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Introduction

This chapter draws on practitioner research with classes in a suburban secondary college in Melbourne, Australia to examine some of the complex interactions between school literacy practices and the literacy practices students engage in within school and outside of school. In particular, it focuses on student texts as instances of successful experiences of using multiliteracies for reading, writing and speaking in English classrooms.

Interfaces

Perhaps nothing shows the incapacity of school systems around the world to meet the challenges of the 21st century more than the way they continue to privilege traditional print-based versions of reading and writing, reifying specific literary skills in the form a developmental sequence through which students “typically” progress (Australian Education Council, 1994), and then testing them to show whether they have reached the required benchmarks. This opening sentence roughly captures bi-partisan educational policy in Australia over the past decade or more. Such constructions of literacy do powerful ideological work, enabling schools to classify students according to their performance on standardized tests, and thus ultimately to consign them to a place in the social order. Schools can thereby be held accountable for educational “outcomes” mapped against mandated learning continua, including comparison with the performances of “like” schools, i.e., schools with a similar demographic, and calculation of the “value add” that has been achieved over a school year.

A key way to confront this psychometric mindset is by highlighting the contrast between the traditional literacy practices that young people are obliged to perform at school and the multimodal forms of communication available to them in their out-of-school lives. At the very least, these forms of communication expose a gap in the curriculum and a failure to use the experiences of young people as a basis for meaningful communication and engagement in school settings. Multimodal texts that use visual images and sound, as
well as the printed word, challenge the idea that literacy refers only to print, and provide a strong rationale for enabling students to explore a wider range of semiotic resources than those which have traditionally been used in schools. For Alvermann, “the performative, visual, aural and semiotic understandings necessary for constructing and reconstructing print and non-print based text” should be at the heart of any school curriculum (Alvermann, 2002b, p. viii; cf. Bruce, 2002, p. 15).

“Multiliteracies,” “new literacies,” “multimodal communication”—these terms are frequently used to refer to the meaning-making practices in which children and adolescents engage outside school. New multimedia technologies provide young people with ways to negotiate the social relationships and situations presented to them in their everyday lives, though it is important to recognize that they have differential access to these semiotic resources (cf. Sefton-Green, 2000). We wish to resist sweeping claims about a cyber generation or “aliens” in the classroom that somehow belong to another space and time (Bigum & Green, 1993; Doecke & McClenaghan, 1998), or who evince a sensibility that is the result of properties that supposedly inhere within new technologies. In the following discussion we use words like “multiliteracies” and “multimodality” interchangeably to invoke meaning-making practices that often involve new technologies without supposing that they are simply the product of technological innovation.

This is to say that the social relationships in which those technologies are embedded remain primary for any understanding of the cultural practices in which young people engage. Words like “multiliteracies” do more than name a new set of skills or practices to be added to the skills and knowledge formalized by the existing curriculum. The fact that multiliteracies play a vital part within the social practices and networks in which students are involved outside school (Nixon, 2003) raises important issues about the links between schools and the communities they supposedly serve, and ultimately the role that schooling should play in contemporary society. Buckingham uses terms like “literacy events” to emphasize that the literacy practices in which adolescents and children engage in their out-of-school lives are purposeful, and take on different functions according to the situations and relationships in which they are enacted (Buckingham, 2003, p. 38). Such meaning-making practices are manifestly social activities, and as such they challenge the ways schools construct literacy as an individual cognitive activity and a window on a student’s “ability.” The literacy practices which students pursue in their everyday lives are more richly varied and formally complex than those that have come to typify schooling. Mackey (2002) shows how adolescents use popular cultural texts as a means to create and affirm their identities, “as part of developing a sense of self,” both in terms of where they belong in the world and in order to cultivate the emotional resilience to cope with the situations they face (p. 66). Such activities contrast with the drilling and skilling for no immediate communicative purpose that have begun to dominate classrooms in the Western world (institutionalized in rituals like phonics instruction, “literacy
hours, lesson scripts designed to produce pre-defined learning outcomes, and standardized testing, including lessons devoted to teaching students how to “do” the test). Educators need to consider how the semiotic practices in which adolescents engage outside of school might become a focus for investigation within school—a legitimate object of inquiry for students and teachers alike—displacing the sterile formalism that has come to typify much “English” or “literacy” instruction.

Yet it is perhaps necessary to draw a line under the foregoing reflections in order to avoid appearing to idealize the literacy practices in which students engage, as though schools and other formal educational settings have no role to play in their students’ lives. This reservation applies to some of the rhetoric of prominent advocates of multiliteracies. Gee (2003), for example, is an ardent exponent of what children can learn by engaging in leisure-time activities like computer games. However, for all his emphasis on the situated nature of literacy practices, the learning he describes has a curiously unanchored quality. When he discusses the way people engage in “perspective taking” and “affinity spaces,” he constructs them as individuals who exist outside the world of discourses in which they operate. They “relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavours, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social class. Indeed, in an ‘affinity space,’ these latter variables ‘are backgrounded’ ” (Gee, 2006, p. 85). By contrast, our work with students is based on acknowledgment of and sensitivity to the ways their views continue to be shaped by their social positioning.

Paradoxically, Gee almost echoes the views of neoliberal ideologues who maintain that educational inequality can be addressed by a change in instructional techniques without consideration of the socio-economic factors that might affect young people’s engagement in schooling (see, for example, Rowe, 2003). The only difference is that neoliberals advocate measures like sustained phonics instruction, whereas Gee touts games like Pokémon as facilitating children’s learning, “regardless of their economic and cultural differences” (Gee, 2003, p. 10). To make such a claim about the value of gameplay is to ignore the ways that these activities are mediated by the social structures in which they are located, the network of relationships that stretches beyond the immediate pleasure of the activity, and indeed the immediate situation as it might be perceived by the players as they engage in the activity and draw meaning from it (cf. Buckingham, 2007).

For all the force of the critique of traditional literacy practices and the ideological apparatuses (cf. Althusser, 1971) that have been developed to implement and monitor them, those practices continue to impinge on the work of teachers and students. This is so, even when teachers might be deeply at odds with the ideological work they are performing. At the level of the everyday life of classroom teachers, a hard-and-fast binary between school literacy practices and the multimedia activities which students enjoy outside of school does not really provide a means by which to handle the situations in
which they work. Multiliteracies undoubtedly generate a valuable perspective on schooling, but this perspective must be understood from the teacher’s standpoint, as he or she negotiates relationships with students in the classroom. The critique of traditional literacy practices that might be prompted by recognition of the multimodal means of communication in which students engage everyday is directed at the very context in which teachers are obliged to work. Indeed, the notion of “obligation” does not really capture the contradictory nature of the situation of committed educators, for their commitment is primarily focused on the welfare of students with whom they have formed relationships within the institutional setting of the school. Those relationships are inevitably shaped by the traditional expectations of teaching and learning that are being promoted by standards-based reforms (Darling-Hammond, 2004), even when they might give rise to forms of communication and sociability that exceed them. Any attempt to investigate the potential of multiliteracies within classrooms is inevitably mediated by traditional forms of curriculum and pedagogy. Such, at least, is the case with the classroom in which one of the authors (Douglas McClenaghan) has been working, where—as a practitioner researcher—he has been seeking to gain a better understanding of the ways in which his students might draw on the multimedia resources available to them to make meaning.

Standards-based reforms of the kind that have occurred in Australia and other national policy settings are undoubtedly making it increasingly difficult for teachers to sustain their professional commitment to the education of the students in their care. Yet we still wish to argue that schools need not be seen as simply imposing a limitation or barrier which prevents the full realization of the potential of young people and the meaning-making practices in which they engage, as in old-fashioned romantic notions of the struggle by students, with the aid of enlightened teachers, to engage in “authentic” forms of creativity vis-à-vis the prison house of schooling (although such a view is somewhat of a caricature of the work of progressive educators—see Reid, 2003). We hold on to the belief that it is still possible for teachers to engage in a “pragmatic radicalism” (Boomer, 1989) which seeks to facilitate the language and literacy of students within the situation in which they find themselves, including the institutional structures around them. Indeed, schools arguably give students an opportunity to cultivate a reflexive awareness of those practices that might not otherwise be available to them. They can enable students to make their informal knowledge of popular cultural practices explicit in relatively formal ways (cf. McClenaghan & Doecke, 2005, p. 126), to develop a “knowing practice” (cf. Kemmis, 2004), an enhanced awareness of the potential and value of their cultural practices as meaning-making pursuits. This is arguably knowledge which students are only able to construct through school, through interacting with their peers and a knowledgeable and interested adult (Wells, 1999). The following discussion shows how a small group of students go about building this kind of knowledge.
School Writing

The multimedia work which Douglas’ students produce shows them using their out-of-school knowledge to meet the conventional expectations of schooling. That they are “doing” “school writing” (Sheeran & Barnes, 1991) is a necessary frame for interpreting the artifacts we are about to consider (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). The fact is that Douglas and his students are obliged to work together within the institutional setting of the school, and their relationships are mediated by the institutional roles defined for them there (Smith, 2005).

Schooling provides a setting where students encounter various forms of sociability. Like people congregated anywhere, they must learn to get along together. They enter the school gates, moving from one conversation to another, one set of relationships to another. This is so, even though standards-based reforms attempt to construct them as competitive individuals, treating the relationships between them as secondary, and denying them the creativity and understanding that might be achieved by working together. Yet, as we have argued in our introductory remarks, the multimedia work in which young people engage—in this case adolescents of around 15–16 years of age—are manifestly social activities. To fully exploit the potential of multimodal forms of meaning-making in the classroom means affirming the social nature of learning. It requires teachers to seize every opportunity to build on and enhance students’ sense of belonging to a community in which they can interact meaningfully, engage in productive talk and other forms of collaborative work, sharing their work and learning from one another.

This sociability is evident from the way the texts which Douglas’ students produce speak to other texts, constructing meaning intertextually (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994), by both drawing on the cultural resources of their out-of-school lives and engaging with the texts produced by their peers within the classroom. The writing on which we are focusing was produced by students who were completing Year 10 English in a state secondary school in a middle-class suburb in Melbourne, Victoria. This involves a syllabus that would be recognizable anywhere in the English-speaking world, including a number of set texts (novels, plays, films, poetry), as well as certain writing tasks, all culminating in an examination at the end of the year.

Text Response

Perhaps a distinctive feature of the English curriculum in Victoria is the notion of “text response,” which refers to school literacy practices designed to reflect students’ engagement with the texts that have been chosen for study. “English” has traditionally comprised “set texts,” requiring students to complete tasks which show their “comprehension” of what they have read, typically in the form of answers to comprehension questions and essay writing (Teese, 2000). In the early 1990s, however, Victoria witnessed educational
reform with a new senior curriculum that allowed students to produce more “creative” responses to text, which could take any number of forms, including such possibilities as rewriting a section of a novel from the point of view of a minor character, producing a poster for a film that might be based on the novel, rewriting the ending of a story and giving a rationale for the choices made, casting a text in a different style and reflecting on the effects (cf. Reid, 1984; Adams, 1998). Any number of alternatives are available to students, although this freedom is only something that can be exercised during the school year, when they complete work for their teacher. At the end of the year, they are still obliged to sit for a written examination which takes the traditional essay form.

Douglas’ students have been able to use the latitude provided by “text response” to produce multimedia texts about the novels, poems and other texts chosen for study. Sometimes this work is done individually, sometimes collaboratively, but always as part of a continuing classroom dialogue involving whole-class presentations. The students are encouraged not to think of themselves as writing solely for their teacher, and they accept that their work is only “complete” when it has been presented to a larger audience who construct their own interpretations of the text created. Thus they learn from and build on what they each accomplish. This sense of openness to experimentation, play and continuing negotiation generates a context where students produce formally innovative work that challenges conventional expectations and values, even while—as we have stressed above—meeting the educational outcomes specified for this year level.

The text that prompted the response which we shall examine here was *The Shark Net*, an autobiographical novel by Robert Drewe, evoking the atmosphere of Perth in the 1950s and 1960s. The text had actually been part of a prescribed text list for more senior classes, but had subsequently been set for study for Year 10 (we have discussed how a Year 11 student used the conventions of a manga comic to respond to this text in another essay (see Doecke & McLenaghan, 2009)). *The Shark Net*, interestingly, takes on a different form from autobiographical reminiscence. Juxtaposed with Drewe’s first-person account of his childhood and adolescence is another story, namely that of Eric Edgar Cooke, a serial killer and “the last person hanged in Fremantle Gaol, on 26 October 1964, and the second-last person to be executed in Australia” (p. 345). The text, in short, has a hybrid character, combining the nostalgia of reminiscence with journalistic prose and language more akin to that of detective fiction than that of autobiography. In a number of chapters, the narrative is actually constructed from Cooke’s point of view. It is perhaps not then surprising that the students respond to the heterogeneity of the text by producing work that has a similarly heterogeneous quality.

The novel obviously appeals to the students because of the way Cooke killed his victims in an utterly random manner. The students are less interested in Drewe’s reminiscences as a baby boomer—indeed, most find this thread within the text, including the proliferation of detail that would only be
recognizable to someone brought up in the 1950s and 1960s, somewhat tedious. Yet it is not as though they simply respond to the text at the level of a horror story (as in teen flicks about serial killers). They are disposed to accept the parallel narratives and juxtaposition of scenes as a legitimate story-telling device (perhaps because such devices are now a standard feature of television shows, films and other popular cultural genres), and—what is more—they appear to understand how the contrast between Drewe’s own story as a successful journalist and Cooke’s story as a misfit and serial killer comment on each other. What follows is what one student did. We shall present the following notes somewhat playfully in order to create an ironic distance from more formulaic notions of text response such as the school essay and other school “genres” (cf. Christie, 1991).

**How Do You Compose a Response to The Shark Net?**

Kate creates a video in the style of a music clip, using “Little Red Riding Hood” by Bowling for Soup. This song conveys a sense of the vulnerability of the young women Cooke murdered. Kate changes the lyrics, putting different words up on the screen while the song is playing, thus making connections between Cooke’s story and Drewe’s. The song starts with “Who’s that I see walking in these woods?” The words up on the screen are: “Who’s that I see walkin askew?” “Why, it’s Little Red Riding Hood!” (song) “Why it’s little Robert Drewe!” (words on screen). Later she presents the point of view of one of the victims with these words: “Little Cottesloe Lass, I don’t think that you should continue walking in my wood alone.” She enlisted her brother’s help to make the video by filming him moving through shadows and darkness. The video consists of camera shots that are oblique and suggestive: dark shadows against a fence, silent feet creeping up the barely lit steps leading up to a house. Figure 13.1 shows a shadow, which could be Cooke or Drewe. Figure 13.2 portrays a similarly shadowy, ambiguous figure, surrounded by darkness. Later in the song she swings the focus back to Drewe: “What’s wrong with being everything that a journalist should be?”

**How did Kate Evaluate Her Work? (Notes Taken in a Conversation with Douglas after the Class Presentation)**

The inspiration for the movie came from hearing a song by Bowling for Soup. It popped back in my mind that this would be a good way to demonstrate Eric Cooke’s story when we were told that we were doing a text response. From that I launched into doing a video. The inspiration came together bit by bit. With the scenes I created, I wanted to show that Eric Cooke was sort of a predator. He thought that Perth was his ground at night and that he was in control. The whole video shows him prowling around. I showed footsteps because no one would have seen these murders. You just see his feet. The flashing effects of the camera and the
Figure 13.1 Screenshot from Kate's video.

Figure 13.2 Screenshot from Kate's video.
darkness I took from *Psycho*. *Psycho* is mentioned in the book. No one ever witnesses his murders apart from the victims themselves. I was trying to give the impression that it could happen anywhere. You only see Eric Cooke’s face—my brother’s—towards the end. I was modernizing the story. The story is all written. Watching it, it becomes scarier. I wanted to convey a sense of Cooke as predatorial. I was using local scenes, and showing my video clip to a local audience, they would recognize the places, and so feel more threatened by Eric Cooke’s story. People like Cooke could be anywhere. The main expertise I needed was patience because the program crashes a lot! I originally thought that I would do a poster, but I then felt I couldn’t put any of my emotions into it, and in a video I could channel my emotions much more effectively.

As a form of text response, this artifact reconstructs the imaginative world of *The Shark Net* using the popular cultural resources available (most notably the genre of the music video clip) to convey a vivid impression of how Kate has interacted with this text. The meaning of *The Shark Net* can be seen to emerge out of this interaction—it is not something that is “in” the text (cf. Frow, 2006, pp. 102–103). The writerly quality of many music clips (Barthes, 1978), involving a juxtaposition of imagery and lyrics, arguably enhances students’ awareness of the active role they play as readers when engaging with imaginative texts of this kind. The essay has long been privileged as the form best suited to interpreting texts, and there is no doubt that some students become supremely adept at handling this genre (we shall leave aside the question of the culturally loaded nature of this form, and how its privileged status matches the privilege of those who are habituated to the empty fluency that it requires (cf. Teese, 2000)). Yet to our minds, by employing popular cultural conventions, artifacts like the one that Kate has created open up far more interesting insights into students’ engagement with texts than might be possible through an essay.

**Creative Writing**

The playfulness evident in Kate’s text is also a function of the interpretive community in which she presented her work. We have already mentioned that Douglas employs a number of strategies in order to encourage students to think of themselves as belonging to an interpretive community, such as asking them to present their work to each other and not simply hand it to him to be marked. This requires dedicated time—whole lessons, in fact—when students view and discuss each other’s work. Kate’s presentation was the subject of a lively discussion when she presented it, when students remarked on the way her use of local scenes had enhanced the sense of the danger posed by Eric Cooke. A kind of leveling occurs when popular cultural forms are brought into the classroom, partly because students are typically adept at using such media, enabling the teacher to step beyond his or her role as an
authority (and the kind of closure that occurs because the teacher's reading of a text is privileged). However, this is not to fall back on cliched notions of differences between baby boomers, who are supposedly inept at handling new technologies, and Generation X and Y or whatever. Such technologies are a common source of interest for everyone—teacher and pupil alike—with respect to their meaning-making potential.

The text on which we shall now focus was the product of this joint exploration of the possibilities for meaning-making opened up by multimedia texts. It shows how the students not only draw on the semiotic resources provided by the texts they encounter outside school (in Kate's case, the music video clip, Psycho and other horror movies) but the texts they themselves create. In this case, the text we are considering is an example of "creative" writing—another familiar school genre that takes on a new life via the use of multimedia. To understand what Bhavini and Olivia are doing, however, it is necessary to know that earlier in the year another girl in the class, Grace, had given a PowerPoint presentation in which she juxtaposed images of war, specifically the conflict in the Middle East, with images of Western affluence. In the background she played the Cranberries' song, "Zombie." The class had been looking at examples of print poetry which use words and images, including some poems which had been recreated in the style of a graphic novel or comic. Douglas had then suggested that they might like to attempt something similar, using photographs or PowerPoint. Grace decided to present a visual interpretation of the Cranberries' song lyric, taking images from the web which she arranged in a PowerPoint display. She was passionate about what was happening in the Middle East, and her aim was to disturb what she saw as the complacency of her audience, choosing graphic images of the human misery created by war. She saw a multimodal text of this kind as a vehicle to confront her audience, a perception that was shared by other students when they saw her text. (For a discussion of Grace's text, see Doecke & McClenaghan, 2009.)

Several weeks later Bhavini and Olivia presented a text that obviously utilized many of the conventions that Grace employed, not in the sense of slavishly imitating what she had done, but in the form of a dialogue with her text. Like Grace's text, their presentation also involved images of war, combined with music, namely "Hide and Seek" by Imogen Heap. Without diminishing Grace's achievement (which has a raw quality that is perfectly appropriate to its confrontational stance), "Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy" is more self-consciously "literary," as is suggested by the title. By contrast, Grace's piece did not even have a title, but simply began with the thumping pulse of the Cranberries' song, accompanied by a relentless stream of images of war, human mutilation and other acts of inhumanity, involving a crescendo that culminates in five stills showing images of Western affluence, before returning to the parade of scenes of wartime settings.

The content of Grace's text and that of the multimedia text prepared by Bhavini and Olivia is broadly similar, not only because of the proliferation of images of war and violence taken from the Internet, but because they each
focus on the situation of the most vulnerable, namely children. This is underlined in Bhavini and Olivia’s text by their use of “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy,” as well as the lyrics of “Hide and Seek.” A distinctive feature of their text in comparison with Grace’s presentation is the fact that it begins with video footage of young children happily playing “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy” in the schoolyard, conveying the pleasures children derive from such games. The presentation then cuts to images of violence, punctuated by stills presenting each line of the nursery rhyme, and further shots of the children as they hold hands, go around in a circle, and then fall down. Figures 13.3 and 13.4 present examples of this juxtaposition. The sounds of the children playing are not heard, only the words of the song, which thus provide an ironic backdrop to the innocence of the children’s game. The lines of the nursery rhyme are rendered strange or unfamiliar by being broken up, taken out of their context and presented on the screen as isolated words and phrases that punctuate the text: "Ring-a-ring-a-rosy ... A pocket full of poesies ... A-tishoo, a-tishoo ... We all fall down." The presentation lasts for the duration of the song, and towards the conclusion, the song’s opening lyrics displace the lines of the nursery rhyme: “Where are we? What the hell is going on?” Figure 13.3 shows a still from this moment in the video.

A feeling of textual unity is conveyed by the way the song and the written text converge. We have already heard the lines which conclude the presentation (“Where are we? What the hell is going on?”) at the beginning, when the presentation and the song started simultaneously. And yet it is not a matter of everything folding neatly into itself. To the contrary, meaning has also been generated by juxtaposition and contrast. Indeed, those who know the origins of “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy”—as these girls did—know that this apparently innocent children’s rhyme actually describes society during the plague, when people tried to protect themselves from infection by covering their noses and their mouths. “We all fall down” literally refers to the terrible loss of life that occurred in the Middle Ages, when the mortality rate was so great that communities collapsed and people were forced to abandon accepted conventions in an effort to protect themselves. Taken as a whole, the text appears (to an adult reader at least) to present a critique of a society where innocence has been violated, where those in power have abnegated their responsibilities to their children and future generations, and where everyday suburban life is somehow implicated in war and the destruction of human life.

What were Bhavini and Olivia Trying to Achieve by Producing This Text? (Notes Taken in a Conversation with Douglas after the Class Presentation)

BHAVINI: Where we got our ideas from was quite random. Olivia was saying that she wanted to use some kind of multimedia program. I was thinking of poems that sort of had a double meaning to them. And we came up with “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy.”
Figure 13.3 Screenshot from Bhavini and Olivia’s video.

Figure 13.4 Screenshot from Bhavini and Olivia’s video.
OLIVIA: We just thought that “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy” was one that children use without knowing the true meaning behind it. We wanted it to be a bit different. Images that we found on the Internet showed the other side of the meaning.

BHAVINI: Grace really liked the song “Hide and Seek” at the time. She sent it to me at one time to listen to. Grace listened closely to the lyrics, they really connected with our piece. It was quite lucky that we found that song. Some of the lyrics fitted perfectly with what we were trying to say.

OLIVIA: We really did just “do” the project, and it was only when we finished that we realized how well it worked. We wanted to show how easy we have it as kids, living in a place like Australia. A lot of people our age know the rhyme but they don’t know what the plague actually did to people.

Conclusion

What does “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy” mean? When teachers direct questions like this about texts to their students, they usually already know the answer. Such questions have been said to typify the discourse patterns that obtain in classrooms (Cazden, 1988; Barnes, 1976). Discourse analysis of this kind often runs the risk of producing reductive accounts of classroom interactions, taking no account, for example, of a teacher’s intentions, or how those intentions might conflict with what they feel obliged to say or do in classroom settings. Whatever teachers feel about such practices, they know the pressures that exist to treat a text as though it has only one meaning, as though it forms a single whole or theme into which everything fits. What, after all, is the public ritual of standardized testing about, if not to reduce texts to sameness, to judgments that might be reached by ticking the right box amongst the multiple choices available?

The various levels at which “Ring-a-Ring-a-Rosy” operates resist any attempt to reduce it to a single meaning or statement of intentions on the part of the authors. The authors have drawn on an array of semiotic resources, producing a text in which “a range of meanings blend and clash,” to borrow again from Roland Barthes (1978), which is actually richer than their own account of what they set out to accomplish. From the standpoint of a classroom teacher, their text might be read as challenging the learning continua and assessment rubrics that must currently be used when assessing students’ work. While the text clearly satisfies the outcomes prescribed for this year level, its semiotic richness prompts a reading on other terms, requiring careful attention to what it offers. Rather than being positioned as a judge of such work, the teacher is invited to assume the role of a knowledgeable and interested reader, drawing on his or her own semiotic resources to make meaning through engaging with this text (cf. Doecke & McClenaghan, 2009; Sawyer, 2005).

Such an interpretive stance is a feature of the standpoint of a practitioner researcher, involving a capacity to treat any framework for reading texts as
provisional, always acknowledging the possibility of other meanings and points of view. It is also a stance that we might encourage our students to adopt, as they explore the potential of multimedia texts of the kind we have been examining in this essay. The way the students in Douglas' class learn from each other is instructive. The unspoken rule seems to be that a student can create a similar text, and all the short films they have produced share certain generic features, including the font used for the words that appear on the screen, their use of current but not mainstream pop music, the duration of the song dictating the length of the presentation. At the same time, students cannot copy too closely what has gone before—one student complained privately to Douglas that another student’s film was too similar to her own. A film must in some way show its creator has enhanced the collective understanding of what such multimedia texts can do, of the meaning-making potential that they make available to people. Through their formal experiments, the students are developing a sense of what Frow calls "the dynamic nature of textuality," rather than supposing that meaning-making involves slavishly conforming to a model (Frow, 2006, p. 141). Thus their multimedia texts speak back to the regulatory environment around them.

References


