

Multiliteracies: A new paradigm for arts education

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Abstract

This paper seeks to both redefine literacy in the modern world and to advance the notion of multiple literacies. It presents the view that literacy is no longer purely linguistic. Literacy might be defined as a way of thinking, and in the present century, as a way of structuring, communicating and interpreting ideas within the varying contexts of social, cultural and technological diversity. At the same time cognition, emotion and expression require multimodal means of transmission through various communications channels and media. In acknowledging this paradigm shift, the writers of *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* document (Ministry of Education, 2000) embraced the concept of multiliteracies to broaden the understanding of literacy in teaching and learning and to acknowledge a multiplicity of discourses within the school curriculum.

Introduction

Schooling at the commencement of the twenty-first century remains largely a Balkanised terrain of multiple insecure territories, most with nineteenth century European ideals and twentieth century Fordist organisation and outcomes. 'New' curricula, which value product over process, are being written, trialed and implemented. Nation states promote competition over co-operation, consumerism over public good, technological dependency over self-reliance and ask not what the state can do for you, but what you can do for the state! The so-called 'Knowledge Economy' further canonises traditional numeracy and literacy in schooling, yet its maintenance and survival depend on valuing creativity and innovation. Meanwhile the relentless drive of globalisation rolls over the world,

alienating huge tracts of people and leaving most searching for individual and collective identity.

The schooling system increasingly fails to relate to individual pupils or to their life-world. It largely fails to realise that its students are capable of morphing between knowledge bases as they rapidly search the Web or surf television channels. Many students are finding it increasingly difficult to remain transfixed through a one hour 'chalk and talk' lesson not because these students are incapable of learning in the tried and true ways, but because teaching has failed to keep up with change. American educator Bill Green, of the University of New England, claims that "there are aliens in the classroom and it sure ain't the pupils!" (quoted by Australian educator Alan Luke at the Auckland Primary Principals Association Conference, Auckland, March 2002).

Gonczi (2002)¹ suggests that the focus on the "mind as a container" should be replaced by the "mind as a holistic pattern detector". This notion is important in a world which requires the interpretation of a wide range of knowledge symbol systems each with its own mode of transmission, cultural purpose and social and economic goals. The March 2002 bulletin from the Auckland College of Education, *Te Kuaka*², singles out the role of Pacific Island arts and crafts on early childhood numeracy (p1) and on the role of dance and drama as the key to classroom success for the bilingual teacher (p5).

The modern mass media and the technologically complex means of global communication "circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history" (Hall, 1997: 3). To engage in this fast-moving world of pastiche and instantaneousness, to better prepare our youth to communicate and critically interpret through a range of media, I suggest we embrace the concept of

¹ Reshaping the Learning Curve for the future. Report by Jacqui Elson-Green. *Education Review*, March 6-12, 2002. (p.7).

² Role of Pasifika arts and crafts in early childhood numeracy (p1), and Dance and drama the key to classroom success for bilingual teacher: using dance and drama to help pupils learn (p5, Lovina Chapman). *Te Kuaka*, March 2002.

multiple literacies. Such a concept seeks to broaden the understanding of literacy in teaching and learning and to acknowledge a multiplicity of discourses within the school curriculum. Literacy should imply a mode of meaning other than the purely linguistic, it needs to incorporate visual, aural, gestural, spatial and multimodal meanings (The New London Group, 1996). Kress (in Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 157) suggests that literacy begins in the situated self of the learner rather than in the generic individual and reflects cultural resources, artist resources and multilayered identities. Literacies in the arts are developed as students learn in, through and about different arts forms within the arts disciplines and use its languages to communicate, develop and interpret meaning.

Literacy

Literacy is a socially-made form of representing and communicating. Traditional literacy forms a kind of symbolic capital, the “pre-eminent form of symbol manipulation that gets things done in modern times and as a symbolic marker of ‘being educated’” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 121). Literacy has traditionally been used as a token of power and status and schooling has consistently used literacy to deliver hegemonic messages.

Gee (in Lankshear & McLaren 1993: 274) states “language cuts up the world in different ways”. For example, the systems of production and consumption we call Fordism stress *systems* that produce meanings (values) over the individuals who carry out the production.

Linguistic and cultural diversity have become central issues in education and the meaning of literacy pedagogy must change to meet this shift away from the “old order”.

Differences can be used as a productive resource, and the ability to switch between cultural discourses, whether through language, music, gesture, symbols, or material objects, offers a break from the old mono-cultural ways of meaning making.

Literacy theorist David Olson (1977: 75) states that “to take explicit written prose as the model of a language, knowledge and intelligence has narrowed the conception of all three, downgrading the general functions of ordinary language and common-sense

knowledge”. In other words, Olson has identified a literate bias in schooling, one which presumes that all knowledge can be translated into words. Literacy obviously needs a broader definition, one which opens up the potential for a more pluralistic view of literacy. For example, Graff (1995: 321) claims that we should note:

...the many literacies in addition to or “beyond” “traditional” alphabet literacy – from those of science and numeracy, to the spatial literacy that some geographers term “graphicacy”, to the loudly touted and seemingly highly vulnerable “cultural literacy”, “historical literacy”, and “moral literacy”. Some among the lengthening lists are long established in presumption but much more novel discursively or semantically: ecological literacy, “tele-literacy” and other media literacies, food literacy, emotional literacy, sexual literacy.

Raymond (1982) encourages us to see literacy not as a style of language, but as a style of thought. In the same way, writing is not a language, it is a way of giving some permanence to a language we hear and speak by means of marks we can see. Children are encouraged to make marks as a part of their development, but what is the difference between marks which bear alphabetical resemblance and those which express other meanings and identities such as ‘child art’. The drawings of a developing child are symbolic in nature and form a part of a maturing ability to think symbolically. Not all symbols need to be marks on a page, and actions, gestures, and spoken or musical sounds can be viewed as forms of symbolic representation.

Thirty years ago Marshall McLuhan (Fiore & McLuhan, 1967) claimed that the principle *means* of communication moulds a society more than the *content* of that communication. Under the “technology of transmission” he classified speech, pictographs, ideographs, alphabets, print, radio, film and television. Robert Logan extends McLuhan’s notion that the alphabet is a technology. Logan states that:

...a medium of communication is not merely a passive conduit for the

transmission of information but rather an active force in creating new

social patterns and new perceptual realities. A person who is literate has a different world view than one who receives information exclusively through oral communication. The alphabet, independent of the spoken languages it transcribes or the information it makes available, has its own intrinsic impacts (Logan, 1986: 24).

If we see language as a symbolic exchange: oral, written, or electronic-characterised by informational simulations in which the "self is decentred, dispersed, and multiplied in continuous instability" (Poster, 1996: 6), then we can see that all signs carry information, and that literacy is a "mode of information". The present infatuation with the 'knowledge economy' gives a "certain fetishistic importance to 'information'" (ibid).

Representation and Reading Cultural Forms

Meaning is constructed through our interpretation of some representational system. This system of signs and symbols - whether sounds, written text, music, electronically produced images, dance, or objects – seems to represent concepts, ideas and feelings. Sociologist Stuart Hall sees the symbolic domain as distinguishing the 'human' element from the biologically driven and as being at the "very heart of social life" (Hall, 1997: 3).

The meaning of language lies in its function as a system and in the subsequent systems of language usages: the synchronic (the conditions for existence of any language) and the diachronic (the changes which take place in a language over time). A collection of signs within a given art form might be ordered as, for example, phrases, themes and motifs. The elements involved form in their synthesis, syntagmic relations with each other, and in turn may be represented and interpreted. Connotations are the set of possible signifieds, and connotations become denotations. The denotations of a sign are the most stable and apparently verifiable of its connotations. The signified is the abstract or mental concept the sign invokes, such as calling something an "impressionistic painting", a "ballet", or

“jazz”.

The signifier is the sensory impression of the sign, the mental image of marks on a page or in clay, the sounds in the air, the movements of the body. It is material in nature, the vibrations of the vocal cords or instrument, the physical movements of the body, the piece of clay. For example, the actor's words or the singer's song become forms of 'verbal signifiers, or what Saussure described as a "sound image". The connection between signifiers and signifieds might be so imbedded that separation rarely occurs. Metaphorical relations might be subconsciously constructed; for example Renaissance Art appears to form a bridge between heaven and earth, and Classical Music implies civilised living and social order.

The 'signified' can be constructed as a cultural (or subcultural) 'way of seeing', a way of categorising and structuring. The cultural and social conventions dictate the appropriate uses of, and responses to, a sign. Signs might have characteristics of one arts discipline which might transfer quite well into another arts discipline, but there is no such thing as a sign without a discipline (medium). Each arts discipline is not neutral and is imbedded within its own constraints and cultural significations. The understanding of these significations requires forms of arts literacy.

Semiotic functions in the arts, as with other forms of communication, are culturally and socially determined and Walker (2001: 8) states that it is "from this cultural imbedding that its strength and integrity arise". In a global society these significations become discursive formations which define what knowledge we consider useful, relevant and 'true' in specific contexts. I use 'discursive' as a general term which refers to approaches in which "meaning, representation and culture are considered to be constitutive" (Hall, 1997: 6). While semiotics might be concerned with *how* signs and symbols produce meaning, the discursive is more concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation. It should therefore be apparent that in a global society, obsessed with the branding and spin of consumerism and power, that schooling must give its students the

skills, knowledge and understanding needed to interpret the wide range of messages, ideas and emotions present in a multimodal world.

Multiliteracies

The New London Group (1996) claim that literacy pedagogy should connect with the changing social environment through what they call “multiliteracies”. They argue that the multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in contemporary society calls for a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches, and maintain that the pedagogical use of multiliteracies will enable students to gain access to:

...the evolving language of work, power, and community, and [will foster] the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment (1996: 60).

Through this view, literacy takes on a broader definition and it is already becoming increasingly common to refer to, for example, scientific literacy (Shamos, 1995), media literacy (Quin, 1998 in Livermore), cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1987), political literacy (Freire, 1985) and critical literacy (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993).

The traditional view of literacy in New Zealand has been centred around the English language and culture with its associated rules of grammar and usage. It could be seen as a post-colonial project and the literacy movement yet another form of hegemonic domination. In coining the term “multiliteracies”, the New London Group seeks more equitable social and cultural participation. They refer to “the understanding of literacy and literacy teaching and learning to include a multiplicity of discourses” (New London Group, 1996). They elaborate by claiming that:

...literacy...now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. This includes

understanding the competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment... (ibid, p61).

The long-held notion of music as a language has resulted in a dialectic with one position supporting it through the fact that music communicates, that it adopts many of the trappings of spoken and written language forms – phrases, sentences, structure and the like – and that it has a dialect, such as the dialect of jazz, or more specifically, traditional jazz. Many musicians from Haydn through to present day jazz and Latin musicians regard music as a language with specific vocabularies and not just as clusters of patterns.

The opposing view is that a language must have metalinguistic assertions which assert things about other of its elements. This position claims that paintings and music fail to assert anything which could be assessed for truth and so fail the test. Goodman (1978) has argued that the arts are constituted by symbol systems and thus are denotive. In his view musical works are not descriptions or representations, but, to the extent that they are expressive, they are denotative. Despite regarding the arts as denotative, Goodman denies music and the arts are languages because denotation is a preparation for predication. This is not so in music, and could not be so, given the difference between linguistic and musical symbol systems (Davies, 1994: 9).

Such empirical insistence on accepting the “reality of nothing but the most tangible evidence of the senses” (Arnheim in Walker, 2001: 9) is both a narrow and shallow view on knowledge construction and how we see the world. It relies on “logos” which permeates western thought, that the word “signifies the presence of wisdom in the cosmos and in Christian thought” (Walker, 2001: 11). I suggest that a phrase in language is not more exact than one in music. If I were to say “There was a tree in the valley”, this statement would open up more questions than it answers, with imagination and experience aiding its interpretation. If I were to perform a piece of music titled “The Tree in the Valley” similar imaginative constructions would result and the ‘truth’ would be no less a matter of interpretation.

Meaning-making in the life world often requires the interpretation of several modes which might be integrated with the textual, such as the audial, the visual, the spatial, and the behavioural. The various expressions of media, whether mass or multi, give evidence to this, implying the necessity for the valuing of diversity and the viewing of the world as a multiplicity of cultures, experiences, ways of meaning making and ways of thinking.

Tyner (1998) suggests that a tendency to oversimplify the concept of *multiliteracies* can be problematic. She further states that:

Multiliteracies suggest a splintering of literacy into discrete parts that belie the true nature of literacy as a complex and intersecting set of social actions...Because their competencies and characteristics overlap, multiliteracies are not necessarily discrete from one another, although there may be discrete facets to each articulation of literacy...Furthermore, the goal of the teacher is to expand the number of choices available to students. An understanding of the many literacies and their uses offers opportunities for students to become as proficient in as many literacies and learning styles as possible – not only those with which the students find an affinity (p64).

This suggests either cross-curricular or new approaches to education which will benefit students as they make connections and construct meanings. The New London Group note that the

...revolutionary changes in technology and the nature of organisations have produced a new language of work. They are all reasons why literacy pedagogy has to change if it is to be relevant to the new demands of working life, if it is to provide all students with access to fulfilling employment (1996: 66).

Literacies in the Arts

The Arts offer important insights because they are socially constructed and as products of a culture they must comprise signs and indicators to show how that culture works for its members.

Literacies in the Arts are developed as students learn in, through and about the different arts forms and use the specific languages of each discipline to develop ideas, and to communicate and interpret meaning. The Arts are seen as forms of representation, modes of meaning and, significantly, “modes of information” (Poster 1990, 1996). This makes possible a climate of cultural and sub-cultural pluralism in our schools and society as global arts forms are learned and expressed, and are given value and understood. This is especially important in New Zealand with its declared commitment to biculturalism.

Literacies in the arts also means that students should have the opportunity to gain skills in contemporary technologies and to learn how these might transform the way the arts function in that society.

The development of literacies within *The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* assumes that:

- literacies have political, social and cultural significance – they cannot be regarded as autonomous;
- the meaning of a particular arts literacy depends on the context in which it is embedded;
- the processes through which the arts literacies are learned and understood help to construct their meaning;
- each arts discipline embodies a range of discourses which may themselves constitute literacies.

(Ministry of Education, 1999: 27)

The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum document (Ministry of Education. 2000: 10-11) states that:

Literacies in the arts involve the ability to communicate and interpret meanings in the arts disciplines. We develop literacies in dance, drama, music, and the visual arts as we acquire skills, knowledge, attitudes and understanding in the disciplines and use their particular visual, auditory and kinaesthetic signs and symbols to convey and receive meaning...

Literacies in the arts require an understanding of particular cultural and practical conventions within each arts discipline. Literacy in one discipline does not imply literacy in another. Each discipline has particular signs and symbols that relate to specific art forms or genres, such as haka, jazz, role-play, painting, rock music videos, or tapa cloth-making. Literacy in the art forms and genres of one culture or period does not imply literacy in those of another culture or period.

A jazz musician who quotes a phrase in their playing from an acknowledged master jazz musician is demonstrating the same kind of literacy that someone adept at quoting Shakespeare or other master authors might be credited with. A techno-musician who utilises the tape techniques of 'musique concrete' while using contemporary digital equipment is demonstrating he/she is literate with past movements in the genre as well as technological literacy. A 'classical' musician performing what is now known, somewhat pretentiously, as "western art music" needs a particular kind of reading literacy as they engage with musical notation; they also need to be literate enough to communicate the appropriate expressive detail and literate in the valid performance practice of the particular style/genre. Likewise, a gospel singer needs to be aware of the codes of the African-American experience and a choral singer in the English choral tradition the particular desired tones, diction and articulation.

As a social text, the arts often present a more realistic record than the printed word. Renaissance art, for example, is often a social and historical text on the period through

which the Popes could promote themselves to disciples, merchants display their wares, and non-readers could follow the gospels. An example of advertising through art in the Renaissance has been nicely highlighted by Lisa Jardine (1996) when she points to paintings of the Madonna sitting in a room surrounded by the tradable goods of the period and of the particular city in which the painting was commissioned (for example, Venice). It was also common for the merchant paying for the work to appear somewhere in the picture – who wouldn't trust someone appearing in a picture with the Madonna?

How one comes to learn and engage with these literacies needs further inquiry. Certainly one must be aware of the components of a sound-based language (Damasio & Damasio, 1992/1999: 11) and understand the design of the representational resources which make up the various artistic forms. Design “rests on a chain of processes” (Kress, in Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 160) and principles which might be cultural, political or pedagogical.

Multiliteracies and Arts Pedagogy

Tyner (1998: 32-33) comments that “...the public's image of literacy still belongs in the little red schoolhouse of long ago. To the average citizen, the purposes of literacy are practical and applied: to get a good job, vote in an informed way, and understand the labels on consumer products”. Tyner (p33) goes on to quote Peter McLaren, who comments that:

...mainstream theories of literacy conceive of being literate as possessing only that requisite fund of knowledge – that privileged form of linguistic currency – necessary for students to succeed materially in an industrialized capitalist society...the non-standard literacies of minority groups and the poor (that is, different dialects, non-standard English) are regarded as deficits or deprivations rather than differences (McLaren, 1988: 214).

This gives rise to a view that the acknowledgement of multiple literacies in education might be potentially empowering. I refer to a broader concept of literacy than even McLaren, one which not only acknowledges cultures and subcultures, but different

knowledge forms such as music, dance, technology, and health. When people communicate they “form habits and link forms with meanings. Some of these habits are idiosyncratic, others are conventional within communities (*of practice*) of various shapes and sizes, but they will always serve as the initial guidelines for both production and interpretation” (Verschuere in Copley, 2001: 93).

Shaker states that “the best intellectual learning occurs in a context that illustrates its practical value” (2001: 26). He suggests that schools need a curriculum structure more suited to twenty-first century life-skills, a structure which falls into *economic literacy*, *social and emotional literacy*, and *aesthetic literacy*. Within the social and emotional, music can help teach about other cultures, protest, health and well-being, change (either physical or emotional) through listening, re-creating and composing. Aesthetic literacy, and I mean here a personal aesthetic, could give students the creative means to “intercede in one’s environment” and to have the means to do so effectively (ibid: 28). It might stress comparisons, open-minded selectivity, and would operate as a motivating factor in children’s schooling. Self-confidence grows through the ability to make interpretations and not be beholden to “truths”, to be able to make choices with the whole self.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to demonstrate that traditional views of literacy need to change and expand. I have espoused the notion that literacy is not the sole domain of the verbal and/or textual forms of representation. As we move into what could become a ‘post-textual age’ broader definitions of literacy have become a necessity. The learner and citizen of the twenty-first century must learn to interpret a range of codes which will interface through a wide variety of media. The increasing dependence upon electronic media means that visual and audial messages may well predominate much of our daily intake of information. Even so, the re-assertion of cultural identities means that the spoken and gestural message will also carry some impact. Of course, text is by no means dead, as Drucker (1998: 57) indicates when he states that: “all of us hear ‘Electronics’ or ‘Computers’ when we hear ‘Information’”. But the number of *printed books* published and sold in every developed country has gone up in the last thirty or forty years as fast as the

sales of new electronics”.

The challenge for education will be not only in educating for new breadth and forms of literacy, but also in educating how to critically interpret these forms as sources of information, expression and personal identity. The possibility of domination by rival ideologies and discourses is real and could well mean that education will be forced to compete with the ‘information industry’ as a dominant mode of information. There is also a danger that the notion of multiliteracies could be captured by market-driven discourses, in keeping with the “new fast capitalist literature (*which*) stresses adaptation to constant change through thinking and speaking for oneself, critique and empowerment, innovation and creativity, technical and systems thinking, and learning how to learn” (New London Group, 1996: 67).

By way of advancing this notion beyond ideological capture and into the lived domain, I suggest that we need to view literacy as ways of thinking, the language of which is a coded text that forms a set of discourses through which meanings and beliefs are actively communicated and interpreted. The languages of a literacy follow design conventions which dictate how meaning is communicated and interpreted. Degrees of literacy are dependent on how these are perceived and understood, and form the fund of requisite knowledge within the specific arts. To be considered fully literate in the arts, this knowledge should embrace culture and subculture, as well as politics, economics, race, class, gender and difference. Schools must ensure that arts literacies form a significant component in the education of the multiliterate individual, which Gee (in Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 67) sees as a “Bill of Rights” to function in the new capitalism and knowledge economies of the twenty-first century.

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