Chapter 1
Multiliteracies and the New World Order

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ABSTRACT

Due to the importance of literacy as a key component in many education programs it appears that more than any other curriculum area its history has been marked by continual change in terms of theoretical positioning, shifts in definition and pedagogical practice. Whilst change is often viewed as a positive occurrence, recently teachers of literacy have experienced a rapid period of change in both their practice and the theoretical and research based beliefs that underpin it. This chapter will provide a brief overview of some of the ways in which literacy pedagogy has encompassed a diverse range of forms of communication and meaning making commonly referred to as 'multiliteracies'.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to help orientate the reader and contextualise the concept of literacy and its evolution into multiliteracies through a chronological review of literacy, and specifically literacy pedagogy, over the last quarter of a century. This necessarily brief overview is important in providing the reader with an evolutionary understanding of the term 'multiliteracies'. Following this journey the concept of literacy is expanded on together with the impact of technology on this area. This chapter therefore provides the reader with an overview and understanding of the field of literacy and how technology has resulted in a range of multi-modal forms of communication known as multiliteracies.

The History of Literacy

The history of literacy is a vast and complex subject and involves consideration of human development in terms of political, social, technological, linguistic, religious, institutional and ideological events,

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the explication of which will not be attempted in this chapter. Rather, attention will be directed toward a brief consideration of some of the ways in which literacy has been conceptualised since the latter part of the twentieth century in English language literacy teaching. The issue of definition is significant in discussions of literacy – what literacy "is" and "is not" is just one of the many definitional impasses and binaries that require deliberation and consideration. As the conception of what literacy is has changed, so too has pedagogical responses, strategies and philosophies. The journey from a hegemonic discourse of literacy to the possibilities encapsulated by mulitiliteracies is, in some sense, one that is signposted by key historical and culturally contingent beliefs about what literacy is.

Part of any discussion of a history of literacy subsequently also includes a history of education. The connections between literacy and education are often complex and intractable (Kellner, 2001; Larson & Marsh, 2005). Any discussion of one is necessarily a discussion of the other. Traditionally, literacy in English speaking contexts has been conceived of in relatively narrow terms with prominence accorded to writing as the dominant mode through which meaning is constructed and received. A simplified, uncomplicated and traditional notion of literacy is that it consists of textual practices in which the text is an alphabetic script written on a page able to be read for meaning by a reader. Being literate is commonly described as having the skills and ability to read and write. In a traditional classroom context, the skills associated with reading and writing were a major preoccupation for both the teacher and the learner and achievement of these skills was considered attainment of a literate state. In some ways, this has not changed as reading and writing skills are still a significant aspect of the needs of readers and writers, although it could be argued the form and presentation of the text is different.

A traditional approach to the teaching of literacy was characterised by a unitary approach to the teaching of skills requisite for reading and writing (Graff, 1987; Kalantzis, Cope & Fehring, 2002). Such an approach involved assumptions about the learner, which was for the most part narrowly defined in terms of their linguistic, socioeconomic and cultural background. In Australia, for example, the student was conceived of as being from an Anglo-Saxon heritage, had English as a first language, was from a two parent wage earning household and could reasonably be expected to gain employment upon leaving school. The world of work, at least until the 1980s, that the school leaving population would enter was dominated by opportunities in manufacturing and service provision and it was expected that the young person would most likely stay employed in the same area for their productive working life. Schooling prepared the young person for their life in the workforce by providing them with skills in reading, writing and numeracy in addition to broad, culturally heterogeneous understandings about their social, natural and political environment. The discourse of schooling in Australia up until the 1960s was one of a dominant 'top down' curriculum that took very little notice of the larger social, linguistic, political and ideological changes that were occurring. The interplay between technology and pedagogical practice was restricted to aids for instruction such as film projectors, slide projectors and typewriters. Literacy education in this context was predominantly based on written and oral instruction. Teachers of literacy were therefore seen as teachers of reading and writing who used predominately written texts to "deliver" their teaching.

The texts used by literacy teachers in the past were restricted to those that were comprised mostly of alphabetic print and were easily portable. They included such items as books, comics, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, atlases, maps and charts. The operational pedagogic definition of literacy as comprised of reading and writing was supported by a widely held view of text as being print-based (Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000; Larson & Marsh, 2005). The widening of