
The paper presents an overview of multiliteracies theory and its impact on writing assessment. Current writing assessment practices reflect a cognitive perspective, and shifts in assessment approaches are necessary to encompass a multiliteracies approach. An analysis of one writing assessment tool is used to demonstrate the inconsistencies between current writing assessment practices and multiliteracies theory. In conclusion, this paper explores ideas for reframing writing assessment to align more closely with multiliteracies theory.

What is multiliteracies theory?

Multiliteracies theory views literacies as social practices that help us to achieve social intentions within the vast range of social contexts of our daily lives (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic 2000, Cope & Kalantzsis 2000, New London Group 1996). It broadens our understanding of literacy by embracing linguistically and culturally diverse ways of using language. Multiliteracies theorists value the local literacies that are specific to certain groups of people, as well as the global literacies that are powerful within the broader social, political and economic world. They feel that the literacies that are traditionally valued in schools represent an autonomous, singular view of literacy; one that perpetuates inequitable power relations within broader society (Street 1995).

Multiliteracies theory also expands the symbol systems we associate with literacy from an exclusive focus on the printed word to visual images, multimedia, and digital technologies such as the Internet. In this way, multiliteracies theory keeps pace with the changes in technology and the ways in which communication technology has changed what it means to be a literate person.

Another central tenet of multiliteracies theory is that literacies are forms of meaning-making that are imbued with social purpose and involve making decisions about the use of conventions, norms and practices of cultures, institutions and societies (Ivanic 1998). As such, literacy practices differ from event to event, drawing on the practices common in the cultures familiar to us. We may develop particular identities while engaging in literacies that are recognisable within one socio-cultural group. We may resist the ways in which we are positioned when using the literacies of that group, however, and add our own flavor to the assumptions and beliefs that are embedded within those literacies.

How closely are writing instruction and assessment practices aligned with multiliteracies theory?

In today's writing workshop classrooms, teachers provide abundant opportunities for students to bring the people, languages, values, ideas, and experiences of their lives outside the classroom, including those from popular culture, into their writing. Writing
workshop teachers value and build on the richness and complexity of children's prior linguistic and cultural knowledge. They encourage students to incorporate visual images from the Internet or their own drawings to enhance their writing and to consult electronic, print, visual and other sources to inform their writing. Teachers support students as they choose the genre that best achieves their purpose for the intended audience. Those genres may include dramatic performances or the use of digital technology or multimedia, as well as print genres.

In all of these ways, we believe that writing workshop teachers translate important tenets of multiliteracies theory into daily practice. Daily writing instruction reflects the 'richness and complexity of literacy practices evident in society at large' (Street 2005, p. 4). Writing is not viewed as a set of skills that children can master and then perform on demand. Instead, writing is viewed as one of many social practices that use language to accomplish particular ends within particular social contexts.

Writing assessment practices, however, tend to narrow views of writing to the mastery of widely-used processes in order to create a product that conforms to recognisable standards. These assessments of students' written products include analytic scoring and holistic scoring (Cooper & Odell 1977). Analytic scoring considers individual elements of writing, whereas holistic scoring is based on the total impression of the writing. The underlying assumption about student writing is that writing is a socially and culturally neutral outcome of students' thinking. These tools do not look at the social contexts in which the writing is created, nor at the influence of the teachers' social and cultural views on their assessment of the writing.

Even very recently-published resources for teachers by highly-regarded educational publishers narrow the assessment focus to the cognitive, advising that assessment 'enables us to get to know students' strengths and needs as writers' and to 'tailor our teaching to students' individual needs' (Anderson, 2005, p. 2). There is no mention of these individual needs as being influenced by and arising from the social contexts in which these students live.

How do multiliteracies teachers assess written products?

Spandel's (2005) six traits (e.g., ideas, organisation, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions and layout) are purported to be a 'summary of what teachers value (or look for) in writing' (p. 40). This widely-used and highly-regarded writing assessment tool shows a decidedly cognitive perspective of student writing. In the following, we contrast the features of the cognitive perspective underpinning this assessment tool with features that a multiliteracies teacher would add or modify to align writing assessment with multiliteracies theory. Table 1 provides an overview of the contrasts.

In the 'Ideas' section of the scoring guide (Spandel, 2005, p. 45), a number of ideologically-neutral criteria are assessed: clarity, narrowness of topic, focus on one main message, including details that 'go beyond common knowledge' and the absence of unnecessary information. The only criterion that hints at socio-political meanings is that
of the information teaching the reader something and holding the reader's interest. In this
criterion there is a faint recognition of writing as a social practice. Multiliteracies teachers
would go beyond this by looking at the ideas in the writing within the social contexts in
which they are written and read. They would examine the underlying assumptions about
social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ableness, age, urban/rural lives, and other
ways of being. They might ask: Who is represented most powerfully? Whose voice is not
heard at all? Are the characters and ideas stereotypical or are they stretching the
boundaries of conventional thought? They question what purpose writing serves for
children if their writing shows that they are reproducing stereotyped, limited views of
their places in the world.

Two categories in the six traits scoring guide refer to students' use of tools of language:
word choice and sentence fluency. 'Sentence fluency' assesses students' flexibility and
competence in using language and sentence structures, the cadence of the sentences,
variety in length, and the structure and consistency of tense. Multiliteracies teachers
recognise that assessment of a final criterion, the students' use of 'authentic dialogue ...[that] sounds like real people speaking,' is likely to be a function of whether the student
uses dialogue that sounds as if it were being spoken by people whom the teacher
recognises as 'real'. This criterion is very context-based. When multiliteracies teachers
find that the dialogue does not seem real, they question why this is so. It may reflect the
great distances between the teacher's and her students' social worlds, as much as it may
be a function of the student's struggles with writing dialogue.

'Word choice' assesses the student's use of appropriate, precise and enlightening words
and phrases, the use of strong verbs, the creation of pictures through words, and the use
of repetition for effect. One reference to social purposes for the writing is 'uses language
to inform or entertain--not to impress'. While this criterion recognises the social purposes
of writing, the disparaging of the intention to create a favourable impression on the reader
shows a lack of understanding of the imbalance of power in the student-teacher
relationship. Students, especially those from poor, minority language and/or
environments in which their parents do not have post secondary education, need school
writing opportunities to try out the powerful words and phrases of dominant society to
gain a fluency with them as they enter worlds beyond the classroom. They need to
demonstrate their flexibility in using this powerful register in their writing.

The disparaging of words used to impress also shows lack of awareness of the social
realities in classrooms. Again and again in classroom observations, students have
demonstrated that they write to build relationships with peers and gain status in the peer
social network (Blake 1997, Finders 1997, Lensmire 1994). They consider themselves
successful writers when they impress their peers with their humour or their ability to use
the words and ideas that are viewed as 'in' by their peer social groups. Multiliteracies
teachers understand that being able to use the registers that are recognised and valued in
school worlds and within peer worlds is at least as important as being able to use a strong
verb. They consider such knowledge in their assessment and do not deprecate such
efforts.
'Conventions and Layout', another of the six traits, requires some degree of conformity. The further that the writing strays from conventional spelling, punctuation, grammar and layouts, the more difficult it will be for readers to understand the writing and recognize its intended purpose. Writing conventions often present the greatest challenge to minority language students and to those whose homes are not awash in print. In their assessment of student writing, multiliteracies teachers recognize the challenges that conventions of any kind present to students who are not immersed in the dominant culture. Multiliteracies teachers also value the functional nature of conventions—if writers are to communicate with others, they must use widely-recognizable writing conventions. This social aspect of writing conventions is reflected in the six traits scoring guide. Criteria are stated in terms of the effects of the conventions on readers: free of distracting errors so the reader 'does not have to do any mental editing', and conventions support meaning and voice. Multiliteracies teachers, valuing the language that children bring to the classroom, would consider how English language learners and those who speak dialects other than Standard English are learning new patterns of conventions with growing success. They also assess students' flexibility in using conventions appropriate to the social context.

In addition, there are three criteria related to the layout that recognize the proliferation of multimodalities and multimedia in our contemporary world, a central tenet of multiliteracies theory. These criteria include: using graphics to enhance the text, a design that highlights the ideas being communicated, and an absence of print and visual features that would distract readers/viewers. In this category, the Six Traits assessment tool could readily be used by multiliteracies teachers, perhaps with the addition of a criterion that looks at the ways in which the students' choice and use of media further their social purposes.

The inviting lead, the sense of a piece going 'somewhere', the connections between sections and details, the pacing, sense of resolution and the freshness of the ending—these qualities comprise the 'Organisation' category of the six traits scoring guide. Reflecting a view of writing as a social practice, they focus on how the organisation contributes to the overall effect on the reader. Yet, unless the writer has harnessed these organisational qualities to achieve a desired purpose within particular social contexts, her writing will lack power and impact. Multiliteracies teachers would modify these criteria to highlight the relationship between social purposes and students' use of organisational structures and genres.

A final category, 'Voice', has potential to address central tenets of multiliteracies theory, if voice is viewed as representing the students' agency in taking up meanings, beliefs, values, perspectives of the discourse groups in which they participate and making them their own. One criterion within this category hints at the social histories and contexts that contribute to any one writer's voice by highlighting the reader's response and the sense that the writing 'speaks' to the reader, showing a 'writer to reader' connection. The implication is that the writer's voice reflects positions and understandings that are drawn from discourses that the reader recognises. However, in the Six Traits assessment tool there is much made of the voice sounding like that of 'this particular writer', reflecting a cognitive, rather than a multiliteracies perspective.
Assessing students' writing processes

Many writing assessments purport to create a picture of the student as a writer by observing the student's writing processes. The contemporary view of the student, for writing assessment purposes, is the thinking student who develops 'effective writing processes' and 'deepens [her] knowledge of what it means to write well' in a writing class (Anderson 2005, p. 3). Getting to know student writers means becoming familiar with their thinking as demonstrated through their written products and their rehearsing, drafting, revising, and editing processes. This view of writing processes as being unique to the individual writer does not recognise that, like Rosenblatt's (1978) poem, created anew with each person's encounter with a text in a new context, writing processes are not static for any one writer. For every text that a writer creates, she or he is writing within a new context. Writers will feel the need to modify their writing processes to meet the social/political demands of changing contexts. Thus, it is not enough to examine students' writing processes; these writing processes must be considered in terms of the social/political purposes of the students and the influences of the context on the intentions, style, content, and processes the students demonstrate.

Assessment tools for gathering information about students' writing processes include recording observations of their writing activities and the patterns in their writing. Anderson (2005) advises that teachers take 'Assessment Notes' for each student, with two headings:

* What am I learning about this student as a writer?

* What do I need to teach this student?

The classroom examples in Anderson's book provide information about the student's topic, her point, and the type of entries that she writes in her notebook (e.g., 'writes entries about small important moments, not the whole topic'). The instructional goal following from these observations is to teach about writing to get a point across about a topic. There are contextual notes about her intention ('to be about how much I love getting my brother in trouble' and 'wants to share her piece with other kids who have siblings'). The teacher's sole goal following from this observation is to expand the student's repertoire of audiences to those outside the class. There are also notes on the child's writing process (e.g., 'writes a plan before drafting and is eager to jump into her draft'). The instructional goal following from this observation is to teach the child strategies for planning (p. 4).

If multiliteracies teachers were to use this observational assessment tool, they would also consider how peers respond to the student's writing, how the student expects peers to respond and what she does to ensure this response. The teacher might enter into conversations with groups of students about what they expect girls and boys of their age to write about and what kinds of words/actions/phrases/topics/characters/settings they enjoy writing and reading about. This could extend to looking at examples that sit outside these parameters in an effort to broaden students' perspectives on acceptable social
meanings that can be communicated in their writing.

Teachers would also consider how students adapt their writing processes to meet the demands of the situation. For example, when writing a script for a piece on a school event that will later be videotaped and put up on the school web site, students would likely spend more time planning and gathering information than they would when writing a story about a humorous event that happened to them last year. They also might spend more time revising to cut unnecessary words because the video clip might have time restrictions, whereas the story would likely have no length constraints. Multiliteracies teachers would ask students about their processes in terms of the demands of the writing context in student-teacher conferences, in addition to observing what students did to plan, write, revise, and edit.

Multiliteracies teachers consider their role in writing assessment

In many contemporary teachers' resources, experts such as Anderson (2005), assert that 'good writing teachers, like parents, have a vision of the kind of writers they hope their students will become someday' (p. 15). He goes on to explain that his vision is of lifelong writers who initiate writing, who write well, and who have writing processes that work for them. Drawing upon Graves's (1994) view of initiating as showing 'an understanding of what writing can do for her as author and for her audience' (p. 155), Anderson moves his vision into the realm of multiliteracies teachers. They would add to Anderson's vision that writing must be a tool for living and growing within multiple social worlds using modalities that extend beyond the printed word. The problem with teachers envisioning the writers that children will become is that their visions may be limited to the social worlds that teachers know and value. Multiliteracies teachers are not willing to restrict the ways with writing and representing that their students use and develop in their classrooms to those that are recognised and honored in schools.

Another issue related to the teacher's role is that of objectivity. Designers of writing assessment tools have attempted to ensure fairness by making assessment as objective as possible. There is an assumption, when using holistic and analytic writing assessments, that objectivity is possible as long as teachers fix their attention on the criteria in the scoring guides. Teachers who assess student writing are encouraged 'to suppress or displace value-laden and political readings of student papers by putting the locus of evaluation outside the individual reader, situating it instead either in the text itself or in a supposedly community-wide set of standards' (Schwegler 1991, p. 205). Teacher assessors are viewed as authorities on writing who shrug aside their social values and histories when engaged in the evaluation process.

Sixth-grade teachers in a study conducted by the author in a Canadian province (1998), aligned themselves with this perspective. They claimed that their marking of student writing was not influenced by their perceptions of the student's gender. The teachers felt that strict adherence to the criteria in the scoring guides washed out any gender preferences they may have held. When identifying gender markers in samples of student writing, however, these same teachers associated lack of conformity to writing
conventions, to genre structures, and a paucity of detail and description (all characteristics of writing that would be considered of inferior quality in the scoring guides) with boys' writing. Their scoring of the papers did not show a pattern of privileging girls' writing except in the case of one paper, written by a girl, for which the teachers were evenly mixed in identifying the gender of the writer. In this case, teachers who felt the writer was a girl scored the writer significantly higher than did those who felt the writer was a boy. In spite of teachers' insistence that their social and cultural views did not influence their assessment, it was very clear that these perspectives shaped their perceptions of the writer and the writing. Teachers who thought that a girl had written the story found that the writing was detailed, with colorful language. In contrast, teachers who thought that a boy had written the story characterised it as lacking in detail.

Multiliteracies teachers recognise that objectivity in writing assessment is impossible. The social and cultural influences on teachers' writing assessment will not be erased by attempts to suppress or ignore them. Instead, multiliteracies teachers strive to gain greater awareness of themselves as readers and social beings. They consider how their expectations and values bring some features of student writing to the foreground and how they shine a less favourable light on particular features when they assess student writing. Multiliteracies teachers enter into dialogues with other teachers about what constitutes good writing within various contexts. They may also assess students' writing collaboratively with colleagues, discussing frequently their responses to particular pieces of writing to gain new perspectives on the writing.

Reframing writing assessment using multiliteracies theory

The first step in reframing writing assessment using multiliteracies assessment is seeing students differently— as writers with social and cultural histories, and with social and cultural purposes for interacting within their social worlds. Multiliteracies teachers view students as flexible users of language in print, oral and visual forms in multiple communicative contexts. For them, getting to know students as writers means becoming familiar with students as thinkers and social/political beings interacting with others in various communicative contexts. The second step in multiliteracies assessment is recognising that the teachers who read student writing are also social beings with social and cultural histories. Each time teachers read student writing, they bring the values, perspectives, experiences that come from their lives in multiple social worlds, including the formal school world, to their reading. Assessment, thus, has a broader focus than the students' thinking processes.

Teachers do not need to discard the practices and tools they currently use to assess writing in order to take up a multiliteracies perspective on writing assessment. Instead, modifications can be made to the tools that predominate in writing workshop classrooms, (e.g., portfolios of student writing, observation checklists, and student-teacher conferences). These tools can be opened up to a broader view of students as writers and social beings who use print, digital technologies and multimedia to communicate with others, including their teachers, who, themselves are social beings.
References


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