

Emoji Literacies: Read & Write, Translate, Montage



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Abstract. Emoji literacy is explored as a particular brand of digital visual literacy through three distinct lesson plans developed within different contexts that focus on the expressive potential of these colorful pictographs. Largely unconcerned with the concrete communication afforded by alphabetical characters, each exploration revels on the ambiguity of emoji phrases that refuse to be simply read and demand to be interpreted, perhaps even translated into intellectual experiences that might deviate from the affective dimensions traditionally associated with them. The first lesson plan was specifically designed to take advantage of emoji possibilities as storytelling devices with 6 and 7-year-olds, whose reading and writing skills might still be developing. The second case was developed with young slam poets to explore the expressive limits of pictographs meant to instantly convey “thoughts or emotions without inspiring strong likes or dislikes” (Nageshi, 2014). Finally, a group of visual arts undergrads participated in the third emoji plan, which expanded on Eisenstein's *Montage Theory* as discussed in his seminal 1929 essay, *The cinematographic principle and the ideogram*. Together, these three emoji lessons trace a map that is not meant to quantify and exhaust emoji use in everyday conventional communication but to expand emoji literacy beyond the reaches of the written word and render it capable of fashioning its own poetic, creative and expressive dimensions that can only be fully interrogated within the art classroom.

Keywords: Emoji literacy, art education, internet culture, digital visual literacy



Even a decade ago, research by the likes of Morgan and van Dam (2008) suggested that the visual experience afforded by digital technology demanded a special brand of literacy. They understood digital visual literacy as the necessary skills to both create and understand visual information emanating from computers. Today, computers are no longer a requisite to generate or use digital visual information, rather the smartphones in everyone's pockets are fully equipped to engage digital environments and create visually-rich content that

nonetheless still demands DVL to be critically evaluated, decoded and *written*. Emojis are a particularly intriguing and popular feature of the digital ecosystem afforded by smartphones. They straddle the frontier between the spoken and the symbolic, demanding to be equally read and reinterpreted in a single breath. They populate our communications online with colorful smiles and cute renditions of everyday objects like



and even



They are so ubiquitous that Scall (2016) argues for their exclusion from copyright considerations and makes a case to declare them “a constructed language accessory” (p. 398) meant to thrive under public domain. Stark and Crawford (2015) for their part, have discussed emojis in terms of informational capitalism and their role as instruments of emotional labor that have reshaped “mediated communication in the personal as well as in the corporate sphere — precisely because our interactions in both arenas are often mediated across the same platforms” (p. 6). Of course, emojis have also found their way into the practice of contemporary artists like Carla Gannis (2014), whose *The Garden of Emoji Delights* reimagines Bosch's iconic *earthly* triptych and offers a glimpse into a landscape of frolicking



and



But perhaps no other emoji event encapsulates the reach of these silly pictographs better than Oxford Dictionary's choice for 2015 word of the year:



According to the official announcement “the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji was chosen as 'the word' that best reflected the ethos, mood and preoccupations of 2015” (Oxford, 2015). Furthermore, during the same year two trials, one in New York City and another in Pittsburgh, introduced emojis as evidence of intent in “an explicit acknowledgment that emoji were now part of how we express ourselves and thus also useable as evidence in court” (Danesi, 2017; loc 381).

However, as ubiquitous as emoji might be, and as concrete as a bathtub, a car, two pieces of sushi and a dark-skinned female M.D. may read. The emoji string



will demand a significant amount of interpretation from the reader. It could tell the tale of an evening bath followed by a short drive to get sushi only to end up at the emergency room with a case of food poisoning. Also, it could be an invite to clean up and celebrate with sushi a newly obtained medical degree. Perhaps, it could even be a joke about sushi pieces as big as cars and bathtubs that should require a doctor's note to consume. Such level of ambiguity in emoji strings might account for the prevalence of research that focuses on emojis collaborating with alphabetic characters — AKA words — either as punctuation (Sampietro, 2016), for emotional and affective impact (Zareen, Karim & Ali Khan, 2016) or as devices of mixed textuality (Danesi, 2017). However, visual representations of the most mundane, like



that mesh together into cumulative strings of synthetic abstractions, think



seem like an ideal object of study for art education, where emojis can serve as an entry point to a specific type of digital visual literacy that is congruent with online culture while at the same time incorporating digital devices and practices into a space that typically attempts to remain undisturbed by such impulses.

The following three explorations into emoji literacy focus on the expressive potential of these visual objects and are largely unconcerned with the concrete communication afforded by alphabetical characters. Instead, these explorations, each a particular lesson plan developed within three very different contexts, revel on the ambiguity of emoji strings that refuse to be simply read and demand to be interpreted, perhaps even translated into intellectual experiences that might deviate from the affective dimensions traditionally associated with these colorful pictographs.

The first lesson plan was specifically designed to take advantage of emoji possibilities as storytelling devices with 6 and 7-year-olds, whose reading and writing skills might still be emerging. The second case was developed with young slam poets to explore the expressive limits of pictographs meant to instantly convey “thoughts or emotions without inspiring strong likes or dislikes” (Nageshi, 2014). Finally, a group of visual arts undergrads participated in the third emoji plan, which expanded on Eisenstein’s *Montage Theory* as discussed in his seminal 1929 essay, *The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram*.

It is important to note that the map traced by these lesson plans is not meant to exhaust emojis’ possibilities in art education or digital visual literacy; rather it is merely an attempt to inform academic discussion on

emojis through pedagogical practices focused on creative and expressive potentials that explicitly differ from their conventional usage. A vivid embodiment of this attitude towards emoji, and a good starting point for any discussion regarding emoji literacy in these terms, is Miley Cyrus’ emoji story (9Gag, n.d.), which has been bouncing around public image boards and online community forums since mid-2014:



Even though no concrete fact about Miley Cyrus is expressed, the emoji string above succeeds in communicating the broad arch of the singer’s stages of fame beginning with the TV show *Hanna Montana* —



— all the way up to her controversial performance at the 2013 MTV Music Video Awards —



— and hit song *Wrecking Ball* —



Of course, most of these visual references require initiated readers to be rendered meaningful; initiated not only on emoji literacy but on Miley lore as well. Nonetheless some of the emoji phrases —



and



followed by



— can stand on their own as meaningful tales of a family traveling and an engagement ending badly, provided a basic knowledge of the cultural implications of artifacts like a plane and a ring. This very capacity of emojis to convey meaning while at the same time demanding a degree of interpretation was the initial impulse behind the lessons plans detailed next.

Read & Write: Studio Meme



Studio Meme was designed as part of a much larger arts based educational research on the language of internet memes (De la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015), it was explicitly planned to introduce learners to the practice of reading emoji stories before becoming emoji storytellers themselves. It was deployed during a summer arts program in Tubac, Arizona in 2013, which serviced learners as young as 6 and all the way up to 13. In total, data was collected from 27 learners but while the older participants were introduced to the nuances and practices of Animated GIFs and Image Macros, the youngest group, 6 and 7-year-olds, worked with emoji stories expecting to take full advantage of their capabilities as visual artifacts with an audience whose reading and writing skills were still developing.

Since learners this young were not likely to own cell phones, where emojis resided almost exclusively in 2013, the exercises relied on five shared laptops and *Google+*, a social media platform that allowed for the creation of private circles — where emoji resources were shared — and multi-person instant messages that could be populated by emojis. As an introduction to emoji storytelling, an album containing 31 emoji texts, found online and within game apps, was created and shared with the learners who browsed them while the facilitator walked around chatting with them and helping them decipher the emojis. The texts shared with learners ranged from the simplest of illustrated film titles —



for *Spiderman* — to complex plot lines re-imagined — for *Beauty and the Beast* (Mobile, 2013):



Danesi (2017) identifies this type of emoji texts as *substitutive* since they forgo all alphabetic symbols and demand “a firm control of the emoji code in order to comprehend it or even just “read it” verbally” (pp. 716-717). He however goes on to concede that the narrative flow of these texts give the reader a chance to

at the very least surmise its content, more so than if it were laid out in a nonfamiliar script, which would completely preclude decipherment, bringing out that, even in substitutive writing, the emoji code has more universal features in it than has any alphabetic script (pp. 720-721).

Emojis' purported universality as narrative agents makes them an ideal vehicle to explore storytelling with young learners in the midst of developing their own literacy skills. Emoji code, however, still demands a basic understanding of these pictographs in order to be deciphered, which is why the emoji

module of Meme Studio required the facilitator to first work closely with participants as they read each emoji story (De la Rosa-Carrillo, 2015).

Besides helping learners with the task of interpreting the stories, the instructor also guided them through recognizing the roles that each emoji played as well as their congruency with the referenced movie. Learners were not asked nor expected to guess film titles, rather the emphasis was placed on the methods, logic and grammar of emojis by asking and unpacking questions like how they could recognize Bella in the phrase



Or, what specific part of the story did



referenced?

After the introductory phase participants were asked to craft emoji stories of their own and share them in a group chat initiated by the instructor. Most learners created emoji stories brimming with nouns but lacking verbs; entities whose actions, if any, were up to interpretation. *The 5 Happy Faces*, written by a 6-year-old using the screen name Gustavo Meme for example reads like a puzzle whose characters must be examined to make sense of the title:



In *The Change*, a 7-year-old using the screen name Rosa Meme told the tale of a strong hero who battles a shape-shifting demon for the love of a princess that had been duped into falling in love with one of the villain's fairest forms. After a ranging battle, the story ends in a barrage of kisses and love, just like most romances do:



The space that these emoji stories leave for interpretation is obviously much broader than the one afforded to readers of traditional stories. In fact, the narratives reported here owe much more to the conversations held with the crafters themselves right after the stories were shared than to my personal reading. In a way, these emoji stories were not only crafted by the 6 and 7-year-old participants, they were then also performed and reimagined every time they were told. This performative dimension renders emojis intriguingly fluid as they straddle the line between the written and the spoken. Such fluidity is cemented even further by the fact that, when transcribed, all emoji stories look necessarily different from the original ones found online, which is an indication of not only the formal changes that emojis have gone through in the last four years but also the fact that each platform, device and operating system is liable to display different *skins* for the same smiling pictograph.

From this angle then, emojis and the stories conveyed through them can be engaged not only in terms of the motivational and creative potential in visual storytelling that Lord (2010) has identified for curriculum development in bachelor programs for visual arts, rather emojis may also offer

*a better understanding of the
knowledge of distinct discourse*

styles and structures that children bring with them to school from the outside world, to see how spoken and written channels overlap and interflow in those discourses, and to recognize how linguistic knowledge of this kind can be used to make literate transformations from speech to reading and writing and back again (Fox, 2003).

Slam poets also engage another instance of overlapping spoken and written channels. Their penchant for delivering loud poems that rely heavily on oral traditions like rhyme, rhythm and repetition, without forgetting the performative nature of their practice made them a unique audience to further engage emojis.

Translate: poe[MEME]s



Slam poets are loud, they are in love, they are loners, they wear every feeling on their sleeve and they are proud. Of course, these are gross generalizations, nonetheless for nearly twenty years slam poetry has been hailed as an outlet for students to empower themselves and *emancipate* words, pass the literally written into the metaphorically spoken (Bruce & Davis, 2000). Like emojis, slam poetry is quite fluid in formal terms but is closely associated with poetry slams, where competing poets perform original pieces with a three-minute time limit and without the aid of music or props. They are typically held in coffee houses on slow week nights to an audience of poets, advocates and unsuspecting customers that might even agree to judge the performers on a scale of 0 to 10, based entirely on subjective taste. Poetry slams are meant to democratize poetry and

so slam poetry very often attempts to foster immediate connections with audiences that may know nothing about poetry but, as prospective judges are often reassured, know what they like. However, audiences are also likely to encounter slam poetry during free-form open mics, where poets may share the stage with musicians and storytellers that

read from carefully crafted journals. Some read from small pieces of folded paper pulled from jacket pockets, while others read from typed copies... Open mic spoken word poetry events are a strong example of teaching and learning in out-of-school contexts. In these contexts, participants' "funds of knowledge" are not only valued and considered sacred, but also show that when motivated and inspired, people can and do make strategic choices about their own learning (Fisher, 2003, pp. 365-366).

As a workshop, poe[MEME]s attempted to tap into the liberated words and *funds of knowledge* that slam poetry and spoken word open mics are purported to foster and Tucson Youth Poetry Slam (TYPS) was an ideal partner that could provide a ready-made community of young slammers eager to expand on their expressive practices. TYPS reaches out to high school students to familiarize them not only with the practice of slam poetry but also with its potential as an instrument of social engagement, political activism and self-expression, all of which poe[MEME]s sought to amplify by familiarizing them with elements of internet culture.

poe[MEME]s occurred in July of 2013 and, just like Studio Meme, it was also concerned with internet memes and online visual expressions in general but only the lesson plan focusing on emojis will be discussed here. However, since the ten participants, all between the ages of 16 and eighteen, were not only fully literate but also already poets the discussions were significantly more complex from the start. Once all

participants had been assigned shared laptops and screen names — three or four per device — the lesson began by viewing the videos *Are LOLCats and internet memes art?* (PBS Idea Channel, 2012) and *Samuel, the concise poet* (WNYC, 2009). The first video is mainly concerned with making a case for internet memes to be considered art based on their ability to communicate personal experiences. The second video is a two minute portrait of poet Samuel Menashe, whose self-identified struggle is “with too many words!” (WNYC, 2009) and writes poems like “a pot poured out fullfills its spout” (ibid.). After watching and briefly discussing the videos two main lines of thought were explored: (1) the merits of internet memes vis-a-vis Art, and (2) the merits of concise poetry vis-a-vis slam poetry. Soon thereafter, as it almost always is the case when poets are involved, poems began to emerge:

*write a poem based on memes?
challenged accepted
tries to write slam poem
writes haiku
((socially awkward penguin))
did I just art?
I think I did
because i provoke emotion
tries to provoke emotion
provokes wrong emotion
tries to make it concise
still over time limit
tries to make meme poem
can't even do that
bite the pillow
I forgot my notebook
o you write poems
you must make quite the money
so you're telling me
american kids write 'poems' for a
living
tries to put poems in order
sense no make
oh well
i don't always write poems
but when i do, i get on the bnv team
TL:DR this poem is too long
NSFW*

just kidding is SFW
KTHNXBYE

This poem, written by a group of poets under the screen name Ezra Pound-Meme was by far the most representative of the initial discussion regarding internet memes, art and concise poetry. It is dense with references to internet culture — *challenge accepted*, *NSFW* —, meme speak — *sense no make* — and inside jokes — *bnv team* is a reference to *Brave New Voices*, a national slam poetry competition for poets under the age of 18.

After the poems were written and shared, the poets were asked to peruse three different online slideshows that ask readers to decode emoji phrases standing for the titles and plot lines of films, TV shows and books. Some of the emoji strings were the same that Studio Meme participants studied —



for *E.T.* (Elliot, 2012)—but others were conceptually rich —



for *X-Files* (Buck, 2013) — and complex —



for George Orwell’s novel *1984* (Taylor, 2013). After discussing the emoji versions of films, TV shows and books, participants were asked to collectively translate each other’s

poems into emoji, so Ezra Pound-Meme’s poem above became:



The first feature that jumps out when contrasting this emoji poem with the emoji stories crafted during Studio Meme is the line breaks congruent with poem forms, furthermore there is a proliferation of verb emojis —



and



—, which may speak to the characteristic urgency and active voice of slam poetry. However, if the power of slam poetry is often compromised when printed on a piece of paper, something similar can be noticed in the translation from the written word to emoji where any sense of transgressive word play becomes sanitized and somewhat tamed. Here, it could be argued that emoji creator Shigetaka Kurita succeeded in his original purpose to enable the exchange of thoughts and emotions without eliciting strong feelings of agreement or rejection (Kelly & Watts, 2015), an ostensibly fine sentiment but one that runs contrary to slam poetry's fondness for challenging audiences and their biases even to the point of discomfort. Emojis in this case managed to turn slam poetry bland and neutral, which no slam poet is likely to intend.

In discussing the historical and material constraints of emojis Lebduska (2014) likens them to the Sumerian cuneiform writing, designed to keep track of business transactions in concise and unembellished texts. Likewise

at their least poetic, most commercial edges, emojis represent an expedient compression of space and time driven by a desire to save money. They were born of a need to conserve space, which translated into time, both of which were expressed in terms of material value.

In occupying fewer bytes, emojis made communication faster and cheaper for purveyor and consumer alike (n.p.).

So perhaps the material history of emojis still casts too large a shadow for them to adequately capture the energy of a poetic form steeped in the power of spoken word, activism and nonconformity. Nonetheless, projects like *Poemojis* (Tercero, 2016) and *The Emoji Poems* (Berger, n.d.) continue to push the otherwise instrumental rhetoric of emojis into an aesthetic realm that embodies the paradox of a potentially universal visual language that remains materially confined and linked to the devices required to read, write and become fluent in it.

Film and video are likewise irreversibly connected to a set of devices that make them possible. Furthermore montage, when applied to video and film editing, is quite adept at injecting emotion and urgency into otherwise instrumental and neutral visual objects. The famous Kuleshov effect, for example, posits that a man staring into the camera can be made to be hungry, in mourning or in love by simply switching between different subsequent shots. And so, the final lesson plan was developed for an intro to video editing class as an initial approach to montage theory.

Montage: Intro to video editing



Introduction to video editing is a second semester class in the Visual Arts bachelor's program at Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez. Although the course has

been offered for about ten years it wasn't until the 2016 spring semester that an emoji-based lesson plan was incorporated fully. It's what universities in the US would consider a studio class, where students are expected to further their art practice by incorporating principles discussed during the semester. Ultimately, the video track tries to steer students away from linear narratives and into practices like live multimedia performance and multichannel installations, but the first two semesters are focused on cementing narrative principles that will later be broken. In that sense, this course is meant to provide students with a final approach to linear narratives and it begins with an overview of montage theory.

Introduced in the twenties by soviet filmmakers and theorists, montage theory, much like emojis and slam poetry, is quite fluid and has resisted clear-cut definitions from its beginning; yet, Sergei Eisenstein is generally understood as the foremost proponent and practitioner of montage. Eisenstein (1929/ 1977) states that "montage is conflict... [and] The shot appears as the cell of montage. Therefore, it also must be considered from the viewpoint of conflict" (p. 38). However, the conflict he references has little to do with plotlines and character arches. Rather, he identifies the defining conflict in film as the energy that is released every time two single shots collide with each other. As an example, consider the fact that motion in film only arises from the incongruence between two rapidly succeeding still frames. But cinematographic conflicts, according to Eisenstein, can also exist within single frames, in terms of contrasting scales — taller heroes and shorter villains —, competing sources of light — backlit villains — and differing depth of fields — rack focusing that forces the viewer to survey the screen in meaningful ways. However many other conflicts can arise within single frames, it is crucial to understand montage as the possibility to intellectually infer meaning through the placement — collision — of two or more conflicting, seemingly incongruent visual elements. Through montage filmmakers can transcend what is apparent in the image and to do so

without the recourse of verbal language. This is how abstract notions can be conveyed through the conflicting representation of concrete objects and it also lead Eisenstein (1929/ 1977) to consider cases of montage within artifacts that have nothing to do with film. Perhaps the most notable case of film-free montage is his discussion of copulative Japanese ideograms that can represent "something that is graphically undepictable (sic). For example: the picture for water and the picture of an eye signifies 'to weep'; the picture of an ear near the drawing of a door = 'to listen'" (p. 30).

Emojis can of course be explored in similar terms, so after discussing montage theory students were introduced to basic emoji directional grammar (Steinmetz, 2014)



as opposed to



— and were asked to examine several examples of emoji storytelling placing special emphasis in Miley Cyrus' emoji story quoted above, which was deconstructed using montage principles. Afterwards students were asked to reinterpret two movie trailers of their choosing. Since most college students own or have access to an emoji-ready smartphone, the assignment was completed through messaging app *WhatsApp* and the screen grabs were posted on the class blog, along with the embedded trailers, to discuss together (<https://leondelarosa.wordpress.com/2016/02/02/trailers-emojis/>).

Miguel Briseño's reinterpretation of the *Born in East L.A.* (Video Detective, 2014) trailer was particularly successful. He was not only able to craft meaningful moments

through the juxtaposition of otherwise unrelated objects —



— but also used each character consistently and employed different skin tones. Finally, he was also able to convey a strong sense of rhythm by using line breaks congruently with the sequences and jump cuts in the original trailer.



Even though



looks nothing like Cheech Marin, the movie's original protagonist, there is no doubt he is the star of Miguel's emoji trailer. As such,



is present in virtually every line — as a protagonist should — and is also continually modified by colliding with other emojis as he falls in love, talks on the phone and expresses anger. In fact,



is so well established as the star that even when he is missing, as in



it is easy to decipher that he is the runner not only by the skin tone but also by his previously established relationship with the cop, the US flag and the barricade.

Besides applying the montage principle of copulative symbols, this emoji trailer also serves as a testament to the power of basic narrative notions like a consistent and evident protagonist with a struggle to overcome and an apparent resolution. Furthermore, the fact that all of these are manifested as emojis colliding with each other implies a potential for emoji literacy to exemplify and foster other types of literacies and rhetorics and to do so with the immediacy of visual media.

Final Consideration

Of course, it would be unfair to compare the outcomes of each lesson plan because they engaged very different learners and followed different plans with diverse objectives. Additionally, not only did emojis change significantly in the span of the three years that the lessons took place but the instructor

was also continually deepening his understanding of emojis and their possibilities. Nonetheless it seems apparent that by approaching emoji literacy through montage theory, it expands beyond the reaches of the written word and begins to trace new pathways that although not fully compatible with the urgency and energy of slam poetry might still be capable of fashioning its own poetic expressions that transcend the conventionalities of these friendly and colorful pictographs. If that is the case, then the art classroom appears to be an ideal environment to interrogate emoji literacy through creative and expressive practices.

Additionally, the materiality of emojis implies that by incorporating them into the classroom, specific digital devices and practices are also ushered in and with them a multitude of digital visual literacy concerns could be addressed. Not only will students be able to expand their emoji *lexicon* but will also likely expand their understanding of the possibilities of using visual symbols in general to communicate complex messages as in the case of the *montage* lesson plan. On the other hand there will also be instances where emojis will undoubtedly fail to live up to the task at hand, as in the *translate* lesson plan, which can open the door to discussing the inherent limitations of a purely pictorial communicative system. In this vein, Tatman (2018) recently found that emoji sequences in Twitter and YouTube comments contain significantly less information than text posts of similar length due in large part to emoji enthusiasts' penchant for repetition — crafting long emoji sequences that use only one or two emojis.

But even when repetition is not the issue, directionality and presentation might be. As emojis have grown in popularity new sets and versions have been released and even if they all must comply with the Unicode Standard, established by the Unicode Con-

sortium, they can all display stylistic variations depending on the device, operating system and update that each user is wielding (Stark & Crawford, 2015). Every emoji string I quoted and transcribed in this article, for example, differs from the original ones due to these fluctuations, which can sometimes even affect the spatial orientation of a particular emoji. Gawne (2018) once even inadvertently suggested that an acquaintance ran towards the metaphorical fire of a bad day at work as opposed to away from it as she originally intended all thanks to differing emoji styles. Although such an anecdote might read like little more than an amusing tale of miscommunication, the underlying issue of style variability can also prove relevant to digital visual literacy as it provides an entry point to discuss issues of proprietary iconography and the shortcomings of a centralized communication system that does not follow the ebbs and flows of so-called natural languages. In short, while new words are uttered everyday by toddlers all over the world, a new emoji cannot be utilized unless the Unicode Consortium first approves it and releases it as an update (PBS Idea Channel, 2016).

Finally, emoji literacy might prove relevant to digital visual literacy as a way to design, evaluate and discuss lesson plans that introduce students into the implications of the *pictorial turn* (Mitchell, 1995) and how digital technology has afforded the ideal environment for the visual to thrive. But most importantly, let us not forget just how fun it is to work with these whimsical characters.



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