Literacy in the Arts

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ABSTRACT

My experiences as a secondary school Drama teacher coupled with postgraduate study into literacy have offered me great scope to meaningfully consider my own practice, my students’ practice and what literacy means in Arts classrooms. In this article I consider the relationship between artistic inquiry and literacy in the Arts, viewed in the Australian context as an umbrella term for the subjects of Drama, Dance, Media Studies, Visual Arts and Music. I also discuss multiliteracies, multimodal approaches and critical literacy in the Arts, and examine current Australian social and policy conditions framing critical approaches to literacy in the Arts, specifically in relation to the recently released Australian Curriculum.

Introduction

The notion of what it means to be literate has changed radically in recent decades. Literacy is no longer viewed simply as the act of comprehending the written word on a page; rather, it is considered a social practice and requires the acknowledgement of numerous types of literacies (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Research into multiliteracies and multimodal approaches to the reading and creation of texts has reshaped the literacy landscape and has also served to shift the focus from literacy as the sole domain of subject English to other key learning areas as well.

The Arts has long been revered as an area of imaginative and investigative inquiry that facilitates deep and considered aesthetic understanding of an art form in order to create new artistic products. A vast majority of the literature regarding the Arts and literacy speaks to how engagement in the Arts makes students more literate, or how literacy skills (specifically reading and writing) can be further developed in Arts classrooms (Barton, 2013; Handerhan, 1993). However, Barton (2013) argues that teachers of the Arts tend to view literacy in two interconnecting ways: reading and writing in their respective subject areas, such as music, drama and art, and a deeper disciplinary approach whereby students use their learnt skills to practise artistically themselves. This poses the question: what does it mean to be literate in the Arts?

Aesthetic experience in the Arts

The study of the Arts and artistic inquiry is dominated by the philosophical discussion of aesthetics, which Abbs (1987) describes as ‘a mode of sensuous knowing’ (p. 53). Historically, aesthetics has been used to validate a range of values concerned with the formalist judgements about artistic beauty, but it is also concerned with the social, cultural and political values behind artistic practice (Nicholson, 1999, p. 83). By experiencing art, one is able to effectively read and understand the world and context from which an art piece was borne. Aesthetic experiences can be potent, cathartic and all consuming.

Schools are often the sites where these kinds of experiences first occur for students, where the intersection of artistic expression and personal meaning is first created and explored. Furthermore, it has been widely documented that students whose learning is embedded in the Arts experience a number of positive outcomes. In addition to better grades and overall test scores, students are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom, are more likely to be involved in community service and have a more positive self-concept than those students who are deprived of the Arts (Ewing, 2011, p. 13). This points to the fact that complex and profound learning experiences are occurring in aesthetically charged Arts education.
The fusion of aesthetics and Arts education ‘can create domains where there are new possibilities of vision and awareness … educators can help awareness feed into an expanding life of meaning’ and ‘can make increasingly available moments of clarity’ and ‘moments of joy’ (Greene, 1977, p. 18). The plasticity and malleability of the forms comprising the Arts positions students to embody a range of literate practices to:

- use their minds in verbal and nonverbal ways;
- communicate complex ideas in a variety of forms;
- understand what someone else is trying to tell them in words, sounds, or images;
- imagine new possibilities;
- do the hard work of making them happen. (Adapted from Longley, 1999, p. 71).

It is through the Arts that students can experience and create a myriad of new texts. The Arts ‘give shape to formless ideas – they are a vehicle by which we can express our growing awareness of ourselves and the worlds in which we live’ (Wright, 2012, cited in Barton, 2013, p. 4). However, a solid understanding of form is essential before the creation of art can be properly achieved. Barton (2013) argues that being literate in aesthetic discourses is a crucial component of students’ practice in making meaning through art, that ‘being able to describe, critique, and master relevant Arts vocabulary and technique is essential to the process of creating art’ (p. 3). This reflects the work of Freire (1983), who contends that ‘reading the word’ or the art form and its technical components ‘precedes reading the world’ (p. 5). Merely ‘being creative’ is not enough. Being literate in the Arts and having an understanding of styles, form, components and technical vocabulary of artistic discourses is vital.

**Notions of literacy**

Traditionally, literacy has been rather narrowly defined as functional reading and writing that privileges written language (Handerhan, 1993, p. 245; Janks, 2010). An autonomous model of literacy views reading and writing as neutral processes that are directly related to an individual’s cognitive and physiological functioning (Alverman, 2009, p. 15). It has been recognised that this perspective excludes and devalues the other contexts in which literacy can occur, and also places a deficit value on students who are struggling with the understanding of literate practices in traditional classroom contexts.

The introduction of New Literacy Studies (The New London Group, 1996; Gee, 2003) marked a profound shift in the way literacy is viewed. It is not just a set of skills for the decoding, comprehension and reproduction of written texts; rather it is a social practice that recognises a variety of literacy types. Attention was brought to the fact that there is a multiplicity of and multifaceted integration of communication modes in use in society (e.g., linguistic, visual, oral, sound and kinaesthetic) that require literate understanding and practice. Moreover, the act of becoming literate requires complex interaction between a learner’s background and language, and the context, purpose and discourse of texts explored (Walsh, 2010, p. 215). This view also shifts literacies to being local, situated and grounded in social milieus (Jewitt, 2008, p. 244).

The development of literacy practices in schools thus involves shaping and mastering the repertoire of capabilities called into play when managing texts in ways appropriate to various contexts (Luke & Freebody, 1999). Additionally, a variety of new terminology has been developed over recent years which showcases how literacy has been changing and evolving, such as visual literacy, new literacies, digital literacies, multimodality and multiliteracies (Walsh, 2010, p. 213). When it comes to considering literacy in the Arts, Eisner (1988, cited in Handerhan, 1993) argues that aesthetically charged artistic practice is a form of literacy, that Arts literacies are ‘cognitive activities guided by human intelligence that make unique forms of meaning possible’ (pp. 244–245). This statement links to the concept of multimodality.
Multimodality and the Arts

Walsh (2010, p. 213) defines multimodal literacy as the act of meaning making that occurs via ‘reading, viewing, understanding, responding to and producing and interacting with multimedia and digital texts.’ This interaction may include oral and gestural modes of talking, listening, dramatising, writing, designing and producing texts (p. 213). Multimodality puts forth that meaning is made through situated configurations across image, gesture, gaze, body posture, sound, writing and music, which are referred to as modes, or as organised sets of semiotic resources for meaning making (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246). Intrinsic to the concept of multimodality is the notion that modes ‘rarely, if ever, occur alone’ (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, cited in Albers & Harste, 2007, p. 11) and there are complex relationships among and between modes in constructed texts. A student’s processing of modes within texts can occur simultaneously and is frequently cohesive and synchronous (Walsh, 2010, p. 213). A multimodal approach determines that language is only partial, that many modes are involved in meaning making, and that meaning is made, distributed, interpreted and remade through a range of representational and communicational resources (Albers & Harste, 2007, p. 11; Jewitt, 2008, p. 246).

This speaks directly to the Arts, where the creation of artistic works comes in a variety of forms that are ‘undertaken through the use of multiple modes and multiple literacies’ (Barton, 2013, p. 16). The multiple literacies at play within multimodal works of art further serve to reposition literacy beyond its traditional definition and connect with culturally and linguistically diverse settings and the range of texts that are created and consumed within them. Consideration of artistic practice and inquiry from a literacy perspective requires acknowledgement of the multiplicity of ways of knowing and modes of communication that are integral to the Arts. Not only are students required to read and write about the Arts in a manner associated with a more traditional notion of literacy, but they must also apply their knowledge of Arts practices to the creation of their own art pieces. In the process of creating and pursuing artistic practice, the artist’s ideas are inscribed on the material (be it a dance, theatrical performance, sculpture, short film or concerto), which is in turn read by the perceiver of that artwork. It is a reflexive process whereby immersion in the study of an art form impacts and informs the subsequent creation of one’s own work, and creation provides greater understanding of the broader artistic discourse.

Researchers (e.g., Barton, 2013; Handerhan, 1993) contend that many approaches to the exploration of literate practice fail to take into account the more artistic and aesthetic cognitive processes that underpin Arts practice, and that an examination of literacies learnt within Arts education should emphasise the individual within the creative process. Moreover, when considering the Arts, the notions of literacy must expand to include how individuals interact within a complex sociocultural system and the discourse in which the art is created and perceived (Handerhan, 1993, p. 246). Eisner (2002) argues that:

> education can learn from the Arts that the limits of language are not the limits of cognition. We know more than we can tell … what schools need to attend to is the cultivation of literacy in its many forms. Each form of literacy provides another way to be in the world, another way to form experience, another way to recover and express meaning. (p. 5)

The variety of multifaceted literacies and modalities associated with the aesthetically driven Arts education practices can enable profound learning experiences for students and serve to reveal ideas and information that stretch beyond the limits of language (Barton, 2013; Ewing, 2011; Longley, 1999). However, in terms of research, this is still largely uncharted territory. A substantial amount is known about the semiotic resources of language; yet considerably less is understood about the semiotic potentials of gesture, sound, image, movement and other forms of representation (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246) and there is limited research on literacy and what constitutes literate practice in the Arts (Barton, 2013, p. 6). Further research is required so that ‘the Arts, multimodality and new literacy studies, each with its own distinct principles, together can redefine literacy and what constitutes being literate’ (Albers & Harste, 2007, p. 18).
Critical literacy and the arts

The creation of artistic products by an individual and the perception and reflection upon others' artworks showcase the power of critical literacies at work within Arts contexts. Luke (2000) argues that it is the primary aim of critical literacy to:

1. allow students to see how texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures, and their identities in powerful, often overtly ideological ways; and
2. understand how they use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds.

All texts produced by a culture both reflect the culture itself and the wider world in some way (Moon, 2001, cited in Jetnikoff, 2006, p. 37) and everything that critical literacy says about language and literacy as social practices that inevitably carry ideology is as true of aesthetic texts as of any other kinds of texts (Misson & Morgan, 2005, p. 18). Beyond the conscious inclusion of aesthetic elements, an artist's work is imbued with particular values, attitudes and beliefs from his or her particular discourse. Similarly, artworks viewed by the audience are understood through the perceiver's lens of discourse, and thus meaning is made.

In this sense, both the practice and understanding of art forms, and being critically literate are interconnected. Indeed,

critical literacy makes possible a more adequate 'reading' of the world, on the basis of which ... people can enter into 'rewriting' the world into a formation in which their interests, identities and legitimate aspirations are more fully present and present more equally. (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993, cited in Morgan, 2002, p. 6)

The Arts, literacies and reality are dynamically linked and the understanding attained by critically reading aesthetic texts involves perceiving the relationship between the art, its creator and its context.

Freebody and Luke's (1999; Luke, 2000) four resources model, a four-tiered approach to sets of social practices necessary for critical literacy and reading instruction can be employed by students for understanding and composing art works. Firstly, decoding and 'cracking the code' to recognise an art work's textual features depends greatly on understanding of form, technique and the various artistic elements exclusive to the form. In addition, a strong understanding of symbolism, which is frequently grounded in social and cultural discourses, is key when trying to understand an artist's intent.

Luke and Freebody (1999) maintain that all four resources are of equal importance as students engage in several practices together, and similarly Barton (2013) states that 'once students are initiated into the discourse of understanding and critiquing art using relevant terminology a second notion of literacy comes into play – when the students themselves become artists' (p. 16). This aligns with the four resources model's second component regarding text-meaning practices. The ability to participate in the meanings of the text can allow students to draw upon knowledge of existing forms and practices which allows for understanding and composition of meaningful written, visual, spoken texts and multimodal art forms. This points to students being literate within aesthetic discourses in order for the development of new work to be realised.

The four resources model's third component, regarding pragmatic practice to use texts functionally, speaks to how students make and consume artistic products within the wider world. This occurs intrinsically when students are engaged in Arts education practice as the Arts:

play a major role in defining and interpreting our culture, heritage and society and in celebrating our diversity as a nation. They inspire, entertain, transform, instruct and challenge the way we see, listen and comprehend. The Arts expand our understanding, knowledge and creativity. (Department of Education and Children's Services, 2002, cited in Ewing, 2011, p. 30)

Functional engagement with and the creation of artistic products is the cornerstone of Arts education curricula.
Finally, the four resources model’s fourth tier, concerning critical practices and being able to critically analyse and transform texts, is again inherent to artistic practice. Ewing (2011) argues that ‘critical engagement through Arts processes can help us to see things from a different perspective and suggest connections between different phenomena that were not previously recognised’ (p. 47). The Arts can promote self-understanding and illuminate the advantages of viewing the world from multiple perspectives; they can thus be conceptualised as critical, quality pedagogy. Just as literacy is a social practice, the Arts and aesthetic practices are shaped by discourse and rely on the interaction between maker and consumer to bring forth meaning and critical understanding and perspectives.

**Literacy and the Australian Curriculum for the Arts**

The recently released *Australian Curriculum for the Arts* (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014) for the first time has articulated a concrete national Australian policy regarding curricula and Arts experiences for all school students. While the document is now ready for implementation in schools, reflection and analysis of the policy in its final form by teachers, academics and researchers is still taking place. In 2011 when the Australian Curriculum was still in the drafting stages, Ewing (2011) in her report *The Arts and Australian education: Realising potential* argued that:

> the current manifestation of a national curriculum for Australian children continues to privilege a traditional subject hierarchy with traditional textual understandings of literacy (reading and writing) along with numeracy taking priority. Academic achievement is measured by proficiency in literacy and, to a lesser extent, numeracy. The seemingly contradictory gap between rhetoric and reality about the importance of the Arts continues. (p. 28)

Ewing went on to explain that:

> the then Commonwealth Minister for the Arts, when announcing that the Arts would be part of the second phase of the Australian Curriculum declared that: Creativity, interpretation, innovation and cultural understanding are all sought-after skills for new and emerging industries of the 21st century. Arts education provides students with the tools to develop these skills. (p. 28)

This illustrates the gap and disconnect between traditional notions of literacy and the acknowledgement of complex multimodal and multiliteracies at play within arts contexts. Curiously, in the Literacy section of the final Australian Curriculum document, ACARA still considers how the Arts foster more traditional literacy practices rather than considering what makes a student ‘Arts literate’ or what faculties of multimodal literacies are practised. The document states that:

> students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently, for learning and communicating in and out of school, and for participating effectively in society. Students use literacy when listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts. Literacy involves students using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts. (ACARA, 2014)

The document goes on to state that opportunities to use literacy might occur when students:

- share and explain ideas, discuss concepts, work collaboratively, participate in class discussions, write/talk about their work or other people’s work, and present or introduce work
- use words and images/objects as stimulus
- research the context of an artwork
- ask questions about an artwork. (ACARA, 2014)

Language in its written and spoken forms is still at the core of what literacy means. This is quite the opposite to Eisner’s (2002) assertion that Arts themselves show that ‘the limits of language are not the limits of cognition’ and that schools need to foster the ‘cultivation of literacy in its many forms’
Exploration of multimodality and multiliteracies is imbued within various descriptors in the document, but there is an absence of the acknowledgement of the complexity of these literacy practices and they appear as more of an ‘add-on’. The document states that ‘students use literacy along with the kinetic, symbolic and verbal and visual languages of the five Arts subjects’ (ACARA, 2014, emphasis added).

While the document puts forth that highly complex phenomena are at play within aesthetically charged Arts education classrooms – ‘creativity, critical thinking, aesthetic knowledge and understanding about Arts practices, through making and responding to artworks’ (ACARA, 2014) – they are just simply viewed as actions that fall outside of the realm of what constitutes literacy and being literate. The idea that ‘students communicate ideas in current, traditional and emerging forms’ (ACARA, 2014) requires deep understanding of literacy practices that go beyond the limits of traditional notions of literacy and language. This should be recognised in the Australian Curriculum document. While there are key differences in the practice and ‘doing’ of each art from – Drama, Dance, Media Studies, Visual Art and Music – there are a number of parallels and overlaps as to what counts as literate practices in the Arts. Barton (2013) argues that, essentially, this boils down to the ability to ‘function’ within an art form as a maker and consumer (p. 17). It is clear that further research is needed into what exactly this means, so that future policies and curriculum can be shaped to reflect Arts literacies in a more fitting manner.

Conclusion

The Arts have long been acknowledged as important areas of inquiry and exploration of the world through artistic practice and immersion within the five arts subjects. Engaging in quality Arts education experiences provides students with an outlet for powerful creative expression, communication, aesthetically rich understanding and connection to the world around them. Being able to critically read, write and speak about art should not be the sole constituting factors for what counts as literacy in the Arts. Considerable more dialogue, discussion and research are necessary to form a deeper picture of the Arts and creativity more broadly. As Barton (2013) argues:

knowing that the Arts have not only a distinct body of knowledge but also ways of expressing these is vitally important in education practice. If we fail to recognise this value then the teaching of literacy and initiation and engagement in literate practice will continue to privilege more concrete and essentially measurable conceptions, methods, and skills through assessment in educational contexts. (p. 17)

The cultivation of imagination and creativity and the formation of deeper theory surrounding multimodality and multiliteracies in the Arts are paramount.

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References


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