Multimodal Literacy
RESEARCHING
CLASSROOM PRACTICE

MAUREEN WALSH
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Maureen Walsh
At the close of the first decade of the new millennium, we know much more about young children’s engagement with a range of digital and multimodal texts from birth. There is a rich range of research that outlines how children navigate a range of media and modes in their meaning-making practices outside of school. However, we still lack in-depth analyses of multimodal text analysis and production in primary classrooms. This book, therefore, is important in that it provides a range of insights, using case studies of innovative practices in classrooms, into approaches to curricula and pedagogy in a digital age. The rich examples of children’s work are located within detailed accounts of the context of their production, which enables a fuller understanding of how to foster children’s skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to the analysis and production of multimodal, multimedia texts. A breathtaking range of texts is included in these pages, from videos and digital books to comics, blogs and wikis. The way in which the affordances of new media enable collaborative approaches to reading and writing is highlighted and the implications for children’s engagement in a participatory culture reflected upon. Furthermore, the outline of classroom practice is underpinned by a clear account of the theoretical framework for this work. Challenging concepts are explained clearly and illustrated through helpful diagrams and classroom examples, offering a praxis of multimodality. The author cuts a clear path across the complex landscape of contemporary communication and highlights the key features of this new and exciting terrain. By the end of this book, readers will have a fuller understanding of the nature of teaching and learning in a digital age. The account is not simply celebratory, however. Exciting though it is to be presented with such innovative accounts of classroom practice, the author does outline the challenges to be faced; she does not shy away from asking searching questions about the nature of assessment, or the relationship between traditional, print-based literacy skills and the ‘new basics’ of multimodal, multimedia text analysis and production. These are the key questions which will face us in the decades ahead and they are questions which will require rigorous, research-based accounts of pioneering classroom practice in which teachers and academics collaborate in the investigation of significant pedagogical and curricula issues. This book provides a model for that work and highlights how, through respectful and reflective approaches to classroom-based research, we can work across traditional professional boundaries in the pursuit of new knowledge. We can be certain that, in the years ahead, children will move ever more steadily into a world in which the reading and writing of multimodal, multimedia texts is dependent upon a set of skills and knowledge that we are only just in the process
of working out. At a time when we lack considered accounts of multimodality in practice, this book provides a solid grounding for future explorations and sets out a clear agenda for action. As the author suggests, we need to move beyond the “new” of “new literacies” if we are to develop classroom curricula and pedagogy fitting for the 21st century and this text does just that – thus, in itself, offering a “new” and exciting approach to accounts of multimodal classroom practice.

Jackie Marsh,
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and The Department of Educational Studies
University of Sheffield, October 2010
NEW MEANS OF COMMUNICATION: WHEN DOES THE ‘NEW’ END?

From the time of writing this book to the time when it has been published, there will have been changes in digital communications technology. These changes inevitably impact on the literacy practices of students at home and at school. Technological changes have always impacted on human communication and contributed to social change, however the impact of digital technologies in the 21st century has been unprecedented. Coiro et al (2008) aptly sum up this impact:

No previous technology for literacy has been adopted by so many, in so many different places, in such a short period, and with such profound consequences. No previous technology for literacy permits the immediate dissemination of even newer technologies of literacy to every person on the Internet by connecting to a single link on a screen. (pp.2–3)

At the moment we are able to communicate instantly with combinations of text, photos or videos through mobile phone technology, different types of computers and multimedia devices, such as the Kindle, the iphone and the ipad, and obtain instant information from the internet using these devices and their applications. With Web 2.0, social changes have accompanied these technological developments. We can participate in twittering, wikis, blogs or various social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Flikr); or participate in a virtual environment through gaming or in virtual worlds such as Second Life. Many such sites are rapidly developing for children (Bebo, ClubPenguin.com, Poptropica.com, FreeRealms.com). These communication environments are changing the way people present themselves and the way relationships are developed. We know that
new technology is constantly being developed so that smaller and more mobile communication forms will become available. The ‘new’ of the future is constantly replacing the ‘new’ of now. We do not know how these continued developments will impact on society but we need to examine what these constant changes mean for literacy education in schools.

Implications of these changes in communication for education have been debated for some time and new theoretical views of literacy have been supported by worldwide research. However the actual transfer of new theories into educational policy and curriculum has been much slower. In Australia we have an Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2010) that includes references to digital texts and multimodal texts, thus acknowledging that students may create these texts as well as read and view them. This acknowledgment needs to be further developed so that the links between new theories of communication and classroom practice are clearly articulated.

THE RESEARCH BASIS OF THIS BOOK

This book provides ideas for such articulation between theory and practice by reporting on ongoing research in real classrooms. For several years the Catholic Education Office, Sydney with the Australian Catholic University has supported this research in its primary schools to examine what the constant changes in communication mean for literacy education in the twenty-first century. The principal aims of the research have been to investigate:

1. the literacy strategies needed for reading, using and producing multimodal texts; and
2. the relevant, explicit pedagogy appropriate for integrating literacy learning within both print-based and digital communication environments.

These aims were linked to goals of professional learning for teachers. Teachers were engaged in new learning by participating in the research. In initial meetings with the researcher they were presented with theories of literacy within new communicative, multimodal environments and encouraged to reflect on the classroom implications of these. They were led to examine the design and structure of multimodal texts. Through the organisation of information sessions about the research, teachers understood the aims of the research and were encouraged to engage in reflective practice through their planning and observations of student learning. Samples of teachers’ reflections and students’ comments are provided through this book to show the impact of the research on the teachers and on student learning.

This research has been occurring in primary schools in metropolitan Sydney over the last five years. In this book, for ease of organisation and currency, the
main aspects of research referred to will be the classroom data that was analysed in 2008 and 2009. Sixteen teachers from six Catholic Primary Schools (Kindergarten to Year 6) participated in the research in 2008 and thirty-four teachers from seventeen Primary schools in 2009. Many of the schools had large numbers of second language learners of English. Teachers volunteered for participation in the research in response to an invitation from their employing authority. They were selected on the basis of their interest and experience, particularly their interest in investigating new pedagogy for literacy. Teachers worked within teams, usually of two or three, and developed integrated programs across different curriculum areas, combining print and digital texts for students’ engagement in reading, responding to, viewing, writing and producing texts.

**Methodology**

The study used a mixed method design with online questionnaires and multiple case studies. The online questionnaires were designed to obtain information about students’ use of the internet and digital texts, as well as print-based texts, outside school. Questionnaires were completed by teachers at the beginning and end of each year. The qualitative design of the study was an incorporation of professional learning and research. Teachers worked with the researcher within the paradigm of collaborative participatory research (Wagner, 1997, pp. 13–22; Yelland, Lee, O’Rourke & Harrison, 2008, p.16). This approach to research maintains a balance between developing new knowledge and involving the members of the community with the teachers as partners in the research. The researcher developed the survey and completed classroom observations and analysis of data aided by research assistants and curriculum advisers.

Teachers planned their program and kept diaries with notes on their classroom observations. They submitted these diaries and a written report along with samples of students’ work in print and digital form. Data consisted of classroom observations, diaries in photo and video files; teachers’ programs, reports and reflections; samples of students’ work in print and digital mode, and students’ comments on their learning. Guidelines were developed for observations of specific aspects of students’ literacy behaviour. The data was analysed to discern common themes related to specific aspects of language and literacy learning. In the first instance students’ work was separated into outcomes and indicators from the NSW K-6 English Syllabus of talking and listening, reading, viewing and writing. Each case study was analysed to identify how aspects of digital communication were incorporated into the criteria of talking and listening, reading and viewing, and writing.

The results of the research provide specific examples of ways in which teachers and students were engaging with digital communication for language and literacy learning and shaping future classroom practice. Detailed findings, methodology
and data analysis are discussed in other publications (Walsh, 2008; 2009; 2010). Significant aspects of the findings are presented and discussed in this book.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book attempts to demonstrate the articulation of theory into classroom research and practice within a conceptual framework of literacy as grounded in social practice (Barton, 1994; Street, 1995). The author acknowledges the research that has occurred in the last two decades on aspects of multiliteracies, multimodality, semiotics and new literacies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001; Kress, 2003; 2010; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Marsh, 2002; Unsworth, 2001) and builds on these through new classroom research.

No doubt many teachers worldwide are adapting in creative and effective ways to the changes in digital communication. This book does not offer or propose a definitive methodology, nor is it focused on all the facilities or potential of digital technology. Rather it provides snapshots of how several Sydney teachers, with available resources, have adapted to the changes in digital communication to develop appropriate and sustainable pedagogy. The results of the research are shown to provide specific examples of ways in which teachers and students have been engaging with digital communication for literacy learning and shaping future classrooms. The research demonstrates how literacy is multimodal and needs to be re-defined within new communication environments.

This book draws on the theories and research of others and builds on these through classroom research to:

- provide evidence of new literacy practices within print and digital environments
- describe and define these new literacy practices
- present examples of changed pedagogy for literacy learning
- provide teachers with ideas for reflecting on their own literacy teaching practices.