



Harnessing Multimodalities: A Conversational Framework

Multimodality is about recognising new and alternative ways of learning and teaching by developing alternative, flexible, and adaptive learning environments. Before pursuing the opportunities for innovation, the project team sought to understand what multimodalities meant to educators, students, and those who look in on higher education.

Bouchey *et al.* (2021, p.36) define multimodality as, “the many different modes that people use to communicate with each other and to express themselves.” They discuss the ubiquity of digital technologies and media as being particularly significant, however, as experienced academic practitioners, developers, and researchers, we knew it to be much more than this.

The idea of harnessing multimodalities is intrinsically innovative and divergent in nature. We began our work by exploring our own interests, philosophies, experiences, practices, and propositions for innovation, reflecting a postdigital and post-pandemic era. Activities and discussions over the start-up phase of the project continued to draw upon multiple perspectives and thinking patterns.

We noted that, “it is now more important than ever that we consider how we work collaboratively, as educators and students, on the construction and communication of knowledge and meaning, and the role that technology can play in this.” (QAA blog post, 2023)

The breadth of our interest and the scope for the project was soon confirmed by peers in a sector-wide workshop involving approximately 35 educators at the QAA’s annual [Quality Insights Conference](#) (23 February 2023) where we asked, “What does multimodality mean to you?” The responses to this question were collated in a word cloud and a Padlet board. They offered a miasma of perspectives and meanings which, when analysed, fell across philosophical and theoretical understandings, educational experiences, actual practices, and challenges and opportunities for pedagogic and organisational innovation.

The notion of a conversational framework in this chapter reflects the belief that understandings of multimodalities in higher education are necessarily emergent, diverse, and multidimensional. They exist within a postdigital world in which education, in its many forms and settings, reflects the digital and non-digital, the material and social, and the practices and behaviours that result from engagement. (Fawns, 2019). Multimodalities must be negotiated and evaluated by those interested in and affected by changing contexts and practices, ensuring they are able to navigate the postdigital. A conversational framework gives educators a realistic tool for negotiating complexity and supports their desire to be effective.

This chapter now explores multimodalities through four intersecting lenses and a fifth cross-cutting analysis as suggested by the responses of workshop participants to our question. The chapter concludes with some thoughts on how this conversational framework can be used by institutions to engage staff and students in strategic, pedagogic, and epistemic thinking about multimodal education and work, but also as a tool for framing other conversations.

Framing the project and its outcomes

People approach ideas in a multitude of ways that are hard to predict but which are nevertheless insightful and revelatory. It is not necessary to predetermine what makes a response to a complex question acceptable, it is only necessary to find a way to accommodate what people tell you is important. In this way, an effective conversational framework is both a receptacle to capture perspectives and a mirror to reflect significant thinking within a complexity.

In our use of the framework (fig. 1) we found many ideas cut across the quadrant boundaries. These tended to be well-supported numerically (frequency of related comments), whereas some specific responses sat more easily within specific quadrants.

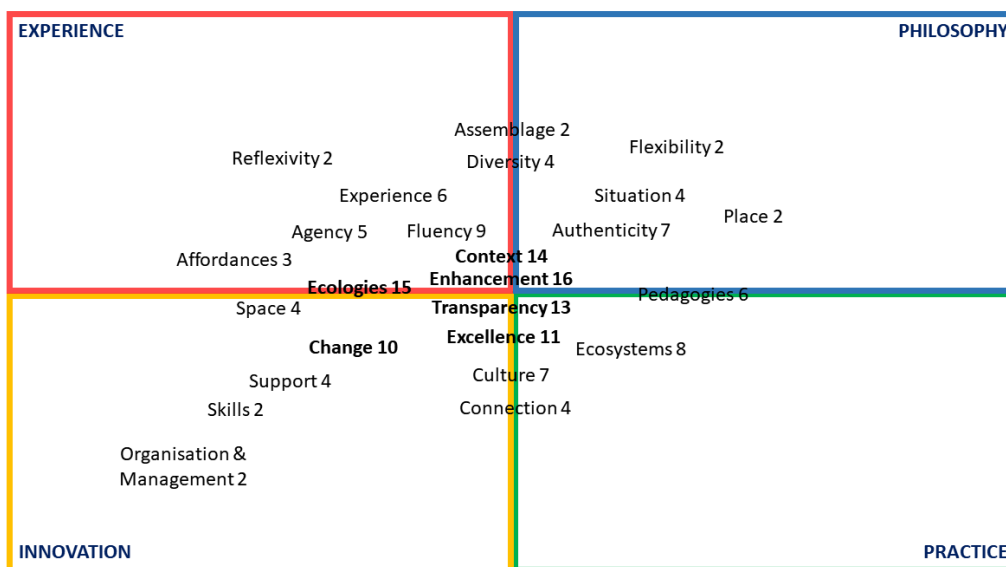


Fig. 1 What do multimodalities for digital learning in higher education mean? Educator responses mapped into the conversational framework.

Cross-cutting themes

Participants emphasised how their interest in and understanding of multimodalities supported ideas for **Enhancement** (16) and **Excellence** (11), for example underpinning strategic ambitions. Use of diverse methods, media and voices can extend and enrich the educational **Context** (14). Providing clarity and **Transparency** (13) were identified as important lenses in discussions about the affordances of different and complementary media, ideas and decisions about multimodal assessment.

Ecologies (15) in terms of representing **Diversity** (4), networked and connected learning, and the infrastructure needed to deliver and support learning also cut across the foci of the four lenses.

The Philosophical quadrant

Reflecting what people and organisations value in relation to multimodalities in higher education.

Multimodal approaches support strategic commitments to **Authenticity** (7) where knowledge, skills and learning are situated in relation to real-world settings and experience. For example, this demonstrates how simulation-based learning reflects multimodal experiences. **Place** (2) and **Situation** (4) echo this meaning but emphasise the value of engagement in learning that is student-centred and current. This, in turn, connects with **Flexibility** (2) in this quadrant, where multimodal approaches accommodate open-ended thinking reflecting the volatility and uncertainty of some domains where knowledge is in continual flux.

The Experiential quadrant

Reflecting what people and their organisations know about multimodality in relation to their formative life-wide learning experiences.

Diversity (4) and **Assemblage** (2) sit between philosophy and experience and echo meanings discussed in relation to ecologies and ecosystems. All point to experiences of education that are informed by multiple perspectives, or which offer a multitude of ways to explore and develop knowledge, skills and attitudes. These themes are found, for example, in problem-, scenario-, project-, and enquiry-based methods in which digital connections extend possibilities for driving student engagement.

The **Experience** (6) of learning and developing **Reflexivity** (2) within experiential approaches were highlighted. Multimodality in this sense suggests learning as a commitment that breaks out of formal constraints. Having access to personal connected devices, for example, supports learning that is not bound temporally or spatially. In this context learning is characterised by **Agency** (5) and **Fluency** (9) – developing the expectation for and confidence of the student to assume more responsibility for their learning in and out of class.

The Practical quadrant

Reflecting what people and their organisation do in relation to multimodality in their experience of designing or engaging in higher education.

Multimodality in digital education is not new, but understanding digital technology and media spatially is important in many explanations. This has become clearer from the pandemic when we all experienced and addressed the challenges of being socially disconnected. There is understanding about the capabilities of the digital space to promote greater emotional engagement, embodied practice, and to foster a sense of belonging. In higher education, our experience of being together online has changed as we have extended online discussions into student-initiated Zoom Rooms, Teams challenges, shared documents, and other digital collaborations and spaces.

Being thrust out of the physical spaces we have used for years during the pandemic has been a catalyst for thinking about **Pedagogic** (6) practicalities.

Disciplinary and professional **Cultures** (7) have changed, while the formality of practices has been disrupted by our collective knowledge and dependence upon finding and making digital **Connections** (4) as a matter of practice and social value.

The Innovative quadrant

Reflecting what people and their organisations would like to do by incorporating multimodalities in their experience of designing or engaging in higher education.

Multimodality presents a focus for necessary **Change** (10) and innovation, with implications for investment in our infrastructure. How education thinks about the **Space** (4) we use for teaching and learning, in and out of the classroom, and the spatial and temporal affordances that change the relationships we have, as teachers, learners, and managers. When learning happens across the physical and digital spaces we use, there are significant implications for **Organisation and Management** (2) including developing **Support** (4) and **Skills** (2) for staff and students.

Framing multimodal innovation and evaluation through the conversational framework

This chapter has demonstrated how the project's conversational framework acted as a useful tool for gathering and mapping the interests of diverse stakeholders to establish the project's scope and real value. It was guiding, therefore. Using the mapping added clarity to our early discussions and illuminated aspects of multimodality that opened up the research, conversations, and activities within the institutionally led themes. The quadrants have helped to frame our analysis and reporting on the thematic development areas of the multimodalities project, therefore. This has been useful in a cross-sector project in which partners have engaged in the overarching project through a continual pattern of localised activities interspersed with regular comings together online.

The same tool will help others to engage stakeholders to interrogate ideas, experiences, practices, and challenges and opportunities for innovation. The quadrants could be mapped to a workshop whiteboard in a Post-It Note activity or to a Padlet or Miro board, for example. As in our own case, such activities can begin by asking participants to generate keywords in response to a question like “What does multimodality mean to you?” followed by asking participants to collaborate in a mapping activity through discussion of placing ideas into the framework and of identifying synonyms and agreeing a reduced vocabulary. Having completed the mapping activity, the co-created framework stands as a useful point of reference in subsequent conversations, but also of rich and enlightening conversations.

Key Sources

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