Foreword

When we got together in 1994, the members of what was to become known as the New London Group could barely have imagined how far and wide the ideas we explored and fashioned in that week might travel over the ensuing fifteen years. This is all the more surprising in a context where the world of meaning-making and representation a decade and a half later have been radically transformed, and in ways that could hardly be imagined back then. Today’s world, saturated as it is with websites, wikis, blogs, digital images, MP3s and digital video, was barely conceivable then. And perhaps soon we face the imminent demise or at least radical recasting of the newspaper, network television, bookstores and maybe even books, the music industry, cinema—some of the most familiar and foundational sites for the creation of meaning in the modern era. Nobody could have envisioned the proportions of these changes.

Yet somehow the ideas that emerged from our conversations have proven conceptually apt, and it seems from the growing use of these concepts, practically useful as well.

We wanted to say that the emerging world of meaning making would be more multimodal—the first of two facets of ‘multi’-ness—in which written, oral, visual, spatial, gestural and tactile modes of representation would be more closely intertwined. An alphabetical definition and pedagogical practice of literacy not only restricted literacy teaching to an artificially narrow spectrum within the range of human meaning-making; that narrowing, we felt, was becoming increasingly anachronistic. We could not have imagined the scale and speed of the drift towards multimodal communications that has subsequently occurred.

We also wanted to say that, despite its imperiousness, global English was becoming more and more internally differentiated and the range of its social languages was burgeoning—a marker of diverging and proliferating cultural identities, technical domains, professional practices, personal interests, affinity group sensibilities, peer group dispositions, and sites of formal or informal community. This was the other side of our two-faceted ‘multi’-ness. Here too, heritage English teaching was missing the mark, teaching exclusively to a single ‘standard’ form and singular literary canon. It was time to recognise, we claimed, that the main name of the representational game was to cross boundaries between the discourse communities in our everyday working, public and personal lives, rather than to teach to a ostensibly singular standard. Here too, nobody could have envisaged the pace of subsequent development of a deep civic pluralism and radical globalisation.

To address these profound transformations, we suggested that as literacy educators, we need to re-orient our pedagogical practices in some fundamental ways. These we captured in an overarching vision of meaning-making as design, and translated this into a pragmatic pedagogy of Multiliteracies: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice.

The design idea brings agency back into the meaning making process. A meaning maker has a range of available representational resources at their disposal (contextually variable grammars of the linguistic, the visual etc.). These we called ‘available designs’. They draw on these meanings to make
meaning, always remaking the world as they go and always in ways never quite heard or seen before, expressing the timbre of their voice, the uniqueness of their life experience, the depth of their identity, all in the most subtle but nevertheless important ways. This we called ‘designing’. Meaning-makers also transform themselves, building their identities through the act of meaning. These then become residues in the world of meaning. These are ‘the redesigned’. In turn, the redesigned becomes available designs for others, found representational objects for a new cycle of meaning making.

Moving away from the legacy didactic pedagogies of modern institutionalised schooling, where learners were to imbibe the disciplines of correct form, we suggested a pedagogy which recognised agency, difference and transformation, and which used these as resources for learning. Once again, we could never have envisaged the scale of the subsequent transformations in meaning making and the breadth of the participatory cultures of the new media which have blurred the once clearly defined social roles of writer and reader, creator and consumer, artist and audience, professional and amateur.

We have come to call this a shift in the balance of agency (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008). Video games are now a bigger business than Hollywood, and instead of a vicarious involvement in the narrative, a player assumes a role and the outcomes of the narrative contingent. Generic, mass produced products are being displaced by customised and customisable products. Top 40 playlists on broadcast radio are being displaced by personally constructed and infinitely varied iPod playlists. A handful of broadcast television stations are being replaced by a myriad of cable channel choices, interactive TV in which viewing options are customisable, and tens of millions of YouTube videos where amateur and professional stand undifferentiated. Everywhere, the balance of agency is shifting from a society of a few creators and many consumers, to a society of users, a more participatory culture, a culture of vibrant and by and large respectful difference.

This is a book which captures the spirit of our times. One cannot but be struck by the vivid stories of learners and their schools, and the astounding variety of their concerns and practices: the grade one students and their teacher working on digital storybooks; children’s interactions with Barbie, American Girl, Transformers and Hot Wheels, simultaneously on websites, with objects and in social relationships; Beatrice, Will and Dana, three students in a hallway discussing how they are going with their digital videos; students comparing Australian to American television humor; an Indigenous Australian boy whose mother’s art narrates their country; a school doing spatial literacy as it adds a gallery, a designated environmental space, and a walking tour to its physical setting; students working in computer cam-capture literacy zones; the video two young women made on the subject of peer pressure; a new literacies course in Hong Kong centred around a model of collaborative and dispersed ownership in a wiki; ICT used to support second language learning of Malay in Singapore classrooms; using the Multiliteracies pedagogy to teach chemistry; the multimodality of robotics in the curriculum. It would have been hard to imagine any of these vignettes of life in school even a decade ago.

This book brings a kaleidoscope of new learning practices to the light of day. Together, these tell of innovative uses of new media in learning, deep sensitivity to learner difference and the application of pedagogies of engagement and transformation. It is a powerful evidence base exemplifying new learning experiences and supporting new teaching practices.

It is also a book full of big ideas, difficult ideas, challenging ideas. Too often, educational research that is evidence rich is theoretically poor. This book represents big thinking and hard conceptual work at the same time as it is grounded in a powerful evidence base. It is a milestone in the evolution of ideas that began on the cusp of a new era, some fifteen years ago. It adds significant clarity to new pedagogies and new sociabilities which are yet still emergent and whose shape is sometimes blurred by the pace of contemporary transformations.

— Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope

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REFERENCES


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