Putting ‘Multiliteracies’ to the Test

Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis

From the heart of Soweto to the tip of Cape York, teachers and students are experimenting with the ideas floated by the New London Group in their manifesto on the future of literacy teaching. Published in the Spring 1996 issue of the Harvard Educational Review, ‘A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies’ has produced a great deal of interest around the world.

The Multiliteracies argument runs like this: our personal, public and working lives are changing in some dramatic ways, and these changes are transforming our cultures and the ways we communicate. This means that the way we have taught literacy, and what counts for literacy, will also have to change.

The term ‘Multiliteracies’ highlights two of the most important, and closely related changes. The first is the way we have taught literacy, and what counts for literacy, will also have to change.

The second major shift encompassed in the concept of Multiliteracies is the influence of new communications technologies. Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning. Take for instance the multimodal ways in which meanings are made on the World Wide Web, or in video captioning, or in interactive multimedia, or in desktop publishing, or in the use of written texts in a shopping mall. To find our way around this emerging world of meaning requires a new, multimodal literacy.

These two developments have the potential to transform both the substance and pedagogy of subject English. No longer do the old pedagogies of a formal, standard, written national language have the use they once did. Instead, the Multiliteracies argument suggests an open ended and flexible functional grammar which assists language learners to describe language differences (cultural, subcultural, regional/national, technical, context specific, etc.) and the multimodal channels of meaning now so important to communication.

So here we are with Denise Newfield and Pippa Stein with their 1996 MA class in English Education at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Denise and Pippa got their students to reflect on the applicability of Multiliteracies in their work as educators, and made a video of each of the students speaking in their work setting. Wilhelm Van Rensburg of Soweto Teachers’ Training College explains the importance of access to the language of power, whatever that may prove to be today. Michael Goodman of Grantley College, Johannesburg talks about the knowledge of visual design that is needed to read the texts of today. Thandiwe Mkabela, an ESL Adviser with the Gauteng Education Department speaks of the need to retain and reskill teachers, as schools admit children from different language backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds. These are just some of the issues that members of Denise and Pippa’s class raised as they engaged with the Multiliteracies framework.

Now to the other end of the world, to Bamaga near the tip of Australia’s Cape York Peninsula. Bamaga High School is the northernmost High School on the Australian mainland. Some of its students come from local Aboriginal communities; some are Torres Strait Islanders who set up a new community on Cape York fifty years ago; some are Aboriginal people who had been moved many hundreds of kilometres from Mapoon when mining operations commenced there thirty years ago. Carrie Jones teaches Art and English, and we are collaborating with her on a project funded by Language Australia and the Australian Research Council. She is working with the students on visual design, transforming natural form through successive stages of simplification and modification to create an abstract design. The students examine naturalists’ photographs of animals; they examine traditional Torres Strait and New Guinean art which represents stories about the natural world; they plan their own designs, developing a metalanguage which describes abstraction and narrative; they write stories that give their designs meaning and depth; and they make printed sarongs and designs for sports shoes with their ideas. Here we have both of these focal elements of Multiliteracies: the connections being made between linguistic and visual design, and the cross-cultural aspects of meaning making. All the elements of the Multiliteracies pedagogy are there, too: basing learning in the students’ own experience (Situated Practice); the explicit teaching of a metalanguage...
that describes Design (Overt Instruction); investigation of the cultural context of the designs (Critical Framing); and application of the Designs in a new context that the students have themselves created (Transformed Practice).

And now back to South Africa, to Cape Town this time. David Bond works in the Graduate School of Business at the University of Cape Town. He has been trying out the Multiliteracies ideas in the Management Communication Course which is a part of the Associate in Management Program. This program targets mature adults with good work experience, but who have been ‘overlooked’ due to lack of educational qualifications, or discrimination based on race or gender. Here David uses the Multiliteracies pedagogy in teaching a negotiation course. In a Situated Practice angle on business communications, he involves students in negotiation role plays, such as between sellers and buyers or writers and publishers. Taking an Overt Instruction angle, he works with students as they attempt to analyse and describe the ‘designs of real life practice’ and the dynamics of ‘face to face behaviour’, including the type of language used. Students develop definitions of negotiation, its different stages, and ways to describe the positions of the participants: power, alliances, positions, interests and alternatives. Taking a Critical Framing angle, students look critically at the metaphors that underlie many negotiation strategies, such as ‘negotiations as war’. And taking a Transformed Practice angle, he takes his students beyond academic-type written assessment to real life applications. ‘The real test of any management development pedagogy’, David says, ‘must be evidence of learning to practice in the workplace. It seems unlikely that proof of transformed negotiation practice in the workplace will be in the form of a written essay!’

Back to Australia again, and this time to William Ross High School in Townsville, North Queensland. This is another of the schools with which we were working in our Language Australia/ARC project. Here Fran Hodges is working with her Year 9 English class on video clips. She starts by presenting the students with the lyrics of a Toni Childs song. All the devices and conventions of poetry are to be found, as well as the specific conventions of song lyrics, such as a repeated chorus. Then she plays the CD. She asks what the music adds to the lyrics and how it does it. Then she plays the video clip. She asks how the imagery of the clip and gestures of the singer add to the meaning of the song. The students have now completed an analysis of the multimodal grammar of the song. Next, the students bring in their favourite songs. Situated Practice: students bring music they relate to in their own life experience and immerse themselves in the music of their friends. Overt Instruction: Fran works with the students as they develop a grammar which analyses the linguistic, audio and visual design of the songs and their video clips. Critical Framing: students compare the meanings and the cultures they represent—the song of the white woman (Toni Childs), rap, techno, house, reggae, heavy metal or whatever. Transformed Practice: the students write, perform and make a video clip for a song they have written themselves.

Still in Townsville, but this time crossing what you would expect to be an enormous discipline distance, Annette Hodgen is teaching an electricity unit to her Year 9 Science Class at Ryan Catholic Community School. Situated Practice: students simulate a cyclone shelter—Townsville is in a tropical cyclone region—and face the question, how are they going to survive without electricity? Overt Instruction: they then look at the different ways in which the meaning of electricity is understood—the kinds of domestic meanings appropriate to the cyclone shelter discussion; the written text of a scientific explanation of electricity; and the circuit diagrams that electricians use. Critical Framing: students discuss the different cultural contexts for these various ways of expressing meaning about electricity, and how and why they are different. Transformed Practice: students create an electrical circuit for an alarm. They write an interpretation of this circuit in commonsense language, to explain to their parents or to sell their product. They explain how the alarm works in scientific language, and they draw a circuit diagram so that an electrician might recreate their design.

Subsequently, more schools have tried out the ideas proposed in the Multiliteracies project. The results of this work will be discussed further at the Learning Conference 2001, to be held in Spetses, Greece, July 4-8 (www.LearningConference.com).

In some ways, Multiliteracies is something old as well as something new. Firmly grounded in what teachers have always done, it does not intend to turn that world upside down. It is not another one of those perennial educational fads. Rather, the purpose of Multiliteracies is to supplement or extend literacy teaching for our new times. In the words of Werner Paetzold at Sunward Park High School, Boksburg, South Africa: ‘the Multiliteracies Project is very exciting—this is something I’ve been doing for a very long time and now the theory’s become a lot more concrete’.

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