Chapter 2
Reframing Conceptions of Contemporary Literacy Capabilities in Pre-Service Primary Teacher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the challenges of integrating new technologies with literacy education in pre-service primary teacher education in Australia. The authors describe the policy context and regulatory mechanisms controlling pre-service education, including a national set of professional standards for graduate teachers, a new national curriculum for school students, the introduction of high stakes national assessment for school students, and the looming threat of decontextualized back-to-the-basics professional entry tests for aspiring teachers. The chapter includes three case studies of the authors’ pedagogical practices that attempt to reframe conceptions of the literacy capabilities of pre-service teachers to reflect the complex and sophisticated requirements of teachers in contemporary schooling. The authors conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of these case studies as they illustrate the ways that pre-service teachers can be scaffolded and supported to develop creative capacity and critical awareness of the kinds of literacies required in the digital age despite restrictive regimes.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the experiences and research of five pre-service teacher educators across three Australian states working in an era of unprecedented change. We, the authors, are all responsible for planning and delivering English curriculum and literacy units to pre-service primary (elementary) teachers (hereafter PSPTs) undertaking four year degrees to become teachers of students aged 5 to 12 years. We have each researched and designed innovative curriculum for PSPTs in our respective institutions that explicitly and implicitly facilitate their engagement with multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas in English curriculum and literacy teaching and learning. The most compelling of these agendas include an inaugural set of national professional standards for graduate teachers, the first ever Australian Curriculum for English which expands the repertoires of literacy practices to include multimodal and digital texts, the introduction of high stakes national assessment for primary school students which narrows the repertoire of literacy practices to print-based practices and the looming threat of decontextualized back-to-the-basics professional entry tests for aspiring teachers. All of these reforms are happening in the midst of another unsubstantiated media campaign targeting falling literacy standards and falling teacher standards.

In their overarching analysis of the field of education, Thompson and Cook (2012) draw on a Deleuzian lens (Deleuze 1992) to discuss how agendas such as these act as “mechanisms of control”. Thompson and Cook (2012) suggest that we are moving from a disciplinary society to a control society, that disciplinary institutions such as schools are “in the midst of a general breakdown”, that disciplinary power is being replaced by modulatory power and that education is being seduced by business rationalities (p. 566).

They cite high stakes testing protocols as part of the transition from education as “disciplinary power” to education as “modulatory power”. This change to modulatory power is viewed “as a gradual, creeping seduction – the becoming-control society” (p. 565). Although not committing to a position of support or otherwise, Thompson and Cook (2012) demonstrate how a Deleuzian lens sharpens our “focus on the corporate and performative practices and policies dominating education” (p. 565).

This chapter is focused on how we might reframe conceptions of contemporary literacy capabilities in PSPT education while operating within a “control society”. We are motivated by Connell’s (2009) plea that in an era of rapid change we do not need a picture of “the good teacher” in the singular, but pictures of good teachers in the plural, and good teaching in the collective sense. We need models of teacher education that will support creative, diverse and just teaching practices in an educational future that we can expect to look different from the educational past (p. 226).

More specifically, as a collective, we seek to explore how our diverse understandings of literacy and the literacy capabilities of PSPTs are reflected in the pedagogical and assessment practices with which we engage as pre-service literacy educators. We begin by providing a contextual explanation of the modes of control currently being enacted in the Australian education sector. This is followed by a brief discussion about the diverse literacy capabilities required of PSPTs and the framework of literacy that we then use to describe our collective practices. These practices are illustrated through three case studies drawn from three different university programs. The literacy capabilities evident in these case studies are then mapped against the regulatory mechanisms governing our current work. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of this mapping and the ways for accommodating the diverse literacy requirements of teachers in contemporary classrooms.