Multiliteracies for the Marginalized

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"Although the fundamental principles of reading and writing have not changed, the process has shifted from the serial cognitive processing of linear print text to parallel processing of multimodal text-image information sources." (Luke, 2003)

Multiliteracies acknowledges "the centrality of diversity, the notion of design as active meaning making, the significance of multimodality and the need for a more holistic approach to pedagogy" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). This pedagogy is deeply founded in social constructivist learning theory. Its intent is to prepare learners for the need to interpret texts in whatever form they may appear.

Five Dimensions of Multiliteracies

Cope and Kalantzis have outlined five dimensions of multiliteracies pedagogy. They are interconnected or "woven" together rather than linear.

Experiencing

This refers to the concept that all learning is contextual and based on personal experiences in all aspects of a person's life.

Conceptualizing

Students are actively engaged in making meaning through categorizing, generalizing and linking theory to the everyday world.

Analysing

This involves reasoning, inferring and making logical connections as well as evaluating the viewpoints and interests of others and oneself.

Applying

Students apply what they have learned to real world situations sometimes in creative, novel ways.

Weaving

This last dimension is the thread that strings the other 4 dimensions together in a kind of fabric. For example, conceptualizing requires students to integrate new and prior experiences to create a new theory about something in the real world.

Preparation for Life

"The kind of person who can live well in this world is someone who has acquired the capacity to navigate from one domain of social activity to another, who is resilient in their capacity to articulate and enact their own identities and who can find ways of entering into dialogue with and learning new and unfamiliar social languages." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Education has a critical impact on the lives of students. It affords better job opportunities, better quality of life and the ability to make informed decisions. The ability to negotiate the increasingly complex world of inter-related modalities is an important skill to learn (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Multiliteracies attempts to prepare students for a fulfilling and meaningful position in the world.

Aboriginal Education

31% of off-reserve aboriginal people in Canada between the ages of 25 and 64 had not completed high school (Bougie & Senécal, 2010). As might be expected, employment rates among aboriginal youth aged 20 to 24 are higher for those who completed high school than for those who did not.

Multiliteracies pedagogy presents an opportunity for educators to reach this marginalized population. Although not explicitly using multiliteracies, the Sk'elep School of Excellence in Kamloops, BC, (Sk'elep, 2011) incorporates a culturally meaningful context into their learning environment. One of their objectives is to produce the future leaders of their community. This could prove beneficial for the aboriginal desire for self-government in Canada. It is in keeping

with the multiliteracies aim of promoting an "active, bottom-up citizenship in which people can take a self-governing role in the many divergent communities of their environments, voluntary organizations and affinity groups" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Situated Practice

"…multiple literacy practices include…sensitivity to the complex nexus of students' lives and the fields of ideas wherein teachers and students play" (Schofield & Rogers, 2004).

School is artificially separated by subject while most of the time, the world is highly integrated and multimodal (Luke, 2003). If educators consider it their job to prepare young people for the real world, then they should consider making schools reflect this contextual reality. This concept is founded on situated cognition learning theory with a student centred focus (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Teachers must allow students to participate through the lens of their own experience while also making learning tasks authentic and firmly grounded in reality. It is important to engage students in topics they find interesting. This is especially true for at-risk students who are already disengaged from form education (Purbhai-Illich, 2011).

School of One

A successful pilot program ran for two months in New York City where students were given choice about how they would study math concepts (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). By tapping into students' interests, they became highly engaged in their learning tasks which were linked to the real world.

Engaging At-risk Students

Purbhai-Illich (2001) found success in an alternate school for at-risk students by basing learning activities on students' interests and lived experiences even though these

sometimes conflicted with institutional policies. Attendance improved and engagement in literacy activities increased when students were allowed to create a short video about gangs and street life, topics that were banned in the school. Teachers were not successful when they picked topics they thought would be of interest to the students. The difference in approach required flexibility in the teacher and institution, often a challenging combination.

Diversity

"Do our language and literacy practices construct an image of the students as intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented?" (Cummins, 2006)

Teachers cannot think of their students as a homogeneous group with similar characteristics. Therefore there is a need to find ways to characterize students as individuals with various abilities, personal histories, learning preferences, prior knowledge, life interests, cultural influences…in short, as unique. Given that, how can teachers incorporate this multiplicity into the learning environment equitably? Multiliteracies proposes just such a pedagogy (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Cummins, 2006).

Digital Equity

"We need to investigate whether equity promises are being realized in the alleged hierarchy-free zones of online communication." (Luke, 2003)

Virtual learning environments purport to level the playing field for learners because they can make invisible the differences that cause difficulties in communication in the real world. In theory, shy, quiet students have the same opportunities to participate as other, more vocal, students. Asynchronous communication makes it possible for students to have more time to think, have more time to produce a contribution, and communicate with people around the globe.

Special Needs in Canada

Of all children in Canada aged 5 to 14, 155,000 or 4% have some kind of disability. 2.8% (112,000) have intellectual disabilities (cognitive or emotional) and 3.1% (124,000) have physical disabilities. Of course, these two types of disabilities often go hand in hand resulting in 87,000 children with both intellectual and physical disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2008). By far the majority of these children attend regular school either without special education classes (85,200 children), or with special education classes (39,600 children). Learning disabilities account for most special education needs, the majority of them requiring assistance for speech language or developmental issues.

Diversity in the classroom is a stark reality for today's teachers. A multimodal, multilingual approach may help teachers successfully engage all students in learning because it acknowledges these differences without marginalizing them.

English as a Second Language

Canada prides itself on its multicultural heritage. With this comes the challenge of integrating English as a Second Language students into our classrooms. It is possible to engage these students through multimodal approaches with peer scaffolding without the necessity for a solid foundation in print-based English language literacy (Cummins, 2006). The example set by Thornwood Public School in Ontario (2011) is an inspiring one.

Meaning Making

"Transformative curriculum recognizes that the process of designing redesigns the designer. Learning is a process of self-re-creation. Cultural dynamism and diversity are the results." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

For multiliteracies theorists, meaning making is a design process wherein the learner actively uses existing resources, or "available designs," to shape a representation of the world from the learner's perspective. Through this design/redesign process, the learner

and the world are transformed. The original available designs may include culture, context or relevant conventions. Learning is manifested as transformation. The new representations made available by learners can then be used by others to redesign and incorporate into their personal representations. The social world is designed by meaning making (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

Making meaning with and from the proliferation of multimodal forms of representation is a challenge for teachers today (Schofield & Rogers, 2004). For example, trying to keep up with the latest technology can seem overwhelming. However, multiliteracies theorists see this as essential to revising what goes on in classrooms around the world.

Available designs

"Found and findable resources for meaning: culture, context and purpose-specific patterns and conventions of meaning making." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Designing

"The act of meaning: work performed on/with Available Designs in representing the world or other's representations of it, to oneself or others." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

The redesigned

"The world transformed, in the form of new Available Designs, or the meaning designer who, through the very act of Designing, has transformed themselves (learning)." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

At-risk students and transformation.

Connecting with the culture and context of at-risk students may open opportunities for personal transformation through literacy. Integrating student autobiographies as available designs provides some familiar territory from which to begin the work of designing leading to redesign or learning. However, the self-identity of at-risk students is often tenuous which makes the window of opportunity difficult to sustain or predict (Schofield & Rogers, 2004).

Certainly though, by trying to force participation with print-based, traditional forms of literacy, teachers may undermine the power of literacy for transformation.

Challenges for Implementation

"Simply, the domination of pedagogy by mode of information may prove harder to displace than any particular political or sociocultural ideology." (Luke, 2003)

Multiliteracies is being challenged on a number of fronts including teachers, parents, government institutions and even students.

Students

Students may perceive traditional literacy as directly related to academic and life-long success because this is what their parents believe. (Tan & McWilliam, 2009). Working in modalities other than print-based text may be viewed suitable for students who need extra help or curricular enhancement. Although technology might be integrated into their lives to the point of invisibility, using it at school for multimodal projects appears to be beyond "mainstream" school activities and therefore not required.

Teachers & Parents

Teachers and parents often have a high commitment level to print-based literacy. Teachers are pressured from parents and institutions to employ a hierarchy of literacies which places emphasis on print-based literacy before engaging in multiliteracies. Some teachers feel they are not familiar enough with digital technology to incorporate it into their daily educational planning. They may feel it is too complicated to introduce to students who are not yet competent with print-based literacy.

Even when teachers like the idea of multiliteracies, it requires a fairly radical change in the shape of education which makes it difficult to implement within the constraints of government or institutional requirements.

Multimodality

"Although the fundamental principles of reading and writing have not changed, the process has shifted from the serial cognitive processing of linear print text to parallel processing of multimodal text-image information sources." (Luke, 2003)

To be literate in modern multimedia is a life skill that requires "considerable navigational effort" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). It requires a certain "cognitive playfulness" while making conscious associations among the various paths followed along the reading journey through multimodal representations (Luke, 2003; Tan, 2009).

Synaesthesia, or the act of changing something from one mode to another, thus creating a "representational parallel," is an effective learning tool (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). It allows students to enter into learning with a comfortable mode of representation and then move into a less familiar mode which may trigger extension of the original learning (Heron-Hruby, Wood, & Mraz, 2008). Multimodal, non-linear representation has shifted the making of meaning toward the viewer/reader and away from the author.

Cope & Kalantzis (2009) outline 8 modes of representation for multiliteracies.

Written Language

- "Writing (representing meaning to another)

- Reading (representing to oneself)

- Handwriting, the printed page, the screen" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Despite the concerns over visual representation usurping the written word, it would appear that text-based communication is not a dying art and in fact, is necessary for comprehension of the multimodalized world (Bolter, 2009; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Although an image may be able to convey meaning that words cannot, it may also need a verbal explanation in order for it to

be understood more fully. Experimenting in other modalities may facilitate reading

comprehension in printed text (Heron-Hruby, Wood, & Mraz, 2008). The written word

now appears in different forms like captions, sidebars, emails, blogs and texting both in

print and on screen.

Oral Language

- "Live or recorded speech (representing meaning to another)

- Listening (representing meaning to oneself)" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

The theory of multiliteracies includes acknowledging the linguistic diversity of many

classrooms around the world (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In an age of "global economies"

and "digital citizenship," this acknowledgement is significant.

It is also important in Canadian aboriginal cultures because of the need to preserve

indigenous languages. The Sk'elep School of Excellence in Kamloops, BC, (Sk'elep,

2011) is an impressive example of how oral literacy can be developed into a meaningful

learning experience. Cross generational teaching enhances the oral literacy experience in

an authentic Secwepemc cultural context.

Visual representation

- "Still or moving image, sculpture, craft (representing meaning to another)

- View, vista, scene, perspective (representing meaning to oneself)" (Cope &

Kalantzis, 2009)

Visual representation is not deposing written text from the throne of communication.

All modes of representation, including images, together serve to enhance the meaning that

is conveyed to the learner who then must make meaning of it within their own personal

context.

Audio representation

- "Music, ambient sounds, noises, alerts (representing meaning to another)

- Hearing, listening (representing meaning to oneself)" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Like visual representation, audio representation may need the support of other modes to convey its full meaning. For example, sound can often express feelings, emotions and context more strongly than text alone.

Tactile representation

- "touch, smell and taste

- The representation to oneself of bodily sensations and feelings or representation to others that "touch" one bodily.

- Kinaesthesia, physical contact, skin sensations (temperature, texture, pressure), grasp, manipulable objects, artefacts, cooking and eating, aromas" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Gestural representation

- "Movements of the hands and arms, expressions of the face, eye movements and gaze, demeanours of the body, gait, clothing and fashion, hairstyle, dance, action sequences, timing, frequency, ceremony and ritual.

- Here gesture is understood broadly and metaphorically as a physical act of signing (as in "a gesture to…") rather than the narrower literal meaning of hand and arm movement." (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Representation to oneself

- "May take the form of feelings and emotions or rehearsing action sequences in one's mind's eye" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

Finding an authentic voice is an important step toward literacy in whatever mode you choose. It may be the voice of a scientist, if you are writing an experiment, or it may be a personal, unique voice you take with you everywhere. As a learner uses this voice to represent what they have learned, it transforms or "redesigns" the learner. It is one's layers of personal identities that design meaning for oneself.

Authentic voices of at-risk students.

Tapping into the authentic voices or identities of at-risk students is a powerful tool to promote engagement in literacy (Purbhai-Illich, 2011; Schofield, & Rogers, 2004). Starting within a context that is familiar, although not necessarily fully understood, can open doors to expanding from one modality to another, thus deepening learning. Sometimes it takes a great deal of flexibility in planning on the part of the teacher and trust within a classroom in order to facilitate revealing this authentic voice.

Spatial representation

- "Proximity, spacing, layout, interpersonal distance, territoriality, architecture/building, streetscape, cityscape, landscape" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009)

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