

Chapter 10

Practicing or Preaching? Teacher Educators and Student Teachers Appropriating New Literacies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the implementation of a new 12-hour course on ‘New Literacies’ during the final year of a Bachelor of Education in English language education in Hong Kong. Specifically, it examines the authors’ attempts to create a community of practice around New Literacies teaching and learning. As part of this endeavour, the authors sought to embody – and to encourage their student teachers to appropriate as part of their evolving teaching selves – the ‘insider mindset’ (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) of new literacies practices, as the authors planned and implemented the course. They hoped that experientially connecting theory and practice of New Literacies would provide affordances for teacher educators, and for student teachers, to capitalise on the powerful potential of digital technologies in order to rethink how curriculum might be implemented in ways that are more multimodal, participative, and collaborative. As the authors discuss below, their attempt encountered unanticipated challenges, reflecting the power of existing institutional structures and unarticulated assumptions. The final part of the chapter examines lessons from the authors’ experience that may have resonance in other contexts and explores how they might approach the challenges they encountered differently in the future.

INTRODUCTION

The development of successful literacy skills is central to educational policy in many societies including Hong Kong. However, what counts as ‘literacy’ continues to be contested in education (Collins &

Blot, 2003), and this debate is even more apparent in the 21st century as literacy rapidly changes as a result of globalisation, mass communication and digital technologies. The terms *multiliteracies* and *new literacies* are now applied to an ever increasing variety of practices in socially, culturally and linguistically diverse contexts (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). At the same

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time, discussions around literacy in education are often associated with the English language, as globalisation and mass communication have contributed to the spread of English as an International Language. As a result, achieving high standards of literacy in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) has also become a goal for education systems across the world.

These concerns are clearly reflected in the two overall aims of the Hong Kong English Language curriculum (Curriculum Development Council, 2002):

1. To provide every learner of a second language with further opportunities for extending their knowledge and experience of the cultures of other people as well as opportunities for personal and intellectual development, further studies, pleasure and work in the English medium.
2. To enable every learner to prepare for the changing socio-economic demands resulting from advances in information technology; these demands include the interpretation, use and production of materials for pleasure, study and work in the English medium.

While many young people in Hong Kong are extensive and proficient users and producers of new literacies, and are active and enthusiastic consumers of multimodal, often digitally mediated texts in their out-of-school lifeworlds, these new multimodal texts and textual practices have not been fully exploited in schools and classrooms, other than being used superficially to “contextualise” grammatical points and vocabulary that drives much English language teaching in Hong Kong. Indeed, in Hong Kong there appears to be growing gap between students’ lifeworld literacies and the school-based literacy which is further exacerbated by the textbook driven teaching practices and high-stakes assessment methods.

Indeed, the literacy teaching and learning models and curriculum materials used by Hong

Kong schools largely adopt a skill-based, cognitive approach to reading and writing, and a traditional paper-based, print-based view of texts. These models are drawn from English as a Second Language (ESL) reading and writing instruction, where reading is frequently described as a neutral, psycholinguistic, cognitive process residing in the individual, and involving linguistic processing and reading strategies such as decoding, skimming and scanning (Grabe, 2002). While linguistic skills and knowledge are necessary, they are insufficient when taking into account the rapidly changing communication landscape of the 21st century, the multimodal, dynamic nature of texts, particularly digitally mediated texts, and the ways in which texts and textual practices are situated within specific social practices and inextricably linked to social relations and social identity (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Gee, 2008; Kress, 2003; Street, 1995).

There are also several educational problems associated with this decontextualised approach to literacy. Such orientations construct the teacher as primarily a technician, and the learner and learning as fixed and predictable entities, and thus run the risk of students perceiving education - and English language learning - as irrelevant, foreign, and ultimately alienating (Larson & Marsh, 2005, p. 5). These approaches may also serve to alienate English language teachers from their students, and limit teachers’ development of educationally and socially responsive teaching approaches, strategies and resources. Finally, a reductionist approach to literacy does not address the need for preparing students and teachers to critically engage with the proliferation of new texts and textual practices, and to use and create texts in socially responsible and socially responsive ways (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Freebody & Luke, 1990).

Thus, to achieve the aims of the Hong Kong English Language curriculum outlined above, there is a strong need for an expanded, socially oriented approach to literacy teaching and learning in Hong Kong schools and language teacher

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