

Chapter 2

Multimodal, Multiliteracies: Texts and Literacies for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The shift from traditional definitions of literacy focused upon print, primarily reading and writing, to multiple literacies has highlighted the significance of attending to different modes of text design and multiple forms of knowledge processes. Today's students engage with complex semiotic systems; therefore, while teaching and learning attends principally to print media, multimodality and multiliteracies have become central to effective pedagogical practice. Some teachers have moved away from a singular focus on print texts to incorporating multiple design modes that are linguistic, spatial, visual, gestural and aural – to enable valuable, comprehensive learning for today's multiliterate, multiskilled students. In this chapter, the authors discuss the Design modes proposed by the New London Group (1996; 2000), and the Learning by Design pedagogy advocated by Kalantzis and Cope (2005) to highlight effective learning based on multimodal, multiliteracies. The chapter provides a vignette of a multimodal activity in a primary class and argues for the extension of such learning through the incorporation of multiliteracies. They conclude the chapter by providing a framework for a possible multiliteracies project incorporating multiliteracies pedagogies and learning from the classroom vignette.

INTRODUCTION

The literacy landscape in the 21st century has shifted from a print saturated system to a multimodal semiotic system (Kress, 2003; A. Luke, 1996). While schools celebrate print literacy practices, young

children increasingly engage with multimodal, multimedia practices along with print based literacy practices in informal settings. Therefore, as critics (Boulter, 1999; Durrant & Green, 2000; C. Luke, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Mackey, 1994; Unsworth, 2001) observe, changes to literacy practices as increasingly multimodal, plural practice needs to be taken into account.

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In this chapter, we discuss a digital text produced by a primary class using western fairy tales as an illustrative exercise in multimodal activity. Further, the chapter examines the possibility of extending narratives such as personal narratives, fairy tales, myths and legends through a multiliteracies project demonstrating Learning by Design proposed by Kalantzis and Cope (2005). In order to achieve this aim, the chapter examines the theoretical framework and various Designs for learning proposed by the pedagogical approaches of multiliteracies (Kalantzis & Cope 2004; The New London Group, 1996; 2000). In doing so, we recognise the importance of Learning by Design and explore how a shift from a print based to a techno-oriented philosophy of teaching aims at an inclusive, holistic focus on literacy.

The chapter first examines the theoretical framework of pedagogies of multiliteracies and the four knowledge processes. Secondly, the chapter describes the pedagogical actions of a teacher in producing a digital text with her Grade One class as a multimodal activity developed from the four knowledge processes. Drawing on these theoretical and lived understandings, the chapter then proposes a schema for using narratives as a basis for real life projects utilising various Designs and knowledge processes. More generally, the chapter suggests ways that can extend classroom activities to incorporate multicultural knowledges, thereby producing deeper insights in understanding and gaining from social and cultural differences and, in turn, what this implies for literacy. We conclude by discussing how a multiliteracies framework helps to develop a local/global interface and reinforces the social and cultural context of literacy.

One Literacy Leads to Another

The arrival of ICTs in classrooms has meant that reading, writing, visual, spatial and aural literacies have changed considerably (C.Luke, 2000; C. Luke, 2003; Jewitt, 2005a; Jewitt, 2005b; Kenner, 2004; Kress, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen,

2001; Nixon, 2003). There has been a substantial dissolving of the linear, rigidly compartmentalised literacies of earlier times and recognition of multicultural, multimodal, multiliteracies as necessary to a relevant pedagogy. Building on concepts proposed by Kalantzis and Cope (2000a, 2000b, 2004, 2005), in this chapter we explore the powerful intermix of print and visual literacies through the representational means of ICTs. In the process, it is discovered that an engagement with these Designs calls almost instinctively for the incorporation of other Designs such as gestural and aural, illustrating the multifaceted, complex literacies children engage with every day.

We present here the digital storybook project undertaken by a group of twenty-eight Grade One students as an exercise in multimodal literacy activities: the teacher and children imagined a project that was inclusive of speech, gestures, images and text. In creating the digital storybook, a popular children's narrative was modified through the superimposition of western fairy tale characters. In the process of re-writing the text, the popular fairy tales were also modified to suit the narrative and visuals, thereby successfully re-creating a new, imaginative version of both the fairy tales and the original text of the narrative. More importantly, the intermix of the different Designs and student creativity within the narrative and visuals shifted the entire process from a literacy activity using ICTs to an imaginative and original exercise invested with an engagement with different knowledge processes. This process served to foreground complex understandings of different literacies by primary level students. Building on a rather serendipitous exercise by an enterprising teacher, this chapter suggests ways that can extend literacy engagements into a multiliteracies project. Thus, one of the significant questions posed in this chapter is: given the multimodal knowledges students bring to school, how might a teacher extend these knowledges through multiliteracies pedagogic practices to illustrate literacy as an inclusive, fluid practice?

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