
Feature Article

Making sense of literacy

Christine Ludwig, Queensland Studies Authority

Literacy, or literacies as social practices, as developed over time, have taken different focuses and emphases in response to societal demands. The growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity and new communications technologies requires a responsibility to consider carefully and precisely what the job of literacy now can be, in a multicultural, multilingual and multiliterate society, increasingly characterised by movement – of people, capital, labour and communications in a variety of languages.

This statement is an excerpt from a larger paper, *Literacy: Position Paper* (Queensland School Curriculum Council, 2002), that seeks to align conceptions of literacy across areas of learning and year levels, to enable policy writers, curriculum developers, schools and teachers to work collaboratively and coherently towards developing students' literacy capabilities. These capabilities will provide students with a vital tool for learning in school, and a foundation for productive and fulfilling lives within our society.

The challenge for schools is to develop students' literacies so that they reflect the diversity of social, technological, cultural, linguistic, and economic contexts of which they form a part. Recognition must also be made of the importance of providing for, building upon, and accommodating the diverse linguistic, cultural and learning needs of individual students, particularly with respect to gender, disability, socioeconomic disadvantage, race and geographic isolation.

Approaches to literacy education

Literacy education in Australia has been influenced by many and varied theories of literacy and the literacy practices developed in schools are necessarily selections from available approaches based on these theories. To discuss ways of teaching literacy to young students, a range of categories has been developed by researchers, policy makers, curriculum writers and teachers. At the present time, it is possible, convenient and useful to classify schools of thought about literacy and literacy education into four large generic categories, namely:

- skills approaches, emphasising the perceptual and technical procedures of decoding (for reading) and encoding (for writing)
- personal growth approaches, emphasising the private, personal, and individual ways in which people use reading and writing, and grow through reading and writing
- cultural heritage approaches, emphasising the transmission of historical and cultural knowledge and perspectives and the significance of reading and writing as offering access to the valued literacy heritage of a culture
- critical-cultural approaches, emphasising the variability of everyday literacy practices from culture to culture and setting to setting, and the importance to everyday social experience of critically analysing literate communication underlying belief systems and their cultural and political consequences.

(Adapted from Gilbert, 1989, and Christie et al., 1991, in Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995)

As there is consistent pressure on teachers to adapt their practices for different learner groups and to changing departmental positions and community expectations, teaching rarely amounts to pure expressions of any of the approaches. They are often acted out imperfectly because they are interpreted within histories of meaning and practice, built on professional and cultural ideas that emphasise different aspects of literacy practices.

Each of these approaches responds to a particular context or point in time and has been actively promoted in Australia in recent decades. As suggested categories for describing literacy, they provide different propositions about the nature of literacy and are associated with different ways of knowing about social and educational practice. Decisions that are made about the very nature of literacy and the appropriate approach to be taken to literacy teaching and intervention give shape to what it means to be a participant in a particular literate society and to what counts as literate performance.

Frameworks for learning and teaching literacy

In order not to pre-empt a particular theory or approach, and therefore privilege a particular set of practices to literacy and literacy learning and teaching, the strengths of each of these approaches can be drawn on and each revisioned to inform current practices and to conceptualise frameworks and programs that allow for teaching and learning to respond to the future needs of students.

Two recent frameworks that allow for the integration and revisioning of these approaches are:

- *Four Literacy Resources* developed by Peter Freebody and Allan Luke (1990)
- *Three Literacy Dimensions* developed by Bill Green (1988)

Four literacy resources

The four literacy resources are a set of specifications that were developed in an attempt to outline the kinds of resources that any theory of literacy education and any pedagogy aimed at that education should address. The set of specifications were developed by using an anthropological lens to see how theories look in practice and so the set is in essence a taxonomy of the kinds of capabilities required to be fully and functionally literate.

The proposition, therefore, is that to learn to employ the set of literacy capabilities required for students to become participating and effective members of a contemporary literate society, they must develop this repertoire of resources or practices for interacting with text. This repertoire of practices, therefore, enables students to move beyond decoding and encoding print to understanding and using texts on several levels for a variety of purposes in a range of technologies.

<p>CODE-BREAKING resources or CODING PRACTICE</p>	<p>TEXT-PARTICIPATING resources or SEMANTIC PRACTICE</p>
<p>How do I crack this code?</p> <p>The emphasis is on decoding and encoding the codes, symbols and conventions of written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts in response to contextual factors which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising and using the alphabet, sounds in words, whole words, letter/sound relationships • using graphophonic, syntactic and semantic sources of information • spelling accurately and understanding the functions of spelling • recognising and using grammar and vocabulary including punctuation and intonation and rhythm • recognising and shaping patterns of letter, sound, word, clause, sentence and text/generic structure • recognising and shaping visual, nonverbal and auditory codes 	<p>What does this mean to me?</p> <p>The emphasis is on comprehending and composing or making meaning from written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drawing on social and cultural background and prior knowledge to construct meaning from texts • comparing own social and cultural experiences with those described in the text • relating previous experiences with similar texts • seeing own interests and lifestyles reflected in texts • interpreting and using literal and inferential meanings in texts • attending to the way texts are constructed to make meaning • recognising and constructing concepts and processes that characterise different ways of constructing knowledge in text
<p>TEXT-USING resources or PRAGMATIC PRACTICE</p>	<p>TEXT-ANALYSING resources or CRITICAL PRACTICE</p>
<p>What do I do with this text?</p> <p>The emphasis is on understanding the purposes of different written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts and using texts in different ways for different cultural and social functions which also includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding that different cultural and social contexts and purposes shape the way texts are structured • understanding the purpose of a text and recognising the purpose in using it • using appropriate text types for particular purposes both inside and outside school • recognising what to do with a text in a particular context and what others might do with it 	<p>What does this text do to me?</p> <p>The emphasis is on understanding that written, spoken, visual and multimodal texts are not neutral but represent particular points of view and silence others which includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising the writer, speaker, or shaper's purpose in creating a text and that texts influence people's ideas • recognising opinions, bias, points of view, gaps and silences and dominant readings in a text • understanding how texts are crafted according to the values, views and interests of the writer, speaker, or shaper • identifying the ways in which information or ideas

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising that each text type has particular structures and features • understanding the options and alternatives for using a text to convey particular meanings effectively. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are expressed and represented to influence and position readers, viewers or listeners • presenting an alternative position to the one taken by a text or deciding to endorse the position taken by a text.
--	---

(Adapted from Freebody & Luke, 1990, Freebody, Ludwig & Gunn, 1995, Luke & Freebody, 1999)

When using such a taxonomy, Freebody and Luke called for an appreciation of the necessity for integration of these four resources but also drew attention to the need for the pedagogic space for explicit teaching of the various resources. The underlying assumptions of the taxonomy are that the resources are not hierarchical or developmentally based: the acquisition of knowledges and skills in the taxonomy is not to be considered in a linear manner.

The taxonomy asks educators to move beyond psycholinguistic and cognitive versions of literacy development, and to view literacy as a socially constructed practice. The position is that seeing critical practices as being advanced or higher order cognitive skills does not do justice to the complexity, diversity and essentially social origins of literacy practices in homes and schools.

Three literacy dimensions

To forge intersections among literacy, curriculum and classroom practice it is necessary to develop some coherent understanding of literacy that reflects the many demands of the literate society of the future. These demands necessitate an interrelated set of knowledges and skills which learners employ as they meet the literacy needs of the society in which they operate. To develop these interrelated capabilities requires an integrated view of literacy in curriculum and pedagogy. Bill Green conceptualised a way of viewing literacy holistically in terms of three interlocking dimensions – the operational, the cultural, and the critical (Green, 1988).

<p>Operational Dimension</p> <p>The operational dimension 'refers to the means of literacy in the sense that it is in and through the medium of language that the literacy event happens. It involves competency with the language system' (Bigum et al. 1998). The emphasis is on the language system and how adequately and appropriately individuals are able to read, view, listen, write, shape and speak/sign in a range of contexts. This language aspect of literacy includes the ability to recognise and use the systems of signs (codes) and patterns of codes (conventions) which are part of language and literacy. These are increasingly complex in our society and include an understanding of the way in which combinations and patterns of script, number, diagram, visuals, nonverbals and sound convey a message.</p>
<p>Cultural Dimension</p> <p>The cultural dimension involves the meaning aspect of literacy. 'It involves, by contrast with the operational dimension, competency with the meaning system. This is to recognise that literacy acts and events are not only context specific but also entail a specific content' (Bigum et al. 1998). This cultural aspect of literacy necessitates understanding texts in relation to contexts – to understand what it is about given contexts of practice that makes for appropriateness or inappropriateness of particular ways of writing, reading, shaping, viewing, speaking and listening. This meaning aspect of literacy includes the ability to engage in purposeful use of genres to discover and exchange meaning and the ability to use the various modes for communication such as books, letters, electronic mail, complex logs and signs, traditional and modern art forms, electronic and print media, or the internet.</p>
<p>Critical Dimension</p> <p>The critical dimension is concerned with the 'socially constructed nature of all human practices and meaning systems. In order to be able to participate effectively and productively in any social practice, humans must be socialised into it. [However] social practices and their meaning systems are always selective and represent particular interpretations and classifications. Unless individuals are given access to the grounds for selection and the principles of interpretation they are merely socialised into the meaning system and unable to take an active part in its transformation' (Bigum et al. 1998). This dimension of literacy is the basis for ensuring that participants cannot merely participate in a practice and make meanings within it, but that they can, in various ways, develop competency in transforming and actively producing a practice. This transformational aspect of literacy includes the capacity to understand the many meanings that messages can convey and interpret and shape messages with several possible meanings.</p>

(Adapted from Green, 1988, Bigum et al, 1998, Green, 1999, Lo Bianco & Freebody, 1997, Office of the Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999)

The three dimensions operate together to provide an integrated view of literacies as social practices. As interrelated, interdependent, complementary and interactive dimensions they involve language learning which involves cultural learning, cultural learning which involves language learning, and critical learning which involves language and cultural learning. In this way there is a complementary and mutually informing relationship between the language system, the meaning system and transforming practice. The three dimensions therefore are bound together necessarily in a reciprocal, mutually enriching relationship and need to be considered in understanding literacies as social practices in the fullest sense.

Literacy practices, therefore, include skills of decoding and encoding, skills for making meaning, and skills related to the use of language to communicate for a variety of cultural and social purposes and to different audiences. From the earliest years, effective literacy learning will also entail critical literacy practices, which develop a conscious awareness of the language and idea systems that are brought to play when a text is used. These skills are always interlinked and interdependent, rather than being learnt in a linear sequence.

New times, new literacies... new 3R's

By using these two literacy frameworks the learning and teaching of literacy can be located among well-developed and responsive approaches that are now reshaped to take account of the demands that the current and future world presents to children, young people and adults. The two frameworks have the capacity to provide opportunities for reconceptualising the traditional three r's of schooling (reading, writing and arithmetic). The frameworks have the potential to provide teachers and schools with the ability to:

- **reflect** and learn from the past and present approaches to literacy learning and teaching in order to evaluate and adjust current practice
- **respond** flexibly to their students and the contexts of their schools and classrooms by drawing on appropriate aspects of the frameworks
- **relate** the emphasis of the curriculum, the characterisation of the pedagogy and the focus of the assessment to make sure they align and articulate.

References

- Bigum, C., Durrant, C., Green, B., Honan, E., Lankshear, C., Morgan, W., Murray, J., Snyder, I. & Wild, M. (1998) *Digital Rhetorics: Literacies and Technologies in Education – Current Practices and Future Directions*. Canberra: DEETYA.
- Christie, F., Devlin, B., Freebody, P., Luke, A., Martin, J. R., Threadgold, T. & Walton, C. (1991) *Teaching English Literacy: A Project of National Significance on the Preservice Preparation of Teachers for Teaching English Literacy*, Vol. 1. Darwin: Northern Territory University.
- Freebody, P., Ludwig, C., & Gunn, S. (1995) *Everyday Literacy Practices in and out of Schools in Low Socioeconomic Urban Communities*. Brisbane: Centre for Literacy Education Research, Griffith University.
- Freebody, P. & Luke, A. (1990) Literacies programs: Debates and demands in cultural context. *Prospect*, 5, 7–16.
- Gilbert, P. (1989) *Writing, Schooling and Deconstruction: From Voice to Text in the Classroom*. London: Routledge.
- Green, B. (1988) Subject-specific literacy and school learning: A focus on writing. *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 32, No. 2.
- Green, B. (1999) The New Literacy Challenge? Literacy Learning: Secondary Thoughts. Vol. 7, No. 1. Victoria, Australian Literacy Educators' Association.
- Lo Bianco, J. & Freebody, P. (1997) *Australian Literacies*. Victoria: Language Australia.
- Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999) Further Notes on the Four Resources Model, Reading Online. <http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html>
- Office of the Queensland School Curriculum Council. (2002) *Literacy: Position Paper*. Brisbane: Queensland School Curriculum Council.

Further elaboration of this statement can be located on:

- the ALEA website, titled *Making further sense of literacy* : <http://www.alea.edu.au>
- the Queensland Studies Authority website, titled *Literacy: Position Paper*: http://realwww.aurora.qsa.qyr1 10/p-10_framework/index.html

Christine Ludwig is currently the Key Learning Area Officer - English at the Queensland Studies Authority managing the development of a Years 1 to 10 English syllabus and support materials for online and print media. She is also responsible for providing statewide strategic leadership in the area of P to 12 English syllabus development and implementation. She has written a number of texts, including *Why Wait? A way into teaching critical literacies in the early years*, articles for journals and chapters in books on aspects of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Christine is undertaking post-graduate studies in the Faculty of Education at Griffith University and her interests include language and literacy curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation, particularly from a critical-sociocultural perspective.