

Interview with Arlene Archer

By Fredrik Lindstrand

We took the opportunity to meet with Dr Arlene Archer from Cape Town, South Africa, when she visited Stockholm in May 2014 to give a keynote speech at the 4th International Designs for Learning conference.

*Dr Arlene Archer has been the coordinator of the Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town since 1999 and is well known to many of our readers for her extensive work within the fields of academic literacy and multimodality. Among her recent publications is *Multimodal Approaches to Research and Pedagogy - Recognition, Resources and Access* (Archer & Newfield, 2014).*

FL: With a number of books in the pipeline or recently published and several keynote presentations at international conferences around the world you are obviously well established within the fields of multimodality and academic literacies. I would be curious to hear a bit more of how it all started for you - where you came from academically and how you came to multimodality.

AA: Well, it started when I lived and taught English in the Czech Republic in the early 90's. My experience of living in an environment where I understood no language made me aware of how we construct meaning through a range of resources, including gesture, facial expression, intonation, proximity, gesture, and so on. Specifically, I became intrigued by the fact that I could watch a movie from beginning to end without understanding a word, and even be moved to tears by it! When I returned to South Africa, I undertook a Masters' degree at the University of the Witwatersrand, where I met Denise Newfield and Pippa Stein. I also met Gunther Kress there, just after

he had written *Reading Images* with Theo van Leeuwen (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). That's when I became interested in social semiotics and multimodality. Specifically I was looking at using video to teach English as an additional language, as an expanded idea of communicative competence. I have always carried that interest in multimodality and English teaching. Now I have been at the Writing Centre at the University of Cape Town for about sixteen years.

FL: Can you tell us a bit more about your work at the Writing Centre and the specific challenges you face there?

AA: The Writing Centre is an exciting place as you get the opportunity to work directly with students on a one-on-one basis. The kind of time, space and energy you are able to dedicate to a student and their writing is unique in a Higher Education context, and immensely rewarding. The Writing Centre is a space which suspends daily life in order to engage with ideas, prompt new ways of seeing and provide opportunities for reflection. One of the underlying premises of writing centre pedagogy is that a critical way of being develops through discussion and argument. Writing centres are thus dialogic spaces, which embrace the complex relationship between the spoken and the written, and how the written is understood by a reader. The Writing Centre plays an important role in helping students navigate academic discourse and the conventions of different disciplinary discourses. It plays a central role in enabling access to academia as well as contributing to student throughput.

FL: A lot of what you do, both in your research and in your work at the Writing Centre, deals with writing in different ways and expanding the notion of communicative competence. Can you say something more about that?

AA: Writing is still my primary interest in a way, but I am interested in looking at it through a multimodal lens. The reason I am interested in writing is because it is about access to the dominant genres of academia, and that is the moral imperative of the work we do. But I think there are interesting ways into writing. For instance, looking at writing as a multimodal form and

looking at changing genres in education and how we understand them.

FL: Do you approach these questions within the frames of a specific project? If so, can you tell us a bit more about it?

AA: So, at the moment I am interested in academic voice - trying to map the contours of academic voice in these new genres and in different modes. What form does academic voice take in images? What does it look like in information graphics, art or an art exhibition? I think academic voice is like a proxy for agency in text - how someone can insert their own agency in their text making. In academic literacies we have thought quite a bit about voice in writing, but we haven't really thought much about the relation between writing and other modes. That is what I am busy with at the moment.

FL: You mentioned that you have been at the Writing Centre for sixteen years. Have things changed a lot during this time?

AA: Well, yes. The context of the country has changed. The kinds of students we get at the university have changed. The genres and technologies have changed, so a lot has changed.

FL: Has that changed what you are doing in any way?

AA: I don't know. I feel like my interest has always been the same. It just takes different forms. My core interest is still about access, but then there is the question of what form that takes, what modes, what media, how you look at it, how students engage with the genres and so on. They do that very differently from how they used to, I think. Handwriting, for instance, used to be privileged. It was quite a marker, indicating which school you come from and stuff like that. That consideration is gone, since handwriting doesn't really exist as a mode in academia anymore. So yes, I think things have changed, but the fundamental impetus and questions have not really changed. I mean the country has changed, but there are still vast inequities in terms of access to resources.

FL: Speaking of access, one of the many things I find really inspiring in your

examples is how you approach students. Instead of building on an assumption of who 'the student' is you seem to engage in seeking to understand who they are and what resources they bring into the communicative situation?

AA: Yes, and I have always found that the 'symbolic objects' thing is a really good way to do this. For years I asked students "where are you from?", "tell me about yourself!" Well, you know, you wouldn't get much. But if you say "tell me about everyday objects that have symbolic meaning for you and your community", students offer such interesting information: "I wear this hat because I was born in January and I'm a Rastafarian", and that kind of thing. So there are different ways into students' narratives. I think objects, and metaphors, are useful in interesting ways. Or, as we do in the Writing Centre, get students to talk in their own language about their work. Because those languages often are not written, they are only spoken languages. And then, even if you don't know what the students are saying – just the act of articulating in one's own language is empowering.

FL: If we could bring more of that into other contexts...

AA: Yes, how to recognize diversity. Look at Lucia Thesen's (2007) research on the lecture theatre as a performative space. On the surface, a lecture looks like it promotes conformity. But it's actually what people do in spaces and places that is interesting. There is a lot of space for resistance, but you don't always see the resistance. So it's a call to see those things, the invisible. Recognise them. Once you recognise students' resources, you can integrate them into the curriculum and even value them through changed assessment practices.

FL: At the moment you are working on a few books?

AA: Yes, I am. I've just published one book with Denise Newfield, called *Multimodal Approaches to Research and Pedagogy - Recognition, Resources and Access* (Archer & Newfield, 2014). She was actually my supervisor when I was at the University of the Witwatersrand all those years ago. It was my students' research group and some of her research group who published

together, which is really nice. It was facilitated to a large degree by Carey Jewitt and Gunther Kress who came to a colloquium in Cape Town. We presented our chapters and they helped us think through some of the larger theoretical issues. It was a good process –community building and affirming. I’m editing another two books now, with Esther Breuer from Cologne University. One is *Multimodality in Writing. The state of the art in theory, methodology and pedagogy*. This book looks at the design and production of multimodal texts which involve writing in different ways. It explores texts, producers of texts, and readers of texts. The other book is entitled *Multimodality in Higher Education*. They are both very exciting. Editing books is nice as you get to read interesting texts and meet interesting people!

FL: Multimodality has expanded quite a lot in recent years and is used in slightly different ways by different people. Some are more focused on text, while others focus more on process and so on. Could you say something about your approach to multimodality and the research process?

AA: I like the way Theo van Leeuwen talks about the semiotic project: first describe and map and then see how it is brought into action. And that part doesn’t always happen. I like the mapping. I think it’s useful, to get that metalanguage or whatever. But then you have to operationalize these metalanguages as ways of enabling student access by, for instance, reflecting on assessment practices.

FL: So if you would look at your approach in research projects, how do you usually proceed?

AA: It’s normally from the same question, about access and inequality. So that’s like the underlying theme. And then seeing, well what’s a different way of getting at this? So for instance in engineering it was about how to access the genres of engineering. How to draw on students’ resources. At the writing centre that’s what we deal with all the time. And then I think my research on voice is the same thing. Voice and agency. I think that’s coming from those bigger questions around access, and it’s just a particular take on it –a multimodal take.

FL: It’s obviously a very big question and a very important one.

AA: Well that’s the point, and there are a lot of people asking that question actually, in South Africa anyway. They come at it from different angles and with different theories. Like I was saying, Lucia Thesen looked at lectures. She used a multimodal approach together with theories on ritual or performance from sociology and anthropology in trying to answer the same question.

FL: If you look at it like a project, how would it be designed?

AA: I would say I am looking at academic literacies from a multimodal perspective. So, my approach combines those two fields. The field of academic literacies has predominantly been talking about writing, although more and more it has been taking into account multimodal approaches. And then I bring in a very strong social semiotic multimodal lens. I’d say that everything that I do falls under that.

F: And the mapping out part, if you would look at it in stages?

AA: There is always the *what* question and then there is the *how* question and then there is the *so what*. I always have those three questions. So the *what* is kind of descriptive - what resources, what modes or what genres. You know, that kind of mapping. And then *how*, *how* are they realized in different contexts or whatever. And then *so what*? What are we going to do about it? And what are the societal and research implications. I always try and frame my research using those three questions.

FL: I guess this is one of the things we don’t talk very much about outside our research groups or write about in articles.

AA. Yes, it’s one of those underlying frameworks. I always draw a table as I’m a mapper at heart. I work from that table, but I very seldom include it in the things that I write. It serves as an underlying framework. My students laugh: “Ha ha! Another table!” But we don’t often include them in the final piece, they’re just like a thinking tool.

FL: As we were saying, multimodality is constantly expanding and developing, theoretically and in terms of the research areas where it is applied. What do you think should be on the agenda for future development?

AA: Well, perhaps thinking about multimodal assessment. We often talk about multimodal means to dominant forms and dominant forms are often still writing. However, when they are not, then we don't really know how to assess them. For instance, three-dimensional artefacts. We can look to art, design and other disciplines, but how do we assess aspects such as 'effort' or 'creativity' or 'process'. For instance, in a particular pharmacology course described by Weiss (2014), students sometimes produce patient information leaflets that are not very slick. They may not be well produced or designed, but many of them are very thoughtful. So how do you get at the reflective aspect of a product and how do you get at things like motivation? That might be part of multimodal assessment. You are not judging students' access to resources (especially in a diverse society) but what they are able to do with the available resources with particular intention. So, I think there is a lot to think about around assessment. I have one student, Safia Salaam, thinking about assessing jewellery and jewellery design; how to assess both process and product in a multimodal environment. And could it be that the visual of the artefact could stand alone, being its own argument, or does it need a written reflection in order for it to be an 'argument'?

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