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Susan M. Holloway
University of Windsor

Patricia A. Gouthro
Mount Saint Vincent University

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Using a multiliteracies approach to foster critical and creative pedagogies for adult learners

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Using a multiliteracies approach to foster critical and creative pedagogies for adult learners

Looking ahead to the needs of adult learners in a world that has become increasingly complex and diverse, we need to foster innovative pedagogies and develop a broad array of literacies for adult learners. ‘Multiliteracies,’ a term coined by the New London Group (1996), expands traditional understandings of literacy to move beyond a narrow focus on reading and writing, taking into account the necessary abilities to navigate communication increasingly mediated through technologies within a more global world. Although multiliteracies has been taken up primarily by educators working in the school system, in this paper we argue that multiliteracies could also enhance a more critical approach to lifelong learning for adults.

Our research aims to enhance dialogue and learning opportunities between those who work in adult education and teacher education, which as Butterwick (2014) argues, are important conversations for educators to have. Generally, when adult education is considered in a teacher education context, it is often with the idea that professional development for teachers could be enhanced if it incorporated some aspects of adult education by recognizing that teachers are actually adult learners (Gregson & Stucko 2007). Cranton (2016) points out that “professional development” is the term used by teachers in school systems, while “faculty development” is the term used by college and university faculty for ongoing professional learning and development. She notes that “although these terms are often viewed as separate disciplines with literatures that do not intersect” (p. 44) there are in fact many areas of overlap and shared concerns by educators about enhancing their capabilities to work well with their students and to develop new pedagogical strategies. In our research we are similarly interested in how teachers in school systems, teacher educators in faculties of education, adult educators in community and

workplace contexts, as well as faculty who teach in adult education programs, might be able to learn from one another in a reciprocal manner by exchanging ideas of how multiliteracies may inform creative, innovative, and critical approaches to teaching and learning.

Drawing upon two research studies to explore how a multiliteracies framework may inform more critical and creative pedagogical approaches in a variety of adult education contexts, this paper begins with a brief discussion of multiliteracies in relation to the adult education literature, and then overviews the methodology used in the two research studies. Data from the interviews is combined with an analysis of related literature to explore the benefits offered by a multiliteracies approach by considering four main areas: lifelong learning and multimodalities; opportunities for engagement for English as Additional Language (EAL) learners; new digital technologies and multiliteracies; and multiliteracies' emphasis on social justice. The paper concludes with a consideration of the potential for multiliteracies to inform a range of adult learning contexts.

Multiliteracies and adult education

Although multiliteracies has been widely taken up by educators interested in literacy in the field of teacher education, it has not yet made much impact on the field of adult education. In this paper we argue that a multiliteracies theoretical framework provides a critical lens for lifelong learning by consciously and explicitly engaging with cultural diversity, technology, and multimodality. As Mirra, Morrell & Filipiak (2018) argue, a multiliteracies approach challenges “educators to rethink the foundational definition, nature, and purpose of literacy, media, and education itself” (p. 13). The literacies that are required for individuals to participate actively in the workforce and in the wider community today are more complex than in the past. Penuel and O'Connor (2018) reflect on the ongoing relevance and changing contexts for multiliteracies as a

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2
3 theoretical framework to explain strategies to enhance learning. They note that when the New
4 London Group of academics first introduced the concept of multiliteracies in the mid-1990s, they
5
6 “described a world of increasing local diversity and global connectedness, accelerated by
7
8 emerging digital technologies, economic globalization, and a declining welfare state” (p. 64).
9
10 This context of rapid change has not only continued into current times, but accelerated, altering
11
12 many facets of life in ways that could not have been predicted a few decades ago. Today, in
13
14 addition to basic reading, writing and mathematical skills, learners need to understand digital
15
16 technologies and develop critical learning capacities to function in a rapidly changing society.
17
18 This is true not only for children and young adults, but for learners at all stages in life, whether
19
20 they are seniors attaining the skills to do online banking, business leaders working with young,
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22 technologically savvy staff members from diverse backgrounds, or newcomers developing new
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24 language, employment, and citizenship capabilities when they immigrate to a different country.
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31 There are some basic tenets of a multiliteracies approach that are foundational, although
32
33 the theory has evolved over time. These tenets are: (1) Cultural diversity should be a deeper
34
35 exploration of what a plurality of languages and cultures across the world can bring to a better
36
37 understanding in a variety of academic disciplines; (2) Technology can enhance learning, but it
38
39 needs to be used in a way that it is helping augment the learning experience. Just because it is
40
41 new technology does not necessarily mean it will improve teaching and learning. (3)
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44 Multimodality involves bringing together two or more modes such as audio, visual, gestural,
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46 spatial, or linguistic to communicate. When learners use drama, for example, they draw upon
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48 several modes to express their ideas: speaking to the audience (audio); making use of the whole
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50 stage (spatial), communicating through facial expressions, body movement, and props (gestural);
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52 set design, costumes (visual). The linguistic mode of communication (reading and writing),
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3 while certainly important, has been privileged for a long time in our society. A multiliteracies
4 theoretical framework contends that the linguistic mode *alongside and integrated* with other
5 modes is integral to innovative teaching and learning experiences.
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10 A multiliteracies perspective views literacy as always socially situated and resonates with
11 the work of adult literacy educators who believe in “starting from the local, everyday experience
12 of literacy in particular communities of practice” (Hamilton & Barton, 2000, p. 379). A
13 multiliteracies framework fits with a critical theoretical approach to lifelong learning which
14 validates that the way that people learn has to be tailored to their own prior knowledge and
15 previous life experiences (Brookfield, 2012). Learning starts with educators finding out what
16 their adult learners already know. Educators can create opportunities for bridging onto those
17 experiences whilst challenging learners to critically reflect on their existing assumptions and
18 frameworks of knowledge (Dirkx, 1998; Merriam & Bierema, 2014).
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31 In focusing on multiliteracies, we acknowledge the importance of the closely aligned
32 theories of New Literacy Studies (Barton, 2007; Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2006; Street,
33 1984), which share the belief that literacy is a product of sociocultural and power relations.
34 Rowsell and Walsh (2011) elaborate on the meaning of ‘new’ in new literacies:
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40 The word ‘literacies’ in new literacies signaled a shift in thinking about the ways that
41 people make meaning with language. Assigning plurality to literacy to privilege
42 ‘literacies’ opened up what had traditionally been seen as a standardized model of
43 literacy education, to one that acknowledges difference based on situations, subjectivities,
44 and multiple text genres. (p. 55)
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51 Similar to multiliteracies, NLS contends that there is a need to explore social positioning and
52 identities in relation to digital literacies. Multiliteracies is distinct from NLS, however, with its
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3 emphasis on the multimodal aspect of learning and literacy, taking into account how literacies
4 may be developed through a range of sensory experiences. Multiliteracies may resonate with the
5
6 more practical focus that many adult educators appreciate, in that there is a focus on the
7
8 development of educational design and pedagogies, which NLS are not so concerned with.
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12 In recent years, within the field of adult education there has been recognition given to
13
14 value of learning in connection to the arts (Author B; Clover, 2010). This focus on arts-based
15
16 learning has been taken up in a range of different adult and higher education contexts but has not
17
18 been discussed extensively in the field of adult literacy. The use of multimodalities within a
19
20 multiliteracies approach incorporates an appreciation for how the arts can enhance learning
21
22 through music, painting, dance, and other forms of artistic expression. Drawing upon a
23
24 multiliteracies framework may provide insights into how learning may be fostered through the
25
26 use of multimodalities that incorporate arts-based approaches to inform adult literacy education.
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31 Multiliteracies consciously, consistently, and explicitly draws upon cultural diversity as
32
33 an asset in learning and gives attention to the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity
34
35 amongst learners, including offering innovative approaches to language acquisition and support
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37 for English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners (Ntelioglou, Fannin, Montanera, &
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39 Cummins, 2014; Gee, 2004). As Cope and Kalantzis (2009) argue, “the logic of multiliteracies is
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41 one that recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy
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43 based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and
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45 diversity” (p. 175). Thus far, the limited research that has been done on adult learners using a
46
47 multiliteracies framework has tended to focus on EAL learning experiences (McPhee & Pickren,
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49 2017).
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3 Like critical adult educators such as Crowther (2013) or Carasson & Sprain (2012) who
4 draw attention to power issues in education, a multiliteracies approach is attentive to social
5 justice concerns. New Literacy Studies similarly argues that “literacy that obscures the power
6 relations inscribed in its construction ultimately disempowers. It treats as technical that which is
7 in fact socially and politically constructed, and is therefore misleading” (Hamilton, Tett, &
8 Crowther, 2012, p. 4). The social nature of literacy is imperative when thinking through how
9 learning can best take place when working with adults. Dialogical opportunities for lifelong
10 learning that address how cultural, social, and political factors impact upon educational contexts,
11 are essential to fostering critical approaches to literacy. Tan & McWilliam (2009) argue that
12 developing innovative pedagogical approaches by using a multiliteracies approach which
13 validates visual and digital learning is needed to help EAL learners reach parity in academic
14 achievement – a goal which is also linked to educators who have a social justice commitment
15 towards education.

16
17 Within multiliteracies, attention is paid to the social contexts in which people learn. By
18 acknowledging that there is value in what learners bring to the formal education context from
19 their backgrounds in community-based education and informal learning from the workplace and
20 the homeplace, educators can also tap into the strengths of adult learners. The perception that the
21 only valuable adult learning is legitimated in a formal classroom context with the end result of an
22 academic degree is problematic. For instance, Tett and Crowther (1998) argue

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24 Rather than viewing the home as a site of educationally constructed failure, it could
25 instead be seen as a source of diverse influences upon the educational process. From this
26 perspective the focus would be on the recognition of the diversity of thought, language,
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3 and world-view that reflect the actual lives and experiences of children, families and
4
5 community members rather than a reproduction of a constructed ideal (p. 452).
6

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8 Tapping into the diverse experiences of learners through less tangible resources such as “world-
9
10 views” harnesses deeper learning opportunities to explore the intricacies of what are sometimes
11
12 important viewpoints that have been marginalized or decontextualized or learned prejudices that
13
14 can be unearthed and challenged. Similarly, Author B (2009) has argued that particularly for
15
16 women learners, the homeplace is an important site of living and learning. Many adult educators
17
18 recognize that community literacies are practiced in multiple ways and through an array of
19
20 mediums (Crowther, Hamilton, & Tett, 2006; Kalantzis, Cope, Daly, & Trim, 2016; Mills,
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22 2015).
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26 Hamilton and Barton (2000) forge this same viewpoint that language, learning, and
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28 experience must be seen as legitimate in a variety of social settings. These learning experiences
29
30 enrich rather than detract from what non-traditional adult learners can bring to their learning
31
32 experiences as they transition into new fields. At the same time, it is also important to consider
33
34 the larger structural power relations of non-traditional learners (West, Fleming, & Finnegan,
35
36 2013) in higher education and community settings and consider innovative approaches to
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38 teaching that will address the needs of diverse learners.
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44 Methodology

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49 This paper draws upon two research studies: an initial pilot project and a larger
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51 study funded through a **Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council** (SSHRC) Insight
52
53 grant to explore the teaching practices of adult educators and secondary school teachers who
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3 have developed innovative pedagogical strategies that incorporate elements of a multiliteracies
4 approach (Cope & Kalantzis, 2001; New London Group, 1996). This research examines features
5 of effective pedagogy and the philosophical decision-making behind its creation.
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10 The initial pilot research project involved interviews with 4 non-traditional adult learners
11 who were studying to attain a Bachelor of Education as well as 2 higher education adult
12 educators. The adult learners had previous careers in their respective areas of expertise in
13 technological studies including mechanics, welding, information technologies, carpentry, and
14 cooking. All of the adult learners were embarking upon new careers in education and many of
15 their quotations reflect their interest in learning to teach adolescents or adults in areas that would
16 draw upon their skills, knowledge, and experience in trades and technologies. Their rich
17 experiences in the trades seemed a good fit with our research focus on multimodalities when
18 looking for a small target group for the pilot study.
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31 The larger SSHRC study uses comparative case studies (Stake, 2005) to focus upon adult
32 learning spaces in southern Ontario and in the Halifax area in Nova Scotia. This study also
33 includes research with secondary level teachers and learners in the southern Ontario region. A
34 couple of our quotations consider points or examples made by teachers which could be
35 transferred or seemed relevant to an adult learning context, but otherwise the data on secondary
36 education experiences is not examined here since thus far the data collection has been primarily
37 with participants in adult education.
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47 Participants in the SSHRC study have various options for participation that include face-
48 to-face hour-long interviews; document analysis of curricular materials; and filming/observation
49 of instruction. In this paper, only the data from the interviews is used, as the other data is still in
50 the early stages of collection and analysis. At this stage in the project we have interviewed 27
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3 participants, which include 14 adult educators, 5 adult learners, 1 school administrator, 4
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5 secondary school teachers and 3 secondary school students. By the end of the study, we will have
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7 approximately 40 participants across all of these categories. Some of the participants in these
8
9 research studies work for a Board of Education that requested that it not be identified. To respect
10
11 confidentiality and maintain consistency, we did not include the names of any participants in this
12
13 paper. The adult education research sites thus far include a dance studio, a centre for language
14
15 learning, a professional music organization, a multicultural centre, a museum, and an art gallery.
16
17 We acknowledge the importance of intersectionalities of identity in terms such as social class,
18
19 race, ability, religion, and sexual orientation, which are all factors that impact on how
20
21 participants themselves learn or teach others, factors, which as critical educators such as Mojob
22
23 (2005) note, continue to persist in shaping adult teaching and learning contexts.
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29 A thematic analysis was undertaken with the data, and in this paper four main areas are
30
31 explored in greater depth: multimodalities; EAL learning; multiliteracies and new technologies;
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33 and social justice and literacies. To develop the themes, we carefully read through the transcripts
34
35 multiple times, coding responses using a combination of a grounded theory approach, which
36
37 involves an openness to observing themes that may emerge from the data (Marshall & Rossman,
38
39 2011), our understanding and careful analysis of responses to questions connected to a
40
41 multiliteracies framework for learning, and our grounding in critical theories of learning.
42
43 Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg (2011) argue, it is possible to view *bricolage* – the combining
44
45 of different vantage points – as an “emancipatory research construct” (p. 167). By
46
47 acknowledging the complexity of knowledge construction, critical theorists perceive that “all
48
49 observations of the world are shaped either consciously or unconsciously by social theory” (p.
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51 168). Our analysis is also informed by Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist approach to grounded
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3 theory that “acknowledges subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and
4 interpretation of data” (p. 14). The critical lens of our focus on learning through multiliteracies,
5 combined with an understanding of how social changes such as migration and emerging
6 technologies shape adult education contexts, influences how we view, interpret, and code the
7 data.
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9
10 To aid the explanatory aspects of our presentation of findings, each section begins with
11 brief excerpts of quotes from interview transcripts with participants from both the pilot and
12 larger SSHRC study, and then a brief analysis is provided in connection with related literature to
13 discuss the four themes we focus on in this paper.
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Multimodalities and learning

One of the SSHRC participants who works with a professional music organization explains the value of a multimodal approach to learning that incorporates artistic renditions, such as musical performances:

when you educate an audience about a piece of music, whether it is inviting that composer to the stage or a historian, you are opening the window to them in a way to what the intention or the meaning is behind the piece or even in the process of creating that artwork.

In her interview, this participant gives the example of how at one performance, they arranged to have a chef prepare hors d’oeuvres to be served at the concert. As he cooked, he talked about the spiciness of the food. In advance, the artistic committee got together “and tried to think about what kind of music, what piece, would sound spicy? With spicy, we might do a tango of some sort.” This example demonstrates how combining modalities may enhance adult learning

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3 opportunities. Looking at a photo or reading a written description of the hors d'oeuvre is not
4
5 going to be as effective as tasting the food while listening to music that interprets the meaning of
6
7 a "spicy" experience.
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10 A participant in the pilot study who is a carpenter by trade, articulated the process of
11 learning for himself:
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14 I learn the best by doing and by making mistakes. I am very good, if I'm giving a task,
15 and I do it, and I do it again, I will always critique it. I will rarely do the same thing the
16 same way. Because I'll find a better way to maybe deliver it or to create it or whatever the
17 case may be. I'm very analytical on that factor. So you know, looking at it in my career as
18 a carpenter, you know, I wouldn't saw the door the same way. The next time, I'll do it a
19 different way to see if it can be faster, more efficient.
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28 As an adult, he can appreciate more greatly the need to develop capacities in all modes. For
29 instance, he pointed to his ability to "read plans" helped to make him a better carpenter. By being
30 able to draw out a set of drawings, it allowed him to better understand the principles of design,
31 and thus made his carpentry "more efficient" and "less wasteful." Moreover, this participant
32 draws our attention to the fact that analysis is not limited only to linguistic modes.
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40 Another participant in the pilot study whom by trade is a cook, mused about his learning
41 trajectory over his lifespan:
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44 Learning was always a struggle for me as a child. So, when I learned how I can learn, and
45 be able to actually focus on what I needed to do, then I always wanted to excel after that.
46
47 I found that it's difficult in grade school. They teach you one way. And then if you didn't
48 get it, well then you just didn't get it. So then I did okay in high school and then I found
49 cooking. And I learned, 'Oh I learn by hands-on. I don't do very well by reading.'
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3 The “how” of learning turned out to be hands-on learning to a large extent for all of these adult
4 learners. Jewitt (2017) ascertains that touch “provides people with significant information and
5 experience in the world” (p. 107). This modal way of learning has been under-theorized for its
6 value in communication. In his own cooking classes, therefore, this adult learner (who is training
7 to be an educator) uses a combination of strategies for instruction, including demonstrations,
8 hands-on activities, and videos that illustrate the skills being taught. In doing so, he recognizes
9 that different learners are more receptive to some strategies and a range of multimodalities than
10 others.
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22 Each of these participants draw attention to the ways in which a multimodal approach to
23 literacy can enhance learning across the lifespan. Whilst important, reading and writing are not
24 the only literacy skills that adult learners need to attain in today’s world. Nagle & Stooke (2016)
25 note that “multimodal design elements are never found in isolation although one element may be
26 privileged in a meaning-making event, and designers make decisions based on shared
27 assumptions about what is appropriate for a given medium” (p. 159). They give the example that
28 in an academic journal article, for example, linguistic modes are privileged. Using a
29 multiliteracies approach to teach means that educators need to consider how people engage in
30 learning through different modalities. In some teaching contexts, as we see with the participants
31 in these research studies, different modalities may be prioritized.
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47 EAL and multiliteracies

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49 One of the pilot study participants teaches with another instructor who has French as a
50 first language. He discussed how they often reflect on how different words are used to articulate
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3 concepts and ideas used in their instruction, so when he was asked how he might approach
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5 working with a student who has a different first language he offered:

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8 if I know this person speaks a certain language, maybe is there a different way can I say it
9
10 in their language? Or ask them how they say it? I'd be like, "Okay, this is what this means
11
12 in French, and now it is in English. Now what's this mean in your language? How do you
13
14 say it in your language?" If it's an easy word, then I could use that instead, or let them, if
15
16 they are having their own glossary, have them write it in their language.
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19 One of the SSHRC study adult educators who teaches French as an Additional Language
20
21 pondered her realization of the importance of code-switching and translanguaging:
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24 I used to believe that a classroom should be 100% French. I do not believe that
25
26 anymore..... I need to know my learner in order to know when I can use the language and
27
28 when I can flip back. And sometimes it might be another language or an example from
29
30 Spanish or from an African language.
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33 Instead of always viewing the development of English language capacities as the responsibility
34
35 of the individual learner, a multiliteracies approach encourages educators to consider how they
36
37 can support students with different language abilities to build on their vocabulary, to develop
38
39 plurilingual translanguaging capacities, and to participate better in the classroom or community-
40
41 based context in which they are teaching, thus creating a more inclusive learning environment.
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44 One of the SSHRC study secondary school teacher participants reflected on this issue:
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46 if English is not their first language, or if language is a problem, then assessing them just
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48 by pen and paper, or even orally is not in their best interest. They're not going to be able
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50 to tell you what they know. They are not going to be able to write it down for you.
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3 Instead, instructors might use different strategies to encourage learners to begin to articulate their
4 ideas and from that explore the topic in more depth. Using a multiliteracies approach, one
5 possibility might be to ask the learners to gather artifacts that could be used to represent a
6 concept and then to explain the rationale for their choice may be one way to tease out their
7 understanding of a concept. Through translanguaging, which brings together “different
8 languages, semiotics, and modes” (Lin & He, 2017, p. 229) EAL communication can be
9 enhanced by educators explicitly acknowledging and incorporating into their teaching the
10 potentials of multimodalities to improve multilingual competencies.
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21 In an increasingly diverse world shaped by global migration, multiliteracies takes a
22 positive approach to linguistic and cultural diversity, recognizing the complexity and diversity of
23 languages. Educators who embrace a multiliteracies approach are encouraged to reflect upon
24 how to enhance their teaching to develop strategies such as these educators have shared, to
25 support learners from different language backgrounds. Martin (2011) notes that a multiliteracies
26 framework draws attention to how ‘discourse patterns reflect reality sets or worldviews adapted
27 by cultures, and literacy is embedded within them’ (p. 224). The way that language is used to
28 represent reality is shaped by various cultural insights and collective experiences, so if educators
29 acknowledge that vocabulary from different cultures represents different nuanced understandings
30 of reality that students have been taught within their own first languages, then they encourage
31 students to think critically about how extending their vocabulary in English will also affect the
32 way that they will understand the new culture in which they are participating or living within.
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49 Martin (2011) notes that there are multiple strategies that students may pursue in gaining
50 fluency in English and argues that educators should think about how to support these approaches
51 to learning. He explains that one way that students acquire ‘lexical literacy’ is to take up
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3 everyday expressions or slang phrases like *put on hold*. They may ‘fasten on an idiom and use it
4 repeatedly’ (p. 229). In this usage, not only do they embed their knowledge of the words or
5 expressions into their vocabulary, but they also receive feedback from native speakers or
6 individuals who are more fluent in English, indicating when they have correctly applied the
7 words within a particular sentence. Through this repeated practice and responses from others, not
8 only do they memorize new vocabulary, they gain lexical literacy in understanding the subtleties
9 of appropriate usage. It is critical, therefore, for educators to think about contexts in which they
10 can support their EAL students by providing opportunities to enhance their fluency in English
11 such as having opportunities for communicative engagement with native speakers in community-
12 based learning contexts and provide activities within their learning contexts to encourage
13 students’ abilities to expand their vocabulary.
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28 By recognizing and validating the use of vocabulary and language from the learners’
29 native tongues, educators also support the capacity of students to engage in “code-switching” as
30 they consciously move between English and their native language, deciding which language best
31 suits their communicative needs at the moment with attention to how certain expressions in
32 either language might be more appropriate to convey the layered, culturally woven meanings of
33 the ideas they wish to convey. Furthermore, Wheeler and Swords (2015) observe that code-
34 switching serves to “maintain the language of the student’s home community” (p. 115) and their
35 heritage culture. Herrera and Murry (2016) contend that code-switching “is not only about
36 creating communicative meaning through using multiple languages in one conversation but also
37 about the social meaning that depends on the context” (p. 319). Through code-switching, EAL
38 students become adept at interpreting the nuances of culture to navigate complex literacy
39 demands.
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Digital technologies and multiliteracies

One of the participants in the pilot study sums up the widespread usage of technology in educational contexts: “there's computers everywhere. Now you can't do anything without technology. You have tablets, new computers, phones. Everything is all about technology today. So, if you don't deal with technology, you won't be able to go far.” Regardless of your discipline or subject matter, this participant noted that there will be intersections with technology, so it's beneficial for educators to be well versed in the usage of different technological mediums.

In the SSHRC study, a participant explained that there can be benefits to incorporating technologies into teaching, if you are willing to be flexible: “Having phones that are smarter than you allows you to immediately answer questions brought up during the learning. It's important to pause the ‘planned lesson’ and go where the learning takes you!” Or, as an adult French as an Additional Language learner participant in the SSHRC study notes, she is given video links to watch to promote active listening in which “they might be talking about a French city or maybe a house and you would just take a tour through the house – the videos are very diverse. They are also helpful with learning about French culture.” Incorporating interactive technologies in teaching may foster an openness to creativity and innovation amongst both learners and educators.

Just as educators in the school system recognize the importance of supporting the development of digital literacies for children and adolescents, educators in adult, continuing and higher education are also concerned with the need to foster these kinds of learning opportunities as well. “In a world where electronically produced text carries meaning, exclusion from digital technologies can have disempowering consequences – especially for life in the home, community, and workplace” (Hamilton, Tett, & Crowther, 2012, p. 4). Adult educators can play

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3 an important role in facilitating discussions amongst adult learners to encourage them to think
4 broadly about how habits and attitudes greatly impact levels of comfort with digital literacies.
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6 Rowsell and Walsh (2011) point out that “designing on-screen has not only transformed how we
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8 make meaning, but also, transformed ways of reconstructing and renegotiating our identities” (p.
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10 56). They argue thus that technologies have to also be understood as socially situated; technical
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12 know-how is only one aspect of working with new technologies. The work that learners produce
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14 in digital spaces requires them to think in very abstract ways with the concepts they build, at
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16 times holding up a mirror to them of their own identities, making them think, “this work I have
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18 produced in cyberspace is in a small way part of who I am.” Curran, Gustafson, Simmons,
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20 Lannon, Wang, and Garmsiri (2019) argue that it would be beneficial to have “a better
21
22 understanding of the role and the use of digital and mobile technologies as a resource to support
23
24 the self-directed learning processes of adults in the 21st century” (p. 79). While their research
25
26 focuses on continuing professional education for professionals in fields such as medicine and
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28 social work, educators who work with both young adult or graduate students in higher education,
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30 and adult educators working in community-based contexts such as employment centres, also
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32 recognize the need to consider both the benefits and potential exclusionary aspects of a society
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34 that is increasingly digitalized.
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42 In an article that examines a sheltered program developed to help bridge the gaps in
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44 learning for non-native English speakers coming to study Geography at a university in Canada,
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46 McPhee and Pickren (2017) argue that supplementing learning opportunities with ICTs
47
48 (Information and Communication Technologies) provides a beneficial way to bring a
49
50 multiliteracies approach to university teaching “in a world where engagements across languages,
51
52 cultures, institutions, and disciplines are significantly informed by social media” (p. 419). They
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3 suggest that using mobile phones and apps such as digital map locators can be a way to enhance
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5 teaching strategies when working with international students who are transitioning into higher
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7 education programmes and who are still developing their language fluency in English.
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10 New digital technologies shape the ways in which educators and learners communicate with one
11
12 another, and impact on how they engage and participate in the broader society. Whilst there a
13
14 many benefits and opportunities for enhanced learning, as Suzanne Smythe (2018) in her 2-year
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16 ethnographic study of the literacy and learning experiences of adults who attended a public
17
18 computing centers cautions, for some adult learners, a lack of access to new technologies or poor
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20 technological skills strengthen the inequities that push them into marginalized positions in
21
22 society. She argues that digital government “is a new form of bureaucracy that ushers in new
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24 literacies, new pedagogies, and new implications for adult education and practice” (p. 198),
25
26 whereby educators have a role in supporting learners to become literate in using new
27
28 technologies. Without these literacies, learners on the margins may be pressed into even more
29
30 precarious positions, feeling they are voiceless, and not knowing how to advocate for themselves
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32 in a climate where they might feel everyone presumes they already have strong foundations in
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34 digital literacies.
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40 At the same time, in terms of teaching with technology, all too often, Mirra, Morrell &
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42 Filipiack (2018) note, media literacy and production are presented as “politically neutral”
43
44 activities, when that is not the case. Sexualized depictions of women, curriculum designed to
45
46 fulfil marketplace interests, and decisions around what kinds of information will be shared and
47
48 how it will be presented via various medias, are all indicators of how power, politics, and
49
50 privilege are embedded in the pictures we see, the digital maps we use for navigation, and the
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52 courses and programs that we take with online content. It is important for both educators and
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3 students to “analyze not only the text itself, but also the roles of the creator, the audience, and the
4 stakeholders with interest in this power relationship” (p. 14).
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10 Multiliteracies and social justice

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12 Using a critical lens, the social justice focus of multiliteracies opens up possibilities for
13 engaging adult learners in deeper forms of learning, in which issues such as democracy,
14 citizenship, and social participation are taken up as well as more pragmatic concerns such as
15 workplace skills. A SSHRC participant who is a secondary school teacher gave this example of
16 an instructional activity that she used with her high school class, but a similar approach could be
17 developed in teaching about citizenship and civic engagement with adult learners:
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26 we would do things like... how is an election like a pizza? And so each riding... there
27 would be cheese, pepperoni, and...peppers... that were all running. Those were the three
28 parties for the pizza. And so they would run their campaigns, the pepperoni campaign,
29 and the cheese campaign, and why having cheese across Canada would be best for
30 Canada because of all the dairy farmers, etc. We would make those outrageous links, but
31 at the same time, help them understand how propaganda works, and how we're going to
32 twist something to focus it so that it's going to be more pertinent to your audience.
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42 In this example, the participant uses a simple analogy that resonates with most learners to delve
43 into the nuances of political systems.
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46 One participant who is a faculty member involved in teacher education in the area of
47 music reflects on the curriculum provided in her Canadian province by the school board:
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51 The Ontario curriculum is an extremely Western-centric curriculum for music. There is a
52 lot of emphasis on Western classical composers. One of things that we do in my class is
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3 we problematize the curriculum. Who holds power in this idea of music? What does it
4 mean when your students are primarily studying the music of dead white men? What
5 does it mean when that knowledge is held up on a pedestal? What does it say to those
6 students who do not have that background? Traditionally music curricula has not been
7 representative of women, of people of colour, of Indigenous people. So we problematize
8 that together. I do talk to them about the issues that I hold with that. The difficulty is that
9 teachers are legally required to teach the curriculum. And in some ways, I'm bound to
10 teach them how to teach this curriculum. So this opens a lot of questions.
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21 This participant raises a number of important issues in her quote here, as educators, whether they
22 are teaching in a structured program like a B.Ed. which involves external accreditation, or for an
23 employer who has a particular curriculum or set outcomes which s/he expects to be delivered, as
24 both the educator and the student need to be aware of how power is shaping their learning
25 contexts. As Author A and Author B (2013) argue "rather than simply delivering subject-based
26 content, teacher education utilizing a multiliteracies pedagogy switches the lens to examine how
27 institutions construct knowledge in particular ways" (p. 55). Multiliteracies is concerned with a
28 social justice approach towards learning, drawing attention, as critical theory does, to the ways in
29 which power infuses all learning contexts. Crowther & Tett (2011) state that "how we construct
30 the relationship between the social and the individual is not in a politically neutral vacuum,
31 easily cushioned from the social and economic struggles for power that are enacted in and
32 around the contexts in which learning is located" (p. 136-137).
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49 As Penuel and O'Connor (2018) note, although the New London Group correctly
50 identified many factors that shape emerging literacy practices and needs, they could not predict
51 some of the societal shifts that are escalating the need for learners to gain critical and creative
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3 literacies to address many of the world's more pressing social, environmental, and political
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5 concerns. As they explain,

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7 The neoliberal state has given rise to, and been threatened by, new, virulent forms of
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9 nationalism that resist global connectedness and local diversity. And although we
10
11 appreciate the ways the Internet allows us to stay connected with others, we also worry
12
13 that such connections provide data that companies use to shape what we see, believe, and
14
15 do (p. 65).
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19 Within a neoliberal agenda, there is often a call for formulaic education in which a course is 'set'
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21 and can be taught by anyone to anyone with no concern for tailoring learning to learners' needs.
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23 Yet deeper learning from a social justice perspective entails adult learners being encouraged to
24
25 draw upon nuanced rhetoric of contemporary examples across home, work, and social
26
27 environments to critique whose voice is heard, whose voice is silenced, what is the dominant
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29 discourse, how are values shaped, and where does power lie?
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33 A critical approach to adult education addresses not only the need for innovative
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35 pedagogies but also considers some of the larger structural social and power relations that impact
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37 on the educational experiences of adult learners. As West, Fleming, & Finnegan (2013) argue,
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39 education has the potential to reduce or to reinforce existing social inequalities. Educators who
40
41 are committed to a social justice perspective in learning must consider the factors that can
42
43 challenge social inequalities.
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46 47 Using a multiliteracies approach in adult education 48

49 Literacies are practiced in a wide range of ways and can be supported through multiple
50
51 mediums (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanič, R., 2000); Kalantzis, Cope, Daly, & Trim, 2016; Mills,
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53 2015). Just as lifelong learning works from a socio-political perspective to engage learners in
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3 civic engagement, a multiliteracies theoretical framework similarly considers language as always
4 socially, culturally, and politically based. Enabling adult learners to engage in higher levels of
5 literacy from a multiliteracies' perspective encourages them to challenge hegemony and contest
6 neoliberal perspectives that narrow opportunities for learning.
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12 These two research studies explore how to contextualize the pragmatics of teaching
13 through a deeper understanding of decisions being made by educators to challenge and engage
14 adult learners. The analysis reveals prevailing themes of multimodalities, EAL language
15 learning, digital literacies, and social justice concerns help to shape that way educators think
16 about their teaching and how best to teach. Educators in all sectors feel tremendous pressures to
17 deliver content and get through the curriculum, which often leads to straight lecturing, and
18 minimal, if any, experiential, hands-on learning. A multiliteracies approach develops more
19 comprehensive capabilities to foster lifelong learners, individuals who are then able to initiate,
20 respond, and adapt to changes in workforce, community, and cultural contexts. Lifelong learning
21 can be enhanced with a recognition for the power of expansive forms of literacy that include
22 multimodalities. When linguistic modes are combined with other modes (gestural, spatial, visual,
23 audio, and tactile) in purposeful ways, the ability to express oneself and communicate more fully
24 become more realizable for many adults. In tandem, when adult educators draw upon the
25 multifaceted social histories of their students, they tailor learning to the specific experiences of
26 the communities they are working with, taking into account linguistic and cultural pluralism.
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28 Where technology comes into play in education, it is a matter of professional judgement to figure
29 out how it can help shape learning in positive ways rather than simply showcase cutting-edge
30 computational tools or social media. A multiliteracies approach has unique qualities that give
31 educators a theoretical basis and practical ways to engage learners in difficult content.
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3 Building upon this premise, our research entails the development of a web platform
4 [Address of Web Platform] in which exemplars of teaching in both formal and community-based
5 contexts are profiled. Working with innovative educators who are willing to take risks in their
6 teaching practices, this research is able to present models of some of the important components
7 of a multiliteracies approach. Visitors to the web platform can view short video excerpts from
8 interviews and from site visits, examine teaching artifacts, and find links and references to
9 academic articles developed from this study. The purpose of the video exemplars is to highlight a
10 multimodal approach to learning and literacy, using a digital platform to ensure broader access
11 for learners and educators.
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24 The emphasis on social justice within multiliteracies resonates with the social purpose
25 tradition of adult education. Digital and multimodal teaching strategies that takes into account
26 differences in culture and language, are requisites for learning in a more global world. Through
27 critical and creative pedagogies that insist on challenging normative views, inequities in
28 societies, and deeper socio-political issues, teaching and learning take on a new level of urgency
29 and importance. Innovative pedagogies informed by approaches such as multiliteracies may help
30 shape the desires of adult learners to affect change in their own lives, within their communities,
31 or to advocate as active citizens at a broader societal level.
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