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# DESIGNS FOR LEARNING #1/11

# Interview with Carey Jewitt

By FREDRIK LINDSTRAND

*We met with professor Carey Jewitt in Sydney during 5ICOM (5th International Conference on Multimodality) where she was keynote speaker. Carey Jewitt is known to many of our readers as a nodal point in the international web of researchers interested in issues around multimodality and social semiotics. As in previous issues of the journal, our main intention with the interview is to give some further insights regarding interests and influences that form a background to her theoretical work.*

Carey Jewitt is professor in Learning and Technology at London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education, University of London. She is also RCUK Academic Fellow and founding co-editor of the journal Visual Communication. She has published extensively within the fields of multimodality, social semiotics and visual analysis. Her recent books include *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (editor, 2009); *Technology, Literacy, Learning: A Multimodal Approach* (2008) and *The Visual in Learning and Creativity* (2008).

**FL:** Today you are well established as professor in Learning and Technology at the Knowledge Lab and have contributed in many important ways to the development of multimodality. It would be interesting to hear a little about your background and what has led you to where you are today.

**CJ:** Well, I have a rational kind of hindsight view of how I ended up here, with the multimodal stuff. I was really interested in visual communication and I studied Fine Art in art college. I worked in a range of media including print making, photography and making installations. After that, I worked with young people in visual arts for a while and then moved on to work with different organisations around issues to do with young people. Many of these where young women in care or risk of custody. Most of their difficulties could really come down to not being able to communicate well, for lots of different reasons. So I got interested in how people communicate. And then I moved into research on communication in the area of health and sexual health. I did a masters in sociology, research theory and methods and while I was on that I was evaluating a young men's sexual health clinic. One of the things that was going on there was that the staff at the clinic were given loads of information pamphlets and posters and things like that and they all really hated them and they wouldn't use them but they couldn't articulate why. I did a semiotic analysis of these leaflets to look at discourses of masculinity in

them and that analysis showed quite negative visual discourses of masculinity whereas the written discourses in the written text of the leaflets were very positive. I presented that back to the young men who ran these centres and they were kind of “Oh yeah, thats why!”. *Reading Images* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) had just come out so I used that as one of the forms to analyze the texts I was looking at.

I sent my text to Theo (van Leeuwen) and Gunther (Kress) and shortly after I got a research post on a project about multimodality and school science and I started working with Gunther on the research project; and Theo and I started working on a book together which led to the Visual Communication journal. So, in sense, for a while there was my interest in the visual and I was interested in the social and stuff to do with identity and communication and then, when I started working with Gunther and multimodality they all came back together again. So it made sense eventually but for a while I had a very fractured CV that made no sense at all. Thankfully all these things have now come together.

**FL:** And then, in your PhD, you expanded your focus slightly by bringing technology into the picture?

**CJ:** Yes, I worked with Gunther on the science project - rhetorics in the science classroom (See Kress, Jewitt et al, 2001) - for three years and then, when that finished, me and him were doing little bit of work for British Telecom, on looking at technology and meaning and I became quite interested in that. This was in 1999, when quite a lot of technologies were just starting to come into many peoples' everyday lives. So I suppose I was seeing that and then I decided to do a PhD and got an ESRC scholarship to do that. I was interested in how technology remediated these kind of modes because in the science classrooms we had researched we had seen people using technologies like blackboards and OHP's and also different kinds of artifacts and objects but we didnt see anybody really using digital technology at all. So I just became interested what the differences would be if they were, so that's why I started looking at technology and I suppose then, from then on, my work has been on not only technology but how people use technologies and the effects of using technologies on the representations of knowledge and different forms of communication between people.

**FL:** A conference like this (5ICOM) becomes an interesting meeting place for a number of different approaches to multimodality. As a contrast to what you described as your initial interests – social aspects of communication and representation for instance – I have noticed that few of the presenters here talk about multimodality from a social and process oriented perspective, with issues like agency and power for example.

**CJ:** Yeah, I agree. I mean I think the kind of work that is going on around multimodality from a more systemic functional grammar perspective is really interesting but it's informed by a slightly different set of interests than some of mine, even though I can build on it sometimes. But really I think their interest is around modes and about understanding the inner organizational systems of modes. Well, the grammar of modes or, like John Bateman was talking about today, the technical features of a mode or something like that. So, I'm interested in that to some extent but it's not my paramount interest. I'm more interested in how modes are used (and re-made) by people and my focus is less on understanding the text, the static objects. Although I think its valuable and important, I'm more interested in how people interact with them and especially because of my focus on digital text and digital environments I don't think you really can look in the same way as the text being a static object anyway because it's kind of brought into life when it's interacted with and it's made so differently when it's interacted with. I think that's always the case with all text. You know printed old texts, they are still brought to life by peoples' engagement with them but you don't see it in the same way. Plus the kind of opportunities for multiple readings and multiple paths aren't the same. I'm not saying there is only one route or pathway through a written text but they are different, so I think that kind of takes me to a different place than some of the more text-focused multimodal analyses.

**FL:** It is important to explore and map out the resources, but I guess you would want to see it in relation to how they are brought into action?

**CJ:** Well I suppose it depends on where you are coming from. If you are systemic functional linguist then you might see that grammar is really being about mapping out the potentials which are essential to understanding how someone uses a text. So I think they all have a place together. It's just that there are different understandings on where meaning would be located and different foci. Like Sigrid Norris and what I think she might call the multimodal interactional discourse; I think her approach is more focused really on how people are using modes in situations and modes don't really exist outside of a context. So we've all got different ways of looking at it. It is quite useful to try and understand what bits of meaning different approaches are looking at and how they construe meaning.

**FL:** Yes, I agree. And you really are in a unique position to say something about that, with all the work you did on the *Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (Jewitt, 2009). It was really like mapping the world of multimodality.

**CJ:** Yeah, I was trying to because I suppose, when I was writing the introductory chapters or mapping the content of the book, I couldn't really work out whether or not, well what was the difference, and everyone talks differently

about their work. And I couldn't work out if there really was a difference between these or if it was just that they had grown up in different parts of the world. So was what Gunther Kress and us at the institute (of education, University of London) were doing really any different from what Sigrid Norris was doing? And if it wasn't then shouldn't we just call it the same thing? So I wanted to work out whether there was any substance to talking about these things as being different. Partly because I wanted to organize the book so that it could represent these different ways of looking and if they weren't different I didn't want these repeated chapters, so I had to kind of get to the bottom of it.

So I had conversations with a range of people who I saw as the kind of, not necessarily leaders of those areas, but kind of key nodal points in those different areas and people. And then, after talking to them, like asking about what they thought mode was or looking at their work and thinking about where the focus of their work was. I just tried to kind of map them. Map the different approaches. And I mapped them around a focus on the modal systems, like the extent of that focus, a focus on sign maker and agency and a focus on context. So I kind of saw those three things as being, having kind of like reviewed those different areas of multimodality, I saw them as being key factors that were different across them. And then I tried to map that and I used an example to try and map how this analysis would approach data quite differently or would require different kinds of data. And then I sent my chapter to Sigrid Norris, Kay O'Halloran, Theo and to Gunther and I asked them to check if they were happy with how I was representing their view of multimodality. It was interesting to try and get the nuances between them. Because I think there are some and I think they were quite compatible. In a sense they just look at semiosis at different points and over different lengths of time and with different purposes.

**FL:** If you look at for example time and semiosis, who is where?

**CJ:** Well, I think Sigrid Norris, her scale of looking is much more micro than Gunther or me. But maybe not that much more micro than say Jeff (Bezemer). It's a sort of sliding scale. I am not offering *really* robust categories, completely because there is some blurring around the edge, but I'd say her work is much more in the now. She seems interested in how modal interaction happens between people. How they play out in the micro seconds of interaction whereas Gunther, I think, is interested in text as uncovering a social action. So really kind of looking at the designer as a social agent or the reader as an agent. So he is, I think, interested in the past of the text and it's the past that can be recovered from the text as an object or from the interaction as an object. And I'd say he is very focused on what things mean to the meaning maker at that time. Whereas I'd say the systemic functional linguists are more embedded in the character of the text, the meaning of the text. Not its use.

That's a kind of different notion of time. So I'd say, in a way, Gunther has a longer more stretched notion of time than that like the time of systemic functional linguistics is very fixed by the text, whatever the text is. It doesn't really look at unfolding time. The systemic functional people don't look at time, on meaning unfolding over time they look at it as kind of crystallized in the text. Like a kind of residue. Whereas Gunther is kind of looking at the text as different moments in time – the designer's, the kind of social historical moment the text was made, also the moment its read. And then he also looks at this kind of unfolding over time. He can look over, like him and Jeff did, looking at from 1935 to 2000 like what text means and he can look like we did in the English classroom as text and meanings rather unfolding over a six week sequence of lessons. Or he can look at 5 minute interactions on video. So he stretches time in different kind of ways. Because it's less about kind of uncovering the structure of a text in a grammatical way I think his notion is more fluid and eclectic. And then I would say Sigrid is always looking at particular moments which are foregrounded for her more theoretically around things like identity work or whatever. I think they do have different scales of time each of which has different uses.

**FL:** You described how you were invited to work with Gunther Kress after completing your masters and you have collaborated with him in many different ways since then. Can you see any differences between you in terms of your approach to multimodality and social semiotics today?

**CJ:** I don't know. Maybe a bit. I'm perhaps less interested in looking at texts as objects and more interested in looking how people bring texts into being in their interaction. So I would analyse a text to look at its potentials but then I'd be wanting to look at how those potentials were brought into the interaction. So I'd be trying to sketch its potentials to look at what's activated and what isn't as a kind of way of getting at the choices people make. So where I can I'd rather not stay with the text, I'd rather be looking at its use and how it's mediating interaction rather than examining it in its own right I think. I think we conceptualise the social slightly differently.

**FL:** Is that where activity theory comes in for you?

**CJ:** Yeah, well I've tried using that, more as a really loose heuristic framework to try to bring in more about the social context of use. I think it works but I haven't really used it in a strong way. In the English project we used broader social theories like Bernstein and Bourdieu. I think Gunther perhaps feels that text is crystallized in social interaction, which obviously I do as well and that he can recover power from the text whereas I think you can see power in the text but I don't think you can explain it so perhaps I feel rightly or wrongly the need to 'wheel in' more social theories than social semiotics. For example,

even when we first met through my masters work on visual discourses of masculinity, my critique of *Reading Images* was that it was a really good method for describing how texts instantiate power relations but you actually need a theory of gender to understand them. I think for Gunther, he would see the person as mediating the social much more than I do, whereas I see the social mediating the person, producing the person much more. So I think that's a difference. For him, of course a text is always read and made by a person, social actor, in a moment which is socially construed and all those things for him are kind of realized in that text, whereas for me I think that at certain level, social semiotics fails and you need to bring in some other social theories to handle some bigger issues to do with power. So that's why I've turned to activity theory and other theories. I don't really use it that much but recently I was in Oslo and on Thomas DeLange's defence of his PhD thesis (deLange, 2010). He doesn't use multimodality but he theorises the relationship between micro genesis and socio genesis and this intermediary plane. He's got a really nice way of looking at them and I think that's actually really useful. So it made me think I should read his work again and think about how I could bring that stuff into my own work a bit more. Because increasingly I have become interested in looking at video historically and that would be a good way of doing that.

**FL:** You said that the different takes on multimodality seem to be compatible. Bateman had a few hot topics in his plenary talk. Do you see anything that needs to be done within the field?

**CJ:** Well one thing he said, I think, was that we need to be more systematic and better at describing stuff. Well, I'd agree with that. But the other thing he said which I think was good was how do you not kill the thing while dissecting it. He said, by taking it apart in a way that you can bring it back together again. I thought that was kind of interesting. But another way to do it is to not pull it apart I suppose. And to find things that move across the different modes. Rather than talking about different modes, to talk about features like voice. Like Arlene Archer's work in looking at authorial voice and other things, or Theo's work looking at cohesion. You can look at cohesion and say what is cohesion across this text and what work are these different modes doing together and I think maybe its kind of looking both of those ways. To do that we break out the different modes to understand them, but then kind of looking across them as well, would that make sense. So trying to find some categories that you can look across with, I think that would be quite useful.

**FL:** So it would be to go more straight onto the multimodal configurations?

**CJ:** Yeah, but then I think he is also right that it's a bit early to do that because I still understand so little. I don't understand enough about the different modes but maybe we can understand more about the modes by taking



different approaches to try and understand them rather than just saying we have to separate them out until we fully understand them. I suppose that's why I think it's useful to look at text in action because then you can really talk about what work they do and then that's a way of getting up a whole in quite a useful way. So it does really come down to, like in a text, if you analyse a text you can say "well image does this and writing does that". But If you look at how people interact with the text, then you get more sense of what work the modes do together because you see the function that they have and the meanings that people give them, derive from them. A lot of people talk about time and space and I think they are quite interesting to look at. All texts, but digital texts especially, are reconfiguring time and space and relationships between modes in quite different kinds of ways. But I do think there's a real focus on being systematic about everything and I do think it's useful, to try and think about how to be systematic. But not in a deadly kind way. I think you still need to be kind of daring as well and to take some risks and put forward some propositions so you can find out whether or not they work. I think that's something that Theo and Gunther really did in *Reading Images* and continue to do in their works. They said things they weren't sure about and they probably got some things wrong but it's a really useful way of thinking about stuff. And I suppose it's good not to be too cautious about understanding all the structures too much, as well as having an end ambition of understanding them. So you don't get bogged down with whether or not something always is going to make sense. But I think as well, looking in really diverse places at what these modes are and moving away from the idea of really understanding a mode. Rather more understanding meaning making, so understanding meaning making in different contexts and then looking more at how the modes are being marshalled in different places, rather than focusing on modes.

I think even during the time I have worked with Gunther there has been a big progression in multimodal research. Theo and him had just finished *Reading Images* in 1996– which is really focusing on one mode – when we started the science project, which focused on a range of modes and in quite distinct kind ways. In the English project we looked across things like ability, character, annotation and so on. The question of the modes being: "are they important?" wasn't really our question anymore. It was how are they being used in this place to do particular kind of pedagogic work, or particular kind of social work in the classroom. The methods for transcribing are not established but we began to develop some kind of working tools. So I think that's been a progression and then in kind of later work looking much more at meaning and having that as a starting point rather than modes or, so I think things have moved on a lot over the past 15 years, but there are still interesting challenges and plenty of work for us to do.

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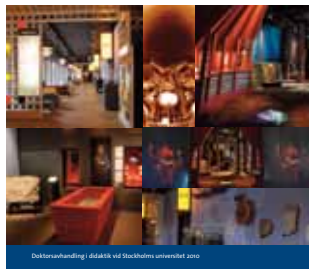


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Tinget, rummet, besökaren  
Om meningsskapande på museum  
Eva Insulander



*Tinget, rummet, besökaren. Om meningsskapande på museum. [Artefacts, spaces, visitors: A study of meaning-making in museums]. EVA INSULANDER, Stockholm: Institutionen för didaktik och pedagogiskt arbete, Stockholms universitet (2010).*

This thesis has been part of an international research program, sponsored by the Swedish Research Foundation, with focus on "The museum, the exhibition and the visitor". Here we find an in-depth study of visitors meaning-making at museums, based on a design-theoretic and multimodal approach. Two different exhibitions about Swedish prehistory are chosen. They expose prehistory in quite different ways: the first one is linear and built around the destinies of different individuals. The second one has a meta-oriented approach and reflects on history making. This exhibition is built as an airport with different "time-gates".

The study has developed a method with focus on the visitors' sign-making. Visitors are filmed and recorded in pairs, they borrow a digital camera that enables them to take their own photos, and they are afterwards interviewed and asked to draw a "map" over the exhibition. Out of this rich source material, meaning-making is analyzed. Also some comparisons are made in relation to the design and the meaning-potential and affordances of the exhibitions.

*Assessment discourses in mathematics classrooms: A multimodal social semiotic study. LISA BJÖRK-LUND BOISTRUP. Department of Mathematics and Science Education, Stockholm University (2010)*

This is a study of assessment practices in mathematics classrooms. Assessment is here regarded as having broad boundaries, present also in feedback in day-to-day classroom communication. A multimodal approach is found in theoretical considerations as well as in data gathering (video recordings and collection of written material), transcribing (performed multimodally) and analyses.

A main conclusion is how four construed assessment discourses in mathematics classrooms hold different affordances for students' active agency and learning. The construal of the discourses is based on findings of three initial research questions, where assessment acts, focuses of assessment acts, and roles of semiotic resources in classroom communication are examined. One discourse, "Do it quick and do it right" has similarities to a traditional discourse described in earlier research. A discourse quite different from this is called, "Reasoning takes time". This discourse has a lower pace and the assessment focus is on mathematics processes. Here the affordances for students' active agency and learning of mathematics are considered to be high.





Theo van Leeuwen  
*The language of colour. An introduction.*