Mix of Accountability, Digital Literacy Initiatives, and Embedded Beliefs**

Since the New London Group (1996) put forth their call for a multiliteracies approach to pedagogy, there has been a recognizable movement within the literacy field to embrace multimodality. As Marjorie Siegel (2012) points out, “It is increasingly rare to open a professional journal or attend a conference without encountering the argument that multimodality is central to literate practice everywhere except schools” (p. 671). Many have made similar observations: multimodality has garnered a great deal of attention in the current professional discourse, yet schools seem to remain entrenched in outdated literacy practices (see Cope & Kalantzis, 2009b; Gee, 2004). It is widely accepted that the primary reason for this is the culture of accountability that prevails in the United States and other nations across the globe. Emphasis on the demands of high-stakes testing that narrowly measure reading and math skills seems to have left little time or motivation for educators to move toward a multiliteracies perspective.

The one area in which schools appear to have responded to the changing landscape has been in their uneven attempts to implement so-called “digital literacy” initiatives: purchasing iPads and 3D printers, incorporating packaged literacy software, or teaching learners to create videos or to code. Yet, even when schools tout such efforts as “twenty-first century learning,” closer inspection reveals that the emphasis is on technology skills, not the multimodal literacy that is so critical to education for the new millennium (Wolfe & Flewitt, 2010). New media does not necessarily equate to “new learning” or higher order thinking: “institutions have an enormous capacity to assimilate new forms without fully exploiting their affordances” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009b, p. 88). Further, while the impetus behind schools’ digital literacy initiatives is, in many cases, an attempt to address issues of learner access to the new multiliteracies environment, Prinsloo (2005) contends:

‘Digital divide’ logic overemphasizes the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of other factors that allow people to use ICT for meaningful ends (p. 94)... it encourages simple digital solutions...focused on getting people exposed to basic techniques of coding speech and decoding print, without adequate attention to the way these limited skills [are] embedded in wider ways of social and individual being. (p. 93)

Arguing for the “neglected issue of context in new literacy studies,” Prinsloo (2009) draws on a South African perspective as he continues:

Many studies of the new literacies write about them with largely one context in mind, that of middle-class, usually American, European, Australian, or Asian contexts, but that context is assumed rather than explicit. When contextual issues are backgrounded or ignored, or when particular contexts are treated as if they are universal, then understandings of literacy tend to become more technical in nature. Under such conditions, the written texts of the old literacies and the post-typographic texts of the new literacies are sometimes treated either as simply the product of skills acquired by the writer or as the point of departure for different skills to be acquired and exercised by the reader. These skills are treated as something externally given, for the learner to “acquire” and utilize. The focus in literacy studies then becomes those skills, and the disabilities and obstacles to which would-be users thereof are subject. (p. 182)



Accountability issues pose a significant hindrance to developing broader perspectives of literacy, and the trend to adopt digital literacy initiatives might be considered as a distraction: a “starting in the wrong place.” Yet, there may be a further reason that schools have not moved toward multimodality, one that is embedded in commonly held beliefs of teachers and administrators. If we examine the cultural milieu, particularly in the United States, we may find that the absence of multimodality in schools may be centered on confusions and misunderstandings of the visual textual forms that most educators label as “art.” My intent in drawing attention to this is not to argue for more time for children’s “art,” as many arts advocates previously (and rather unsuccessfully) have attempted. Instead, my purpose is to address adults’ confusions and misunderstandings of visual textual forms within the general learning context. We must reconsider the narrow traditions of schooling and aim for broader views of cognition (Eisner, 1994).

### **The Need to Address Educators’ Unexamined Assumptions About Art**

Rudolf Arnheim’s (1969/1997) description of the problem supports the notion that the issue is not so much one of including more art classes in schools but, rather, as the critical need to address adults’ misperceptions about art:

The arts are neglected because they are based on perception, and perception is disdained because it is not assumed to involve thought. In fact, educators and administrators cannot justify giving the arts an important position in the curriculum unless they understand that the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field of endeavor. The neglect of the arts is only the most tangible symptom of the widespread unemployment of the senses in every field of academic study. What is most needed is not more aesthetics or more esoteric manuals of art education but a convincing case made for visual thinking quite in general. Once we understand in theory, we might try to heal in practice the unwholesome split which cripples the training of reasoning power. (p. 6)

Despite the work of respected theorists and researchers (see, e.g., Dewey, 1934/1980; Dyson, 2003; Eisner, 1978, 1994, 2002, 2006; Harste, 2000; Heath & Wolf, 2005; Kress, 1997/2005), the position statement of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2005), and recognized examples of practice, such as the schools of Reggio Emilia, these (mis)perceptions of “art” continue. Further, even among those educators who embrace multimodality or arts-based practices, there appears to be some confusion in regard to the role and relevance of visual thinking within multimodal perspectives of language, literacy, and learning. As illustration of this point, I share a brief account and reflection on my observations.

Several months after the publication of the first edition of this book, I was preparing to deliver a presentation at a national conference of literacy professionals. The organization had long promoted broad views of language and literacy through its publications, position statements, and website. Keynote speakers included well-respected advocates of arts and multimodal literacy, and examples of varied textual forms were evident among the exhibitors’ displays. The day before my presentation,

I took the opportunity to attend a selection of presentations that, according to the conference catalog, promised to focus on multimodal literacy, or arts and literacy. Most of these presentations were well done, and the presenters (literacy educators, teacher educators, and/or researchers) were passionate supporters for including visual arts and images into the literacy curriculum. Yet, throughout the day, some of the statements made by these presenters caused me some concern. I began to jot them down on the notes page of my conference book with the intent of incorporating the statements into my presentation the following day. These statements, which came from both early childhood sessions (focused upon Kindergarten through grade 3) and middle level sessions (focused upon grade 4 through grade 8), reveal common misperceptions:

I do not draw well, so I don't expect a lot from my students. It is just important that they try to express themselves.

Drawing and art-making take too much time...students are not comfortable with drawing so we changed to using found images clipped from magazines and on the Internet.

I am not an art teacher, so I do not grade the art...

Creativity is difficult to assess...I just look at how much time they put into it...

Drawing is precursor to writing.... (excerpts from notes taken during conference, 2009)

These statements reveal some of the misunderstandings about “art” that are commonly encountered within our educational community and demonstrate that even advocates of multimodal literacy may lack substantive understanding of its application to practice. Therefore, we must acknowledge that educators’ “unexamined assumptions about art, language, literacy, and learning...[allow] past patterns of practice to continue despite knowledge of theory, research, and practice that may contradict these beliefs” (Narey, 2009, p. 231). I will explore these adult misperceptions further as aspects of my discussion on teacher education in Chap. 15 of this volume. However, for now, these observations support the notion that the reason that multimodality is slow to be adopted by schools, or is ineffectually considered within prescribed versions of early childhood curriculum, may not be due entirely to accountability issues, or distractions caused by overemphasis on digital skills, but, rather, is due to deeply engrained beliefs about literacy and art. In the next section, I will attempt to clarify the interplay of modalities within early meaning-making processes while also offering further insights on children’s “art.”

## How Multimodal Meaning-Making Looks in Practice

Thus far, I have provided a brief overview of meaning-making and multimodality, as I highlighted this book’s intended focus upon visual textual forms (drawing, 3D models, photographs, sculpture, digital images) within the twenty-first century educational milieu. At this point in my introduction to *Multimodal Perspectives of Language, Literacy, and Learning in Early Childhood: The Creative and Critical “Art” of Making Meaning*, it is useful to offer an illustration of multimodal meaning-making in practice. I intentionally present an example that focuses upon multimodal

meaning-making during the very early phases of a child's drawing development. Although it is a description of interactions between a toddler and his mother (the author) in a home, rather than in a formal early childhood learning setting, it is highly relevant to all early childhood professionals' understandings of multimodal meaning-making for several important reasons:

- There is a recent surge of interest in infant-toddler experiences due to the growing numbers of infants-toddlers entering formal early learning environments across the globe (Press & Mitchell, 2014). Knowledge of how to develop very young children's capacities for multimodal meaning-making is a critical need in early childhood education.
- Teachers in quality infant-toddler programs work one-to-one with the child in a manner similar to that of parents; thus, the example of mother-child interactions provides an authentic model for both parents and teachers.
- Focus upon these very early visual texts situates children's later drawings in the broader context of visual language development. For all early childhood professionals (including primary grade teachers and teacher educators) who lack substantive understanding of children's drawings as language and literacy, this example will offer important knowledge and insights.

### *Background for the Toddler Early Learning Example*

Daniel's developmental milestone (see Fig. 1.1) described in the chapter opening occurred several decades ago when I was a young mother on hiatus from my elementary school art teaching position. Although I was not engaged in any formal research of my son's development, I collected a portfolio of his work, eagerly following his growth with combined parental and professional interest. Informed by my art education background, I was aware that Daniel's progression of mark-making was consistent with the sequence of phases and stages that Viktor Lowenfeld identifies in his classic text, *Creative and Mental Growth* (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1947/1964), and that my child's mark-making efforts aligned in many ways with other theories of children's drawing (see, for instance, Gardner, 1980; Kellogg, 1970; Read, 1958).

My observations of children's visual language development in my elementary art classroom during the several years before Daniel was born supported my belief that Lowenfeld's stages provide a useful overview of general characteristics of children's graphic productions within a typical developmental sequence: (1) scribbling stage, 2–4 years; (2) preschematic, 4–6 years; (3) schematic, 7–9 years; (4) dawning realism/gang age, 9–11 years; and (5) pseudorealistic/age of reasoning, 11–13 years. However, my early experiences of teaching children in kindergarten through sixth grade also underscored the importance of viewing stage theories as frames of reference, rather than prescriptive age-determined levels of achievement (Luehrman & Unrath, 2006).

Daniel’s entry and advancement through the stages much earlier than the age ranges plotted out by Lowenfeld exemplify the kind of variations that are frequently observed in stage theories. Multiple factors, individual, social, and cultural, contribute to children’s learning; therefore, developmental stage theories can be useful, but do not account for other important influences. Among these factors, the routine interactions between children and significant adult caregivers have an impact on children’s meaning-making (Ring, 2006). Further, as Bruner (1996) underscores, meanings “have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created” (p. 3). While stage theories can provide general understandings, ultimately a child’s development must be viewed as situated within a dynamic, interactive context (Edwards, 2004). Children’s learning must be supported by a mix of the adult’s “practical” and “theoretical knowledge” (Hatcher, 2011, p. 404) and take in children’s desire to communicate (Halliday, 1975). Within the following descriptions of my early meaning-making experiences with my son, my impromptu responses and conscious decisions in reference to his work emerge in an interplay of theoretical knowledge interwoven with an openness to the dynamic, interactive context of our relationship and serve as authentic illustration of practice.

### *Sequential Phases of Scribbling Stage*

Lowenfeld (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1947/1964) indicates that the child enters stage one: scribbling stage by randomly moving a mark-making tool on a surface. While I sat working on a shopping list or other writing task, Daniel would be on my lap imitating my motions with his own paper and a soft-leaded colored pencil that I had made available to him after he repeatedly pulled at my pen. Appearing to follow Lowenfeld’s description of this phase, when making these early scribbles (Fig. 1.2), Daniel (12 months old) seemed unaware of the connection between his arm movements and the marks on the paper.

**Fig. 1.2** Daniel’s drawing at 12 months of age: random scribbling (stage one, phase one)



Having determined that my son was able to grasp the pencil in his hand and to understand that it was something to move around, and not something to eat, I began to purposefully include time during our daily play to take up a colored pencil and move it back and forth on my own paper, exclaiming “Mommy’s making lines!” I then would give him the pencil and he would imitate, gradually understanding that our actions were causing the marks on the papers. Subsequently, Daniel became quite interested in filling paper after paper with marks. A sample of his work at 14 months (Fig. 1.3) shows the typical back and forth horizontal lines that children create during the longitudinal scribbling phase. During this phase, the lines are initially made by whole arm movements. As the child gains greater control, the lines become shorter and, eventually, evolve into the circular marks that indicate that the child has moved into the third phase of the scribbling stage: Circular Scribbling. Daniel’s drawing at 19 months (Fig. 1.4) demonstrates this third phase of Lowenfeld’s scribbling stage category.

**Fig. 1.3** Daniel’s drawing at 14 months: longitudinal scribbling (stage one, phase two)



**Fig. 1.4** Daniel’s drawing at 19 months: circular scribbling (stage one, phase three)



### *Situating Making Meaning in the “Real World” of the Child*

When Daniel created these early textual forms (i.e., random, longitudinal, and circular scribbles), the meaning for him remained within the process of movement: first, exclusively as imitation of my hand movement, then as connected to the marks on paper. However, on the day that Daniel created the scribble that he later named “pirate ship,” his world of meaning-making changed, and soon he would move from this final phase of the scribbling stage where he drew first, then named, to Lowenfeld’s preschematic stage where he would draw with intention (naming or planning before drawing), as in his early self-portrait (Fig. 1.5).

#### **Adult Interpretations of Children’s Visual Texts**

To a casual observer, the image that I introduced at the opening of this chapter (Fig. 1.1) looks like any other child’s scribble. To some knowledgeable adults who note the groupings of fairly short, clustered lines in the drawing, the image might serve as documentation that the child is well into the longitudinal scribbling phase. However, if shown the image in the context of Daniel’s growing portfolio of scribbled marks (see samples: Figs. 1.2, 1.3, and 1.4), the adult examiners might adjust their categorization as they realize that despite the absence of circular marks in this particular image, Daniel had already progressed to the circular scribbling phase based upon other images in the chronologically organized portfolio. Yet, Daniel’s movement to the naming the scribble phase would only be noted through direct observation of, and interaction with, adults familiar with his ongoing work.

Further, while an adult viewer of Daniel’s “pirate ship” might attempt to pick out the distinct triangular formation to suggest that perhaps the child noted this as a

**Fig. 1.5** At the age of 27 months, Daniel draws with intention: preschematic (stage two)

