

The Multiliteracies Classroom

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

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Reading, Great Britain*

The Multiliteracies Classroom

Kathy A. Mills

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

*This book is dedicated to Lachlan Henry
and Juliette Elizabeth Mills.*

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Contents

List of Tables	vii
Acknowledgements	ix
Foreword	xi
Introduction.....	xiii
1 Multiliteracies Matters	1
Multiliteracies and Society	2
Australian Snapshot	3
Public Schooling and Diversity	4
Multiliteracies Teacher	6
Multiliteracies Class	7
Self-Reflexivity	11
Research Validity	12
2 Situated and Explicit Pedagogy.....	15
Overt Instruction: Conceptualising.....	18
Situated Practice: Experiencing	24
Proximal Practice	29
3 Critical and Creative Pedagogy.....	32
Critical Framing	33
Transformed Practice.....	44
Transformed Identities	51
4 Multimodality, Media and Access.....	53
Multimodality and Access	54
Media and Access	59
Transmediation and Access	63
Agency and Access	67
Society and Access.....	72

5	New Social Spaces	76
	Dialogic Spaces	78
	Bodily Spaces	80
	Embodied Spaces	82
	Architectonic Spaces	84
	Screen Spaces	88
	New Social Spaces	89
6	Discourses and Diversity	92
	Dominant Discourses	93
	Primary and Secondary Discourses	94
	Multiliteracies and Discourses	96
	New Discourses	106
7	Power and Access	107
	Power and Excluded Learners	109
	Power and Print-based Literacies	118
	Multiliteracies and Power	121
8	New Times	123
	Multiliteracies Pedagogy: Making Sense	128
	New Media: New Metalanguages	132
	Discourses for the New Times	132
	Multiliteracies Classroom and Society	134
	Final Word	136
	Appendix: Pragmatic Horizon Analysis	137
	References	140
	Index	148

List of Tables

2.1	Claymation movie-making production	17
4.1	Audio: Dialogue for the case of the disappearing pimples	58
4.2	Movie scenes and audio in <i>Slip, Slop, Slap</i>	66
7.1	Poster naming recipients of sanctions.	113
7.2	Pragmatic horizon analysis of notice	114
7.3	Pragmatic horizon analysis of Joshua's claim	116
7.4	Pragmatic horizon analysis of teacher's claim	119
A.1	Pragmatic horizon analysis: Pilot study example	138

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Foreword

Jennifer teaches an upper primary class in a school located in a socio-economically disadvantaged suburban neighbourhood. This book tells her professional story, and the story of the 23 children with whom she works. These students have been streamed into her class because, according to the results they have achieved in a standardised literacy test, they are of 'low ability'.

Here, we meet Daria, the girl whose family came from the Sudan as refugees when she was four and who aspires to be a fashion model. We meet Ted, an Indigenous Australian boy, full of clever antics but with no books or computer at home. We meet Meliame, the girl who had migrated from Tonga a year ago and who now lives with her uncle and aunt because her father had to return home. And we meet Joshua, the white working class boy who dreams to work at McDonald's because there, he says, you can earn a lot of money.

This is a classroom full of energy and life, not just because the children are full of fun and hope, but also because of Jennifer's endlessly imaginative understanding of literacy. Soon she has her students enthusiastically creating digital animations, movies and web pages. She has them making exciting connections between real-world digital technologies and cutting-edge communications tasks.

The children's activities are never busywork. They also represent the contours of a challenging intellectual journey. The narrative of Jennifer's working life and her students' learning lives is a journey into the micro-dynamics of pedagogy. We witness students weaving between immersive experiences, abstract conceptualisation, critical analysis and real-world application. We see how Jennifer engages every fibre of their subjectivities, and cajoles or inspires them into higher-order thinking. We also see how she draws out and uses to brilliant effect the cadences of diversity among her children.

Jennifer, we come to realise, is an exceptional teacher. These children are very lucky to be in her class. But the story cannot be allowed to end there, and with the publication of this book, we know it will not.

As Jennifer, Daria, Ted, Meliame and Joshua and the rest of their class spring to life, we come to realise that this book does not just speak to the experience of a single teacher and 23 students. The narrative also tells the reader that what Jennifer has done could be done again and again, by any teacher anywhere, in this or their own way. Jennifer is an exceptional teacher, but her practices speak to all teachers. Every teacher can be exceptional. By describing Jennifer's repertoire of riskily imaginative practices and analysing her close attention to pedagogy, this book tells its readers, in vivid detail, how exceptional teaching can be done. It is this simple as well as this hard.

The Multiliteracies Classroom demonstrates in convincing detail how powerful learning can be achieved. Along the way, the book seamlessly weaves cutting-edge theoretical ideas into the fabric of its narrative. In one minute, we are hearing the teacher and students talking about rubbish in a pond or the case of the disappearing pimples. In the next, we hear what this means in the conceptualizations of Bakhtin or Vygotsky, of Bourdieu or Kress, of Gee or Cazden. In one moment, we hear the lilt of the accents of the children's discussions. In another, this is connected to the theoretical intricacies of 'discourse', 'heteroglossia', 'multimodality' or 'dialogic spaces'.

Kathy Mills has produced a masterpiece of qualitative research. The challenges, setbacks and problematic nuances of Jennifer's teaching are all there to be seen – this is not an uncritically laudatory account. However, we also witness the triumphs of a teacher who, in Mills' words, 'did not regard literacy as an independent variable. Rather, she regarded it as inseparable from social practices, contextualised in certain political, economic, historic and ecological contexts.'

Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope
Champaign, Illinois, May 2010

Introduction

As a literacy educator, there are several influences that have helped to shape my thinking about the teaching of language and literacy in the 21st century. The first is multiliteracies. The second is critical sociology. The third is a sociocultural view of literacy, also known as the New Literacy Studies. I address multiliteracies in the classroom as social practice, endeavouring to understand how power works in the multiliteracies classroom, and the way this is tied up with patterns of power in the wider society.

This book will continue the revolutionary project of multiliteracies begun by the New London Group (1996), a group of 10 educators¹ who met together in New London, New Hampshire, to envisage new directions for literacy teaching and learning for the 21st century. The term ‘multiliteracies’ was coined by the New London Group to describe two arguments that convinced me of the need to extend the scope of literacy teaching. They argued that literacy teaching should be more responsive to the diversity of cultures, including subcultures, such as communities and affiliations, and the variety of languages within societies.

They also saw the need for literacy teaching to take into account the increasing range of text forms that are associated with information and multimedia technologies. A feature of the new media is multimodality – the interrelationship between two or more modes. The New London Group explained that the broadened range of texts is partially attributed to the diversity of cultures and subcultures (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000c).

Preferences in modes of representation, such as linguistic, auditory and gestural, differ according to culture and context, and have specific cognitive, social and relational effects. For example, in Aboriginal cultures the visual mode of representation is much richer and more evocative than linguistics alone (New London Group, 2000). Gestural modes of communication, represented through dance and holistic expressions of movement, are an integral part of Sudanese culture.

The book accomplishes three things: First, it recounts the complexities, challenges and rewards of engaging different students into new forms of communication with digital technologies; second, it demonstrates how new literacy pedagogies must take into account how power works in the classroom and the broader society; and third, it inspires readers to consider new possibilities for expanding literacy practices in the classroom to better prepare students for their life work in increasingly digitalised and multicultural societies.

Extending the work begun by the New London Group in multiliteracies, this book is relevant to those who have a stake in education around the globe: Students, teachers, principals, parents, teacher educators, researchers, policy makers, curriculum developers and governments. Readers can envisage how pioneering teachers negotiate the gradual digitalisation of print in classroom, schools and society. They can see cultural and linguistic diversity as a valuable resource for engaging students in new digital media, not just as consumers, but also as critical and creative producers. More importantly, at the heart of the book are important principles for understanding life and society beyond classrooms.

Chapter 1 *Multiliteracies Matters* describes the multiliteracies classroom, the teacher and the students, situating this within the local and global context. The chapter foregrounds the need to rethink literacy teaching to include new multimodal, digital and culturally inclusive practices for changing times.

Chapter 2 *Situated and Explicit Pedagogy* and Chapter 3 *Critical and Creative Pedagogy* analyse a series of media-based lessons in which students collaboratively design digital, animated movies. The inside story of the teacher's application of the multiliteracies pedagogy and Learning by Design is shared using classroom anecdotes of student learning. This narrative highlights the significant potentials and constraints that can be encountered when the multiliteracies pedagogy is implemented in multicultural and low-socioeconomic contexts.

Chapter 4 *Multimodality, Media and Access* investigates – rather than assumes – the potentials of multimodal literacies and new digital media to provide greater access to literacy learning in the multiliteracies classroom.

Chapter 5 *New Social Spaces* advances the currently underexplored yet fascinating social production of spaces – dialogic, bodily, embodied, architectural and screen spaces – when new technologies for media production are integrated into the multiliteracies classroom.

Chapter 6 *Discourses and Diversity* uncovers the subconscious ways in which discourses – socially accepted ways of displaying membership in

particular social groups through words, actions and other representations of self – can constrain or enable certain groups in the multiliteracies classroom.

Chapter 7 Power and Access gives valuable insights into the complex workings of power in the multiliteracies classroom, situating classroom events within patterns of power in the school, local community and society. The weighty consequences of ignoring issues of power in schools are revealed, making this chapter essential reading for all educators.

Chapter 8 New Times provides the inside perspectives of the multiliteracies teacher and culturally diverse students within her classroom. This chapter provides the outline of a social theory for understanding the distribution of multiliteracies in schools and society.

The work of theorising multiliteracies has already begun by a great many minds, stimulating an international uptake of new pedagogies for changing economic times. I am humbly appreciative of this work that paved the way for this research monograph. *The Multiliteracies Classroom* aims to do something very different to the existing literature on the topic. I endeavour to provide an accessible, first-hand account of the implementation of multiliteracies in mainstream and multicultural classrooms.

This book shows how teachers are negotiating principles and practices of multiliteracies in local contexts of diversity, interpreting these events in relation to underlying themes and values of critical theory that have resonated throughout the history of schooling. Extending ethnographic classroom research in a local context to principles of life and learning in an imperfect world, this book is intended to make a significant contribution to education for years to come.

Note

1. Original members of the New London Group who met in September 1994 and authored *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies* in the *Harvard Educational Review* (1996) include Courtney B. Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, James Paul Gee, Mary Kalantzis, Gunther Kress, Allan and Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels and Martin Nakata.

Chapter 1

Multiliteracies Matters

- Researcher:** So tell me what your movie storyline is.
- Jack¹:** ‘Slip, Slop, Slap!’
- Nick:** Yeah.
- Jack:** A man like, gets like, burned.
- Nick:** Sunburnt.
- Jack:** And he’s, like, just got pants on. [No shirt for sun protection]
And he’s, he’s, like, angry. Then he goes into the water,
‘cause he thinks it’s gunna make it better. But it gets worse.
Then he gets angry.
- Matthew:** Instead [interrupted].
- Jack:** And then a lifeboat comes up with some sunscreen.
- Matthew:** Instead of [interrupted].
- Jack:** And then they all do a dance.
- Matthew:** Instead of a lifeboat coming up with the sunscreen, why
don’t we have a big bottle of sunscreen pop up? [He gestures
with hands to show figure popping onto the stage from
below.]
- Mark:** We need some sunscreen on it.
- Jack:** Yeah! How about we make a big bottle of sunscreen and
then it walks up to him!
- Matthew:** Yeah! And it says, ‘I’m sunscreen’, and pours sunscreen all
over him.

These four boys (aged 11–12 years) were collaboratively planning the storyboard or sequence of frames for their animated, digital movie. The movie had an authentic purpose, designed to communicate an educational message to the local school community, and to children in the lower primary grades.

The scenes in the final movie included generic representations of natural recreational sites, such as beaches and coral reef. The Gold and Sunshine

Coast, and the Great Barrier Reef, stretch for 2600 km along the Eastern coast of Queensland, the State where the boys live. These places of significance to the boys also play a key role in the tourist-driven economy of regional and metropolitan Queensland. In the vignette above, the boys made an intertextual reference to a famous Australian television health campaign for sun protection entitled 'Slip, Slop, Slap', which originally depicted an animated seagull with a lisp, who teaches viewers to 'Slip on a shirt, slop on sunscreen, and slap on a hat'.

Multiliteracies and Society

Interactions such as these demonstrate important shifts in literacy pedagogy and learning that are tied to broader shifts in the society in which these boys participate. The task of digital movie making required the boys to engage in authentic social practices of communication that are central to a globalised economy, using new technological tools of production, such as digital cameras, and movie editing and distribution software. Designing movies also requires proficiencies with dynamic combinations of modes, such as images, spatial arrangements, music, scripted voice-overs, gestures and animations, which include, but are not limited to, the encoded word (Mills, 2010b).

Historically, schools have emphasised teachers as experts, learners as novices and learning as the reproduction of disciplinary knowledge and decontextualised skills. What is observed here is a significant pedagogical shift, in which students are positioned to think and design collaboratively and creatively within a community of practice. The production of new media-based texts draws upon the collective, specialist and trans-disciplinary expertise in open-ended engagements with new media design. This is the nature of new workplaces.

The pace of technological change in contemporary society means that digitally mediated textual practices are critical in a significant number of professions. Likewise, many workplaces emphasise change, flexibility, teamwork and networking rather than hierarchical command structures, deskilled work and mass production (Gee, 1994, 2000). Multi-skilled professionals, who have a broad portfolio of skills, and who engage in a dynamic repertoire of integrated practices, have replaced the division of labour into deskilled components (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999).

The theories presented in this book find their empirical basis in critical ethnographic research, conducted in intensive blocks of fieldwork over a three-year period. The narrative centres on the lives of an Australian teacher and her students in a suburban public school in a