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New Times and New Texts: Reconceptualising Literacy Education for the Twenty-first Century

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This article offers a framework for reconceptualising literacy education in the context of globalisation and technological developments that have impacted the nature of texts and literacy practices. It examines the changing notions of literacy outlining the emergence of new text forms and literacy practices in the postindustrial era of new times. This sets the stage for a discussion of the implications for literacy education in the twenty-first century. The article argues for a rethinking of the goals of literacy education as well as pedagogical approaches and the kinds of texts that need to feature if school is to the prepare the learner for real world literacy practices.

Introduction

The search for methods that work best in literacy education in schools has long dominated the discourse on classroom practice and curriculum design in Malaysia. Consider for example, recent curricular initiatives that have targeted literacy development through a focus on reading (for instance, the class reader programme, the NILAM programme, and the incorporation of the literature component in language classes), as well as writing (through process-based and genre-based approaches, for instance). As Luke (1998) observes, "All literacy-based programmes 'work' to some degree or other" (p. 2). But the question of what works best cannot just be answered with a focus on methods alone. Rather, we also need to take into account the social worlds of learners, the times they live in, and the social, cultural and economic practices of their communities.

While the notion of the social situatedness of literacy practices is well established (see for example, Heath, 1983, Street, 1984), the technological changes and processes of globalisation in recent years demand that we rethink what it means to be effectively literate in these 'new times' (Hall, 1996). Hence, in making a case for a reconceptualisation of literacy teaching and learning, we first explore changing notions of literacy. Notions of literacy need to be seen in terms of changing literacy practices and text forms that have emerged as a result of changing technologies. Drawing from the discussion of new times and new texts, we then consider implications for literacy education in the twenty-first century.

Changing Notions of Literacy

To begin with, what do we mean when we say that someone is literate or that young people can or cannot cope with the literacy demands of higher education or the workplace? While the 'normal' meaning of *literacy* is 'the ability to read and write,' such a conception is problematic for it hinges on a range of abilities that are involved in reading and writing (Gee, 1994). At one level, literacy may involve simply the ability to decode a text (i.e., to read aloud what the "squiggles" on a printed page are saying). At another level, it may involve the ability to give meaning to the printed word, to read between the lines or to interpret text. And at yet another level it may involve the ability to critique text, and "read against the grain." Literacy is thus not a unitary concept but embraces a continuum of abilities and competencies ranging from simple decoding to 'critical literacy' (Shor & Pari, 1999; Fehring & Green, 2001).

This expanded perspective on literacy involves thinking about literacy as more than an individual, cognitive process; it is also a sociocultural phenomenon embedded in a variety of contexts that are socially and historically constructed. A sociocultural view of literacy takes into account the *types of texts* involved (e.g., comic books, school books, religious texts, economic reports), *ways of reading* these types of texts (e.g., for close scrutiny or a quick scan), the *sites* where they occur (e.g., street corners, at home or the courts) and the *participants* involved (e.g., teachers and students, or children and caregivers). More importantly, one is socialised or enculturated into literacy practices, which are patterned ways of engaging with texts in particular social contexts.

Shirley Brice Heath's (1983) now classic ethnography, *Ways with Words* provides an excellent illustration of literacy practices in the sociocultural contexts of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the United States, which she calls Roadville (a white working class community that has been part of mill life for four generations), Trackton (a black working class community, also connected to life around the mills and other light industries) and Mainstream (middle-class urban blacks and whites). Heath analyses how the young in each of these communities acquire literacy practices in the process of being socialised into the norms and values of their communities.

Being school-oriented, Mainstream parents modelled and scaffolded for their children ways of talking and "taking knowledge" from books in ways that prepared them for school. Heath (1983) analyses the bedtime story as an example of one such literacy event in mainstream homes where home and school were bridged as parents set up a 'scaffolding dialogue' with the child by asking questions (like 'What is this?) and then supplying verbal feedback. Heath notes that by age two, the child is scaffolded into the 'initiation-reply-evaluation' discourse sequence which is typical of classroom interaction in schools. Through the bedtime story routine Mainstreamers were also socialised into routines involving looking for explanations of events, analysing causes and effects, and linking book events with real world events. Through what Bernstein has called "the pedagogisation" of home discourses, Mainstreamers developed a continuity between home and school literacy practices.

These continuities between home and school were not present with the Trackton and Roadville communities. In engaging with texts, Roadville adults, for instance, did not encourage cross-context linkages between meanings encountered in texts and experiences in the real world. Trackton children, on the other hand talked about what they read in broad terms without referring to specific, discrete content items or features of the texts they read. In a review of *Ways with Words*, Gee (1994) observed that both Roadville and Trackton children were unsuccessful in school despite the fact that both communities placed a high value on success in school. The devalorisation of their home literacy practices in school-based literacy got in the way of achievement in school. By putting the spotlight on the sociocultural dimensions of literacy, Heath's analysis – and the explanations it offered for literacy underachievement among communities at the margins – went beyond an individualistic, psychological analysis of reading processes; crucially, by focusing on the influences of social context and literacy practices it offered a nuanced interpretation

of the subtle complexities involved in literacy acquisition and school achievement.

The sociocultural orientation to literacy has led to a radical rethinking in literacy education. While decoding might have been adequate for the literacy requirements of agrarian societies or for the factory floor in industrial societies, it is clearly inadequate in postindustrial societies (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996) which are characterized by increased globalization, a knowledge explosion, technological change, fast capitalism, civic pluralism and the transformation of public and private lifeworlds (New London Group, 1996). In what Gee *et al.*, (1996) have called the 'new work order' in postindustrial workplaces, knowledge-workers need not only be able "to read the lines, but also to read *between* the lines and *into* the lines," and, importantly, be able to offer critique as well. In other words, 'what it means to be literate' has undergone a shift as we moved into the postindustrial era of the knowledge economy, or what Stuart Hall (1996) has labeled as the 'new times.'

Referring to the literacy demands of the new times, Rasool (1999) observes:

... the whole terrain of communication has been altered, shifting the literacy goal l-posts increasingly into areas concerned with knowledge, information, context and content. In a world suffused by information we need to be not only literate in terms of reading and writing having functional technical skills, but also to be able to participate in a range of discourses. (p. 15).

Spectacular developments in information and communications technology have altered the literacy terrain of the new times. Specifically the widespread use of computers and the internet, as well as mobile phones and PDAs have radically altered the technological modes of communication available, and critically also the kinds of texts generated (such as web pages, spreadsheets, email, SMS messages, chatroom exchanges) and the literacy practices involved. On the emergence of these new texts, Kress (1997) comments:

Not only is written language less at the centre of this new landscape, and less central as a means of communication, but the change is producing texts which are strongly *multimodal*. That is, producers of texts are making greater and more deliberate use of a range of representational and communicational modes with co-occur within one text. (p. 257).

Technological developments have facilitated the fusion of multiple modalities – words, audio, still images, moving images, – in the generation

of new texts both on the screen as well as the page. The linearity of text organization has been overtaken by hyper-textual links which promote interactive reading thus challenging the conventional reading and composing processes in page-based texts. Besides differences in the form of texts, the new technologies have also altered patterns of communication, facilitating instantaneous and synchronous communication with participants who are networked and whose interactions may take multiple pathways.

To sum up the argument thus far, in a postindustrial world our personal, public and working lives are changing in dramatic ways, and these changes are transforming our cultures and the ways we communicate. This means that the way we have taught literacy must change, because what counts for literacy, and the kinds of texts and literacy practices involved are also changing in radical ways. This set of arguments have been set out in a defining article, 'The Pedagogy of Multiliteracies', first published in the *Harvard Educational Review* in Spring 1996, and subsequently reprinted in Cope and Kalantzis (2000). The authors of this blueprint – comprising an international panel of ten academics – go by the name of the New London Group, named after the town in the United States where they met. The Multiliteracies article has been described as a manifesto, a set of working hypotheses about the future of literacy. We consider the implications of this set of ideas for literacy education below.

Literacy Education for the Twenty-first Century

Consider the case of Azmi (a fictitious learner), a form one student in an urban secondary school. An avid user of the computer, he regularly surfs the Internet, plays computer games, and emails and 'chats' with friends in chat rooms. In one instance, while using the computer when doing homework, Azmi works on a report on dinosaurs. He moves from the pages of his schoolbooks to the computer screen at home to research information using the Google search engine. He selects a number of web sites to look for the details he requires and pictures of different dinosaur species, time-lines, diagrams and blocks of written text come up on the screen. The words and images are often in colour and are sometimes even animated as they "fly" across the screen, rotate or dissolve.

On one website, a video clip recreating the life of dinosaurs in their natural habitat fills the screen and over the speaker is an accompanying audio track. What is at work is a plurality of literacies as the learner "reads" these multiple features in texts. Meanwhile, homework is still done in an exercise book and in school, the textbook is the main source of information. This vignette of Azmi, although fictitious, resonates with the experiences of many students. What this suggests is that there may be dissonances between school-based practices of literacy and how learners experience literacy in the real world beyond the classroom.

The changes taking place in new times as outlined in the section above are dramatic: globalisation, technological developments, new text forms and new literacy practices demand transformations in educational practice. It is argued that the rethinking that is now required is as radical as the shift that was made from oral to print and book-based teaching (Kellner, 2000). With present-day changes, we now have to consider how best we can prepare learners in schools so that they become effective *literacy practicers* adept at reading and communicating through the new print forms and screen-based texts that figure so prominently in their worlds. For this to happen, we argue that schooling will have to re-examine its curricula and reconsider the goals, pedagogical practices and texts used in literacy education.

In rethinking our work as literacy educators, Allan Luke (2003) reminds us that:

What is at stake in literacy education is what we teach people to "do" with texts – intellectually and culturally, socially and politically. Nations, communities, cultures and institutions have always deliberately shaped these practices. We [as teachers] are not exempt, nor is our teaching simply a neutral, technical or scientific matter (p. 20).

In teaching learners to "do" with texts the stakes are indeed high: failure to help learners to develop effective ways of dealing with texts will result in their inability to function effectively "in a global, postindustrial networked society" (Kellner, 2000, p. 46). Literacy education, therefore, needs to *situated*. It needs to take into consideration the textual environments that learners will have to function in, so that types and features of text are considered. It also needs to be *responsive* to how literacy is used so that its purposes and surrounding practices figure in schooling. These have implications for the *what* and *how* of literacy teaching and learning.

The point that Luke also makes is that literacy education in schools needs to be carefully thought through and "deliberately" fashioned so that the literacy demands of education, the workplace, and social and cultural life figure when we teach. As literacy educators, therefore, we need to ask questions such as: What new literacies do we need to help learners develop? What goals should we develop to drive our practice? What pedagogical approaches should we use? What texts should figure in our classrooms? These questions are important if we are to prepare learners for active and effective participation in life in the twenty-first century.

Rethinking Goals

In rethinking the goals for literacy education we draw on developments in the textual worlds of learners – the changing nature of texts and changing literacy practices – as well as changing notions of what it means to be literate. In light of this, we see the following as possible goals for literacy education in new times:

- that there needs to be a multiliteracies orientation in literacy education as multimedia, multimodality (e.g. visual, auditory and kinesthetic) and multiple features of text figure in the literacy acts of meaning-making and communicating meaning;
- that context (both the immediate environment and the larger world) should figure to prepare learners for real world literacy; and
- that literacy education should have a futures orientation to prepare learners for literacy practices in various sites such as education, the community and the workplace beyond the school years.

With these goals serving as compass points, literacy educators need to consider how learners can develop the repertoires of practice that they will need, to deal with the plethora of texts and the various purposes of literacy in their own lives.

Rethinking Pedagogy

In the search for pedagogy to prepare learners for new texts and literacy practices, the seminal article on a pedagogy for multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) offers useful starting points. What this article offers is a metalanguage for educators to begin thinking and talking about a pedagogy of multiliteracies as well as a framework for practice. This

pedagogical framework comprises four components: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice (New London Group, 1996). Teachers can use these either separately or in combination to develop literacy activities around texts for the classroom.

The following are features of the four components (see New London Group, 1996; Kern, 2000, Unsworth, 2001 for further details of these components):

Situated Practice: This involves immersion in the practices of literacy as classroom learning draws on the experiences and expertise of the learners themselves that comes from their own lifeworlds.

Overt Instruction: While situated practice involves the active participation of learners as they spontaneously draw on their own lives and experiences, overt instruction provides them with ways of talking (or a metalanguage) about how meaning-making systems may be used in texts. In reading a text, for example, learners will also be encouraged to describe and interpret the different elements in text and how they work together to convey meaning. As Kern (2000) observes, developing a vocabulary to talk about "the meaning-design process" allows learners to develop more control as they engage in literacy practices.

Critical Framing: Here learners are encouraged to see texts and literacy practices against larger social, cultural and historical contexts so that the learner can step back and view them critically. In so doing, learners will also draw on the metalanguage developed through overt instruction to help them interrogate and interpret texts taking into consideration language use and social context.

Transformed Practice: Moving beyond understanding texts, learners will implement their understandings of literacy developed through overt instruction and critical framing to engage in literacy acts in other contexts for purposes of their own. Hence the term transformed practice.

This pedagogical framework for multiliteracies involves multiple teaching strategies including "the strategic use of student-centred, discovery learning as well as teacher directed, overt teaching and intermediate guided investigations of various kinds" (Unsworth, 2001, pp. 19-20).

How can some of these ideas for a pedagogy of multiliteracies play out in the classroom? In a hypothetical unit on television advertising, for example, learners can compile examples of various types of

advertisements aired during particular time slots e.g. television advertisements during weekday early evening and late evening slots. Working in groups learners draw on their own experiences and expertise to categorise these advertisements according to various criteria such as products advertised, target audiences and persuasive strategies used. They may work out why particular advertisements work better than others. In these explorations around the television advertisement, learners are immersed in the literacy experience engaging in what the New London Group would refer to as situated practice.

To help learners develop a metalanguage to talk about advertisements in a more deliberate and in a more focused way, the teacher may design a lesson using overt instruction to highlight textual features of television advertisements. The meaning-design system used to produce a television advertisement, for example may comprise the following elements: the use of words, the use of visuals, as well as an audio dimension. In examining the words used, the teacher may sensitise learners to features such as the techniques of persuasion, denotative and connotative meanings of words, the play with words including rhyme, alliteration and puns, as well as physical features such as choice of font and point size and how words are presented on the screen. In considering the visual element, the teacher may guide learners to explore the design of layout, the use of photography and film footage, as well as the use of symbols and colour. The audio dimension may include an exploration of the soundtrack including the voice-over, background music and the use of jingles.

To critically frame literacy practices, advertisements may be seen in relation to consumerist practices. Discussions of target audience and market and explorations of underlying social values and lifestyles could frame learners' interpretations and critique of such texts. Learners could demonstrate their understandings of how television functions in society to produce their own advertisements and mount their own campaigns in acts of transformed practice. In carrying out such activities, schools become "places where students are apprenticed to the practices of 'text-handling' (Mey, 1991) – of interacting, working with, talking about and 'discoursing' on, thinking and strategizing through, managing and manipulating texts, their designs, discourses and languages." (Freebody & Luke, 2003: 57).

While the New London Group (1996) offers a useful framework for teachers to think about the work of literacy teaching, it is useful to remember that the components in the framework are guidelines and not prescriptions for practice.

Conclusion

What this article does is to offer a conceptual framework for thinking about notions of literacy and literacy education in light of the macro-level changes that are taking place in society. While the discussion has foregrounded new technologies, new text forms and the changing literacy practices that are emerging, we need to remember that these newer literacies co-exist with traditional forms of literacy. As Freebody and Luke (2003) put it:

schools can operate most effectively with a continual eye on the dynamics of literacy practices with old and new technologies of writing and inscription outside of schools. At present, this involves print-based classrooms and teaching environments shifting towards blending the teaching of popular, digital and multimediated cultures with more traditional and longstanding approaches to teaching basic reading, literature and handwriting, and all the rest. (p. 57).

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