The Challenge of 21ˢᵗ Century Literacies

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In the second edition of their influential book on 'New Literacies', Lankshear & Knobel (2006) argued that engagement with these practices was 'largely confined to learners' lives in spaces outside of schools' (p.30). That was nearly ten years ago, and in some respects very little has changed. Of course, in many classrooms there's a lot more technology than there was, provision of smartboards desktops, laptops and portable devices is better, and there is a greater variety of software and hardware on offer. But even when equipment is available, up-to-date and in good working order, problems of curriculum integration still arise. Despite all the rhetoric about the importance of 'new' or 'digital' literacies in education, recent curriculum reforms and their associated assessment regimes have tended to privilege traditional literacy skills and print text. Although some innovative teachers are able to incorporate 21ˢᵗ Century Literacies in their classroom practice (see digitalfutures.org for example), for others the challenge is greater, particularly when it is coupled with competing curriculum priorities or the extensive blocking of websites associated with certain approaches to Internet safety (Hope, 2013). An expansive view of new literacies in practice somehow seems hard to realize. So why should this be the case?

Many education systems across the world have developed policy statements that embrace 21ˢᵗ Century Literacies, and these are often conceived of as a set of skills and understandings to prepare the workforce or citizenry for a changing, interconnected world (Burnett, Davies, Merchant & Rowsell, 2014). Future-oriented and aspirational, these statements may bear very little relationship to curriculum guidance, practice and assessment, or for that matter to the everyday practices of children and young people. In contexts in which literacy attainment is judged in relation to international comparators (such as PIRLS and PISA) it seems that there is a real danger of reducing meaning making to a set of relatively simple skills that are easy to assess. Meanwhile some of the authentic, complex and more controversial practices that are part and parcel of young people's lives, regardless of their level of participation, may be overlooked. With a few notable exceptions, there appears to be increasing divergence between the texture of young people's everyday literacy practices, state-mandated literacy curricula and assessment, and the rhetoric of 21st Century Literacies.

In a study of a group of young hairdressers in England and the role of Facebook in their lives, Davies (2014) highlights how mobile technologies are folded into the everyday actions and interactions of her participants. The effects of 'hyperconnectivity', as first described by Wellman (2001), are apparent in her rich descriptions of identity performance and micro-co-ordination across domains and contexts as these 'Facebook Friends' share images, report on events, evaluate experiences and enjoy themselves. As they do this, the boundaries between public and private, presence and absence, online and offline, material and immaterial begin to dissolve. For example, when some of the group meet up in the evening they use mapping software to identify the location, Facebook to regularly update their status, Twitter to comment on their activity, SMS for one-to-one communication as well as selfies and group shots for a visual record of events. Davies draws two points from these observations: firstly, they are not 'exotic' or planned practices, they are normalized as an accepted part of daily life, both in this social group and, of course, in many others like them. Secondly they are not separate or bounded practices; they are enacted on the move as an

integral part of the course of events. This generates what Davies calls the 'kaleidoscoping effect of space and time' as,

> Many spaces became embedded within Facebook – and vice versa; the boundedness of different spaces seemed porous as images of bedrooms, nightclubs and bars, the salon and the college were displayed in online albums. The online context seemed to bring these spaces closer, blending the private and the public and flexing any boundaries between them. The very materiality of the young women's lives was drawn into and reflected within digital spaces, so that they often regarded themselves on a moment by moment basis, within the ever-evolving 'glass cabinet' of the online world, being at once within and 'looking out', but also materially rooted without while 'looking in'. (Davies, 2014:73)

Studies like this one serve to illustrate how new communicative practices flow into everyday life, how social interaction and technology co-shape one another (Verbeek, 2005), and how new literacies are continually evolving. This sort of fluidity can only add to the challenge that teachers face. Not only is there a gap in curriculum guidance and support, but also a rapidly evolving set of practices to engage with. These dynamic multimodal and mobile practices are at odds with the tightly framed definitions of literacy that dominate many educational contexts. Yet it still seems fundamental that education should work with students to promote literacy practices that are 'safe, ethical and advantageous' (Greenhow & Robelia 2009) to them.

Any attempt to re-examine literacy education for the 21st Century needs to meet the specific challenges of curriculum integration and the moving target of new technologies head on. In contributing to this agenda, we have been working with a set of principles intended to be sufficiently durable to re-invigorate debate, professional development and classroom practice, which we frame as a Charter for Literacy Education (Burnett, Davies, Merchant & Rowsell , 2014). Building on influential work on multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999) and multimodality (Kress, 1997), some of these principles re-state the commitments of earlier literacy researchers. However they are principles that need re-stating given the persistence of 'old' models of literacy education in many jurisdictions. They also recognize more recent research in literacy that has explored the generative and emergent nature of meaning making with and around digital technologies. Promoting 21st Century Literacies does not involve replacing one set of learning goals with another. It does however necessitate a recognition that resources for communication are richer, more diverse and more flexible than before.

1. **Recognise and build on students' repertoires of textual practices**: Studies like Davies' highlight the entanglement of the digital and non-digital in everyday life as people move fluidly between devices, modes and media (e.g. also see Teichert, 2010; Lewis, 2012). The significance of repertoire then is not just about an incremental expansion of the kinds of texts students produce, but providing contexts in which students can draw in open-ended ways *across* this developing repertoire: to combine and re-mix varied textual and linguistic practices within contexts that matter to them.
2. **Acknowledge the role of multimodality in meaning making:** Literacies are always multimodal, but an explicit recognition of multiple modes can enable students to explore, develop and convey meanings in ways that may otherwise be overlooked. Kuby et al. (2015) advocate for 'multimodal as agency', arguing that opportunities to create using multiple modes enables students not just explore ideas and possibilities

in more nuanced ways, but renegotiate their identities as learners. Specific knowledge of alphabetic representation and visual design are an integral part of this and not, as some have argued, a pre-condition for new literacies.

3. **Encourage improvisation and experimentation as well as the need to produce intelligible texts:** Design and production continue to play an important role in approaches that encompass creativity through the use of multiple modes and media. Recent work has provided a counterbalance to the emphasis on intentionality in design by highlighting the often unplanned and emergent nature of creativity (Leander & Boldt, 2014). For teachers, this means being open to unexpected directions (Hobbs, 2012) and playful or improvisational approaches. Phillips and Willis (2014: 76), for example, value a 'living authorship' that is 'action-oriented, generative, authentic, open, relational, affective, responsive, ever-changing and engaging.'

4. **Recognise the affective, embodied and material dimensions of meaning making:** Linked to this focus on meaning-making in the moment, recent work explores affective dimensions with a particular focus on using socio-material perspectives (Deuzanni, 2015) highlighting relationships between meaning-making, bodies and things, or paying attention to 'affective intensities' (Ehret & Hollet, 2014). Recognising the affective, embodied and material dimension involves acknowledging how meaning-making matters to students in the moment.

5. **Promote collaboration around and through texts in negotiating meaning:** In their seminal paper on participatory cultures, Jenkins et al (2006) heralded the role of process and collaboration in media production. However, nearly a decade later, the school curriculum still privileges the individual production of fixed texts. In an extensive survey of school wikis Reich (2012) found that only 1% had been used for collaborative authorship, and while much composition in schools does involve cross-fertilisation of ideas amongst students (e.g. Ghiso, 2013) the value of such collaboration has received scant recognition.

6. **Generate opportunities for students to engage with others in a variety of ways with and through texts**: As Underwood (2013) argues, 21st Century Literacies do not just involve doing things with technologies but doing things with others. Qualitative studies are enabling us to gain detailed insights into the ways through which children and young people collaborate and interact on and around screens, for example with others in virtual worlds (Marsh, 2011), and with other children and adults through and around screens (Davidson, 2012; Burnett, 2015). While encouraging such collaborations, we need to be alert to the complex ways in which such interactions are managed and support children to take up such opportunities with confidence.

7. **Provide contexts for exploring how texts position self and other.** Advocates of critical literacies argue that literacy education must address the power relationships perpetuated through and around texts through critical engagement. Calls for greater criticality have intensified in recent years linked to fears about internet safety, commercialism, the stereotypical depictions associated with games and virtual worlds, and the need for discerning use of online resources. As we have argued elsewhere (Burnett & Merchant, 2011) demonizing the texts young people use in everyday life is likely to achieve little. Providing contexts in which young people may critically consider the practices in which they engage, and how they positon themselves and are positioned by others, with opportunities to re-work texts to reflect alternative experiences, are important.

8. **Ensure opportunities for producing and consuming texts in safe and supportive contexts:** The kinds of practices described above are less easily defined than those

associated with more easily accountable literacy practices. Schools have a role to play in providing risk-free environments in which students may follow passions, experiment, explore, gain feedback and consider alternatives.

9. **Acknowledge the changing nature of meaning making:** Incorporating multimodality and digital resources as a response to 21st Century Literacies is not enough. If we are to address the divergence between literacies in everyday life, literacy in school and 21st Century Literacies, we need to continually revisit our definition of the scope and range of literacy at school to reflect its changing nature. Otherwise we will perpetuate a ''heritage curriculum'' (Yelland et al.,2008: 1) that is of little relevance for students' current or future lives.

We hope that this charter can be used as a resource for policy discussions, professional reflection and pedagogical development - as a way of thinking about how we can empower students to take hold of new literacies in productive and creative ways. It does not suggest a universal approach, but articulates generative principles that will inevitably take on different expression in different contexts. This, in fact, constitutes the challenge of 21st Century Literacies for educators.

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