Towards a literacy of fusion: new times, new teaching and learning?
Elaine Millard

Abstract
This paper seeks to widen discussion about which forms of literacy are most appropriate for the education of children in the twenty-first century. It outlines the current debate about the changes to children’s literacy practices, which are described as being prompted on the one hand by the pervasive influence in society of new technologies, and on the other by the extent of pupils’ engagement with popular culture. Using a single example, representative of a number of classroom action research studies devised by the author in which children’s own interests were used to motivate writing, she argues that what is required from teachers is a transformative pedagogy. This would allow children’s cultural interest to be merged with the school requirements into what is described as a literacy of fusion. The paper ends with an outline of the aspects of learning to which a teacher working to create such forms of literacy would need to attend.

New times, new teaching and learning?

We are living in a world characterised by very rapid change. Many of our old certainties, plotting a steady path from education to life-long employment and eventually onto a company assured pension, are now almost completely defunct. Postmodern conditions, often referred to in relation to education, as the New Times (New London Group 1996), are characterised by human ability to access and transform information and communicate it at speed. Moreover, the interface between audio, visual and print technologies is constantly shifting, so that different modes of meaning imprint themselves powerfully on the consciousness in turn, as the emphasis falls on one, then another mode of replication. These changes are also consequent on the ways in which users have chosen to deploy and transform the resources, or affordances made available to them by any newly created medium. As Kress (2000) argues:

‘our interests in representation and communication at a particular point are never readily matched by the existing semiotic resources, but rather we choose the most apt forms, the forms already suited by their existing potentials for the representation of our meanings. As there is never a total “fit”, the resources are always transformed.’ (Kress, 2000: 155)

Children currently in school have been born into a mesmerising and kaleidoscopic world of representation, where sound, image and print are constantly refracted by each other, presenting endless possibilities for transformative play. Young lives are pervaded by multiple representations of themselves, their family members and key significant others. Stored representations might, for example, range from a still or moving image of a beloved grandparent, a sporting idol or pop star, to different depictions in book, comic or CD-ROM and DVD of a favourite story character such as Tigger or The Little Mermaid. These images may be emblazoned on their clothing and personal belongings as well as constantly re-presented on small or large screens. Not only this, but cultures and experiences once deemed esoteric are now instantly available on screen and page. A Bollywood film released on the subcontinent can be simultaneously replicated and reported on in the Western hemisphere. Disparate cultures meet and co-mingle so that it becomes increasingly harder to see where one tradition ends and another begins.

As Cope and Kalantis (2000) comment in their introduction to Multiliteracies, there is an increased multiplicity and integration of significant modes of meaning making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on. This is particularly important in the mass media, multi media and in the electronic hypermedia (2000:5)

Current multi literacies are marked by a fluidity of movement between image and word, logo and logos, icon and command. Children become adept at locating significant detail on screen and moving effortlessly from space to space. Linearity is giving way to a topographical awareness of the design of a page in print as well as on screen (Moss, 2001). Yet, children’s and young people’s increased access to the many varied means of multimodal meanings does not of necessity mean that they are sophisticated or knowledgeable about their preferences; much remains on the level of implicit understanding inscribed, through the workings of familiarity or Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘habitus’ (systems of durable, transposable dispositions). These conditions create what Gunther Kress has described as ‘deep-seated dispositions in the person who is literate’ (1997: 8). However, many pupils do have an ability to switch effortlessly between different signifying systems and technological modes of transmission.
well in advance of the skills of those teaching them. Children are becoming multimodally literate whilst many of their teachers remain print-bound.

New times, old solutions

Times are ‘a-changin’ and one might expect a radical response from educationalists to the challenge of helping the young to adapt. Yet, in the main, the response of the majority of advanced national governments to the widening gap between those whose role it is to teach and those who are to be taught is to insist on technicist solutions. Rather than moving with the flow of communicative change, attempts have been to arrest language in the modernist moment, with skills more fitted to the needs of the generation now responsible for prescribing what should be taught. The emphasis is all on control through stages and targets and timed delivery of key skills. Curricula devised in this way conform to what Street has labelled “autonomous” models of literacy with ‘a single thing with a big L and a single Y’ (1993: 81). It is a literacy that assumes the precedence of written, over spoken texts with a hierarchy of importance topped by the analytical and expository skills of essayist literacy, which still dominate modes of assessment in higher education (Lillis, 2001). It is based on the reaffirmation of a standard, written, national language, transmitted largely through a print-based, linear pedagogy.

Access to technological means of transforming meaning are often minimal in school and even when employed, serve often to reinstate the privilege of a more literary forms. A conventional literary model is frequently recuperated with movement from the more visual, interactive form of pupils’ own experience to a static narrative which is dominated by the word. This displacement is frequently replicated in the English subject curricula, so that, for example, videos may be used to access the content of a set book or play and e-mail employed as a means of transmitting formal school knowledge such as a book review or class profile from one classroom to another. Lankshear and Bigum (1999) have described such teacher practices in their account of a government-funded study of literacy, technology and learning in the Australian states of New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria. They suggest that much of what they observed reflected an

‘old wine in new bottles’ syndrome. The teachers seemed often to be looking for technological applications that resonated with their pedagogical styles and, generally, with fitting new technologies into classroom business as usual – encouraged, of course, by syllabus guidelines which lend themselves precisely to this kind of thing.

(Lankshear and Bigum, 1999: 456)

In such scenarios, pupils remain desk bound and blackboard (or whiteboard) gazing, force-fed with endless formalised tasks which ask them to feedback information transmitted to them as a group. Lankshear and Bigum cite ‘Seymour Papert’s (1993) wry observation that “someone from the nineteenth century could step into contemporary classroom and know at a glance where they were.”

Who is disadvantaged?

The disjunction between the multimodal world of communication which is available to school children in the wider community and the constipated, bound modes of the standard curriculum has resulted in the increasing alienation of pupils from the schooling on offer. Alienation increases as pupils progress through their education and the differences in their gendered literacy preferences widen (Millard, 1997). It makes some older pupils, particularly large sections of boys, difficult to teach and is at the heart of the disparity of attainment within the standard assessment tests and final examinations between boys and girls.

Because of a perceived lack of relevance to pupil present and future interests, many schools experience a level of disaffection that has rendered the role of the teacher an unattractive one. The emphasis on class control and teaching structures now aims to turn teachers into trained technicians with little opportunity to create productive interchanges of knowledge, or work with their pupils’ prior knowledge base. Ultimately, the overriding goal of such national programs to devise teacher-proof methods of delivery seems increasingly deluded as it becomes more and more evident that the old inequalities of access to full educational opportunity and ceilings on attainment are as culturally and class-bound as they ever have been.

Allan Luke, who has been instrumental in reshaping the education policy of Queensland, has written that the literacy debate has too long found itself bogged down in arguments about methods of literacy instruction which do not address this key issue of access. In a paper provocatively entitled, Getting over method: Literacy teaching as work in “new times,” he has argued:

The ways that literacies are shaped have uneven benefits for particular communities and, unfortunately, the outcomes of literacy teaching continue to favour already advantaged groups in these communities. The matter thus is not one of finding the right and correct scientific methods of teaching literacy and ‘targeting’ these at marginalised groups. …

It is about the kinds of literate cultures they’re likely to encounter and how we would have them design and redesign those cultures and their texts.


Luke urges on educationalists a more flexible framework in which teachers could begin to think critically
about their practice and how to begin to bridge the gap between the seductive and increasingly productive practices of the world outside the classroom and the schooled literacies rehearsed inside school gates. However, this will demand a shift in emphasis for much of the current work on home to school literacies which feature in all the education policies of developed Western economies have made it their imperative to persuade families to accommodate to the systems, practices and emphases of the school curriculum.

It seems increasingly important that the one-way traffic (Marsh, 2001) from educational institutions to home should be reversed and that teachers be enfranchised to take meaning from what their pupils bring with them into the classroom. No more so because rather than there existing a simple binary relationship between home practices, watched over by parents and school practices, dominated by teachers, as children mature and take greater control over their consumer and leisure interests the relationships widen out to become more self-determining. Children’s cultural exchanges with other children become of prime importance to them and are dominant in the negotiations of interests between home, school and peer groups.

More than at any other period, children’s worlds are increasingly divergent from those which previous generations experienced when young. Dan Tapscott (1999), writing of what he terms ‘the net generation’ suggests that modern ‘kids’ are spending their early years in an environment that differs fundamentally from that of their parents. The latter grew up with the relatively limited medium of national broadcasting, largely dominated by television. For the current generation, the computer (or, as Seymour Papert, 1993, terms it, the ‘children’s machine’) is now what, beyond anything else, dominates their experiences of meaning making. Traces of children’s engagement with the new technologies can be found in almost every aspect of their self-selected reading and writing. By this I do not mean only to designate the actual time children commit to playing on and working with computer and related machines themselves, but the pervasiveness of technological design features on all texts, the multi-modality of communication processes and methods of access to other texts which have been made possible by technology.

The role of popular culture

In attempt to counter school bias, recent research has begun to consider children’s increasing interest in popular culture as an important influence on their acquisition of multi-modal literacies and their ability to transform meaning making from mode to mode in their creative play. Such interests encompass audio recordings, collectors’ cards, comics, computer and video games, cult series fictions; film and video narratives, football fanzines and programmes, the Internet, magazines, popular music and posters, stickers; TV and a multiplicity artefacts and clothing designed to support these interests. The growing body of research points to an increasingly important role for popular culture in the meaning making of children (Dyson, 1994, 1997, 1998; Millard and Marsh, 2000, Robinson, 1997). Yet classroom teachers, when consulted, seem not to welcome many aspects of popular culture and would not wish to include them the official school curriculum (Dyson, 1997; Green, Reid and Bigum, 1998, Makin et al, 1999; Millard and Marsh, 2000; Sanger, Willson, Davies and Whitaker, 1997).

Therefore, although there are some rich descriptive accounts of children importing popular culture into their own compositions (Dyson, 2001a and b; Millard, 1997; Millard and Marsh, 2001 a&b) there are comparatively few studies which explore teachers’ deliberate plans to use aspects of popular culture to develop literacy in school. In the United Kingdom, Marsh (2000) describes her work with 6- and 7-year olds to develop writing from role-play based on Batman and his Batcave; Millard and Marsh (2001b) have described the use of comics to create opportunities for developing reading and Marsh and Thompson (2001) the use of media boxes based on videoed media texts to engage nursery children in creative play and narrative construction.

Entering the castle of fear

In order to demonstrate how a fusion of children’s home literacy may be achieved, I am using one example of work with a Y5 class on quest narratives. The underlying popular cultural genre informing the work are computer games based in a dungeon or castle. In class a shared narrative, The Castle of Fear, which was predominantly pictorial, was used as a starting point. Drawings were used as a planning tool. This allowed conventional linearity in composition to be disrupted and provided rich examples of the different ways in which children chose to respond to the task: some focusing on drawing discrete rooms, others making elaborate inter-connections that crossed frames. Some used extensive colouring to signify the genre with an emphasis on red and black, others created elaborate line drawings while some (all of them girls) abandoned their maps quite early in the process to focus on the descriptive writing of setting and character.

Elements in the children’s planning were found to have been taken from local, personal and fantasy literacies, some global in their influence, some like many of the girls’ choices more local. For example, elements from the narratives of the Harry Potter story, Lord of the Rings and the latest Star Wars epic,
predominate in this list because they are part of the shared preoccupation of that time stimulated by the media and its commodifications. In contrast, the devil men come from one Sikh boy’s memories of shared stories told to him by his mother and a kangaroo was introduced from one girl’s memory of an imaginary companion created by a child in the film, Chocolat. This she had recently watched with her mum, but it was not part of the classes’ general interest.

Boys’ genre knowledge was derived largely from computer, film and adventure genres. Girls use more traditional elements from folk and fairy tales and reveal their hatred of all things that creep and crawl. In sharing this table with the class the teacher and I were able to initiate discussion about these differences and the children were encouraged to reflect on their own compositional preferences and to extend their range by considering using those of other class members.

Here for example, a boy reflects on his drawings of a scene from The Hobbit, which he presented in a film frame after hearing a section of that story read in class as part of the support activities:

I’m not into writing. I like organising my ideas in pictures. Whenever Miss J. (the classroom teacher) asks Chris to draw his ideas I want to do that too. When the Misty Mountain song was read to us, I got a picture of a dark moon and I swooped in over the mountains to a castle and then deep down into the dragon’s lair.

His picture sequence is clearly film action, shot in perspective with the focus moving slowly in on the dragon’s lair. Designated a ‘clever’ boy, he had not often been encouraged to sketch out his ideas for writing in images, however, his response on this occasion shows clearly how the affordances of the visual mode enables him to articulate ideas of narrative structuring by means of the image, acquired through his preference for filmed narratives. I have written about this and other projects and the different aspects of literacy they draw upon more extensively elsewhere. These examples, limited as they are by the space available to me here, serve to demonstrate how readily children can adapt the knowledge gained from their out-of-school interests to meaningful tasks in school and how their framing of the simplest tasks can reveal their sensitivity to modalities (ways of making meaning) other than the written text.

Creating a literacy of fusion

This is the process which I wish to call a transformative pedagogy of literacy fusion as it can be seen as fusing aspects of school requirements and children’s interests into what becomes both a more tasty and a more nourishing diet. I employ this rather over-worked metaphor of eating deliberately, as food-based metaphors are often employed when discussing the role of books in children’s life. Fusion cuisine has been developed to combine elements of Eastern and Western traditions without homogenising or hybridising the tastes, so that recipes in which distinctive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Girls’ choices</th>
<th>Boys’ choices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Castle Setting</td>
<td>12 Castles: 3 Spooky, 3 Fear, 2 Scary, 2 Horror, 1 dark, lmad</td>
<td>6 Castles: 2 Haunted, Death, Evil, Black Magic, Doom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Settings</td>
<td>Funfair, Haunted Church, Hogwarts’ School</td>
<td>City of Theed, Devil House, City of Evil Graveyard, Perfect Storm, Dark Planet, Dungeon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People to be rescued</td>
<td>7 Princesses: Diana, Leah, Sleeping Beauty, Louise, Pretty, Juliet, Lianne, 4 best friends</td>
<td>2 Queens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objects to retrieve</td>
<td>A lost puppy, a key, treasure, a book of spells Harry Potter’s animals.</td>
<td>4 treasures 2 diamonds, gold, a key, a ring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enemies</td>
<td>6 spiders, 3 snakes, tarantula, bats, mad clown, Crocodile, slimy creatures.</td>
<td>6 monsters, 3 vampires, pirates, wart hog, Darth Mall, mad, mad professor, crocodile Hindu devil men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Companions</td>
<td>Owl, snowy owl, best friends, kangaroo, brave knight</td>
<td>Robot, wolf, dog, dinosaur, Hobbit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
seasonings and cooking styles from Asia, Mexico, the American Southwest, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean are incorporated into 'home' cooking. Fusion literacy, like the cuisine term from which it has borrowed its descriptor, is strongly influenced by the Australian experience of a search for transformative practices predicated on the critical awareness of language in use. This in turn is a by-product of Halliday's linguistics (1978) in which the Available Design for any discourse creates the possibility for new meanings to be more or less predictable in their outcomes, yet always harbouring elements of negotiated change and transformation.

To describe the aspects that facilitate this fusion, I have employed an old mnemonic tricks from rhetoric by labelling each with the same letter, A. Those practices which I am calling transformative pedagogy, and which enables fusion literacy, would involve teachers giving attention during planning to the following aspects.

**Access**

The role of the teacher in this aspect is to decide on what might be worth studying with a particular class of children and how underlying meanings and structures can be made accessible. It also requires a consideration of whose meanings will be given space in the classroom. For example, will Pokémon or a Bat Cave be accorded equal attention with the Hobbit and Narnia and what about gangsta rap? In selecting and welcoming in different sources, teachers need to be aware of both their pupils' passions and preoccupations and how these can be productive in enabling new meanings to be created.

**The arena**

Arena is the word I am using to designate the importance of selecting an appropriate context for learning. It requires the teacher’s attention to the purpose and audience for a particular kind of communication that would make aspects of writing or oral presentations meaningful in class. For example, the quest stories described above the class were encouraged to write for each other and were given many opportunities to swap ideas for planning particular puzzles and problems and read and critique positively each other’s choices.

**Agency**

Agency requires the teacher to focus during the development of work in class on who is allowed to shape and transform meanings. Much of current literacy curriculum asks the teacher to be the model of good practice by composing in front of the children or by accepting and reshaping their contributions to fit a particular genre. A transformative pedagogy would allow the children to explore aspects of their own identities and to be provided with spaces where they can choose whom to persuade or entertain on their own terms. An example of explorations of identity with young children is provided by Marsh’s accounts of a project in which girls were encouraged to create their own superheroes using figures such as Bat Woman or Barbie as models (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Out-of-school identities, children’s preferred modes of communication and associated literacies need to be given a place in classroom activity (Hull and Schultz, 2001).

**Affordance (see Bearne and Kress, 2001)**

It may appear that the transformative pedagogy which I am advocating is child-centred learning in another guise. It does share with this earlier take on pedagogy an interest in children’s own resources for learning. However, to achieve fusion it also requires that teachers develop a more complex understanding of the affordances of particular modes of communication and the implications of these for the development of critical awareness.

**Appropriateness**

This requires that teachers help children make their selections as to which modes and genres are best suited for the task. Will a satirical cartoon prove more effective than a formal letter? Which of the aspects of Pokémon play can be used to effect in the classroom? It focuses on how to help children to select and best use the stuff which they have to hand. It is the role of the teacher to recognise such preoccupations and to initiate discussion of what might work best for particular tasks.

This brings me to the final ingredient which is linked directly to critical awareness:

**Accountability**

Effective fusion relies heavily on a teachers’ attentiveness to the interests and skills brought into the classroom and their skill in helping children to transform what they already know into stuff that will give them agency in a wider world and allow them to become more critical of their own and others’ meanings. With this critical awareness comes the possibility of accountability whereby teachers enable children to trace who is accountable in texts and also to account for their own responses and choices in making them. As an example of this, when the class who were creating quest narratives were shown the table I had made of their choices some boys mocked the girls’ use of fairy story elements as babyish. Their teacher helped them to think about parallels with characters and events in films such as Star Wars and Lord of the Rings, helping them to see the commonality in the fantasy genres. The discussion of problems and their solutions also led to
lively debate about whether there were ways of overcoming evil empires other than zapping them with weapons.

Conclusions

It is perhaps appropriate now to remind ourselves of the founding principles on which a transformative practice has been created. Giroux for example, has argued powerfully that it is most important to begin to engage literacy “not just as a skill or knowledge, but an emerging act of consciousness and resistance’ (1993: 367). He suggests that literacy cannot be viewed as a neutral skill but should be defined in political and ethical terms. It is political because to “read” the world always brings in relations of power, and it is ethical because we read the world differently depending, for instance, on circumstances of class, gender, race, and politics. Giroux’s position informs those practices which we call ‘critical literacy’ and which inform much of our current debates about pedagogy and curriculum (Lankshear and Bigum, 1999; Luke, 1998, Luke and Carrington, 2002).

However, I want to stress that critical literacy will remain only a theoretical ideal unless connected to a pedagogical practice that ensures that it becomes embedded in children’s preferred modes of responding to and producing all manner of texts. Children will only develop a critical awareness of their own and other’s texts, if they are given sufficient experience and pleasure in them. Before critical literacy can be encouraged, students require access, within the classroom to a variety of ways of telling, designing and making and the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue in relation to their preferred modes and dispositions. It is this practice which I am describing as transformative pedagogy based on a literacy of fusion or, as I have described with my colleagues at conferences, a literacy on the move.

References


CONTACT THE AUTHOR:
Elaine Millard, The Literacy, Language and Culture Research Centre, The University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2 JA