

INTRODUCTION

The work of learning and teaching literacies

Old basics and new

This book offers a ‘Multiliteracies’ approach to literacy. We coined this term together with our colleagues in the New London Group during discussions in which we were trying to capture some of the enormous shifts in the ways in which people made and participated in meanings (Cope & Kalantzis 2009; New London Group 1996). The Multiliteracies approach attempts to explain what still matters in traditional approaches to reading and writing, and to supplement this with knowledge of what is new and distinctive about the ways in which people make meanings in the contemporary communications environment.

The two ‘multis’ of Multiliteracies

The term ‘Multiliteracies’ refers to two major aspects of meaning-making today. The first is *social diversity*, or the variability of conventions of meaning in different cultural, social or domain-specific situations. Texts vary enormously depending on social context – life experience, subject matter, disciplinary domain, area of employment, specialist knowledge, cultural setting or gender identity, to name just a few key differences. These differences are becoming ever more significant to the ways in which we interact in our everyday lives, the ways in which we make and participate in meanings. For this reason, it is important that literacy teaching today should not primarily focus, as it did in the past, only on the rules of a single, standard form of the national language.

Communication increasingly requires that learners are able to figure out differences in patterns of meaning from one context to another and communicate across these differences as their lives require. A doctor reads different things

and speaks differently depending on whether they are with a patient or another doctor, yet doctor and patient need to relate. A salesperson is an expert about a product who can make sense of technical manuals, but also needs to be able to explain something to a customer who may find reading an instruction manual difficult. An interaction between two school friends on Facebook will be very different from the history essay they write for school. All the time, we move between different social spaces, with different social languages. Negotiating these language differences and their patterns or designs becomes a crucial aspect of literacy learning.

The second aspect of meaning-making highlighted by the idea of Multiliteracies is *multimodality*. This is a particularly significant issue today, in part as a result of the new information and communications media. Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal – in which written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning. Writing was once the main way of making meanings across times and distances. Today, written modes of meaning can be complemented by, or replaced by, other ways of crossing time and distance, such as recordings and transmissions of oral, visual, audio, gestural and other patterns of meaning. This means that we need to extend the range of literacy pedagogy beyond alphabetical communication. It also means that, in today’s learning environments, we need to supplement traditional reading and writing skills with multimodal communications, particularly those typical of the new, digital media. Our approach here is to expand traditional understandings of the function and form of the written word. We want to explore the broader range of ways in which literacy works in contemporary society.

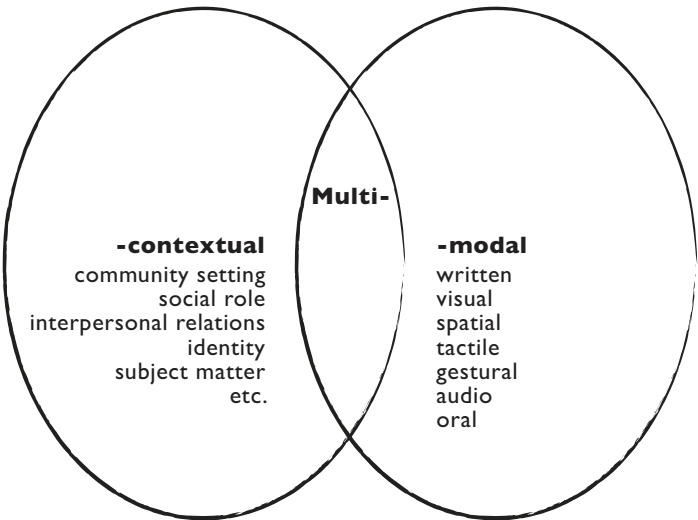


Figure 0.1 The two ‘multis’ of Multiliteracies

Agendas of literacies

Our key questions in this book are:

- How do we enable all learners to make and participate in meanings that will develop their capacities, as children and later as adults, to be effective and fulfilled members of society; to make a contribution to society according to their interests and abilities; and to receive in return the benefits society offers?
- How do we redress the ongoing and systemic inequalities in literacy learning and broader educational outcomes for learners from different backgrounds and with different dispositions?
- What and how do we teach in the context of enormous changes in the modes and media of communication?
- How do we promote understandings about literacy relevant to our contemporary times when our ways of making meanings are changing so radically?
- If literacy has traditionally been understood to be two of the three 'basics' (the proverbial three 'R's of reading, writing and arithmetic), what might be considered 'basic' today?
- What is the continuing role of the traditional basics, and how do these connect with 'new basics'?
- How might these new basics engage more effectively with a broader spectrum of learners?

The basics of old literacy learning involved elementary phonics to translate the sounds of speech into the symbolic images of writing, and reading as a process of decoding the meanings of written words. It focused on textual formalities, such as 'correct' spelling and grammar. It privileged a particular form of speech and writing in the national language that was held up as the unquestioned 'standard' or 'educated' form. It had students read to appreciate the style of 'good writing', first in school 'readers' and later in canonical texts considered to be of 'literary' value. Reading meant 'comprehension' of meanings that were thought, in a straightforward way, to be intrinsic to texts and as intended by their authors. 'Knowledge' and 'skills' were demonstrated in tests as the successful acquisition of these elements of literacy, by writing correctly or showing that one had read the 'correct' meanings written into texts by giving the right answers in multiple choice comprehension tests.

The old basics shaped the development of people who were literate in a certain sense and for a particular kind of society. However, from the perspective of today, this traditional or heritage conception of literacy is in many respects too narrowly focused. At worst, it seems decontextualised, abstract, rule-bound and fragmented into formal components, such as phonics, grammar and literature. In its most rigid forms, this kind of literacy learning produced (predictably for those times) compliant learners: people who would accept what was presented to them as correct, and

who passively learned knowledge that could not easily be applied in different and new contexts.

If they did well at school, the students of this era became knowledgeable in the sense that they recognised received rules and conventions. They learned complicated spelling rules, or the grammar of adverbial clauses, or the lines of great poets. This was a kind of knowledge – a moral lesson about complying with the directives of received authority. It may well have worked for the social settings of the time in which unquestioning compliance was regarded as a good thing. A lot of students, however, didn't do so well at this kind of schooling, and when they found jobs that were unskilled or menial, they could have blamed themselves and their 'abilities' for not having done better at school.

These heritage literacy teaching practices are not adequate on their own to meet the needs of the today's society and economy. This is not to say that phonics, grammar and literary texts are unimportant – in fact, as we will make the case in this book, they are just as important as ever. However, what was taught was for some students sometimes not enough, and at other times not terribly relevant or the highest priority for learning given today's functional, communicative needs. Nor, as we will see later in this book, are some 20th-century attempts at reform, such as progressive education or 'authentic' literacy pedagogy. For all their optimistic idealism, many such pedagogical innovations have had a negligible impact on the systemic inequalities reinforced by education.

The more contemporary terms for the traditional three R's are 'literacy' and 'numeracy'. Certainly, traditional mathematics, reading and writing are today as important as ever – perhaps even more important. However, literacy and numeracy can either stand as substitute words for the old basics, or they can capture a broader understanding of communication and a more active approach to learning.

We use the term 'new basics' to catch the flavour of a more contemporary, relevant and inclusive approach to knowledge. Literacy is not simply a matter of correct usage. It also is a means of communication and representation of meanings in a broader, richer and all-encompassing sense. If this is the case, the new communications environment presents challenges to heritage literacy teaching practices, in which the old habits of literacy teaching and learning need to be reconsidered and supplemented. For example, we have to consider how we learn grammar and spelling in writing environments supported by checking routines in writing software. Also, contemporary sites of writing, such as email messages, text messages and social media posts, are more fluid and open, creating new literacy conventions.

In fact, the messages in these new writing spaces are often more like speaking than writing. Some have even developed new and quirky conventions that we learn as we go – abbreviations, friendly informalities, emoticons and cryptic 'in' expressions – all of which take their place in the new world of literacy. Increasingly, contemporary texts involve complex relationships between visuals, space and the written word: the tens of thousands of words in a supermarket; the written text around the screen on the news, sports or business program on the television; the text of an ATM interface; websites full of visual icons and active hypertext links; the subtle relationships of images and text in glossy print magazines; news and

Table 0.1: Old and new basics

Old basics	New basics
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading and writing are two of the three 'R's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Literacy and numeracy as fundamental life skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Phonics rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple 'literacies' for a world of multimodal communications
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Correct spelling and grammar	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Many social languages and variation in communication appropriate to settings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Standard, educated English	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'Kinds of people' who can innovate, take risks, negotiate diversity and navigate uncertainty
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appreciating texts of prestige 'literary' value	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A wide and diverse range of texts valued, with growing access to different media and text types
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Well-disciplined 'kinds of people'	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People who can negotiate different human contexts and styles of communication

information delivered to e-book readers; and the hybrid oral-written-visual texts of instant messaging and social networking sites.

Written texts are now designed in a highly visual way, and meaning is carried as much multimodally as it is by the words and sentences of traditional literacy. This means that teaching the traditional forms of alphabetical literacy today needs to be skilfully supplemented by rigorous learning about the multimodal design of texts.

We now have to learn how to navigate the myriad different uses of language in different contexts: this particular email (personal, to a friend) in contrast to that (applying for a job); this particular kind of desktop publishing presentation (a newsletter for your sports group) in contrast to that (a page of advertising); different uses of English as a global language (in different English-speaking countries, by non-native speakers, by different subcultural groups) in contrast to formal settings where certain 'educated' forms of the language are still used (such as scientific reports); in indexes to reference books in contrast to web searches; or in writing a letter in contrast to sending an email. So the capabilities of literacy involve not only knowledge of formal conventions across a range of modes, but also effective communication in diverse settings and the use of tools of text design that are multimodal, rather than a reliance on the written mode alone.

These are the reasons why we have chosen to title this book 'Literacies' in the plural. In the past, 'literacy' seemed enough. Today we need to be able to navigate 'literacies'.

Communication and representation

So far, we have mainly been speaking about communication, or the passing of a message from person to person. However, literacies are more than that; they are also about thinking, or a phenomenon that we want to call 'representation'. We use literacies to make meanings for ourselves – silently, as we talk to ourselves using

the concepts that language provides us, as we formulate arguments in our heads, as we write notes, as we create mental images, as we conceive things in diagrams, as we make models. Nobody need ever hear or see what our representations are. However, we are nevertheless using literacies to think and to make meanings for ourselves, to make sense of our worlds. Literacies in this sense come together as an extension of our minds.

More than simply being a business of communicating competently and appropriately in contemporary social settings, the new basics are also about what we have called a ‘new learning’ (Kalantzis & Cope 2012). Literacy, for instance, involves rules and their appropriate application. Literacies are additionally about the challenge of being faced with an unfamiliar kind of text and being able to search for clues about its meaning without the barrier of feeling alienated by it and excluded from it. They are also about

understanding how a text works so you can participate in its meanings (engaging its own particular ‘rules’). They are about working out the particular context and purposes of the text (and here you will find more clues about its meaning to the communicator and to you). They are about ways of seeing and thinking (representation) as much as they are about creating meaningful and effective messages (communication). Finally, literacies are about approaching communication in an unfamiliar context and learning from your successes and missteps as you navigate new social spaces and encounter new social languages. These are some of the more expansive and more flexible elements of the ‘new basics’.

In the most general of senses, education is always about creating ‘kinds of people’. The old basics were about people who learned rules and obeyed them; people who passively accepted the answers to the questions of the world that had been provided to them by ‘authorities’, rather than regarding the world as many problems to be solved; and people who carried supposed correct information and rules in their heads. The new basics enable new ‘kinds of people’: people better adapted to the kind of world we live in now and the world of the near future. These people will be flexible and collaborative learners. They will be problem-solvers, broadly knowledgeable and capable of applying divergent ways of thinking. They will be more discerning in the context of much more and ever-changing complexity. They will be innovative, creative risk-takers.

Forming people with these capacities requires not just new contents for literacy teaching but also new pedagogies, or ways of teaching. In fact, it is the contention of this book that literacy learning will increasingly need to focus on enabling these

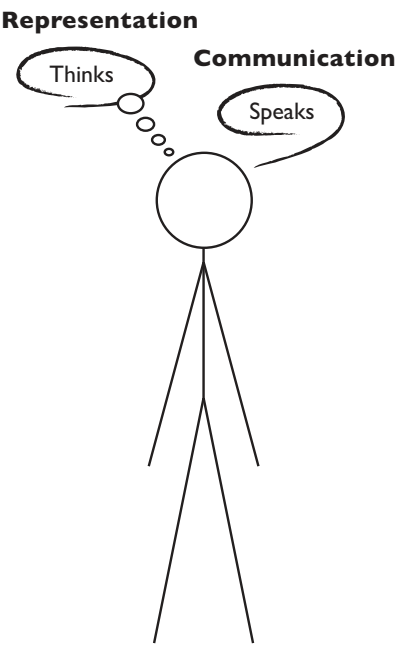


Figure 0.2 Representation and communication

kinds of people – namely, people who are able to move comfortably between the many literacies of work, public and community life, and know how to communicate through multiple and changing media – and not just people who are in command of only their own specific dialect or social language, nor a rigid and culturally specific body of rules for ‘proper’ communication that in the past was called ‘literacy’ in the singular.

These kinds of people will be able to navigate change and diversity, learn as they go and communicate effectively in a wide range of settings. They will be flexible thinkers, capable of seeing things from multiple perspectives. They will have an expanded range of ways of making meaning – a broad communicative repertoire, so they can make and participate in meanings in a wide variety of social and cultural settings. They will be capable, in other words, of negotiating ‘literacies’ in the plural.

Literacies as tools for meaning

An ability to work across literacies in the plural opens paths to social participation, ideally enabling learners from different cultural, social, gender and socio-economic backgrounds to make meaning and succeed. Underlying this book are three key agendas for the individual and public good:

- *personal enablement*, or the ability to lead a life with full capacities for self-expression and access to available cultural resources
- *civic-economic participation*, including communicative capacities for work, informed engagement in political processes and community participation
- *social equity*, including capacities to access education, opening access to social and material resources.

What kinds of literacies learning will enable students to be effective, self-reliant and actively participating community members, citizens and workers? And how will literacies contribute to the project of equity, giving learners from historically marginalised groups opportunities that have not always been, or are not reliably, available to those groups? And how will we know when a learner’s potential has been realised and that their learning has contributed to transforming them into creative and socially effective makers of meaning?

The story of social mobility in the modern world is not uncommon; it has been the goal of immigrants and less-educated people with aspirations for their children. For the world’s billions, however, mobility is the exception rather than the rule. The social position of one generation by and large predestines the social position of the next. And when mobility opportunities do arise, the reason for the opening most often is education.

We live in a grossly unequal world, and even the most strident defenders of an unequal status quo argue that the system gives everyone at least one best chance. This chance is education. Doing well at school offers ‘equality of opportunity’. The reality, of course, is that not all schools are as well resourced as others. And some students from some kinds of backgrounds find the culture of conventional

schooling less congenial than others. As a general rule, students succeed who find schooling congenial and who go to schools well enough resourced and thought to be 'good'; those who are not provided such conditions, fail. This is how, despite its promise, education reproduces inequality.

We want to formulate a proposition about this situation, and a programmatic challenge, as follows:

All schools can be congenial to learners. All schools, even less well-resourced schools, can provide powerfully engaging and effective learning experiences for all learners. And because they can, they must.

More boldly and more contentiously, we believe that, for the first time, the promise of education can be made real for all. Our reason for believing this is based on an optimistic view of the potentials offered by the conjunction of new technologies of meaning-making with an epochal shift in what we call the 'balance of agency'. The old cultures of command and compliance are being displaced by cultures of contribution and creative collaboration. We will elaborate on this argument in the chapters that follow. The raw material for our general argument is going to be literacy learning, one of the most significant things that schools provide. If we, as educators, allow learners more agency, and we use whatever technological resources are available to support new relationships between learners and their learning environments, we may be able to achieve something that has not so far been achieved in the modern history of mass-institutionalised education – greater equity of outcomes. In this book, we want to examine the ways in which such a utopian objective may be achieved through literacies pedagogy.

This book, then, is about realising one of the key promises of democracy. Despite changes in pedagogical fashion, content emphasis and classroom organisation, teacher preparation and professional learning, the inequalities of learner outcome between different social groups are at best staying the same or at worst widening. We need to change this situation and, where we are slipping back, turn things around. Literacies, understood broadly as tools for meaning, are a key to success for all curriculum domains in school and for self-realisation in life beyond school.

New literacies, new schools, new teachers

Today's learners

Schools everywhere in the world are today facing larger challenges than they ever did in the past, given the diversity of classrooms, the pace of technological and social change, and a crisis of public and private resourcing for education. The challenge to sustain and expand the historical practices of literacy pedagogy is but one piece in a larger context of educational change.

Let's start with our students. In our schools, we see a new generation of learners. We'll call them Generation 'P', for 'participatory'. These learners have different kinds of sensibilities from the students of our recent past. They have at hand

ubiquitous smart devices, connected to the new social media and allowing them to communicate with people at a distance from them at any time of day and anywhere.

An earlier generation of learners may have been more used to being passive watchers of stories at the cinema or on television; this was intrinsic to the producer-to-consumer dynamic in the 'mass media'. Generation P, however, have become used to being characters in the stories of video games, where they play a part in how the story ends. An earlier generation used to listen to the 'top 40' songs from playlists selected by a radio station. Members of Generation P make their own playlists for their mobile music players, and if you ask the students in any class what is on their playlists, they are all going to tell you something different depending on their preferences.

An earlier generation expanded their habits of literacy by reading in their spare time, and more so than they did by writing. Generation P do as much by writing as reading in their spare time – and reading and writing are fused as integrated practices in social network sites and text messaging. An earlier generation passively watched TV programming that others considered good for them, tuning in to a handful of available channels. Generation P 'channel surf' hundreds of channels, or the millions of videos that are on the World Wide Web, or make their own videos – on their cameras or on their phones – and upload them to the Web.

An earlier generation received much of their learning within the formal context of schooling. Generation P learn more in semi-formal and informal settings and from a variety of sources – in the self-learning routines of electronic devices and software applications, for instance, and in social interactions in expert communities, such as networked gaming and interest communities on the Web.

The world of communication and meaning-making has changed. The members of this generation are showing signs of being frustrated by an old-fashioned literacy curriculum that expects them to be passive recipients of knowledge deemed by their elders to be good for them. The children of Generation P do not necessarily take well to being given rules that they have to apply. Nor do today's workplaces and other community settings necessarily require impassive, compliant dispositions. The most productive workers and most effective community members today are not those who just take orders from the boss or uncritically follow instructions issued by leaders. They are the ones who actively participate, who solve problems, who innovate, who take calculated risks and who are creative. In sum, they ideally give the best of their innovative and creative selves to the groups and organisations to which they belong.

New kinds of school environment and new kinds of literacy learning designs are already emerging that aspire to cater for the next generation of learner. The curricula of such new schools encourage learners to be actively and purposefully engaged in their learning by setting them real intellectual and practical challenges. Teachers and learners are required to make meaningful choices about what and how they learn in order to meet new, higher standards of performance and student wellbeing.

Here are just a few examples of the kinds of work students do in the new school contexts: researching information using multiple sources and reporting upon their findings in an extended web project report; tackling real-world problems, which they have to try to solve; documenting hypotheses; performing trial interventions; reporting on results; analysing issues from different perspectives; working in groups to create a collaborative knowledge output; and working in internet and other multimodal new media spaces that bring together writing, image, sound and video. These more engaging and more varied learning spaces are more relevant to the kind of world that Generation P already inhabits in their everyday lives. The new learners take greater responsibility for their learning, in part because they are given greater autonomy and scope for self-control. They are knowledge-producers, drawing together a range of available knowledge resources, instead of being knowledge-consumers fed from just one source – the reader or textbook – like students in the classrooms of the recent past. They work effectively in pairs or groups on collaborative knowledge projects, authoring knowledge to be jointly constructed or shared with peers. They continue to learn beyond the classroom, using social media to continue their reading, writing and learning anywhere and at any time. This phenomenon is called ‘ubiquitous learning’. They critically self-assess and reflect upon their learning. They give feedback on their peers’ writing in ‘social networking’ interactions. They are comfortable players in environments where intelligence is collective and writing is collaborative. They no longer draw on the sum of things that can be retained in just one individual’s head; they have the capacity to source knowledge online or from other students or from experts, parents and community members.

Tomorrow’s teachers

These are big changes, indeed. However, none of these can be achieved without a transformation of the teaching profession. If we are to have ‘new learners’ we need nothing less than ‘new teachers’. The new teachers are designers of learning environments for engaged students, rather than people who regurgitate the content of the textbook. They are professionals who are able create the conditions in which learners take more responsibility for their own learning. They remain authoritative sources of knowledge without being authoritarian. They are comfortable with internet learning design and delivery platforms – learning spaces that are not just lesson plans, nor textbooks, nor student workbooks but are all these things, with a look and feel more like social networking or blogging sites. The Scholar digital literacies platform that we have created is one such example of this kind of workspace (<https://cgscholar.com>). We will speak more about Scholar at the end of this Introduction.

This evolution of teaching practices involves a big shift in professional identity, as teaching increasingly moves from being the talking and testing profession to becoming a hybrid documenting, data-driven profession. The online environment expands the reach of learning across time and space, beyond the walls that confine students to a classroom and a bell that constrains chunks of learning within the set number of minutes for a ‘lesson’.