After the Testing: Talking and Reading and Writing the World

Allan Luke
Queensland University of Technology

I begin by thanking Margaret Hagood and Emily Skinner - the incoming editors of *JAAL* for the invitation to write this commentary. I acknowledge the commitment of *JAAL* to literacy education for social justice that has been sustained by Tom Bean and Judith Dunkerly. I honour the contribution to *JAAL* and to the field by our friend and colleague Helen Harper.

These words are retrospective and prospective. As I enter the last year of my work as a teacher, researcher and teacher educator – this writing has given me pause to rethink what we in the literacy education community have been through over the past decade. I ask yet again what can be done to recommit ourselves to a literacy education that is about equitable access to powerful ways of reading and writing, representing and engaging with communities and cultures, local and global. The enterprise of education never has been just about the transmission of basic skills and the making of 'human capital' for corporations and markets. And until this decade, our task has never been about improving our 'performance indicators' in the measurable and cost-efficient production of such capital. Universal access to reading and writing - and, now, engagement with dominant digital modes of information – necessarily is about making sense of the world, about building, critiquing and imagining possible worlds, possible futures and possible lives. Teachers, principals and teacher educators know this, *JAAL* readers know this - but somehow it has proven elusive for many charged with funding, managing and shaping educational policy.

In case you've joined us late or missed the first episode, here is my version of the story so far. A decade and a half ago, John Elkins and I were the first Australian-based editors of *JAAL.* Our aim then was to refocus our educational communities' attention to what we called "new times": the new demographic, cultural and economic conditions affiliated with globalization, the coming of digital culture, and difficult conditions of poverty and risk faced by many communities and families. The social facts of cultural and linguistic diversity continue to raise serious challenges for traditional schooling and print-based curricula. We and many contributors to *JAAL* have since taken up the challenge of describing new conditions of childhood, adolescence, and schooling.

Our view was that digital technologies were fundamentally changing, life, work, leisure, social and economic relations. And this was before the emergence of social relations and discourse via Twitter and Facebook, before Wikileaks and the major impact of internet communications on political campaigns in America, on social movements and on revolutionary political change in contexts like the Middle East and Asia. Digital technologies have become unavoidable elements of

political life, of everyday consumption, of social relations, and indeed of community and public pedagogy and learning. Simply – childhood, 'development' and learning have changed in unprecedented ways that researchers and teachers are struggling to come to grips with.

Finally, we noted the increasing disparity between the wealthiest and poorest segments of the community, with increasing numbers of children, students and youth living in conditions of poverty. Our task then was to convince the readership of JAAL that business as usual in print literacy education just wouldn't suffice the challenge – that cultural and linguistic diversity, and digital cultures were not going to fade away - and, indeed, that there was no possibility of going 'back to the basics'.

It is now over a decade and a half down the line. We have been through a decade of "educational fundamentalism" (Luke, 2004): the belief that the future lies in turning the clock back to self-evident print 'basics' through test-driven policies that focus on the production of performance indicators, on the development of private education systems and markets to supplant universal free, public education.

It is time for yet another reappraisal. Simply – the great neoliberal, test and market-driven experiment has not worked. How convenient it has been for governments to call for objective, scientific evidence on literacy education – along the way, stereotyping and denigrating qualitative research, descriptive accounts of school reform and teachers' work, cases of local community-based school reform, and absolutely ignoring studies of teachers' and students' classroom interaction. And how convenient it has been for many of the politicians and bureaucrats (those who remain in their positions and can actually be held 'accountable'), media pundits and public intellectuals, scientists and policy advisors who advocated the 'fix' of more testing, standardization and market competition to now sit silent in the face of, literally, hundreds of published studies that show not only that their social policy experiments have not 'closed the equity gap' between rich and poor communities, between mainstream and cultural and linguistic minorities, but that they also have led to a host of collateral and unintended negative effects. Ironically, their response has been to continue to promulgate non-scientific and, at times, mythological accounts of the success of the Charter School movement, of merit pay schemes, and of district and state test score miracles in New York and elsewhere.

This policy decade has left many schools, school districts and state systems facing demoralized workforces and industrial strife, confused and angry parents, teacher educators and researchers who have been cut out of policy-making and cut back in funding, and systems bureaucrats and school leaders attempting to piece together coherent responses to a left-over blend of accountability mandates and diminished institutional and fiscal resources. In her work in California schools, Jessica Pandya Zacher (2011) describes teachers and students striving to work effectively in the face of these conditions. Accountability demands remain, but diminished state funding had led to increased class sizes, less effective support for bilingual and multicultural students, and, in a mixed

blessing, schools and districts that cannot afford to purchase scripted basal materials and other mandated resources. Teacher professionalism and their students' adapatability is being pressed to the breaking point. Yet the bottom line is that teachers and students are still working together in public school classrooms as *bricoleurs*: adapting, modifying and constructing available resources, strategies and texts to shape the everyday, enacted curriculum. If there is indeed a classroom universal – it is not 'basics skills' or 'standards', but simply, as Cazden, John and Hymes (1972) showed us four decades ago, the construction of knowledge through classroom discourse.

Now that we've had a decade and a half of solid early twentieth century policy responses to twenty-first century challenges and problems – what is to be done? Fortunately, (classroom) talk and (big) ideas are cheap. No multinational publisher owns them, no test system has figured out how capture them in multiple choice format, and no curriculum mandate has yet to ban them. Yet.

Intellectual Demand and Classroom Talk

I am currently part of a team of teacher educators working on a school reform project in one of Brisbane's outer suburbs. We are working with the teachers' union, the school leadership and staff, and the local Aboriginal community in a four year project to see if together we can turn the performance of a low SES, Indigenous and multicultural elementary school. Our aim is to describe how school-level curriculum planning, and a focus on teacher professionalism can generate improved outcomes for students *sans* the test and standards-driven, scripted curriculum models (e.g., Luke, Woods & Dooley, 2011).

Along the way, we're working with teachers and young people on the uses of digital arts and multiliteracies – looking for indirect and direct effects upon conventionally measured achievement, outcome and performance indicators. We've had the opportunity to contribute to Aboriginal afterschool cultural programs, and support an Indigenous language revitalization program.

Of course – in the complex ecologies of the community schools - clean, scientific claims about direct effects of particular interventions are difficult if not impossible. Schools are not laboratories and everyday teaching and learning never follows the textbook designs of scientific experiments. Nor does it help for researchers, any more than external systems auditors or professional development experts, to barge in, boots and all, and declare that outcomes will improve if everybody simply does as they are told. Much to the consternation of systems bureaucrats and policy makers looking for magical 'scientifically-based' policy fixes, school reform is by necessity a messy, complex, local and longitudinally drawn out process. In the case of this school, many of the actual points of intervention have not always been by choice and design, ours or the teachers. New initial literacy curriculum in the preschool and year 1 levels was initiated by state policy. In our first year there, a scripted approach to upper elementary reading comprehension and inservice on functional grammar was mandated and implemented regionally.

The clean and simple world of cohort selection, control groups, test, treatment, posttest simply does not correspond with the world of lower socioeconomic urban and suburban schools, which are buffeted by waves of demand for accountability, for quantitative indicators of 'outputs' and 'performance', for leadership 'targets' and so forth. This is to say little of the impacts of various social policies and economic conditions the schools, with government welfare 'reform' policies redefining school/family relations and the global economy making life more difficult for working families in such areas. Over our first three years in the school, the sheer amount of 'reform', or rather mandated interventions masquerading as reform, has been overwhelming. The logic and coordination of these state-level moves often seem unfathomable to teachers and principals, much less students and community elders, at the ground level. And the school leadership has wound up acting has human shields, deflecting bureaucratic noise and a mountain of accountability-driven red tape away from the core business of classroom teaching and learning.

At the same time, our case has borne out several of the axioms of the school reform literature. Sustainable gains in achievement take time, in this case a 3-5 year cycle that can accommodate and generate cultural and discourse change in the staffroom and classroom, professional development, local development of a whole school literacy curriculum plan, in the context of engagement with the culturally and linguistically diverse community. Our work using the four resources model to build and plan curriculum units has refocused us and the school on three keys to improved literacy and language education: (1) the gradual elimination of deficit talk in staffroom culture, curriculum planning and teachers' work (Comber & Kamler, 2004); (2) substantive and intellectually demanding teaching and learning about how to 'read the world'; and, correspondingly, (3) rich, scaffolded classroom talk around matters of substance and weight. Ironically, in the context of an intervention focused on digital arts, popular cultural forms and new multiliteracies, our work repeatedly returns us to core issues of 'reading the world' and the effective use by teachers and students of the oldest communications medium in history: spoken language. Let's explore this further.

The intervention has spanned all dominant communications media: spoken language, print, and digital multiliteracies (e.g., Mills, 2010). We are working closely with teachers at all grade levels to begin auditing their current curriculum emphases and begin developing whole year/school plans using the "four resources model" (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Our work program was designed to engage with students' multiliteracies: through a combination of after-school media and digital arts clubs, Indigenous students' homework, and specific curricular units involving documentary film-making, music and video recording. Nominally, the focus of our work has been to search out transfer of training effects between digital arts and traditional print literacies, bearing in mind that these have proven elusive to date (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010).

In the midst of all this activity – the school was still struggling to show any substantive gains. By year two, the school leadership team had put in place effective behavior management and attendance interventions, focused on basic

skills instruction, and had shifted away from deficit talk about students, families and communications in the staffroom. The after school digital arts workshops and Aboriginal homework programs were flourishing. But something was missing. There was little attention to substantive intellectual demand, to real world knowledge and to meaningful engagement with the world. Volcanoes were exploding, Brisbane had flooded, there were major national and global debates about climate change, about immigration, Australia's Indigenous peoples were renegotiating a new cultural and political accord. Yet much of the work in classrooms continued to focus on test preparation, basic skills acquisition, orchestrating the complex provision of special education services, and everyday classroom management. Students and teachers appeared to be doing everything except 'reading and writing the world'.

With the principals' green light, we had a long, difficult and somewhat prickly discussion in a staff meeting. This issue, we explained, was one of "intellectual demand" (Ladwig, 2011) – of upping the ante under the expectation that students who had other cultural and linguistic backgrounds, some who were still struggling with some basic skills, were ready and able to discuss 'big ideas', to engage with discussions and talk about the world around them, about field and disciplinary knowledge. We made an empirical case that while basic skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, recall) were necessary for improved achievement, they weren't sufficient (cf. Freebody & Luke, 1990; Paris, 2005). We explained that sustained engagement and improved outcomes for the most at risk urban learners required: intellectual demand; connectedness to the world; and, sustained conversation (Newmann et al. 1996; Ladwig, 2008; cf. Hattie, 2008). Finally, we concluded this with illustrations about the use of web-based and found media resources to engage students in substantive content and to teach specialized discourses of science and the arts. To study the storms and flooding across our state, for example, we modeled the use of newspaper and newscast weather reports (for content-rich examples of scaffolded classroom talk, see Dudley-Marling & Michaels, 2012).

Thankfully, our efforts and those of the teachers, students and community show signs of success. The school did manage to bring standardize test score measures up but, perhaps more importantly, has won public recognition and awards from the community, the state system and Aboriginal elders. In our view, it was this later push towards intellectual demand and substance that consolidated a shift in teaching and learning and classroom talk.

Earlier this year, one of the grade 5 teachers and I were walking with the students through the local shopping mall, where they were interviewing community members for their videographies on "healthy places". She turned to me and said: "You should hear the discussions we're having now, the questions they're asking, and their understandings of the world". Also on the walk I had a long talk with a quiet ten year old boy who had been working on his video – a recent migrant from Russia. Before telling me that both his parents – with degrees – were having trouble finding work because of their English, he proceeded to do a detailed comparison of health and weather conditions in Siberia versus Australia. It was a classic case of students' rich funds of knowledge

coming to the fore in an educational context that otherwise would, in Bourdieu and Passeron's (1992) terms, "misrecognize" his life experience and cultural background knowledge.

In design experiment and action research models like ours – it is well nigh impossible to generate simple causal explanations. In school reform, across these 3-5 year cycles of change, there are no magic bullets. But our efforts and those documented in many studies of successful school reform demonstrate that schools can improve outcomes for at risk students on conventional indicators through whole school curriculum planning. In fact, the success of North America's most successful state school system – the province of Ontario – has been predicated on whole school planning of balanced literacy programs using the four resources model (Levin, 2010; Luke, 2011).

David Olson (1986) once described literacy as a technology for the building of "possible worlds". In the current policy context, it is continuously reduced to automaticity of basic skills and cognitive operations. Reading and writing and, indeed, digital multiliteracies are means and not ends in themselves. Missing from the current policy debates is a focus on the transitive nature of reading and writing. Reading and writing are always about something in the phenomenal world, and they can be used to construct, build, imagine and critique other possible worlds – quite literally as a passport to other spaces, journeys and places. At best, the current focus on standards, testing and improved measurable outcomes may set the table for what has been and remains the perennial task of teachers and students, readers and writers: talking and reading and writing the world. Where we abrogate this responsibility - our classrooms, our students and our cultures remain barren.

Acknowledgement

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