Considerations for New Literacies Research, Policy, and Practice

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Defining what it means to be literate in the 21st century is a daunting task for researchers, teachers, and policymakers. With the advent of social networking sites, computer software programs, the World Wide Web, and personal computers, knowledge creation and sharing are no longer bound to print media. These phenomena are reshaping the context of schooling as we know it. Teachers are expected to incorporate more technology and culturally relevant strategies into their learning environments. Statistics show the average American child between the ages of 8-18 uses significantly more major media sources than he or she did five years ago (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Consequently, *new* and different conceptualizations of literacy are emerging. As Hagood insightfully points out in her introductory chapter, New Literacies should persist across spaces—in school and out of school. Yet, like other New Literacies scholars (e.g., Jocson, 2006; Kinloch, 2010; Kirkland, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, 1995), Hagood observes that in-school literacy practices are underdeveloped and do not yet adequately address the multimodal and integrated nature of our world or learning. Therefore, she describes New Literacies as "evolving social practices that coalesce new digital tools along with the old symbolic tools to achieve key motivating purposes for engagement in the literacy practice" (p. 62).

From a policy standpoint, Hagood's book is timely as it raises important questions concerning

how we choose to define comprehension and what it means to be literate. With changes to our nation's assessment system currently underway, the cases proffered in this text help crystallize what we once valued as a nation—creativity. Better assessment of comprehension and literacy will provide useful information to multiple stakeholders and will benefit certain groups of students and districts currently marginalized by the use of a single standardized test measure (Deshler & Hock, 2006; English, 2000; Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Hilliard, 2002, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Policy makers, administrators, teacher educators, curriculum specialists, teachers, parents, after-school professionals and all educational community members should consider the different, transformative, and robust practices presented in this text, as well as what these practices could mean for our next generation of leaders—our children. This text takes a bold approach at describing what some of these practices might look like in the classroom. A 21st century definition of literacy is used to "conceptualize literacy as socially situated and culturally constructed…including both print and non-print texts that acknowledges the vast literacy competencies in adolescents' literacy repertoires" (p. 91).

The text consists of nine chapters, each a case study authored by researchers and/or teachers. The first four chapters examine the intersections of in school and out of school literacy practices, while the remaining five chapters unearth the pedagogical designs occurring in schools. The authors filter their research using pedagogical components of design drawn from the work of the New London Group (1996). The elements include: (1) situated practice (which draws on relevant texts of users' lives), (2) overt instruction (which forms metalanguage for understanding text uses), (3) critical framing (which develops understandings of text meanings by context and purpose), and (4) transformative practice (Hagood, 2009, p. 3).

Several theoretical perspectives undergird the work in this text. Researchers who frame their work through multiple lenses will undoubtedly notice and appreciate the connections across the nine chapters. Constructivist thought, particularly social constructivism, which supports higher-order thinking and higher-order functioning stemming from social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) is a predominant theme. Consideration is given to the sociocultural viewpoint in that the study participants are interacting with several forces, sometimes simultaneously, to make sense of the text. These forces include the reader (past experiences), text (author's intentions), context (teacher's intentions), and society (politics and economics beyond the classroom) (Sweet & Snow, 2003).

In the first four chapters the authors discuss the connections of New Literacies across spaces, most prominently how out-of-school literacy practices have forged their way beyond the fringes of classroom practice. For example, the first chapter, *The Tupac Effect: A Case for Socially Relevant Education* by Bitz, explores how a project (Youth Music Exchange) originally taught in an after-school program was replicated in several classrooms across the nation and now other countries. The impetus for the program emerged from an evaluation Bitz conducted on a Baltimore school that had recently attended a symphony orchestra concert. Initially, he was supposed to study whether the Mozart Effect, (i.e., when students who listen to classical music score better on standardized tests) (Rauscher, Shaw, & Ky, 1993) was working with the students. One student informed Bitz that he thought the concert was boring and a complete waste of time. He suggested that if schools wanted him to do well academically, then they should study the Tupac Effect, and thus Youth Music Exchange was born. Students set up a recording studio in a

small room located in their school library, demonstrating how educators can capitalize on student interest by infusing media, art, and music. Findings suggest these learning practices helped students acquire academic concepts such as reading, writing, and problem solving in a meaningful context.

The second chapter, by Johnson and Rezak, focuses on critical media literacy, a practice that systematically critiques and evaluates mass media in an effort to help readers gain more agency in deciding their positioning to text, The title of the chapter, *Pancake Mountain*, refers to an underground television show. The show, created by a former advertising executive, airs on a public station and can also be streamed on the Internet (http://www.pancakemountain.com), making it very accessible to teachers and students. The show stems from a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) line of thinking, encouraging individuals to "stop consuming what is constructed (mainly commercially, *added*) for you and make your own culture" (p. 32). The authors purport that *Pancake Mountain* uses humor and creates a space for youth to come together to critique media and to learn how their identities are constructed by various forms of media (p. 25). The authors explain how teachers can learn more about the program, analyze popular television shows (Disney shows like *Hannah Montana* are frequent favorites on *Pancake Mountain*), and how studying critical media literacy might best be situated in a classroom context. As several scholars have noted (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Morrell, 2004, 2008; Trier, 2008), critical media literacy mainly deals with increasing agency, redefining textual positioning, and constructing knowledge of everyday life by critiquing one's social, economic, and political positioning.

Chapters three and four examine more ways in-school and out-of-school literacy practices may merge through DIY (do-it-yourself) media and museums. Chapter three explores adolescents' use of DIY media in out of school settings and suggests educators be made aware of the multiple ways these practices could motivate students. Also of significant importance in chapter four are the samples of virtual museum learning spaces that were used in a second grade classroom to foster museum literacies.

The next five chapters focus on the design of new literacy pedagogy in schools. In chapter five, *Using Blogging to Make Social Studies Content Engaging and Comprehensible*, Melissa Venters describes the critical framing and transformative practices she employed during her integrated Civil War unit with eighth-grade urban students. Following Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (Marzano & Kendall, 2006), Venters used www.classblogmeister.com to generate five questions for student response. This chapter offers a useful and explicit chart that describes how she communicated this assignment to her students. She also offers a brief review of research on New Literacies and blogging to help frame the unit of study and the methodology that she employed. Also significant is her detailed explanation of the forces impeding the delivery of her unit (time, technology issues, district filters, and so on). The major benefits to blogging are aligned with critical theory (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Freire, 1970; Gee, 1990; Street, 1995) because it creates the opportunity for students to focus on the close examination of social, political, racist, and economic forces as a tool to redefine the status quo.

In chapter six, Skinner and Lichtenstein present a compelling description of implementing digital storytelling in a middle school (grades 6-8) Gifted and Talented program focusing on the most

recent presidential election. The authors define digital storytelling as "[working with their students to help them harness the power of voice and imagery to connect people to their community by using technology that is relevant to the way we live today" (p. 92). In doing so, Skinner and Lichtenstein explore the literacy practices students learned from the project and how the implementation of the unit positioned students as critical consumers and active producers of knowledge. Similar to Venters' case study, these authors explain the intense obstacles concerning technology integration in the classroom, but also discussed how rewarding and educational the adventure can be. The authors in this chapter rejected traditional standards and meta-narratives, instead insisting that personal narratives are a form of knowledge and that traditional standards, often "normed" for dominant populations (Hilliard, 2002, 2003), continue to marginalize students. Chapter seven asserts how incorporating artifacts and personal objects from students' homes and communities can facilitate the student narrative writing process. The topic of special education is reviewed through a New Literacies perspective in chapter eight with special emphasis placed on current practice and future promises, while chapter nine is reserved for portraying successful middle school teachers who use New Literacies.

Although the major strengths displayed in this text advance what is known about New Literacies and benefit the field of literacy education, some limitations should be considered. Several scholars have noted the knowledge gaps (Hilliard, 2002) and opportunity gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2009) that continue to plague America's educational system. Additionally, scholars Delpit (1998) and Sizemore (see Bradley, 1996) wrote about the "rules of power" indicating that students should know the codes for success. This is especially important with standardized tests, so that tests are not used as a tool to further sort already marginalized students. The case studies in this text focus on a broad range of academic achievements. None of the studies mention being able to improve comprehension in the content areas as measured by standardized test scores (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). In a society that places a high premium on numbers, one wonders if this is the type of information needed to help New Literacies breach the walls of policy and gain better entry into classrooms. How can New Literacies improve academic achievement and provide relevant information for multiple stakeholders? One might also argue that the goals of New Literacies do not encompass improving standardized scores. In the next edition, the authors might consider investigating how New Literacy practices might be used to help redefine, from a policy standpoint, current assessment practices because we have learned that what gets tested is what gets taught (English, 2000) in most classrooms across the United States.

In addition, most of the case studies focus on English and social studies classrooms, leaving much to be desired in the areas of math and science. How can New Literacies foster greater levels of comprehension, critical thinking, engagement, and motivation in math and science? For some students reading in the content areas is like reading a foreign language—full of new vocabulary and difficult-to-understand material due to the various nuances such as content, text structure, vocabulary, style, tone, word choice, purpose and intended audience (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Content area literacy has a growing body of research (National Reading Panel, 2000; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; National Institute for Literacy, 2007) that examines how students read to understand expository material in subjects like math, science, history, and English. Expository reading has been found to encompass markedly different processes than narrative reading. It was thoroughly explained in the introduction that this text was not meant to be a "how-to" manual. However, researchers,

teachers, and policymakers might find some use in providing guidelines for how New Literacies might mesh within the current framework and constraints researchers and teachers face. How can we redefine assessment practices that meaningfully encourage 21st century learning in various content areas like math and science?

Also, more of this type of work may need to happen in "regular" classrooms without the support and expertise of researchers to filter the complications. Understandably, this is an embryonic field of research often requiring the support of experienced researchers, but at some point consideration for what types of job-embedded, professional development initiatives could be implemented to teach comprehension strategies for content area literacy using a New Literacies framework might be necessary. It might be insightful to describe how teachers, schools and districts negotiate obstacles such as time constraints, building filters, and computer issues rather than only listing them as hindrances to planning and implementation.

The New Literacies perspective is becoming more definitive as a theory, but as outlined in this text, generally is concerned with the design, redesign, critique, and broadening definitions of text. New Literacies underscore the importance of work that holds that literacy and learning are not neutral enterprises. The most interesting aspect of this work is how it pushes readers to "see" the multiple spaces New Literacies occupy—museums, television shows, after-school programs, the Internet, and more. It also delivers a clear message to the larger implications of studying *how* to include these practices, no longer *if* these practices belong in school settings. Of course this would alter the role of the teacher and would require a drastic revision of current assessment practices (also national, state, and local standards) and an overall paradigmatic shift regarding the function and purpose of educating students. Furthermore, this text offers a salient and unified message that New Literacies should not merely be encapsulated as a set of tools for "doing school," but rather be thought of as a mindset for creating space to invite students to employ 21st-century thinking.

Knowledge plays a very important role in our nation's growth and sustainability. Especially as the importance of knowledge expands under the influence of globalization, governments tend to consider education to be the best investment to the future. To this degree, investing in components of education that drive creativity and innovation seems optimal. *New Literacies Practices* helps shape how and what to research next by fusing the multiple dimensions and experiences of adolescents' lives and demonstrating how students can engage content area literacy, ultimately increasing their comprehension. Continuing to research the intricate and unique ways teachers seamlessly blend culture and content area literacy strategies to generate an array of 21st century learning experiences for adolescents might broaden current conceptualization of comprehension, critical thinking, engagement, and motivation in the classroom (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Hagood and the chapter authors are to be commended for bringing these very necessary topics to the forefront and providing a solid foundation for others to build upon.

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