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Mapping Multiliteracies in Canadian Adult Education

Summary

Video and PowerPoint technologies are often used in colleges, university classrooms, and workplace training modules, in the effort to deliver cutting-edge pedagogical approaches, but all too often these technologies in fact reinforce traditional, didactic (and often dull) teaching approaches. Cope, Kalantzis, and Lankshear (2005) say it is not enough to “simply replicate the old learning electronically” (p. 15). This study seeks to investigate a multiliteracies theoretical framework, a teaching and learning theory that prioritizes digital literacies, linguistic and cultural pluralism, and multimodality (learning through integration of various modes such as visual, oral, aural, spatial, tactile, and gestural modalities to communicate meaning) toward engaged, immersive and multifaceted learning and learners. Literacy can no longer be defined narrowly as just reading and writing. Because it is concerned with multiple ways of learning and societal power relations, a multiliteracies framework accommodates diverse groups of learners, including minority language groups. As a result, it has a social justice focus. A core concern is cultural power relations, such as how minority language groups function in mainstream classrooms. Learning through multiliteracies and multimodality – for instance, in a biology class could include building a digestive system using model parts – because this does not rely solely on linguistic text, it helps to level the playing field, providing more opportunities to succeed. As a society, we need to employ a multiliteracies theoretical framework which provides a critical lens for learning by consciously and explicitly engaging with cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality as integral to innovative teaching and learning experiences.

Multiliteracies provides a theoretical framework for Canadian education in the 21st century that can produce better learning results for adults. The New London Group coined the term “multiliteracies” (1996, 2000), which refers to the combination of two or more modalities such as gestural, linguistic, oral, visual, and spatial modes to construct and communicate meaning. For example, in a board game, throwing the dice is tactile and gestural, reading the cards is visual and linguistic, and giving your answers is oral – all of which when put together forms a multimodal experience. Multiliteracies also often involve innovative usage of new technologies, and more importantly, a way of thinking about how new technologies can be adapted to enhance the educational needs of learners. The New London Group, cognizant of the social and political implications of language, articulated that the other main tenet of a multiliteracies theoretical framework is to teach with ethnic and linguistic diversity in mind. For good teaching to happen, a multiliteracies theoretical framework would

argue it needs be experiential, inquiry-driven by learners' questions, and serve an authentic purpose, for instance, by having learners affect change in their broader communities rather than doing the work simply for grades or a paycheque. Yet despite the push for innovation in our society, it has been a hard, slow, and sometimes non-existent shift from policy to practice.

Most research studies using a multiliteracies theoretical framework focus on elementary schooling. Yet, it is precisely because content and concepts become more complex as learners get older that a multiliteracies pedagogy can best address older learners' needs. Thus, the overarching goal of this research has been to conduct interviews with adult educators about their teaching practices and teaching philosophies, and interviews with their adult students about their learning experiences in these learning spaces to gain deeper insight into how a multiliteracies pedagogy informs teaching.

The researcher is particularly interested in educators engaged in innovative 21st century teaching and learning that take cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality in a student-centred, inquiry-based, learning environment core pedagogical mandates.

In total, 2 adult educators and 4 adult learners were interviewed for this study. As one option for the individual interviews, the researcher showed the educators and/or their adult students short clips of media content from a previous project (if they had participated in that event), which allowed these adults to then reflect on and be further prompted to discuss their own teaching/learning experiences. Another option was that the participants shared their teaching/learning materials. Transcripts went through a feedback loop in which participants could edit their own transcripts.

There are four foundational questions to this study:

1. How can adult educators use a multiliteracies approach to explore innovative and student-centered teaching and learning experiences in their particular learning contexts which incorporate new and emerging technologies? How do adult learners experience this kind of pedagogy?
2. How does a multiliteracies pedagogy inform opportunities for critical learning about complex issues of identity, inclusion, equity, and diversity across the lifespan and within multiple disciplinary and educational contexts?
3. What do adult educators need as resources and supports to effectively engage in a multiliteracies pedagogy in Canadian community learning spaces?
4. Why and how does a multiliteracies theoretical framework of Available Design, Design, and Redesign as discussed by the New London Group shape lesson planning?

Key Words: Multiliteracies theory; literacy; multimodality; adult education