Final Project

Multiliteracies: More easily said than done

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As Bolter (2001: XI) rightly points out, “there have been enormous changes in the writing space offered by electronic technology”, extending with it contemporary notions of literacy (Dobson & Willinsky, 2009). “Literacy itself needs to be conceived more broadly than the coding of the oral to written language” (Cope & Kalanzis, 2003:17) to include what the New London Group termed back in 1996 ‘Multiliteracies’ (New London Group, 1996). Unlike the printed book or text, the World Wide Web moves through visual and conceptual space (Bolter, 2001:45) and texts “are now designed in a highly visual sense” involving “complex relationships between visuals, space and text” (Kalantzis et al, 2003:22). As a result, questions have been raised regarding the need to change the approach taken towards literacy. The kind of skills required to approach and comprehend text in these new spaces has changed. However, it is all very well to advocate the need for a multiliteracies approach, but there are countries where basic literacy has not yet been achieved. A multiliteracies approach cannot be generalized and must take into account the effect socio-economic differences have on how a person perceives or creates meaning in any text, be it printed or online; to this end, schema theory can be of great use. However, before looking at how literacy should be approached, it is perhaps necessary to look at the changes in writing space that technology offers (Bolter, 2001).

As Postman (1992:20) argues, “[N]ew technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop”. To a great extent, this is due to the changing space of text and how it is used.

Kress (2005) does an excellent job of pointing out some of the major differences between, printed and online text; summarized in the following table.

Table 1

	Printed Text	Online Text
1	Order designed by author	Order designed by both author and reader
2	Single entry point for page and book	Multiple entry point on 'page'
3	Author produces knowledge for audience	The 'visitor' (reader) produces knowledge4
4	Author know world of audience	Authors/designers imagine world of audience
5	Fixed reading path	Path chosen by 'visitor' (reader)
6	Author decides point of departure	'Visitor' (reader) decides point of departure
7	Writing dominates page organization	Image dominates page organization
8	More writing than image	Image and writing co-equal
9	Canonical uses of modes	Modes governed by "aptness"

[Adapted from: Kress, 2005:11]

In addition, though a "typical Web page consists of text and graphics like a page in a magazine or illustrated book… phrases in the text or portions of the graphics on the Web page can be "hot": clicking on them will bring up a new page" (Bolter, 2001: 27). Web pages may consist of text and graphics like magazines and books, but it is important to point out that their lay out is not uniform and varies a lot. Previously, when teaching reading skills, one could rely on certain structures and lay outs being evident depending on the genre or purpose of the text. For example, in an small study carried out with Mexican secondary school students who did not speak German, most were able to find the contact information in the text (Appendix 1) based on knowledge regarding the lay out norm as to where this type of information appears within an advertisement; i.e. at the bottom of the page (del Paso, 2007). However, in Web pages the lay out is arbitrary, making it harder to retrieve information (Appendix 2).

Another difference is linking, which though apparently considered the electronic equivalent of footnotes, leads to other pages that are not necessarily subordinate and their content does not always follow a chronological order. As Bolter points out, hypertext consists of discrete units and is "like a printed book that the author has attacked with a pair of scissors and cut into convenient verbal sizes." (Bolter, 2001: 35). It can be both visual and verbal, and even considered a "genre or series of genres" (Bolter, 2001:41). However, perhaps the greatest difference with static print is that the hypertext "responds to the readers touch" and has multiple entry points (Bolter, 2001; Kress, 2005); at the same time, though, it allows the reader less freedom to make his/her own associations because the links are imposed and prescribed by the author. These "connections of hypertext constitute paths of meaning for the author and for the reader" and their "significance will depend on which path the reader has traveled in order to arrive at the topic" (Bolter, 2001:35). I would, however, argue that their significance does not reside in this alone, but also on the reader's schemata; a point often ignored in the literature on this topic. Schema theory is not only applicable but can be useful when analyzing how meaning is made within these new writing spaces, as much by the author as by the reader.

A schema (plural: schemata) is an abstract structure of knowledge, or put more simply, it is a mental representation stored in memory upon which all information processing depends. According to schema theory, people make sense of new experiences by activating the mental representations or schemata stored in their memory. Schematic processing allows people to interpret new information or experiences; however, the process often requires making guesses and confirming or rejecting these when comprehension fails (Anderson & Pearson,1984; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983;Goodman,

1975; Rumelhart;1980). Anderson and Pearson (cited in Carrell et al, 1998:33) summarize this process of comprehension nicely in the following sentence:

> "To say that one has comprehended a text is to say she has found a mental 'home' for the information in the text, or else that she has modified and existing mental home in order to accommodate that new information."

Schema theory speaks of three types of schemata: formal, linguistic and content schemata. Formal schemata are related to the rhetorical structure of a text, such as differences in genre or between narrative styles and their corresponding structures (Carrell, 1987). Linguistic schemata, include the decoding features students need, in order to understand how words are organized and fit together in a sentence (Aebersold and Field, 1997:17). Content schemata, on the other hand, refer to knowledge about the subject matter or content of a text (Carrell, 1987). Within the specificities of content schema, mention has been made of the role a person's 'knowledge of the world' can have on his/her understanding of new information (Alderson, 2000:45). But what is *knowledge of the world*; knowledge of whose world? As Alderson rightly points out, each person has their own world, which may be limited or different from others (2000:45).

How is the above applicable with regards to these new writing spaces? If hypertextual links “can serve many informational and rhetorical purposes”, what formal schemata do readers need in order to grasp the meaning of a hypertext? If linguistic schemata refers to the way words are ordered and fit together to provide meaning, but the World Wide Web moves “through a visual and conceptual space different from the space of the book” (Bolter, 2001:45) what schemata is needed now? It is no longer just words that fit together to create meaning, but images, sounds, and links that provide different

paths, possibilities and even genres. Finally, regarding content schemata, how do the digital divide and a person's social context influence perceptions? In the educational context, "[I]f effectively learners construct and reconstruct knowledge and language is a social practice, then the social context of the learners and the teachers cannot be ignored" (del Paso, 2007:10), and should be considered when designing strategies for teaching multiliteracies.

As Cope and Kalantzis (2009; 188) rightly assert, a"pedagogy of multiliteracies allows alternative point of learning": differences in forms of engagement; divergent thinking and analytical perspectives; "different modalities in meaning"; and "reflects a rebalancing of agency in the recognition of active "design" and inherent learning potentials in the representational process… each meaning maker designs the world afresh in a way that is always uniquely transformative of found meanings".

However, as Dobson and Willinsky (2009:8) rightly point out, there is a "need for a more complex analysis that takes into consideration the affordances of various network structures for readers with a variety of learning needs and styles", and I would add whose cultural or socio-economic background may influence or affect their comprehension or meaning making. Further research should also be carried out to see how transferable reading micro-skills used for printed texts are to online spaces. If learners lack the reading micro-skills for printed texts, is it feasible for them to tackle these new spaces and more networked, non- hierarchical environments?

In Mexico, for example, the average student "scored 420 out of 600 in reading literacy in the PISA OECD exams; much lower than the OECD average of 493 and the lowest rate in the OECD"; 50% of students did not poses the basis skills, and only 3%

scored within the top 2 levels (OECD, 2012). It is not surprising given that the average Mexican reads 2.9 books a year and though there are 6 public libraries per 100,000 inhabitants, there are only 3,479 volumes for every 10,000; that is 0.34 books per inhabitant (CERLALC-UNESCO, 2012). The Vancouver Public Library alone has 2.8 million volumes (Vancouver Public Library, nd); that is equivalent to 4.6 books per inhabitant.

Added to this, only 26.8% of households have a home computer, and 18.4 Internet access (OECD, 2011a), while the income of the richest is 25 times that of the poorest (OECD, 2011b). This along with the pervasiveness of the English language online (Dobson & Willinsky, 2009) no doubt influences the learner's formal, linguistic and content schemata or lack of. In short, Mexico has not yet achieved basic literacy, let alone multiliteracies, but how are they to acquire basic literacy without access to books and now mutliliteracies with no access to technology?

In the meantime, technological innovations continue at an alarmingly rate, as does research on how to approach these new technologies and new writing spaces; forgetting there are still many very far behind. Not only must we "attend to where exactly and by what means digital literacy can be said to be furthering, or impeding, educational and democratic, as well as creative and literary, ends" (Dobson & Willinsky, 2009:22), but also in finding ways to narrow the huge gaps that exists in terms of literacy and now multiliteracy. In addition, given the enormous gap that exists, any literacy and multiliteracy approach must take into account social context in order to design the best strategies to narrow this gap.

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en&containerItemId=/content/serial/18147364&accessItemIds=&mimeType=text/html

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Appendix 1

Hallo, Amerika, ich komme
Mit TWA zum Spartarif.

Gönnen Sie sich das himmlische Vergnügen, mit TWA den Atlantik zu überqueren. Und sparen Sie dabei mit dem günstigen TWA Holiday-Tarif auch noch Geld. Nahezu 100 Reiseziele in den USA haben wir auf unserem Flugplan. Sie brauchen uns nur noch zu sagen, in welche Stadt Sie wollen. Wir bringen Sie hin. Täglich von Frankfurt, Stuttgart oder München aus. Starten Sie mit einer der größten internationalen Airline, und lassen Sie sich von unserem Service so richtig verwöhnen.

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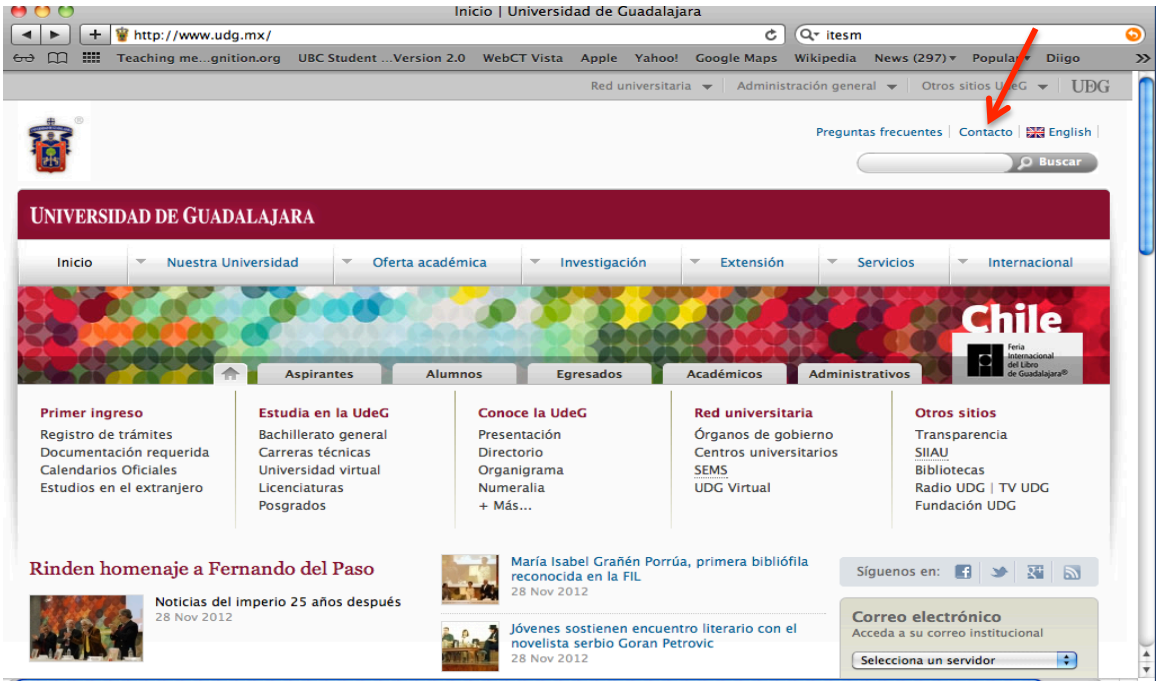
Der bequeme Weg nach U

Appendix 2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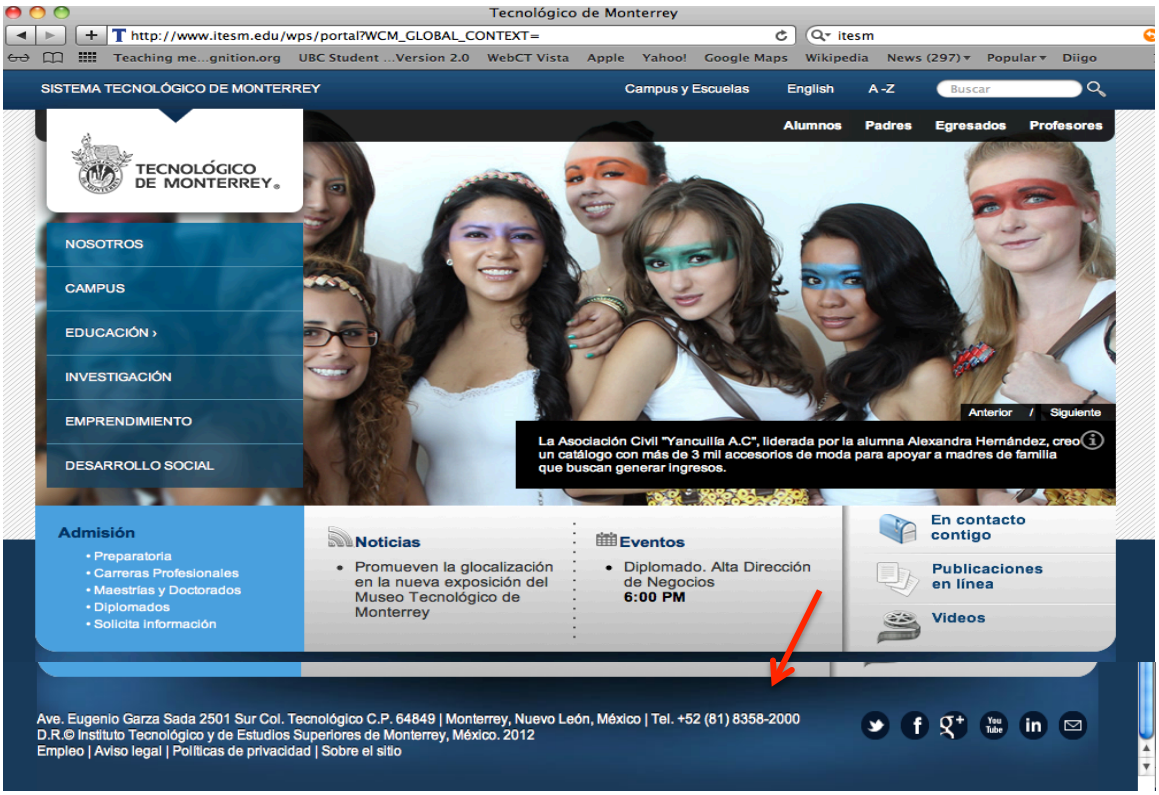
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