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Injecting Early Years Teaching with a Strong Dose of Multiliteracies
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Abstract
Tech-savvy children elaborately dance through a myriad of informal and formal school and out-of-school literacy practices, sometimes leaving the adults who teach and care for them feeling like relics of yesterday. How can we harness what students bring to learning and reconcile that with what we have traditionally taught this age group? How do we leave our comfort zones and design meaningful experiences which transform learners (both young and not so young)?

This session will draw on a practitioner action-research project which facilitated the professional learning of a group of teachers who collaborated with theorists from the New London Group in the production of a series of videos, *Multiliteracies in the Early Years*.

Introduction

Tech-savvy children elaborately dance through a myriad of informal and formal school and out-of-school literacy practices, sometimes leaving the adults who teach and care for them feeling like relics of yesterday. Literary is shifting and expanding and the learning needs of this generation of school entrants are arguably more diverse than preceding generations.

How can teachers harness what young students bring to learning and reconcile that with what we have traditionally taught this age group? How might we leave our comfort zones and design meaningful experiences which transform learners (both young and not so young)?

This paper begins by situating and describing a project which focused on the production of a series of videos, *Multiliteracies in the Early Years*. The videos were produced by the author in her previous role as curriculum developer with the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Their development involved collaboration with early years teachers and Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope from the New London Group, developers of multiliteracies theory.

The latter part of this paper elaborates on the early reflective responses and classroom enactments of one of the practitioners involved in the project as she engaged with multiliteracies theory. This paper has the following organisational structure:
• the theoretical context: the changing communications environment and multiliteracies theory
• the situational context: early years literacy in the Victorian government school sector
• leaving the comfort zone: teacher professional learning
• segues into multiliteracies: one teacher’s response
• conclusions and recommendations

This exploration includes the teacher’s context, motivations and is offered as a companion to the videos; a possible stimulus to provoke dialogue and thought and possibly to support other practitioners in further applications of multiliteracies theory.

Theoretical Context: the Changing Communications Environment and Multiliteracies Theory

The worlds of Victorian students entering school early in the new millennium are increasingly information-saturated. ‘Making-meaning’ in these worlds might involve various combinations of words, visuals, audio, gestures and other data; in various presentations, often involving some type of screen; certainly created in all manner of ways; by all manner of creators; and originating from all manner of sources around the globe.

What adults label as ‘new’ technologies to children, just are. The Web was spun world wide before they were born. They entered this digitised new world, clicking and surfing, in the dying moments of the 20th century. It was a century which, educationally, had been served well by the traditional classroom: 30-40 students using the technologies of crayons and unlined paper; pens and paper with dots and lines; maybe ‘publishing’ their work on a word processor; learning to read words in narrative texts...striving to show an audience of one teacher that they were literate.

Bruce (2003) argues that the advent of emerging technologies such as mediated communication, hypertext, the Web, virtual reality and interactive agents present far reaching social consequences across many communities not unlike earlier transitions from oral
communication to writing, from manuscript to print, from print to radio, movies and television.

Comber and Kamler (2004) observe that these young children have more diverse learning needs and ways of knowing than their parents and grandparents (and presumably their teachers). Traditional approaches to language, literacy and pedagogy that has served past communities well, is inadequate in preparing today's students to thrive in a social and cultural environment transformed by digitalisation and globalisation (Durrant & Green, 2000; Education Queensland, 2002; Kress, 2000; Colin Lankshear, Snyder, & Green, 2000; Leu, 2002; Luke & Freebody, 2000; New London Group, 2000; Unsworth, 2001, 2002).


A heavily referenced theory, which offers possible ways forward for practitioners is that of 'multiliteracies' (New London Group, 2000). Multiliteracies theory argues for the need to teach a diverse range of students to use meaning appropriately and effectively in an increasing range of contexts by drawing on a range of pedagogical approaches. Three major aspects of the theory are:

- a focus on diversity amongst learners and attention to practices which encourage a sense of belonging (the starting point of learner identity and subjectivity) and transformation (as the changes wrought on human capacity and subjectivity through the learning process).
- engagement in meaning-making with multimodal designs of meaning: (combinations of linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial designs)
- deployment of four pedagogical traditions when planning, implementing and reviewing teaching and learning: situated practice; overt instruction; critical framing and transformed practice. During the life of this project, these pedagogies were being re-
worked and re-framed as four ‘knowledge processes’ or ways of knowing: experiencing; conceptualizing; analyzing and applying respectively ((Kalantzis & Cope, 2004).

Despite seemingly compelling arguments about society’s technocultural shift Healy (2000) describes print pedagogies as having a ‘stranglehold’ in early years classrooms. Teachers have been found to dismiss digital literacies; regard media, multimedia and digital literacies as rivals to conventional print text in the literacy classroom; or undertake a kind of digital ‘makeover’ (Durrant & Green, 2000; Green & Bigum, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003a, 2003b; Lankshear et al., 2000; Papert, 1993).

Perhaps they don’t include digital literacies because they assume that children are already competent in their use (DEETYA Department of Education and Training and Youth Affairs, 1997; Lankshear et al., 2000). Maybe there’s a suspicion of the pleasure students find engaging with multimodal texts, and teachers believe learning should be more about ‘work’ than ‘fun’ (Gee, 2005). Or maybe there is a fear of multimodality as a kind of representation of the complex modern word complete with its ‘risk(s) and the unknown’ (Gee, 2005).

Whatever teachers’ reasons, discontinuities are evident and students’ abilities to communicate effectively in globalised, social contexts may be threatened if they lack the wherewithal to experience, conceptualise, analyse and apply knowledge of a full range of representations (Kalantzis, Cope, & the Learning by Design Project Group, in press).

This paper describes the experiences and reflections of a Prep teacher (her students are aged 4-6) who agreed to participate in a collaboratively designed action-research project which attempted to support teacher learning and expand teaching repertoires (see following description). The stimulus was engagement with multiliteracies theory.

At one point midway through the project, she observed,

*The alphabetic (print) mode is a really important mode and we’re not disregarding that in any way, but we’re saying that there’s so many other ways to make meaning and (we should be) giving the kids ways of acknowledging that*
and valuing all the different ways of (making) meaning; and knowing they can use them in different situations. Rachel, Prep Teacher

The paper reflects on Rachel’s early reflections and ‘segues’ in her practices as she begins to complement her print based practices with a range of multiliterate practices. This description is offered to others as a possible springboard for reflecting on, discussing, planning and implementing multimodal practices.

Situational Context: Early Years Literacy in the Victorian Government School Sector

This collaborative, action-research project took place in the Victorian Government school sector during 2003, a time when the Victorian Minister for Education was initiating a review of curriculum in schools. The call for reform acknowledged that nationally and internationally, curriculum provision models are under challenge to be more relevant for twenty-first century learning (Victorian Government, 2003).

The subsequent Blueprint for Government Schools (Department of Education and Training, 2003) outlines the Government’s vision for future directions for Victorian schools. It outlines seven ‘flagships’ for driving change, including student learning and teacher professional development and stresses the need for cultural change in recognising and responding to student needs and building the capacity of educators.

One of the student learning initiatives is the development of the draft Victorian Essential Learning Standards which are undergoing a year of validation (Department of Education and Training, 2003; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004, 2005). The approach is a shift away from outcomes-based, disciplinary bound curriculum, towards a more interdisciplinary approach. The Essential Learnings organise knowledge into three strands, represented in the form of a triple helix: a personal and social development strand; a disciplinary knowledge strand; and an inter-disciplinary skills strand. Within a climate of flexible, school-based decision-making, teachers are encouraged to design curriculum which equally privileges and combines the three stands of knowledge.
The approach suggested by the Victorian Essential Learnings is a shift away from current outcomes-based practices wherein Victorian school teachers choose appropriate curriculum delivery to meet the needs of their student community, within the parameters of the Curriculum and Standards Framework II (Board of Studies Victoria, 2000). This described eight key learning areas, with descriptions of curriculum and outcomes.

The most recent statewide systemic advice on early years literacy was the *Early Years Literacy Program* (DEET Victoria, 1997, 1998, 1999); (Crèvola & Hill, 1998; Hill & Crèvola, 1998) which describes a whole school design approach to early literacy, consisting of various design elements. The classroom teaching element focuses on the teaching and learning of reading and writing. At the time of writing, there is no advice available on how teachers currently implementing the *Early Years Literacy Program* might embrace broader views of texts and literacy.

While the ‘discipline-based learning strand’ in the domain of English, (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005) does make mention of teaching and learning about multimodal texts, it is with regard to students in the middle years of schooling (aged 11 -12). A search of the English domain failed to show specific reference to the teaching and learning of multimodal texts with students in their earliest years of schooling.

While the use of a range of electronic texts is advocated in the ‘inter-disciplinary learning’ domains of ‘Communication’ and ‘Information and Communications Technology (ICT)’, the concentration on print text practices in the ‘English’ strand and non-print text practices in other strands suggests a sequential approach to the introduction of texts, (print *then* multimodal), rather than a complementary one (print interfacing *with* other modes, i.e. multimodal). The lack of explicit advice suggests that, by default, print texts will continue to be privileged in the first five years of Victorian schooling.

This project was set early in this transitory period. The project teachers are all Victorian *Early Years Literacy Program* trainers and/or school coordinators with responsibility for teaching students in the early years of schooling (aged approx 5-9).
Leaving the Comfort Zone – Teacher Professional Learning

A discussion paper prepared for Reference Group for the National Inquiry Into the Teaching of Literacy (Rohl, 2005), points to a plethora of research into influences on student achievement including the students themselves, their home backgrounds, schools and school systems, policies, school principals, peers and teachers. However the paper indicates that while all of these variables contribute to student achievement, a persuasive bank of research has found that ‘excellence in teaching is the single most powerful influence’ (Hattie, 2003).

So if multiliteracies theory is a useful ‘vehicle for traveling the (contemporary) curriculum’ (Healy & Honan, 2004), what types of professional learning experiences might be useful in stimulating teachers to engage with and enact the theory?

The project firmly situated the teachers and their students as the central focus for application of theory. In the case of the teacher in this paper,

...24 first year prep children, many different nationalities some having their first experience of English. Probably half have been to kinder... Rachel

The project used a collaborative practitioner action research/action learning model (Gibbons, Limoges, & Notwothy, 1994; Jarvis, 1999; Newman, 1998; Nofke & Stephenson, 1995) wherein teachers were co-researchers. Four teachers, two of the New London Group theorists and the author in her role as curriculum developer, collaborated on processes which facilitated professional learning. The project incorporated collaborative processes, reflective opportunities, with attention to teacher concerns, theory description and interrogation, and collegiate planning to support pedagogical change. The deadlines of the filming and publishing schedules created focused, intense learning experiences and produced shareable documentation.

Staged filming was both a means of teacher reflection and of documentation. Teacher interviews and snapshots of classroom practice were recorded for sharing with a larger educational audience and as a focus for further reflection.
The teachers also documented their practice on a Web-based pedagogical template inspired by the multiliteracies pedagogies (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004). This is described in depth in a forthcoming publication (Kalantzis et al., in press).

While the project involved four teachers who between them taught students in the first five years of schooling, given the confines of this paper, I have decided to elaborate on one of the project teacher's early responses.

**Segues into Multiliteracies: One Teacher's Early Responses**

The starting point for professional learning was to build understanding about what multiliteracies means. The teachers in this project had familiarity with some aspects of multiliteracies theory, but were hazy about other aspects,

> I was quite confident with some parts (of multiliteracies theory)... but I had to find out about the other aspects. So it was a (steep) learning curve as to how everything fitted in. I wasn't sure where it fitted in the classroom in an integrated way... Rachel

The group had a short but intense workshop with the theorists giving an overview of the three aspects of the theory. Soon after, I visited each teacher to reflect on the theory and discuss starting points for curriculum development in preparation for filming. When asked about her early understandings of multiliteracies and how she might proceed in classroom enactment of the theory, Rachel commented,

> I'm confident with visual literacies and critical literacies... so where I want to go is looking at audio literacies and gestural literacies. Then much further down the track we'll probably be looking at the spatial effect too, as we're learning.

This reflection shows an understanding of multimodality and control over the direction of her learning. Rachel is also clear in terms of the situating of this project in the context of working with Prep students,
When preps come to school they come from a variety of different entry points and they’ve all got to learn a new language at school and a new way to make meaning. The thing they know most about is themselves; so we worked on themselves and their own facial expressions and we played lots of games using facial expressions and getting to know the language of feelings and things like that.

Rachel’s goals in this project lay at the intersection of her own learning needs, her students’ learning needs and her engagement with multiliteracies theory. She planned to layer her linguistic and visual literacy teaching with gestural literacy, through an evolving unit of work which she would later call Body Talk. A description of these classrooms enactments, as responses to her early engagement with the theory, are described to show her ‘segues’ into multiliteracies teaching and learning.

**Verbalising expressions and feelings: small group and independent learning**

Rachel introduced gestural literacies by involving small groups of students in playing mirror games, exploring gestures, movements and facial expressions. Students were involved in searching magazines for pictures of people taking on various stances and adopting different facial expressions.

The children cut out examples and sorted them into similar groups, labelling them according to the ‘feelings’ the students believed they expressed. Analysis of the results showed that the range of expressions represented in the magazines was quite limited; the magazines showed mostly ‘happy’ people.

Rachel used a commercial game, *Expression Bingo*, to further build the language around a range of facial expressions and their possible meanings. This led to the idea of having students ‘rehearse’ particular expressions.

**Exploring how hands, stance, eyes and actions add meaning: small groups; whole group sharing**
Rachel worked with a group of students in the art room where they ‘rehearsed’ various expressions (and stances), examining these initially in terms of mirrored reflections. They then chose an expression and held that ‘pose’ while Rachel took photos.

_We went into the art room that had mirrors and the children practised pulling all sorts of faces ...they had the fun of watching themselves and they had to choose their favourite expression and I took a still (photo of each child) using the digital camera._

The rest of the grade was then involved in examining the photos to try to describe the feelings subjects of the photos (their peers) were displaying through their expressions. The teacher prompted the students to analyse photographic representations of individual body parts – particularly eyes, mouth, hands and stance – to determine possible gestural meanings. Students were involved in justifying various points of view. The students labelled the photos and constructed a poster illustrating possible meanings.

**Posing for a ‘Body Talk’ video: small group focus**

Rachel asked the same small group of students to adopt the same expression but this time with an integrated body movement or stance that matched the expression, extending notions of gestural literacy to include both those made by the face and other parts of the body. She then used the digital video camera to capture these movements.

**Analysing peers’ expressions and stances (no audio): whole class viewing**

Rachel showed the whole grade the footage of the students adopting various ‘poses’ and expressions, without any audio accompaniment.

_I'd been prompting (when filming the children in the small group) ...so I turned the sound down completely and we watched it and tried to guess the feeling that the person was displaying and talking about how we knew that._

Following this the class was asked to explain how they knew what feeling the child on the screen was portraying. Students were prompted to think about the ways various parts of the
face and body were used: the eyes, the mouth, how the head was held, what was being done with hands, legs, etc. They discussed the way the whole body can be used to ‘talk’ or convey meaning.

*Making gestural meaning explicit: small group reflective writing*

Rachel devised a planning sheet to support students to organise their reflections on the experience of ‘acting’ for the camera and then watching themselves on screen. The students considered:

- What I used (eyes, mouth, hands, body actions, etc)
- How I felt when I did it
- How I felt when I watched myself

Rachel further scaffolded students’ attempts to record their experience of being filmed in illustrative and print modes through language experience. As she describes,

> I decided to use language experience with a small group, (after) seeing themselves on video and then talking about what expression they were using and reaffirming what sort of body language they were using.

The students drew ‘freeze frames’ of their video representations. Then, Rachel modelled writing sentences about the expressions they were using, building a linguistic description of the ‘body language’ or gestural meaning intended, e.g. *I was thinking*. They also described associated movements and positioning of facial features and body parts, e.g. *I put my hand on my cheek.*

*Exploring illustration: whole class ‘read to’: Rosie’s Walk*

Rachel’s students had already begun work on the topic, ‘The Farm’. *Rosie’s Walk* is a picture book Rachel had often used in connection with this topic. She decided to try to use the text in to support teaching of a range of modes of meaning; initially linguistic
(through reading the print) and visual (through directing attention to ‘the story in the pictures). As she read to the story, Rachel was highly receptive to the children’s responses.

When we were reading Rosie’s Walk, a small group of children started to say what sound effects, just spontaneously, that might happen, and I thought it would be interesting for them to watch the video (of Rosie’s Walk) without the sound and see what sort of connections they made.

Her observations of students’ responses during the ‘read to’ directly influenced her decision-making about how she could use this classic story as a vehicle for adding the teaching of gestural and audio literacies to her teaching repertoire.

Exploring movement: Whole class viewing: Rosie’s Walk animation (without audio)

Rachel introduced an animated version of Rosie’s Walk, ensuring the focus was on the gestures in an animated form, by turning off the volume. She narrated the story herself, so the students heard the words that accompanied the text, but not the additional audio tracks.

They saw the pictures (from the book) moving and they got that concept of what was happening; the fox really following and Rosie not watching, but they didn’t have any idea of what sounds would be accompanying it.

Again, students spontaneously offered possible sound effects, this time to accompany animated pictures. Rachel scaffolded this discussion, building up the students’ meta-language of key terms such as ‘sound effects’ and ‘audio’.

Exploring sound: whole class viewing 2: Rosie’s Walk animation (with audio)

Rachel replayed the animated version of the story this time with the accompanying audio (music, sound effects and the verbalised text read in American mid-West accent).
They were really cued in to what sound effects (were in the animated text). I noticed that when they heard the sound effect they’d anticipated, or it was something different, they turned to each other and they’d look ... they were really listening for that sort of thing ... and watching them move to the music...

Rachel describes high levels of student engagement and reactions as students watched the animation with the audio accompaniment

Conclusions and Recommendations

Today’s school entrants are relying on teachers to make seismic shifts in practice to meet the educational challenges presented by the emergence of the ‘knowledge society’. This requires support of and engagement by each one of these professionals who,

_gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act - the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets the policies, and who is alone with students during their 15 000 hours of schooling. (Hattie, 2003, pp. 2-3)_

Such seismic shifts may begin with smaller segues such as those described here. After all, multiliteracies theory was designed to,

_supplement, not critique, existing curricula and pedagogical approaches to the teaching of English language and literacy (New London Group, 1996: 122)_

In terms of the New London Group's modes of meaning, Rachel's described teaching repertoire, which was already strong in terms of visual and linguistic modes, grew to include the explicit teaching of gestural and audio literacies.

To achieve this, Rachel deployed a range of pedagogies or 'knowledge processes' to engage a quite diverse group of students in their learning (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004; New London Group, 1996, 2000). The confines of this paper do not permit a full discussion of these but
emerging work (Kalantzis & Cope, 2004; Kalantzis et al., in press) points to parallel gains in teacher’ pedagogical learning.

Aspects of the Early Years Literacy Program are evident in Rachel’s curriculum planning and implementation. For example, she describes whole class and small group teaching focuses. She uses many of the teaching approaches such as shared reading and language experience. But these classroom organisational structures and teaching approaches are re-framed and expanded in light of her learning around multiliteracies.

Taking the camera through the classroom door and publishing classroom documentation on the Web enabled the development of sharable examples of the highly isolated and ‘privatised’ work of teachers (Luke, 2003). They were also attempts to share what Luke describes as teachers’ pedagogical expertise which is all too often hidden from view.

As well as the harnessing of new technologies in the pursuit of our learning, this exploratory and collaborative effort involving teachers, academics and a ‘departmental worker’ was made possible by a co-learning, research-oriented approach. It involved tolerating a certain amount of ambiguity as the application of multiliteracies theory in early years contexts was explored. As one of the theorists commented in personal correspondence,

...we were all learning the whole time, together, and the theory has developed in parallel with the practice (B. Cope, personal communication, 21 January, 2005).

Context-specific approaches such as this which build rich ‘learning communities’ (Office of Learning and Teaching, 2005) around a common enterprise, focus and engage all involved as learners. New technologies have the potential to position teachers as knowledge producers in such enterprises (Comber & Kamler, 2004), sharing their unique segues with other teachers moving from known to new ways of teaching.
References


Kalantzis, M., Cope, B., & the Learning by design project group. (in press). Learning by Design.


