

Refocusing Multiliteracies for the Net Generation

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Abstract

This paper questions assumptions which underlie two influential concepts associated with new directions in tertiary pedagogies. One of these concepts (the ‘Net Generation’) is an attempt to pin down a series of characteristics of a new generation of students arriving at universities with different skills and knowledge sets from previous generations. The other concept (‘multiliteracies’) attempts to design a pedagogy which equips students for the demands of a rapidly changing world. Combining these two concepts raises some important questions. Although multiliteracies is essentially a philosophy of teaching and learning, much of the writing on multiliteracies implies that it is something that should be taught, which in turn assumes that students do not already have ‘multimodal’ abilities when they arrive in our university classrooms. However, one of the central characteristics to come out of the research on the Net Generation identifies precisely that: a highly developed ability to negotiate among different modes of communication, and a fluency in image-rich environments, rather than a text-only environment. But this raises the question: do ‘fluency’ and speed in reading images (or text) equal the ability to evaluate those images critically? This paper explores these questions and makes some suggestions for future directions.

Introduction

To begin with, let me indulge in kicking in a door that has been open for a long time now, by saying that the world has been undergoing profound changes in the last couple of decades. This is an open door because it has been plain to see for everyone, and analysed in a highly sophisticated manner by a wide variety of writers from an equally wide variety of disciplines (e.g., Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; McKee, 2005; Rifkin, 2000). Change in itself is of course a fundamental part of the human condition and therefore nothing new. What is unsettling, however, is the apparently accelerated pace at which these changes move, and the wide reach that they display across the globe. They seep into the domain of citizenship and every aspect of working life and community life, and they can be categorised into two related streams. The first is the growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity, under the influence of migration and global economic integration. The second is the changing nature of communications technologies (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001a). Both of these streams of change have had a profound influence on tertiary education institutions, and have forced these institutions to rethink their pedagogies. This is far from a straightforward process, given the longstanding traditional position of universities in western societies, as high level pursuers of ‘the truth’, and accessible only to the select few.

The changes signposted above have come in waves over several decades: from the social changes in the 1960s and 1970s, in the form of the feminist, civil, Indigenous and human rights movements, to the apparent triumph of neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s, to the communication technology 'revolution' from the 1990s onwards. Of course I am using broad strokes for the convenience of my argument here, and the compartmentalisation into decades is clearly not as neat and tidy as sketched above. Together, however, these broad waves of change have caused a need to revisit and question the position and function of universities in contemporary societies. At this point, it is important to stress that universities were never isolated from society, but rather in a dialectical relationship with society. The balance in this relationship appears to have shifted in recent decades under the influence of a combination of factors (i.e. economic, political and technological), which reinforces the need to take stock and reconsider what universities can and should do to engage with these changes.

Given the current state of the world, I believe now is an opportune time for universities not only to take stock but also to take responsibility as educational institutions with a certain amount of influence over future directions, however limited that may be. One way of doing this is by teaching current and future generations of students "to design their own social futures" (The New London Group, 1996), which is exactly what the concept of multiliteracies is about. It is about recognising and understanding the changes discussed above and redesigning pedagogies that aim to put control in the hands of students, armed with a critical ability to justify the future changes that they make. In other words, rather than simply teaching them how to use technology *per se*, it is even more important to teach them why to use that technology, and what the potential impact of their actions might be in a variety of different contexts. Of course this may be a rather uncomfortable process, as there is no way of predicting how students will "design their own social futures", and indeed they may not have any desire to transform society at all or to deal with global problems. But regardless of whether they desire to 'better the world', make as much money as possible or indeed do both at the same time, the ability to reflect critically on their own practice is a central skill in the contemporary context. And as mentioned above, this skill underpins the concept of multiliteracies, which since its introduction has created a widely ranging and important discussion about the way that we teach.

But for all its merits I believe that there is a need to question the role of educators within the concept of multiliteracies, because in my view it assumes too much power on the part of teachers and lecturers, without adequately considering what students bring to our classrooms. To address this imbalance, this paper attempts to combine the concept of the Net Generation with that of multiliteracies, both of which are concerned with new directions in tertiary pedagogies, but from different angles. This involves questioning a number of assumptions which underlie these two influential concepts. One of these concepts (the Net Generation) is an attempt to pin down a series of characteristics of a new generation of students who arrive at universities with a different skills and knowledge set from previous generations, which in turn has major implications for the way that they learn, and hence should be taught. But I will begin by discussing the other concept (multiliteracies), which is an attempt to design a pedagogy that equips students for the changing demands of the contemporary world

by arguing for multiple and multimodal approaches. Although I believe that the concept of multiliteracies is potentially transportable across all fields of higher education, I recognise that it would have different implications for different disciplines, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper. The arguments in this paper are therefore limited to the social sciences and are framed in that context.

Multiliteracies: A New Pedagogy for Changing Contexts

The concept of multiliteracies was introduced by the New London Group (1996) as a new approach to literacy pedagogy, and has since become highly influential in debates about education in general, and higher education in particular. This is hardly surprising given its timing and scope. The multiliteracies project provided a comprehensive framework which was designed to address the profound changes that were happening in the world, as discussed above. By 1996 there was a strong feeling, in the face of these changes, that the traditional approach to literacy was fast becoming outdated and incapable of ensuring that “all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60). Literacy pedagogy had hitherto been carefully restricted to “formalised, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language” (The New London Group, 1996, p. 60). The concept of multiliteracies allowed for a much broader view of literacy, and was designed to engage with new ways in which meaning is made: increasingly multimodal. Kalantzis and Cope (both original members of the New London Group) argue that

...meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal - in which written-linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning...To find our way around this emerging world of meaning requires a new, multimodal literacy. (2001a, p. 11)

Although the concept of multiliteracies did include an application element, it was primarily a theoretical ‘manifesto’, and thus mainly designed as a framework to start ‘designing social futures’. Since its inception, it has generated enormous interest and discussion, and almost 10 years on it is still a very useful starting point for thinking through the challenges facing higher education, which have only accelerated and hence become more urgent. Furthermore, promising results are beginning to emerge from attempts to apply multiliteracies to varying degrees (e.g., Michaels & Sohmer, 2001; The Wits University Multiliteracies Group, 2001).

Multiliteracies is divided into two parts: the ‘what’ of multiliteracies; and the ‘how’ of multiliteracies. The ‘what’ of multiliteracies is then divided further into three different but interrelated aspects: The Designed; Designing; and The Redesigned (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 25). All three of these aspects are based on the recognition that meaning is never static or final, but rather fluid and forever subject to change. Hence The Designed refers to the importance of context in relation to meaning, or “how texts are historically and socially located and produced, how they are ‘designed’ artefacts” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 25). In short, meaning is never ‘natural’, although it may appear to be, but instead is always shaped by social and cultural forces that work to naturalise certain meanings over alternative meanings, which are thereby marginalised, at least in the wider public sphere. In this way, it is significantly influenced by social power, and to recognise and locate this power is empowering in itself, because it denaturalises meaning on the one hand and creates an opportunity to

reinscribe a different meaning on the other. This process of reinscribing refers to Designing, “the process of shaping emergent meaning which involves representation and recontextualisation”. The outcome of Designing, then, is The Redesigned, “something through which the meaning-maker has remade themselves [*sic*]” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 25). It is in this ability and/or confidence to recreate meaning that the key element of multiliteracies (‘to design their own social futures’) is located, and this is therefore envisaged to be a key outcome of this process. But, although there is an implication here that the new meanings thus created will be socially progressive, there is of course no way of predicting this, which is important to keep in mind when moving towards more student-centred approaches.

So where is meaning located specifically, or in other words what is the scope of the Designs of meaning? The New London Group has identified six major areas in this respect, which are based on a greatly widened understanding of ‘texts’ (beyond the traditional written text), an understanding that has been common in cultural studies for a while (Hartley, 2002): Linguistic Design; Visual Design; Audio Design; Gestural Design; Spatial Design; and Multimodal Design (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 26). The last one is particularly important here, because it draws attention to the increasingly vital ability to work across different media and platforms, or what Flew calls “multi-modal competence: the growing expectation that the users of convergent media will have competence and literacy across a range of media forms” (2002, p. 180). This leads to the next step in the multiliteracies concept: the ‘how’ of literacy pedagogy, or in other words how do we teach this kind of competency? And what if there is a large gap between students who come to our classrooms already equipped with this competence (read the Net Generation) and students without these skills?

The New London Group identifies four different elements that they argue should be included in multiliteracy pedagogy: Situated Practice; Overt Instruction; Critical Framing; and Transformed Practice (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, pp. 28-29). Situated Practice is about the grounding of learning in meaningful experiences, which include personal experiences from students’ lifeworlds, but also simulated experiences of likely workplaces and public spaces. This is one of the few areas of the multiliteracies concept which implies an explicitly student-centred approach, but it is not elaborated on in much detail, and I will return to this shortly. The second element, Overt Instruction, is about the application of the Designed/Designing/Redesigned triangle. This requires the teaching of available patterns of meaning and the resources that we can find and use to make, and remake, meaning. Critical Framing is an extension of Overt Instruction, and here we enter the domain of interpretation and of drawing attention to the importance of social and cultural context. It requires students to “stand back from what they are studying and [view] it critically in relation to its context” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 28). In other words, they will be asking questions about what their design is for, what it does and how it does it. This is not necessarily new (it is basically teaching critical thinking), but it is a vital component that in my view remains underdeveloped within the multiliteracies concept.

Finally, Transformed Practice is about the transfer of meaning, and ‘forces’ students to apply their Designs in a different context, thereby redesigning it and changing its meanings. This element in particular is an essential part of multimodal literacy, and I say literacy (rather than competence) because in my understanding literacy must

include a critical component, which the combination with Critical Framing is meant to ensure. These four elements should not be seen as a mandatory sequence that one has to work through one by one; rather, they can be applied in a variety of combinations. However, “they are the four essential elements in a full and effective literacy pedagogy” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001b, p. 29). This completes a broad outline of the multiliteracies concept and, as mentioned above, it should be seen as a theoretical intervention and a wake up call, rather than a full-scale blueprint of how to teach effectively in contemporary tertiary education. It was always envisaged to be a starting point for discussion and debate, and as such it has been, and continues to be, very useful. Thus, since its inception the concept has attracted a variety of criticisms which I will address next.

Critiquing Multiliteracies and Sharpening Its Focus

There are a number of ‘flaws’ that can be identified in the multiliteracies concept. One of these is a direct result of the enthusiastic uptake of the term in academic writing. The danger here is that the term (and particularly its literacy component) have the potential to become an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996), which is flexible to the point that it gets applied to just about anything. In relation to this, Kress draws attention to the seemingly infinite extensions of its metaphorical uses in popular, everyday contexts: “visual literacy, gestural literacy, musical literacy, media literacy, computer-, cultural-, emotional-, sexual-, internet-, and so on” (2003, p. 23). He then raises serious questions about this widened use of the term. Focusing specifically on the meaning of literacy itself, he questions whether it is desirable that this meaning should be widened, as the term ‘multiliteracies’ inherently does. This critique has various dimensions, which are worth exploring here, for they are useful in developing a more focused definition of literacies.

Firstly, Kress (2003) reminds us that the term ‘literacy’ has a long history, and was specifically developed with reference to language. This also means that it has strong historical, social and cultural connotations, from which it is not easy to escape. But, given this connection to language (as writing and as speech), it is important to realise that these modes of writing and speech are governed by very different logics from the image, for example. In Kress’ words, “*the world told* is a different world to *the world shown*” (2003, p. 1; *emphasis in original*). The organisation of writing (mirroring speech) is governed by the logic of time, and by the logic of sequence of its elements in time, in temporally governed arrangements. By contrast, the organisation of the image is governed by the logic of space, and by the logic of simultaneity of its visual/depicted elements in spatially organised arrangements (Kress, 2003, pp. 1-2). The question thus becomes: can we use the same term for the skills associated with the image and the written word/speech without obscuring its meaning? Or should we create another term for the same reason that we distinguish numeracy from literacy (in its traditional sense)? Within his critique, Kress does not deny the urgency of the ‘multi’ part of multiliteracies, nor does he underestimate the importance of multimodality, as discussed above. He does argue, however, that we should make a threefold distinction in our naming practices, which are worth outlining in full (2003, p. 23):

1. words that name the resources for representing and their potential – speech, writing, image; gesture;

2. words that name the use of the resources in the production of the message – literacy, oracy, signing, numeracy, (aspects of) ‘computer literacy’ and of ‘media literacy’, ‘internet literacy’; and
3. words that name the involvement of the resources for the dissemination of meanings as message – internet publishing, as one instance.

Although I don’t necessarily agree that we cannot use the term ‘literacy’ in its widened sense, I do believe that Kress’ distinctions are of vital importance if we want to apply multiliteracies in tertiary education, and specifically in the social sciences. If we continuously reflect on our practice, these distinctions would allow us to be aware of what type of literacy we are teaching at any one time, and moreover incorporate that awareness when we design our curricula. To take that one step further, it would also allow us to identify what we don’t need to teach, which is particularly relevant when it comes to the Net Generation, as will become apparent.

On a theoretical level, the widening of the meaning of literacy to multiliteracies is a “theoretical change from linguistics to semiotics” (Kress, 2003, p. 36), which is never spelled out as such by the New London Group but is frequently implied. This move is important and deliberate, because it recognises the increasing primacy of an ever expanding semiosphere (Hartley & McKee, 2000) in our professional and private lives, and the role of educators in shaping that semiosphere. In addition, while this semiosphere is expanding, aided by communication technology, it is at the same time increasingly fragmented, which again draws attention to the importance of multimodal literacy. Lotman has coined ‘semiosphere’ as the “semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages”, which is both the “result and the condition for the development of culture” (1990, pp. 123 and 125). He uses the term in its singular form, but it can usefully be pluralised into semiospheres, given the fragmentation mentioned above. It can then be argued that to be a confident and able inhabitant and participant of these semiospheres, and to have the ability to move across, and engage with, a wide variety of semiospheres (and by extension cultures), require multiliteracies that move far beyond written and spoken language alone. To teach these types of literacies requires a clarity of focus, which Kress has usefully drawn attention to.

Another critique of multiliteracies is also concerned with specificity, but on a different level. Based on her work in the family literacy movement in the United States of America, Elsa Auerbach rightly questions whether it is possible “for one approach to integrate pedagogies which have such different purposes, practices, and views of the social order” (2001, p. 106). And, if it is possible, then the ideological position should be explicitly stated, and this is lacking, at least in the original multiliteracies ‘manifesto’. According to Auerbach, there is a fundamental tension between pedagogies of access and of transformation, because pedagogies of access are essentially assimilationist and may therefore be incompatible with a social change perspective. Simply to state that the twin goals of access and critical engagement need not be incompatible (The New London Group, 1996) is not enough and could potentially lead to what Auerbach calls “theoretical co-option” (2001, p. 106). She argues that “it’s not possible to stand within the dominant approach and at the same time promote a social change perspective” (Auerbach, 2001, p. 106). Of course the Critical Framing part of multiliteracies is designed to get around this, but because its

connection to and interaction with Overt Instruction, for example, are not specifically addressed, there is a sense that the tension between access and transformation is glossed over in the overall multiliteracies framework. And as Auerbach (2001) stresses:

By no means should the framework be allowed to gloss over central issues of power and ideology in existing schooling, ignoring the ways that the social construction of literacy education has historically served as a tool for reproducing the existing social order. It is unproductive to look at pedagogical processes separate from ideological purpose or to present existing pedagogies and transformative pedagogies as continuous or complementary. (p. 107)

Although this is a strong and valid critique, she does not write multiliteracies off altogether, but instead sees it as a starting point with many potentially useful applications, but only under full awareness of the inherent ideological tensions.

This comes close to my own critique of multiliteracies, which is also based on a sense of discomfort with its rather cloudy ideological position, but is more specifically focused on the source of educational content. In other words, who sets the agenda and why? The arguments in the multiliteracies 'manifesto' appear to come almost entirely from an educator perspective and, although a student-centred approach is hinted at through the Situated Practice component, there is a lack of specificity in terms of how this could be applied, and for what reasons. This is directly linked to the ideological tension outlined above, and it needs to be addressed, because it is central to an effective engagement with a changing tertiary context, and in particular the changes brought on by technology. A teacher-directed approach tends to see students as 'blank slates' to be filled in with relevant content, and potentially prevents us from recognising changing skills and knowledge sets that students bring to our classrooms. By contrast, a more student-centred approach would recognise these changing skills and knowledge sets and engage with them explicitly.

In my view, then, there is too much emphasis in multiliteracies on what and how we need to teach students, and not enough on what different sets of skills students themselves bring to our classrooms. Despite the Situated Practice component, there is an implication that multiliteracies is something that needs to be taught, which in turn assumes that students do not already possess 'multimodal' abilities when they arrive in our classrooms. However, one of the characteristics to come out of the research on the Net Generation identifies exactly that: a highly developed ability to negotiate among different modes of communication and a fluency in image-rich environments.

Enter the Net Generation: Implications for Multiliteracies

In *Educating the Net Generation* (2005), James and Diana Oblinger have created an extensive list of characteristics of what they call the Net Generation. Not all of these characteristics are relevant for my purposes here, but many are, so the following is a selected list of characteristics based on their research (2005):

- *Ability to read visual images* - intuitive visual communicators
- *Visual-spatial skills* - perhaps linked to game playing experience
- *Inductive discovery* - learn better through discovery than by being told
- *Attentional deployment* - ability to shift attention rapidly from one task to another

- *Fast response time* - ability to respond quickly and expect rapid responses in return
- *Digitally literate* - ability to intuitively use a variety of IT devices and navigate the Net
- *Connected* - through networked media
- *Experiential* - prefer to learn by doing rather than by being told what to do. (pp. 2.5-2.7)

Taken together, these characteristics paint a particular picture of the types of skills that contemporary students may bring to our classrooms. In my view, combining this list of characteristics with the concept of multiliteracies has the potential to make both concepts stronger and address their weaknesses. For example, these characteristics allow us to identify what types of skills we may not need to teach, because students may already have them when they arrive, particularly when it comes to the use of technology. If we take this seriously, it would mean that we may not need to spend much time teaching what we might call the functionality of technology (or how to use it in a practical sense) (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Selber, 2004). That would then leave more time to concentrate on critical reflection (and what we might call ‘critical projection’) in terms of how students use technology and what they use it for. This critical reflection is one of the major strengths of the multiliteracies concept, while it is underdeveloped in the writing about the Net Generation. For example, ‘the ability to read visual images’ is not the same thing as the ability to read visual images critically. So, while the Net Generation may be very well-versed in the ‘functional grammar’ of visual and moving images (i.e., editing techniques, camera angles, computer generated imagery), the ability critically to engage with and reflect on those images requires an altogether different set of skills.

Selber (2004, p. 25) makes an important triangular distinction in this respect among what he calls functional literacy, critical literacy and rhetorical literacy. Firstly, functional literacy positions students as users of technology. Secondly, critical literacy positions them as questioners of technology. Thirdly, rhetorical literacy positions them as producers of technology, backed up with the informed critique acquired during the second phase. The latter is what I referred to earlier as critical projection. Lankshear and Knobel (2003, p. 11) make a similar distinction which they call the operational dimension of new literacy, the critical dimension and the cultural dimension. The last dimension refers to “knowing how to make and grasp meanings appropriately within the practice - in short, understanding texts in relation to contexts” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 11). Mapping these distinctions onto both multiliteracies and the Net Generation provides a focus to both, and allows us to be more specific about what we need to teach students in a contemporary context, particularly if we want them to be able “to design their own social futures” (The New London Group, 1996). The writing on the Net Generation in particular has a somewhat celebratory tone to it and a simultaneous sense of inevitability that in short could be called technologically determinist. This is not necessarily warranted and could indeed be ideologically suspect. For example, the research is peppered with assertions like “they are able to weave together images, text, and sound in a natural way” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 2.5), which tells us very little about how they use this ability in a practical sense and what they use it for. Again, if the objective is “to design their own social futures” (The New London Group, 1996), then students

need to be able to move beyond the level of use value to the level of design. Similarly, when they write that “two-thirds of students indicated they know how to find valid information from the Web” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005, p. 2.5), there is no explanation of what criteria are used to determine what is “valid”. This is not to say that that it is up to ‘us’ to decide what is “valid”, for this would merely replace the content in my earlier critique of teacher-centred approaches with a particular ideological value system, which would be just as undesirable. But I do believe that we are in a strong position to teach the ability to justify what is valid in a particular context and the ability to reflect on that justification.

In sum, there is a large difference between the ability to use technology in whatever form it is offered ‘from above’ (driven by market forces) on the one hand and the ability and confidence of students to shape the use of these technologies or better still to shape the technologies themselves to suit their specific purposes, whatever they may be. Manuel Castells foreshadowed this in 1996 when he referred to the most valued forms of literacy as being about higher order symbol manipulation, which relates to the design of both content and of technology itself. And the greatest added value associated with communication technologies is when they are seen as processes to be developed, rather than as tools or applications to be mastered at the level of use. The concept (or construction) of the Net Generation refers mostly to the latter level, while multiliteracies has the potential to develop higher order symbol manipulation, so that students would be in a better position to design their own social futures. But for that potential to be capitalised on, multiliteracies requires a shift from a teacher-directed focus to a learner-directed approach.

From Teacher-Directed to Learner-Directed Approaches

To engage effectively with the changes in communication technologies, and to develop the ability to take control of the possibilities that they offer, require a different approach to teaching, where the emphasis shifts from ‘the teacher’ to ‘the student’. It is increasingly becoming clear that a teacher-directed approach is inadequate to prepare students for a changing world, and it is even more inadequate within the multiliteracies context where the stated goal is to equip students with the tools “to design their own social futures” (The New London Group, 1996). The shift required to achieve this goal is quite a major shift which involves a radical overhaul of attitudes and practices. Most importantly, it requires teaching staff to relinquish a certain level of control over many aspects of learning programs (Kehrwald, 2005). For example, it requires the recognition that the Net Generation is made up of ‘insiders’ in IT environments, while much of the teaching staff can more appropriately be classed as ‘newcomers’. This means that they have different mindsets, where the latter affirms the world as the same as before, only more technologised, while the former affirms the world as radically different, precisely because of the operation of new technologies (Lankshear & Bigum, 1999, p. 458).

If we assume for convenience sake that ‘we’ (as teaching staff) fit into the latter category, then it is not hard to see that this attitude/mindset easily could lead to a ‘bolted on’ approach where we teach what we have always taught, and we simply add ‘technology’ to the mix. One common symptom of this mindset is to move existing offline materials online wholesale, so that we end up with “massive archives of online training materials” without adequate contextualisation (Selber, 2004, p. 5). An

extension of this same mindset can be seen in the massive investment of academic institutions in technology infrastructure, while paying scant attention to what Selber calls the humanistic perspective. He cites Neil Postman, who argues that “a worthwhile education focuses on the consequences and contexts of technology rather than merely on the technology itself” (cited in Selber, 2004, p. 1). Again, to achieve such “a worthwhile education”, we need to reconsider our current teacher-directed approaches very carefully and to be prepared to change our mindsets. This includes recognising that the skills that we teach do not necessarily translate to a desire to transform society.

There are two key elements of a teacher-directed approach, and both are problematic in a contemporary context. The first one operates on the presumption that the teacher is the ultimate authority on matters of knowledge and learning. “Hence, whatever is addressed and done in the classroom must fall within the teacher’s competence parameters, since he or she is to *direct* learning” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 30; emphasis in original). Given the characteristics of the Net Generation outlined above, this is a highly questionable presumption. Secondly, “learning as ‘curricular’ means that classroom learning proceeds in accordance with a formally imposed/ officially sanctioned sequenced curriculum which is founded on texts as information sources” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 30). The emphasis here is on reading as the ultimate route to knowledge, and literacy is treated as an operational tool. In other words, reading is seen as a matter of competence which involves techniques of encoding and decoding. This attitude is very pervasive and, even when literacy gets expanded to multiliteracies, there is still often a disproportionate emphasis on competence. Sankey and Nooriafshar provide a clear example of this when they argue that “being literate in the future implies having the ability to decode information from all types of media” (2005, p. 155). Although this may at best include a critical component, even if it is not spelled out, it certainly does not include Selber’s rhetorical component or the design element of multiliteracies. In my view then, we need to add what I would call ‘recoding’ to the twin set of encoding/decoding, which would allow students to steer design elements into their self-defined directions for their own justified purposes.

I am aware that this sounds good in theory but on a practical level it raises a myriad of questions: What do we teach/not teach and why? What are the implications of different knowledges (and literacies) that students bring to the classroom? Do we need to ‘know’ more than they do? Do we need a ‘just-in-time’ approach to teaching? Or do we need to know how to harness and channel the skills that they come equipped with? And importantly do the institutional contexts in which we teach allow for the necessary flexibility to implement some of these different approaches? The last question is fundamental to address, because to apply these theoretical frameworks successfully hinges on profound changes in institutional mindsets in order to create the flexible context that would be required. And ‘flexibility’ here refers to both operational matters in institutional settings and mindsets of educators. Teacher-directed approaches make it easier to deal with large groups of students and are therefore naturally favoured by universities with ever tighter budgets.

In addition, none of these theories addresses what is increasingly a reality in universities: a very diverse student population, both culturally and in terms of skills and knowledge, and even in terms of learning styles (Sankey & Nooriafshar, 2005).

This goes particularly for the Net Generation, where a problematic link is made between age and skills/knowledge. And, while the concept of multiliteracies acknowledges student diversity, it is less clear on how to deal with this in an applied context. But as a starting point these concepts suggest the need for a different role for lecturers or educators: a kind of ‘broker’ role in which one nurtures and guides existing strengths, rather than seeing students as ‘empty vats’ to be filled. Kehrwald refers to this when he notes (*albeit* ambitiously) that “roles have changed from that of provider and controller of information to mentor and facilitator in the learning process” (2005, p. 143). This would then lead to students “owning their own learning agenda” (Albion, 2005, p. 122). An approach such as this would genuinely recognise a changing and increasingly fragmented world, not only where student diversity requires a fragmented approach to teaching but also where students need to be prepared for an increasingly fragmented world. This requires the ability to move effortlessly among a variety of semiospheres but more importantly the ability to shape these semiospheres into new directions.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) identify a number of examples of practices which in their view require “new literacies”, and which are also transformative because they challenge existing practices and often operate outside the control of stakeholders in those practices. Their view, reinforced by their examples, assumes that challenging existing practices is necessarily positive and desirable, which is problematic. Their examples include “meme-ing”, “blogging” and “culture jamming”, among others, but these could just as easily be replaced with the corporate success of Microsoft, to name one example. Each of these started small and entailed a ‘thinking outside the square’ attitude. But they also show how quickly an apparent cultural niche can move to create a strong impact in a contemporary global context, before being co-opted into the *status quo*. It is through examples like these that we can glimpse the transformative potential of a ‘multiliterate’ generation of students, and I believe that it is our responsibility as educators to foster this potential.

Conclusion

Sankey and Nooriafshar have recently argued that “if maximum benefit is to be extracted from information presented by modern communication technologies, both in terms of engagement and learning, a futures oriented approach must be adopted” (2005, p. 155). They extend that by noting that “such an approach will prepare students to ‘read’ the world and communicate through multiple modes of communication and prepare them to function in our increasingly technological society” (2005, pp. 155-156). In other words, they are talking about what kind of knowledge young people need to participate effectively in contemporary societies. This paper has been concerned with expanding these ideas to move beyond effectiveness into transformation. This is an important goal of multiliteracies, but how to achieve it is not always specifically addressed. Combining the implied teacher-directed approach of multiliteracies with the research on the Net Generation has facilitated a shift in emphasis to a more student-centred focus. Although this makes sense at a theoretical level, it can be used only as a foundation from where to begin working on practical applications. As Kellner (2000) wrote: “It is a time for new pedagogical experiments to see what works and what doesn’t work in the new millennium. It is a time to reflect on our goals and to discern what we want to achieve with education and how we can achieve it” (p. 259). This is not an easy process, as it

requires in many ways a profound overhaul of existing attitudes and age old practices. It also requires a high level of flexibility which could be seen as something of a paradox in academic institutions. And, given the increasing diversity of students, it requires the ability to guide and nurture some students in skills that they already have, while using more traditional instruction methods with others, depending on their specific literacy needs: functional; critical; or rhetorical. This would mean a genuine engagement with complexity and fragmentation which, given the current state of the world, is urgent. In my view, universities are in a unique position to provide a new generation of students with the sets of skills that would allow them to “design their own social futures” (The New London Group, 1996), whatever they may be.

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