

## Special Forum: Multimodality and Theological Librarians

# Expanding and Diversifying Scholarly Communication

by Daniel Smith

My role as librarian affords me opportunities to explore the intersections between research, instruction, and digital services. With that in mind, the invitation to explore the possibilities of multimodal scholarship for theological education is very exciting for me. As I see it, multimodal scholarship holds much promise and potential for the future of scholarly communication within theological education. First, this expanded notion of research allows for the scholarly conversation to be more inclusive of various modes and modalities. Second, this approach enlarges the content of information literacy and the ways that it can be taught and assessed. Finally, this approach has the potential to diversify and make scholarship more accessible for all and hopefully increase its overall impact and transformative potential.

One of the frames of the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* (<https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>) is "Scholarships as Conversation." Multimodal scholarship offers various entry points and possibilities for expression within this conversation. When researchers are freed to ask questions and share their findings in diverse ways, the conversation is also enriched and expanded. In this way, multimodal scholarship can be more inclusive than traditional print scholarship. Multimodal scholarship could also emancipate researchers to express themselves in the ways that are most natural and authentic for them. In addition, the conversation can become more communal, and researchers can easily collaborate with each other to create a richer product.

As a research and instruction librarian, I am deeply committed to being inclusive in my teaching of information literacy. Inclusive pedagogy recognizes that people possess various social identities that intersect with the ways that they learn. Inclusive pedagogy also recognizes that students should be offered various ways to demonstrate their knowledge and learning. At the seminary where I work, several professors give students the opportunity to fulfill their assignments in a multitude of ways, including text as well as via visual, auditory, and kinesthetic options. Although most students choose the traditional print option, it seems that more and more, students are opting for the other options. I have been amazed at the various ways students utilize technology throughout their research. The digital world has made it possible to incorporate many types of media into the research process and final product, and students possess amazing technological prowess. As librarians, I think that we should encourage students to explore different ways of expressing their research and utilizing their gifts, thus expanding traditional notions of research and planting a seed that could ultimately grow into a something very new and exciting. Personally, I continue to explore ways that I can incorporate multimodal opportunities (Literat et al., 2018) into my information literacy sessions, and I encourage students to share ways that they have or plan to incorporate a variety of media into their research. In research consultations, I have worked with Doctor of Ministry students who have conducted empirical research and encourage them to incorporate graphs and visual representations of the data that they have collected. Likewise, I have worked with liturgical studies students to incorporate audio as well as musical scores into their research products.

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Theologically, multimodal scholarship recognizes the diverse gifts that have been divinely imbued, while also recognizing different ways of knowing and being. As members of the body, we can be better nourished and sustained by encouraging every part to utilize their gifts to the fullest. Although disputed, Howard Gardner's research is often used to support the popularly accepted notion that people possess multiple intelligences and use them in varied degrees, and religious educators have incorporated this into their pedagogies. Also, the Christian tradition is saturated with images and artwork which allow for expression, particularly when the subject is ineffable or cannot be fully encapsulated in one way. At an Atla conference a few years ago, I presented about the promise of visual literacy within theological education. As I see it, this connects to multimodal scholarship. Images and videos can convey meaning in ways that the traditional text cannot. We must recognize this potential and seek to incorporate it into the ways that we teach research in theological libraries. In addition, as people of faith we must commit ourselves to making scholarly conversations as accessible as possible, recognizing their potential beyond the academy. I believe that multimodal scholarship is one way to make academic research more accessible. Recognizing the importance of access and removing unnecessary research barriers, Atla has already committed itself to promoting open access publishing, and I think that multimodal scholarship increases the impact of open access resources by presenting research in more diverse and engaging ways.

As information professionals, I think that we must critically interrogate the reasons why traditional scholarship has been limited to a largely text-based medium. Perhaps this limitation was only based upon technological restrictions? Or, perhaps there is more to the story? The possibilities for expressing research in more diverse ways has existed for quite some time. Why has multimodal scholarship never gained the same traction throughout theological research as traditional publishing? As various scholars have proclaimed, multimodal scholarship is more possible now than ever before, because advances in technology and communication have greatly enhanced its potential. Given this reality, we must seek to expand traditional notions of scholarship to become more diverse, inclusive, and multimodal.

## **WORKS CITED**

Literat, Ioana, Anna Conover, Elizabeth Herbert-Wasson, Karen Kirsch Page, Joseph Riina-Ferrie, Rachael Stephens, Sawaros Thanapornsanguth, and Lalitha Vasudevan. 2018. "Toward Multimodal Inquiry: Opportunities, Challenges and Implications of Multimodality for Research and Scholarship." *Higher Education Research and Development* 37 (3): 565–78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1389857>.