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Multiliteracies: Interrogating competing discourses

Abstract

The term 'multiliteracies' was coined by the New London Group in 1996 to describe the emergence of new literacies and changing forms of meaning making in contemporary contexts of increased cultural and linguistic diversity. The proliferation of powerful, multimodal literacies means that previous conceptions of literacy as 'writing and speech' are collapsing. Educators and researchers worldwide are rethinking literacy pedagogy to enable students to participate fully in our dynamic, technological and culturally diverse societies. This paper interrogates competing discourses that have arisen in academic literature during the decade since multiliteracies originated. This scholarly debate is timely because multiliteracies are receiving increasing international interest in literacy research, pedagogy and educational policy.

Keywords: multiliteracies; literacy; multimodal; modes; pedagogy; metalanguage; design; multimedia; literature

Educators have been alerted to the increasing salience of multiliteracies in the context of globalisation, and the need for literacy pedagogy to respond to the changes in the multimedia textual environment. This paper examines the growing body of international research and literature concerning multiliteracies. As a lecturer and researcher of multiliteracies I was prompted to write this article when one of my students in his third year of a Bachelor of Education programme wrote:[1]

> I see the need for multiliteracies in education, but think that education in Australia generally has swung too far in embracing multiliteracies, and has turned its back on traditional approaches when it needs to be shaking the hands of both approaches. (Unpublished paper)

The student explained that he had heard this view from a mentor during his practical experience in a local school as part of his teaching degree. According to Hamston (2006), many pre-service teachers in Australia continue to define literacy in terms of monomodal or linguistic skills alone, while the use of multimodal texts are not modelled in their school-based practicum placements.

This paper examines how educators have taken up or resisted tenets of multiliteracies, both globally and within the Australian context. The aim is to highlight key debates within this multifaceted theory. The first controversy is the relative place of time-honoured or 'quality' literature as opposed to popular, multimedia texts in the multiliteracies classroom. The second concerns the extension of linguistics (written and spoken words) to a multimodal metalanguage for literacy curriculum, including the criticism that the theoretical and practical boundaries of multimodal design are inadequately developed for formulating curricula (Prain 1997). The third is about the potentials and limitations of the pedagogy of multiliteracies – situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice, which is evaluated in the light of recent classroom-based research (New

London Group 2000). I draw from my classroom-based ethnographic research, in which I examined first-hand the application of the multiliteracies pedagogy with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Mills 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2007a, 2007b).

Describing multiliteracies

More than a decade ago, a group of 10 educators met together in New London. They advocated a new approach to literacy pedagogy in response to the changes in the globalised communication environment (New London Group 1996). They proposed a pedagogy of multiliteracies to broaden approaches to literacy that were centred exclusively on linguistics, to include multimodal textual practices – combining linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes – and literacies that were culturally inclusive (Cope and Kalantzis2000a).

Specifically, the term 'multiliteracies' was coined by the New London Group (1996) to encompass two powerful propositions in the changing communications environment. The first concerns the multiplicity of communication channels and media tied to the expansion of mass media, multimedia and the Internet, while the second pertains to the increasing importance of cultural and linguistic diversity as a consequence of migration and globally marketed services (New London Group 1996). These two propositions are related because the proliferation of texts is partially attributed to the diversity of cultures and subcultures (Cope and Kalantzis 2000b). For example, in Aboriginal cultures the visual mode of representation is much richer and more evocative than linguistics alone (Cope and Kalantzis 2000b). Likewise, gestural modes of communication, represented through dance and holistic expressions of movement, are an integral part of Sudanese culture (Mills 2006c).

In the decade since the work of the New London Group began, the multiliteracies argument has been used to emphasise the importance of oral vernacular genres (Newman 2005), visual literacies (Burton 2006; Callow 2006; Noad 2005; O'Brien 2001), information literacy (Hodgman 2005), emotional literacy (Liau et al. 2003) and the visual and performing arts (Hertzberg 2001; Makin and Whiteman 2007; Martello 2004; Thwaites 1999). Recently, it has been applied to understandings of geographical, historical, political, economic, ecological (environmental) and cultural literacies in the context of the social education (Muller 2006; Schultz 2006). The concept of multiliteracies has been extended beyond language and cultural studies to address scientific multiliteracies (Weinstein 2006) and numeracy (Every and Young 2002).

The application of the concept of 'multiliteracies' to a broad range of academic disciplines prompts concerns about the marginalisation of conventional approaches to literacy curriculum. As interpretations of multiliteracies become, more inclusive in the literature, it is timely to recall that the multiliteracies argument was originally framed in the context of the New London Groups' discussions about 'literacy and literacy teaching and learning' (New London Group 2000, 9). Cope and Kalantzis, members of the group, state explicitly:

We began the discussion with an agenda that we had agreed upon in advance, which consisted of a schematic framework of key questions about the forms and content of literacy pedagogy. (Cope and Kalantzis 2000a, 7).

Despite the application of multiliteracies to a broad range of academic disciplines, this dialogue is positioned in the context of literacy pedagogy.

Multiliteracies, literature and popular texts

A growing body of multiliteracies research is centred on the relevance of a burgeoning array of popular, oral vernacular and mass media texts (Mackey 2003; Mason 2004; Newman 2005; Nixon and Comber 2001; Stevens 2001). A key emphasis of multiliteracies is the need for literacy curricula to incorporate a widening range of digital text types with their associated boundaries of generic structure that are less visible than those of time-honoured, written forms. For example, Newman (2005) cites the multiliteracies argument to frame a textual analysis of hip-hop ciphers, applying Halliday's functional linguistics. Walsh (2006) reported on the incorporation of visual literacies in a language programme, highlighting the hypermedia design skills evident in the portfolio websites of adolescent students. Callow (2006) examined the visual metalanguage used in the classroom when analysing the images in political advertising. These examples point to the current emphasis on popular and pervasive multimedia texts in multiliteracies research and classroom practice.

This emphasis on the dynamic representational resources used in popular, multimodal texts may raise concerns among educators who value the unchanging merit and meaning of 'historically ratified texts' – a cultural heritage approach (Hollingdale 1995, 249). At the symposium 'English Beyond the Battle Lines: Rethinking English Today' by the English Teachers Association of Queensland (ETAQ), Professor Buckridge stated that Queensland faced the 'imminent disappearance of the literary canon' if literature was not restored in schools (Livingstone 2007, 3):

> In ecological terms, the thing we're on the brink of losing can be thought of as a huge and priceless piece of cultural heritage to which everyone in Australia and the rest of the world has an inalienable right of access . . .

Are teachers of multiliteracies replacing time-honoured, 'quality', classical English literature with transient, informal, abbreviated forms of electronic communication and inferior, consumer-driven mass-media texts?

There are three logical reasons why a multiliteracies pedagogy sits uneasily with a cultural-heritage approach. Firstly, multiliteracies aims to move literacy education forward from antiquated pedagogies of an exclusively formal, standard, monomodal and national language to those that are inclusive of informal, open-ended, multimodal forms of communication, which cross national boundaries and support productive diversity (Cope and Kalantzis 2000b). From this standpoint, the intertextual institution of a dominant literary tradition is inequitable, since marginalised cultures also have a stake in literacy practice in a multicultural and globalised society (Mills 2005a).

This brings us to a second argument: advocates of multiliteracies see reading as a critical, social practice, rather than purely a means of cultural transmission. Critical framing within a pedagogy of multiliteracies involves the development of alternative reading positions and practices for questioning and critiquing texts, with their affiliated social formations and culturally specific assumptions (Cope and Kalantzis 2000b). This aspect of a pedagogy of multiliteracies builds upon 'critical literacy', in which texts are viewed as sites where culture is produced or reproduced (Kamler 1994; Knobel and Healy 1998; Macken-Horarik 1996). The selection of 'quality' literature is a culturally and politically complex act; it is ideologically value-laden (Anstey and Bull 2004; Baker and Luke 1991; Durrant and Green 2000; Macken-Horarik 1997; West 1992). Multiliteracies challenges the appropriateness of these decisions, taking into account the interests of all students in increasingly diverse communities. Rather than using texts in the reproduction of the dominant cultural values of the West, critical framing in multiliteracies pedagogy stimulates students' thinking about how textual practices work in the construction of subjectivity and production of culture.

Furthermore, this debate can be framed in the light of the diverse purposes of literacy in society today. Historically valued texts are not representative of the kaleidoscope of texts and literacies that children encounter in society. For example, the valued literature canon systematically excludes certain text types such as picture books, popular texts, romance and science fiction (Mills 2005a). Removing these popular fictions from the curriculum disenfranchises many groups and negates valuable opportunities to meet children's interests. At the same time, ignoring the pervasiveness of popular culture leaves a significant number of gendered representations and stereotypes unopposed and unquestioned (Arthur 2001; Hollingdale 1995; Muspratt, Luke, and Freebody 1997; Singh 1997; West 1992; Wyatt-Smith 2000). A pedagogy of multiliteracies provides opportunity for this critique. Furthermore, information texts, emails, websites, databases, visual literacies and oral discourses should not be overlooked as 'inferior literacies'. In relation to the hierarchical ordering of textual practice, Luke (2000, 85) argues:

> . . . the 'new' electronic writing is a different form of literacy – not an inferior or lesser form of some 'golden age' vision of literacy. The electronic typewriter was not a diminished form of literacy or handwriting . . .

It is not argued here that there is no space for time-honoured, 'quality' literature in a pedagogy of multiliteracies. For example, some scholars have published work concerning both literature and multiliteracies, such as Unsworth (2006a, 2006b) and Mackey (1998), among others. These theorists have shown that the distinctions between 'quality literature' and 'popular culture' is increasingly becoming blurred by a burgeoning variety of children's literature and classic stories in electronic formats, published as CD-ROM versions and on the World Wide Web, supported by online communities, forums and chat rooms about literature (Unsworth et al. 2005). Whether 'classical' or 'popular', multimodal or monomodal, digital or not, the selection of texts for teaching multiliteracies needs to be done reflectively and critically. Failure to do so results in the reproduction of dominant cultural values, and compliance with the 'literary tastes of the most powerful' (Muspratt et al. 1997, 297).

Multimodal design

This section addresses the contention that the New London Group's extension of linguistics (written and spoken words) to include multimodal texts is too broad to be useful to literacy curriculum and practice. Multimodality expresses the complexity and interrelationship of more than one mode of meaning, combining linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural or spatial modes. Visual meanings or modes include images, page layouts, screen formats, colours, perspectives, vectors, foregrounding and backgrounding. Audio meanings include music, voice-overs and sound effects. Gestural design involves body language, gestures, kinesics, feelings and behaviour. Spatial design includes environmental, architectural and geographical meanings (Kress 2000a; New London Group 2000).

Multimodal design differs from independent modes because it interconnects the modes in dynamic relationships. It captures the multifaceted and holistic nature of human expression and perception, involving the whole body in the process of learning and semiosis (Kress 2000a, 2000b; New London Group 2000). It was members of the New London Group (2000, 19) who began to extend the linguistic semiotic system of Halliday (1978, 1994) to incorporate visual, spatial, gestural and audio modes in a metalanguage of design (Cope 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 1999; Kress 2000a, 2000b; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2001). The New London Group (2000, 25–28) also uses the terms 'meanings', 'modes of meaning', 'designs' and 'design elements' as synonyms for 'modes'.

The semiotic aspects or metalanguage for multiliteracies has not been without criticism at various points in its development (Cameron 2000; Pennycook 1996; Prain 1997; Trimbur 2001). For example, Prain (1997) criticises the New London Group for claiming that static rules do not govern meaning making, while in practice providing elaborate codes and checklists of stable multimodal and linguistic elements based on Halliday's functional grammar (1994). This, Prain suggests, contradicts their appeal to the multifarious, hybrid texts that are proliferating and ever changing. He also argues that the reformulation of linguistic grammars to include the five modes of design has opened up an unwieldy number of text types to be addressed in literacy education, requiring semiotic tools of analysis that the New London Group has not provided. Prain (1997) contends that the theoretical and practical boundaries of multimodal design are inadequately developed for formulating curricula and are currently unsuitable for classroom discussion.

The New London Group (1996) does not propose that multiliteracies is a completed project. Cope and Kalantzis (1997, 2000b) called for the ongoing reformulation of a multimodal metalanguage, and scholars and researchers have responded by continuing this dialogue. In particular, the ongoing extension of Halliday's work to multimodal semiosis has been taken up by several theorists since the New London Group. For example, Unsworth (2001, 2006a) and Jewitt (2006) follow Kress (1996) in applying categories of systemic functional linguistics – representational or ideational, interactive or interpersonal and com- positional or textual meanings – to the metafunctional organisation of multimodal texts.

Since the New London Group, theorists have continued to develop a new metalanguage or grammar for describing the confluence of different words, images, sounds, gestures and spatial elements of multimodal textual designs (Burn and Parker 2003; Burton 2006; Callow 2006; Clancy and Lowrie 2002; Hamston 2006; Hull and Nelson 2005; Jewitt 2006; Jewitt and Kress 2003a, 2003b; Kress 2000b; Kress et al. 2001; Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Noad 2005; O'Brien 2001; Osbourne and Wilson 2003; Stein 2007; Stein and Slonimsky 2006; Unsworth 2001, 2006b; Watson and Johnson 2004).

Jewitt and Kress (2003b, 290), who have contributed much to the development of multimodal semiotics, acknowledge that because 'multimodality attends to everything as meaningful' it is sometimes perceived as 'imperialistic'. Jewitt and Kress (2003a, 290) counter that multimodality is a new venture, and thus, multimodal semioticians need to examine precisely 'where the boundaries of its affective work are located'.

In response to the criticism that multimodality semiotics is too broad for literacy curriculum, it needs to be acknowledged that the multimodal quality of texts is a reality of our fast-changing, globalised textual environment. Teaching literacy exclusively as a stable, autonomous system of linguistic conventions and rules is no longer sufficient for the multiple platforms of communication in society (Kress 2000a). Likewise, the multimodal nature of semiotics should no longer be ignored in contemporary theories of meaning.

Systems of meaning are fluid – created, developed and transformed in response to the communicative needs of society (Kress et al. 2001). Consider, for example, that the written discourses of online chat rooms are more abbreviated, interactive, spontaneous, informal, spoken-like and rapidly transmitted than many print-based texts. These networked textual practices generate new 'standard' terms that are widely recognised by competent users of the discourses, such as 'lol' (laughing out loud) or 'afk' (away from keyboard). Colloquial forms or minimal reinforcers such as 'ah' and 'mmm' convey a similar degree of spontaneity and responsiveness to speech, within an extensively 'threaded' organisational structure of the text (Love and Isles 2006, 220). This highlights the need for a multimodal metalanguage that accounts for the dynamic, temporal and varied affordances of new media and textual practices in relation to different social contexts and cultural purposes (New London Group 2000).

Conversely, there are aspects of Internet discussion threads that essentially remain regular and stable. For example, when users identify a spelling error in their transmitted text, a common practice is to immediately forward the corrected spelling, flagged by an asterisk. Large repertoires of English words used in online discussions have no commonly recognised abbreviations, and users must draw upon 'standard' spelling. New textual designs always build on existing resources for meaning making, having a degree of familiarity that enables the formulation of descriptive and analytic categories to describe texts (Cope and Kalantzis 1997).

The multiliteracies argument has awakened literacy educators to recognise that the skills required to communicate effectively in society are constantly changing. In particular, cultural differences and a proliferation of communications media give impetus for a pedagogy of multiliteracies for locally diverse, educational contexts (LoBianco 2000; New London Group 2000). Interestingly, syllabi across the seven states and territories in Australia, where this paper is written, address the need for students to design multimodal texts for a variety of social purposes (ACT Department of Education and Training 2000; Board of Studies New South Wales 1998; Department of Education and Training Tasmania 2007; Department of Education and Training Western Australia 2005; Department of Employment Education and Training Northern Territory 2005; South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services 2004; Queensland Studies Authority 2006; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005).

The semiotic terrain is undeniably changing in fundamental ways, and this transformation requires the continued revision of metalanguages or new grammars to describe the burgeoning and hybridised variety of text forms associated with information and multi- media technologies (New London Group 1996). To continue to teach to a narrow band of print-based genres, grammars and skills is to ignore the reality of textual practices outside of schools. Students must be free to engage in new and multimodal textual practices, rather than simply reproduce a tightly confined set of linguistic conventions.

Multiliteracies pedagogy

Despite the prominence of multiliteracies in international literacy research since the New London Group's paper in the Harvard Educational Review (1996), the multiliteracies pedagogy – the 'how' of multiliteracies – has been received with both enthusiasm and reservations. The New London Group had envisaged that a multiliteracies pedagogy might provide 'access without children having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities' and to be 'genuinely fair in the distribution of opportunity' (New London Group 2000, 18). The multiliteracies pedagogy of the New London Group involves four related components: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice (New London Group 2000). Situated practice involves building on the lifeworld experiences of students, situating meaning making in real-world contexts. Overt instruction guides students to use an explicit metalanguage of design. Critical framing encourages students to interpret the social context and purpose of designs of meaning. Transformed practice occurs when students transform existing meanings to design new meanings (New London Group 1996). These components of the pedagogy do not constitute a linear hierarchy, but may occur simultaneously, randomly or be 'related in complex ways . . . each of them repeatedly revisited at different levels' (New London Group 2000, 32).

An example of an initially ambivalent response to the multiliteracies pedagogy appears in a monograph edited by key members of the New London Group, Cope and Kalantzis (2001). Auerbach (2001) argues that the notion of accommodating four pedagogical traditions has the potential to be

both problematic and productive, grounded in a concern that the multiliteracies pedagogy may neglect irreconcilable ideological tensions between each approach. Auerbach (2001, 99) cautions that 'unless the ideological basis of each of the four components and their implications for practice are made explicit, the pedagogy lays itself open to distortion or cooption'. The argument is not that overt instruction, situated practice, critical framing and transformed practice are necessarily or inherently oppositional; rather, there is a call for explication of their ideological stance and implications for the multiliteracies pedagogy. Interestingly, this is coupled with a caveat that the framework should not be able to disregard central issues of power and ideology that have existed in schooling, ignoring ways that the social construction of literacy has historically served as a tool for reproducing the existing social order (Auerbach 2001).

Investigating this issue of power, my ethnographic classroom research examined the enactment of the multiliteracies pedagogy through the theoretical lens of critical theory (Mills 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2007a, 2007b). The study documented a teacher's enactment of the multiliteracies pedagogy through a series of multimodal, media-based lessons with her culturally and linguistically diverse students of class six (aged 11–12 years). A salient finding was that students' access to multimodal semiosis was not distributed equally because of complex interactions between the enactment of the multiliteracies pedagogy, power relations and classroom discourses. Existing degrees of access were reproduced, based on the learners' relation to the dominant culture. Specifically, students from Anglo-Australian, middle-class backgrounds had greater access to transformed designing than those who were culturally or economically (Mills 2007b).

For example, the influence of power on students' access to multiliteracies was shown when a group of economically marginalised boys were prohibited from completing the multimodal, digital aspects of moviemaking because they were disruptive in class and received established sanctions. Instead, they were required to do monomodal literacies consisting of handwritten work. Consequently, the enactment of coercive power prohibited these boys from being socialised into valued multiliterate practices of contemporary society (Mills 2007b).

In relation to pedagogy, the symbolic practice of ability grouping for English was found to be a constraining form of differentiation, distributing different literacies to students in a marginalising way. The low-ability group received monomodal literacies and transmissive forms of pedagogy, which created the conditions for further marginalisation. Transmissive pedagogy used to regulate the behaviour of the low-ability literacy group did not foster decision-making, communication or creative and technological skills that are required to transcend working-class jobs. Furthermore, the low ability groups comprised the culturally, linguistically and socio-economically marginalized students. Therefore, the ability group for English unintentionally contributed to a non-reflexive causal loop that sustained the unequal distribution of multiliteracies (Mills 2005b, 2007a).

Classroom discourses – required ways of speaking and act in the classroom – also influenced students' access to multiliteracies. For example, Ted, an Indigenous Australian student, continually violated the discursive patterns or rules by which discourses were formed and that governed what could be said or remain unsaid, and who could speak with authority or remain silent (McLaren 1994). Ted was frequently reprimanded for 'unsolicited replying' – calling answers without being nominated by the teacher. A common pattern of classroom discourse in Western schooling requires interactions by invitation of the teacher in whole-class discussions. However, unsolicited replying is a common Indigenous Australian discourse pattern (Cazden 1988). In contrast, Anglo-Australian, middle-class students were consistently able to report on their work to satisfy the expectations of the teacher. They were selected to become spokespersons for groups.

They gained control of classroom discussions by raising their hands – 'Warren, I see your hand up – you're in control'. Such ways of acting and speaking in the multiliteracies classroom were considered successful by the teacher. Dominant students gained rewards, praise and power in directing whole-class discussions because they sat upright with their hands on their heads and assumed other required postures (Mills 2006b).

In summary, the research demonstrated that irrespective of the relative merits of the multiliteracies pedagogy over conventional approaches, its ability to provide equitable access for all must be understood in relation to the complex network of power relations in the institution of schooling that both constrain and enable its successful implementation (Mills 2006c).

These findings are supported by Janks (2004), who reported the observations in a South African school in which teachers code-switched between the local language – Setswana – and English. By grade seven, students were to respond only in English, prohibiting 90% of the students, who had not mastered the dominant language, from speaking. Following Bourdieu, who posited the 'access paradox' in 1991, Janks' work draws attention to the consequences for students' access to language when issues of dominance are ignored.

So are literacy educators and researchers celebrating or censuring the multiliteracies pedagogy? On the one hand, Sydney-based research in 2001 indicated that the multiliteracies pedagogy was implemented in a number of specific sites, but had less impact than Freebody and Luke's (1990) 'four reader roles' (code-breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst), as well as 'explicit and systematic' pedagogies (Hammond 2001; Hammond and Macken-Horarik 1999). However, throughout the last decade, the multiliteracies pedagogy and the framework of 'knowledge processes' – experiencing known and new, conceptualising by naming and theorising, analysing functionally and critically, and applying appropriately and creatively – have been applied across a range of levels of educational institutions globally (Kalantzis and Cope 2005).

There are early reports of the successful implementation of the multiliteracies pedagogy in South African and Australian educational contexts documented by Stein and Newfield (2000), Bond (2000) and Cazden (2000). Soon after, Doherty (2002) reported a small-scale literacy project offered to urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. The application of the multiliteracies pedagogy had a significant, positive impact on the students and their community (Doherty 2002). Similarly, Kalantzis and Cope's (2005) Learning by Design Project in Australia, involving a cadre of more than 80 teachers, lead to positive shifts in teachers' pedagogy and students' learning outcomes through the enactment of the multiliteracies framework and attention to multiple modes of communication (Burrows 2005). Other scholars have contributed to research and literature about classroom applications of the multiliteracies pedagogy, making positive recommendations for its use in a diverse range of learning contexts and levels of schooling (Anstey and Bull 2004, 2006; Black and Goebel 2002; Healy 2007; Healy and Honan 2004; Lewis and Fabos 2000; Mason 2004; Stein 2006, 2007; Unsworth 2001).

Historically, literacy pedagogy and research has been a much-contested field. Each new wave of educational practice, designed to improve literacy education, has in turn been replaced by something else (Mills 2005a). From transmissive to progressive approaches, and from genre approaches to critical literacy, each has made a positive contribution to literacy education. However, taken in isolation, each of these literacy pedagogies has not been sufficient for all students to access multiliteracies. This is increasingly the case as existing pedagogies become further removed from the multimodal forms of communication required in the twenty-first century (Cope 2000; Cope and Kalantzis 2000a). The multiliteracies pedagogy is an innovative attempt to combine the strengths of past approaches to overcome their weaknesses while addressing the need for new, multimodal, digitally mediated,

culturally diverse and dynamic multiliteracies for our changing times (New London Group 1996).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the way in which 'multiliteracies' has been taken up in various disciplines since the New London Group first coined the term (New London Group 1996). Kulick and Stroud (1993, 55) explain how the Gapuners in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea actively and creatively seize literate skills for their own purposes and needs, rather than literacy 'taking hold' of Gapun. In a similar way, theorists have encountered multiliteracies in active and creative ways to serve their own purposes, shaping and extending the understanding of multiliteracies.

The relative place of time-honoured literature versus popular texts was evaluated in the context of work on multiliteracies since the New London Group. It was argued that texts chosen for analysis in a multiliteracies approach respect the cultural traditions of all students. This includes historically validated Anglo-Saxon literature, and the kaleidoscope of popular, electronic and multimodal literacies that children encounter in society (Mills 2005a). It was also argued that the sharp distinction between classic literature and popular, multimedia texts is becoming blurred as the digital media, such as e-literature, increasingly support conventional texts.

The way in which the New London Group's development of a multimodal metalanguage has been taken up by theorists was analysed and clarified. It was contended that the emergence of a burgeoning variety of text forms and the dynamic nature of language in contemporary life point to the need for a multimodal metalanguage for semiosis. Semiotics has now extended beyond a narrow and exclusive band of 'standard English', print-based codes, to describe the convergence of linguistic, iconic and multimodal representational resources (Kalantzis, Cope, and Fehring 2002; Lankshear et al. 1997; Mitchell 1999).

The New London Group's pedagogy of multiliteracies – situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice – was examined in the light of recent classroom-based research. Its potentials and limitations for providing equitable access to multiliteracies for all students were reviewed in the historical context of power in educational institutions and society. The multiliteracies pedagogy was seen as a positive innovation on existing approaches, responding to a broadened range of hybrid literacies and increased cultural diversity.

Despite the competing discourses concerning multiliteracies, literacy scholars are united in their view that global trends call for multiliteracies approaches that incorporate a broadened range of hybrid literacies and new pedagogies. Significant changes are occurring in the form of rapidly emerging modes of communication, increased cultural diversity, evolving workplace cultures, new challenges for equitable education and the changing identities of students. The proliferation of powerful, multimodal literacies demands that educators trans- form literacy programmes to teach new forms of communication, which are necessary to participate fully in our dynamic and culturally diverse society. It is only then that the interrelated, multilayered, complementary and increasingly divergent lifeworlds of students can become ideally creative, and flourish as responsible makers of meaning (New London Group 2000).

Note

1. Used anonymously by permission of the author.

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