

NEXTcast 2.11: Sarah Feldbloom and Leanne Milech on the Use of Multimodal Texts as Teaching Tools

In this episode, we speak to Humber English professors Sarah Feldbloom and Leanne Milech about research they've done into the use of multimodal texts (including Solange's "Don't Touch My Hair") as teaching tools.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) Welcome to *NEXTcast*, a podcast about teaching and learning at Humber College. I'm Nathan Whitlock, an editor at Humber Press. On *NEXTcast*, we talk to some of the faculty and staff who are leading innovation at Humber, both inside and outside the classroom.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) In this episode, we talk to Professors Sarah Feldbloom and Leanne Milech about research they've done into the use of multimodal texts as teaching tools. Welcome to *NEXTcast*, Sarah and Leanne.

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) Thank you.

[Leanne Milech:](#) Thank you.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) So you've been working together on a research project, through the Teaching Innovation Fund, and it's focused on using multimodal texts as a teaching tool. Could you explain exactly what those are?

[Leanne Milech:](#) The easiest way to explain it is to say that every text uses multiple ways of communicating information. So, 'ways' is a synonym for modes. So even a piece of paper with writing on it has two modes of communicating. There's the space, the white space on the page, and then the text itself.

[Leanne Milech:](#) Something like a movie has even more. There's sound, there's communication through images. If there's captions, there's communication through words. So, really, anything can be a multimodal text. Even talking at the front of the room, teaching at the front of the room; moving your arms, and speaking, you're using the space in the room, you're using gestures, you're using facial expressions, your voice. So we're all teaching with multimodal texts all the time, but the way that we've used the definition of multimodal texts in our research is to focus on texts that are digital in nature. So social media texts, websites, and we are also working with podcasts and film.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) So, in other words, just bringing in more resources, bringing in a richer variety of resources, rather than just handouts and articles or something?

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) There's a second component to the research. Basically, right now we have two different task groups. We have one task group of students who are learning the curriculum through traditional typographic text, so those are generally what you would think of as a text-based document, like an article that you might read or something like that as sources, and they're also producing traditional typographic texts as their assignments and activities. And then we have another task group that's learning immersively through multimodal text. So that means their learning tools are multimodal and they're also producing multimodal texts for all of their activities and assignments.

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) Leanne right now is working with the test groups that are learning through traditional typographic approaches and using those resources. In her class when they did their summary assignment, they wrote a summary for instance of an article. In the class or in the two classes the test group that I'm working with, the students produced a podcast as their summary. So that gives you a sense of how that other layer functions as well.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) The term, typographic texts, reminds me of riding a street car about ten years ago in Toronto, and hearing some young people refer to film cameras, which sort of blew my mind a little bit, like, "Oh, yes, we've crossed that border where now film cameras are the exception." Typographic texts are now the exception.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) So this research is ongoing?

[Leanne Milech:](#) It's happening now, so we conceived of it one year ago. Two years?

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) We started talking about it about a year-and-a-half ago, in the fall of 2017.

[Leanne Milech:](#) Then we did an under-the-radar test to see what would happen if we just started teaching, adding in these richer multimodal texts, to see if students became more engaged in the courses that we were teaching, and if they achieved the learning outcomes of the course at a higher level. Through that, with no real funding or anything, just observation and asking students to self-report, we saw that there was an increase in success and engagement. So this year, we applied for a Teaching Innovation Fund and are now formally doing the research this semester. It's happening right now.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) We should back up a second. What kind of courses are you focusing on in terms of implementing these changes?

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) We're both teaching in the English department, so we both teach various writing courses. The course that we're doing this formal research in is a WRIT 100 class, and WRIT 100 is a fundamental writing and communications class that looks at building skills for critical analysis, building skills for summarizing, for paraphrasing, for reading comprehension, those sorts of things.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) And this is not telling tales out of school or something, but WRIT 100 is traditionally where you might find students who might be somewhat reluctant, maybe at first, to always engage with those skills, to engage with reading and writing, because they're not English students. They're not there to get an English degree. They're from other disciplines and they may be a bit reluctant to engage. Was that part of the spur to start bringing in these other resources, to build that engagement?

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) It's so funny that you say that. Leanne and I are quite attracted to reluctant learners. For both of us it's really important to notice the students in the class who maybe don't have a lot of confidence around writing and communication, or haven't had great experiences in the past, or for whatever reason don't have a very rich foundation. As a result, those are usually the students that are reluctant. They're reluctant cause they have the negative feelings that aren't necessarily ... I don't think it's ever really their fault. Because we're both really passionate about serving those students, I think you're right. That's a great observation.

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) I've been working, before I was a professor, I was working on youth media projects like literacy and social justice and confidence-building projects with youth in resilient communities. I found that it was fun for the students, well, they weren't students, for participants. It was fun and challenging and motivating for them to have an opportunity to think deeply, to be challenged, to play, to be creative, and that that created opportunities for them to learn other things, to learn language.

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) I was bringing that in, but not necessarily ...

[Leanne Milech:](#) You weren't conscious, necessarily?

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) Yeah, I don't know if I was totally conscious. Before we started talking about it, we were both doing things in our classrooms that were accessing this approach and these kinds of texts, and doing

that because we thought it was good for the students generally and also were excited to support students who were reluctant. That's a really important connection you just made.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) So it was a more organic process, it wasn't like you attended an academic conference and someone spoke for an hour about multimodal texts, and you were like, "Oh, yes, I will try to implement this in my course." It was, "This is what we should be doing anyway," and then you became more aware of it. Is that the case?

[Leanne Milech:](#) Yeah, for sure. I have a background in film, that's what I did for my undergrad, and when I came to teaching, immediately I noticed in my first WRIT 100 class that there was some resistance and some reluctance to the material. My instinct was, "How can I engage these students?" I started doing critical analysis with film, and also I love music, so I was bringing in songs. We analyzed "Solange." "Don't touch my hair." There's a lot going on there. I saw right away, it lit them up and it helped them access the material. So it was really just natural instinct. Sarah was the person who actually told me there was a term, multimodal. I didn't even know. So it was very organic.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) And yet you were the one who defined it for us.

[Leanne Milech:](#) How ironic!

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) You've come a long way.

[Leanne Milech:](#) I've come a long way, yes.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) We did an episode of this podcast last year, and it was about accessibility, about accessible teaching, accessible learning. As the conversation went on, and we were talking about different approaches and different techniques and different tools to use, I actually asked the people I was speaking with, "Isn't a lot of what we're talking about just good teaching? Isn't a lot of this what we should be doing anyway?" I feel the same way about this. I totally understand the idea of formalizing it and studying it, but at some root level, isn't this really what we should be doing anyway?

[Leanne Milech:](#) A hundred percent. And when we started doing research and looking at the literature to create our TIF proposal, we saw that this is basic knowledge. It's been proven time and time again that we need to be teaching multimodal literacy. It's been proven already that it increases engagement and helps students achieve learning outcomes. By doing our research, we're trying to add to that and

say it does, and in the college context, that it works here, and we need to do it here. Yes, you're right, it's already been proven that this is important and necessary and we need to catch up a little bit.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) Well that's excellent. Thanks for spending some time telling us about all this.

[Leanne Milech:](#) Thank you for having us.

[Sarah Feldbloom:](#) Thank you so much.

[Nathan Whitlock:](#) NEXTCast is produced by Kristin Valois for Humber Press with the assistance of the Creative Productions team at The Centre for Teaching & Learning. Special thanks to Santino Pannozzo. To listen to previous episodes of *NEXTCast* and to read issues of *NEXT* magazine go to humberpress.com. You can also find free downloadable transcripts of every *NEXTCast* episode at humberpress.com. To suggest stories for future episodes of *NEXTCast*, or to just let us know what you think, email [humberpress, all one word, at humber dot ca](mailto:humberpress@humber.ca). That's humberpress@humber.ca. Thanks and see you next time. That's still not a pun.