Thinking Through New Literacies for Primary and Early Years

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Introduction

This book explores new literacies in relation to teaching and learning in primary schools. New literacies as a concept have grown in academic standing since the late 1990s following the work of the New London Group (1996). However, there has been little work that is explicitly focused on the teaching of new literacies in primary schools despite the ever-widening range of literacies that children encounter in their lives. Indeed, much of the emphasis on literacy in schools is closely linked to ‘traditional’ literacy and its relationship with standardised testing.

This book considers a wide spectrum of new literacies and the role that they play in children’s development, learning and lives. Each chapter is focused on a different literacy or aspect of such and offers a discussion of how the literacy can be best defined as well as thoughtful consideration of its impact on teaching and learning. It is not meant to be a guide to a collection of activities that are proven to work in the classroom. Rather, it is meant to help develop a deep understanding of new literacies in order to provide reflective practitioners with the tools needed to provide well-reasoned teaching and learning activities that will develop children’s literacy in a wide sense of the word.

Who is this book for?

This book is for both pre-service and in-service teachers working or preparing to work in primary schools.

Whatever your role, you may find the book valuable to help you think through the pedagogy behind new literacies in order to support your ongoing professional development.

The team of authors who have written this book share many years of experience in teaching in primary schools, including as curriculum leaders, coordinators and school principals. All now work in higher education as teacher educators and share a passion for the use of ICT in teaching and learning. It is this passion for the flexible approaches that ICT can offer which provided the catalyst to write this book and you will find many references to the close relationship that technology and new literacies share.
Critical thinking skills

This book makes use of a number of different thinking skills, which are integrated into the various chapters. These include:

- **Consider** – the factors that influence these decisions
- **Interpret** – people’s motivation and the consequences of these actions
- **Compare** – different actions, people and contexts
- **Articulate** – your beliefs and assumptions (in speech and writing)
- **Discuss** – with other people – tutors, other students, teachers – the issues raised
- **Identify** – what you have to do or to avoid, to make your plans successful
- **Analyse** – the reasons there may be for these actions

Each chapter begins with an overview of the key points that will be considered in the chapter. Each chapter contains a number of critical thinking exercises, which will draw on the list of skills identified above to help you to focus your thoughts and develop your understanding of the issues in a structured way. They are accompanied by a commentary that provides some feedback on your likely responses to the critical thinking activity. Each chapter also includes at least one case study, which will be used to illustrate, in a practical manner, some of the key themes from the chapter.

**Chapter 1** is focused around an overview of new literacies. It does this by considering what is meant by literacy and how understanding of this has changed over time. This provides a justification for why our understanding of it needs to be broadened to incorporate the range of new literacies, which are part of our lives. Chapter 1 explores different models of literacy, which go beyond the confines of being able to decode words that are written on a page and provides an example of the text from a SATs (Standard Assessment Test) paper in order to elaborate on the social and cultural aspects that are bound up in the words that we read. It provides examples ranging from the use of language forms in text messages sent via mobile phones to the use of tablet computers in education.

**Chapter 2** has as its focus the role of technology in supporting early reading and writing. It begins with an exploration of the impact that TV can have on the literacy development of young children and the importance of parental views and support in this. It then progresses to use Postman Pat as an example of how familiarity with a popular TV character can provide a context for the development of a range of literacy skills that can be supported by a wide range of technologies. This then develops into a discussion that analyses the potential of using film and visual images as a vehicle for developing many key early literacy skills.

**Chapter 3** concerns verbal literacy and particularly its links to online technologies. The use of blogging tools is an example of this where writing is similar in format to verbal forms of language so it is used as the basis of a case study. Other online strategies include ‘quad’ blogging, fan fiction and the use of Twitter with a Year 2 class. The problems that can be raised by seemingly simple Internet searches is discussed in depth and forms a useful introduction to Chapter 4.
Chapter 4 explores what is meant by information literacy and makes connections between the definitions of literacy that were discussed in Chapter 1 and the way in which information literacy is defined. It builds on the examples provided in Chapter 3 to argue that information literacy is an essential and multi-faceted skill. It offers some frameworks through which to consider what is meant by information literacy and how it might be applied in classroom environments. The way in which information is filtered is used to start the chapter and ideas develop through to a section in which the importance of creating information, rather than simply consuming it, is emphasised.

Chapter 5 considers oral and aural literacy through the medium of music and the role that digital technologies play in music. It will encourage you to consider how widely you use music in the classroom and if the genre of music you use would match that listened to by children outside of the classroom. It goes on to explore the links between music and literacy and as such it emphasises the important role that music can play in children’s wider learning of literacy. It considers the emotional impact of particular pieces of music and the effect that music can have in films and so on. It progresses on to outline some practical ICT tools that can be used to bring music making and remixing into the classroom.

Chapter 6 starts with a case study that outlines the vast array of visual information that is available to us as we go about our daily lives. This is used to discuss the point that literacy is concerned with understanding, not simply decoding, words and that understanding of visual signs and symbols is part of the literacy of our daily lives. It moves on to look at the links between visual literacy and reading, writing and speaking and listening. It concludes with an example that looks at how a form of critical media analysis can tie all of these together.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of identity in cyberspace. Many of the chapters in this book make reference to the role of technology in supporting new literacies and literacy development and this chapter explores the issues that arise when personalities are represented online. It offers an insight into the differences between ‘digital natives’ and ‘digital immigrants’ and develops this into a study of the amount of personal information that digital natives frequently make available online. This leads on to a discussion of the vital role that e-safety plays in making use of technology to support the development of new literacies before considering how avatars can be used to help represent personalities online.

Chapter 8 looks at new literacies and inclusion. It begins by highlighting that access to literacy has been historically used as a means of withholding information and power from large sections of society. This is used to set the scene for an exploration of the role of inclusion and new literacies. This covers two perspectives: first, the way that new literacies can support inclusion; and second, special steps that might be needed to ensure that all children are included when working with new technologies. There are sections on new literacies and inclusion, children with English as an additional language, children with special educational needs and new literacies from a feminist perspective.

Chapter 9 looks at how copyright affects the ways in which teachers use a range of materials in the classroom. This includes the special provisions in the copyright legislation that allow teachers to use copyrighted materials without the permissions usually needed, and some practical tips on managing copyright issues.
This chapter will introduce you to some definitions of what it means to be literate and encourage you to take a critical approach to the ways in which the term ‘literacy’ is used in education policy documents, in the media, in school and in everyday conversations.

The critical thinking exercises in this chapter focus on:

- analysing widely held assumptions about what it means to be literate, including your own
- identifying the key features of The New Literacy Studies
- considering the relationship between literacy and technology
- articulating the implications for educators

The key ideas discussed are: literacy definitions, literacy models, ‘new’ literacies, texts, technology and pedagogy.

Introduction

This chapter begins with a case study that introduces themes of literacy, technology and pedagogy, which will be explored in greater detail in this and subsequent chapters. In this chapter we explore ideas about what it means to be literate and how definitions of literacy have changed over time. We identify some of the assumptions that lie behind these definitions and consider how our own ideas about literacy have been influenced by background, education, experience and training.
We turn then to the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS) from which the term *new literacies* emerges and identify its key features. We consider how sociocultural perspectives encourage us to think of literacy as a social practice rather than as a set of skills to be mastered. We critically evaluate the old and new literacy dichotomy and discuss whether there is room for both perspectives in the primary classroom. Finally we consider the role of digital technologies in the teaching of literacy and consider key pedagogical issues and implications for practitioners.

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**Case study**

At a primary school children and teachers gather for the first ever *KidsMeet* event, where children take the place of teachers and present to each other (and to the world via video-link) something they have learned in class that inspires them, has made a difference to them or that they think is worth sharing with everyone else.

There are 12 presentations from children aged 5 to 11 years old, on a range of topics from drama games to Twitter. Most children speak in small groups, although one pupil does a presentation all on her own.

Year 6 students talk about their ‘digital pencil-cases’ (known in ‘teacher talk’ as iPods and iPads), which are great for publishing their writing straight to a blog and for responding to comments from their world-wide audience. They are also keen to show off how the audio features of their digital pencil-cases make their ideas accessible to all ages. The youngest presenters, from Year 1, demonstrate outstanding ICT expertise as they provide a live demonstration of audio and image editing and explain how this has inspired and enriched their retelling of *Cinderella*.

The presentations in the hall break off as a live video conference call is received where four Year 4 boys introduce the series of video tutorials they have created, demonstrating how to write ‘exciting sentences’. Back in the hall, children from another school demonstrate how to make computer mini-games with a program called Kodu, while students from a primary school show how they use Google Apps to work collaboratively with when researching, creating and presenting their topic work on evacuees. A Year 6 pupil recommends the use of Popplet to organise topic work and last but not least, Year 5 children talk about their play scripts and show a mini horror movie they have made based upon the *BrainPOP* series. They talk about how they learned to edit, act, script, write, direct and produce their movie.

This *KidsMeet* event (since followed by others) provides a snapshot into some of the inspiring work taking place in primary classrooms every day. However, if you enter the phrase ‘*KidsMeet*’ into a search engine you can browse the pupil and teacher blogs, videos and photos to get a full flavour of the event directly from its participants.

*KidsMeet* is a pupil-focused event designed by teachers to provide children with opportunities to showcase their learning. The primary focus is on literacy, including speaking and listening and the use of new technologies to support and enhance learning. During this chapter we will analyse some ideas about literacy and technology in order to better understand the rationale behind this and similar initiatives.

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1 You can read more about this first meeting at [http://lordlit.com/2011/06/17/741/](http://lordlit.com/2011/06/17/741/)
Chapter 1: What’s new about new literacies?

Key idea: **Literacy**

Isn’t literacy just about learning to read and write?

Few educational practices have greater ability to prompt passionate debate than the teaching of reading and writing.

No educational practice is neutral. All learning is based on some assumptions and the process of becoming literate is no exception. Even arriving at a definition of what it means to be literate is not straightforward, as you will discover in this chapter. Each day-to-day practice that you perhaps take for granted in our schools is the product of sometimes fiercely contested social and political processes. Few educational practices have greater ability to prompt passionate debate than the teaching of reading and writing.

Today we regard ‘literacy’ as a highly desirable condition and ‘illiteracy’ is portrayed as a scandal, disease or epidemic to be eliminated at all costs. Prior to the twentieth century, however, it was feared that mass literacy might lead to social unrest, by raising the expectations of the poor through access to subversive and radical literature and encouraging them to question the political and social status quo. The notion that literacy should be acquired in early childhood and that an individual’s failure to do so would have calamitous consequences, for them personally and for society as a whole, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Three main reasons are usually offered for the importance of mass literacy. These are linked to the economic and social well-being of the state and to personal advancement. It is now held to be self-evident that a literate workforce is a productive workforce; essential to a nation’s economic well being. The performance of students, relative to those from other countries in international league tables of literacy, is watched anxiously and slippage ‘down the international tables’ is a matter for media comment and political concern. Secondly, literacy is seen as a social good. Links have been made between childhood poverty and low literacy levels and there is particular anxiety regarding the high levels of illiteracy among inmates of prisons. Young white males from lower socio-economic classes and indigenous young people in particular are believed to be marginalised through their poor literacy skills and resulting exclusion from employment and education. Finally, literacy is valued as a route to self-actualisation. Personal fulfilment is held to be a direct consequence of literacy and is linked to an individual’s ability to read and write fluently for pleasure, for personal empowerment, to express creativity and to engage fully in a world dominated by print.
Critical thinking exercise 1

Consider the following tests of literacy that have been used separately at different times and by different people to assess literacy capability in populations and individuals. Do any of them surprise you?

A literate person can:

1. read and write his or her own name
2. read, write and speak in English at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society
3. with understanding both read and write a short, simple statement on his everyday life
4. understand, interpret and deduce information from a given text
5. name one person by name or title who is part of the judicial branch of government in Alabama
6. communicate proficiently, including with technology

Variously, these ‘literacy tests’ have been used: to assess historical [1], national [2] and global [3] rates of literacy in populations; to select children at age 11 for grammar school education [4]; as a test applied to people of African American ethnicity in order for them to be granted voting rights [5]; to assess suitability for an administrative post [6].

Discuss which, if any, of these definitions seem to you to be reasonable tests of literacy. What assumptions or hidden agendas can you detect in the statements? Which of the three priorities for literacy do you think are prioritised in these statements?

Comment

Definitions of what it means to be literate have changed over the years as society itself has changed. Being recognised as a literate person depends upon who is measuring literacy, as well as how and why. Organisations that devise tests of literacy often go into detail about the results of their testing and the conclusions that can be drawn from their results, but they rarely spell out the assumptions that underlie their models of literacy.

To further illustrate the contentious nature of literacy and literacy tests, consider the ongoing debate around NAPLAN. National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Critics of NAPLAN argue from a range of positions and particular groups of critics focus on the aspects of literacy that are assessed in the Reading, Writing and Language Conventions tests. For example, Lee Willett and Allan Gardner have de-constructed the Spelling part of the Language Conventions test. A series of papers written by leading literacy educators across Australia have been published and include some specifically critiquing the aspects of reading and writing being assessed. To understand the background to the debate and how some of the tensions arise, you will need to examine contrasting theoretical models of literacy.

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2 See http://www.nap.edu.au/
3 See http://www.iaea.info/documents/paper_4d737fd.pdf
Chapter 1: What’s new about new literacies?

Key idea: **Models of literacy**

Understanding the polarised views of literacy helps to gain an insight into the way that literacy is defined and how it can be developed.

Models of literacy can be classified into two main types: autonomous models and social models. An autonomous or individual model of literacy identifies a person as ‘literate’ if they have mastered a set of discrete skills, of which foremost is the ability to relate spoken sounds (phonemes) with symbols (graphemes) such as alphabetic characters. All writing is a visual representation of language and all languages that have a writing system (orthography) rely on a shared agreement that symbols and sounds stand in a systematic relationship to each other. Some languages, such as modern Turkish, have a stable, one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds; others, such as English, have a more complex system with many exceptions and irregular forms. For example, consider the sound which is pronounced ‘ay’ (as in ‘day’) in the following words: *way, maid, save, great, rein, reign, eight, fête, straight, champagne, grey*. It has been found (Seymour et al. 2005) that it takes children roughly two years longer to read English than to read Finnish, which has a more regular system. This relationship of sounds to letters has been likened to a code. Children are said to have ‘cracked the code’ when they can reliably encode and decode common patterns of sounds and symbols; however, as we have seen, there are many exceptions to the common patterns and there is much more work for children and their teachers to do before they can be described as fully literate. For example, the many words in the English language that have irregular, inconsistent and unique patterns (such as ‘yacht’) need to be memorised during repeated exposure to print.

The autonomous model of literacy identifies learning to read as a technical and neutral skill, based on memorisation and application of phonic patterns and the irregular exceptions, in order to crack the reading code. Literacy is essentially an individual cognitive process that takes place within the learner’s own head.

Critics of the autonomous model of literacy raise a number of problems with it. Firstly, they suggest that the model makes it easy for failure to read and write to be blamed on the learner, through lack of ability, application or motivation; or on the teacher, through lack of ‘correct’ teaching and remediation. They suggest we need to look more widely into the complex reasons for some children failing to learn to read. A further criticism is that reliance on over-simplified definitions of literacy can result in disadvantaging already marginalised groups in society, through a muddled process of cause and effect. If poor literacy levels are most often identified among deprived socio-economic groups, then is poverty a cause of illiteracy or a result of it? If illiteracy is deemed to be a cause of poverty then resources may be unevenly directed toward raising school literacy scores, at the expense of other policy initiatives to tackle deprivation.

Supporters of social models of literacy argue that literacy is much more than the ability to encode or decode text. Paolo Freire is a key figure in proposing socially and culturally inspired alternatives to autonomous models of literacy. Reading (and writing) must be accompanied by critical reflection.
developed through social interaction, before it can truly be defined as ‘literacy’. Freire is particularly critical of the notion of functional literacy; the ability to read and write sufficiently well to play a part in the social environment and contribute to economic growth, but not well enough to critique, challenge or change the existing social order. Freire would regard a reading test that includes sounding out groups of letters, without regard for meaning and context, as an inadequate indicator of literacy. For him, encoding and decoding alphabetic print must be integrated into a far wider context; one that encourages learners to collaboratively make sense of their world.

During the 1990s an integrated model of literacy emerged, that took into account both autonomous and social perspectives. This approach was perhaps most clearly described by Freebody and Luke (1990) as The Four Resources Model of literacy, which defines literacy as a linked repertoire of capabilities (see Figure 1.1).

![Diagram of the Four Resources Model of literacy]

It is important to note that Freebody and Luke do not intend their model to be developmental; the roles of the learner described in the model are not learned in any particular order but develop alongside each other. All four resources are equally important and each should be systematically integrated into planned learning sequences at all levels of schooling.

Critical thinking exercise 2

Consider a recent literacy lesson that you have taught or observed. Reflecting on what you have read in this section about models of literacy, can you identify any features of the lesson that reflect autonomous, socio-cultural or integrated approaches to literacy development?

Comment

It may seem a long step from debates about which type of reading test should be taken by six-year-olds to discussions of power in society, but it is the political and ideological roots of many of the key features of literacy teaching that we now take for granted, which leads to such fierce debate about the literacy curriculum and teaching approaches. Understanding the theoretical background of these debates and examining our own assumptions about what literacy is and how it is developed supports us in making informed choices between different approaches to teaching. The next section introduces you to the field of New Literacy Studies and discusses how the ideas that lie behind it are already influencing the way that literacy is and could be, taught in our schools.

Key idea: Discourses

The field of ‘The New Literacies’ is based on a socio-cultural perspective of what it means to be literate in our society and builds on the ideas of Freire (above) and also those of James Paul Gee (1996). Gee’s work is based on the assumption that each individual first acquires a primary ‘Discourse’5, a particular way of talking, listening, valuing, behaving and interacting with others. Children absorb a primary Discourse long before they begin formal education. “Primary Discourses are those to which people are apprenticed early in life during their primary socialization as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings” (Gee 1996, 137).

Gee suggests that we adopt a number of secondary Discourses as we develop, through the influence of education, work and social groups. We each have only one primary Discourse but we can adopt many secondary Discourses. Gee defines literacy as “the mastery (or fluent performance) of a secondary Discourse” (2007). The more dissimilar any secondary Discourse is from our primary Discourse, then the more effort and resources will be needed to learn it. Therefore a child who begins school with a primary Discourse that is very different to the school Discourse is, at least potentially, disadvantaged. ‘Literacy’, for these children, will be harder to achieve. Not all Discourses are equal, according to Gee and some are associated with greater social power and status than others. These

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5 Gee differentiates between Discourse (with a capital D) and discourse (lower case d) to differentiate between different concepts in his work.
are known as dominant Discourses. Gee argues that dominant groups in society apply various tests and filters to identify individuals who have developed fluency in the dominant Discourse and these tests are often focused on ‘superficial’ features of language such as spelling, grammar and accent.

**Critical thinking exercise 3**

In the UK, SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) tests are given at the end of year 2, year 6 and year 9. A famous English author, Michael Rosen, recently critiqued the 2011 English SAT paper which included a comprehension exercise of an article from the Travel Section of the *Sunday Times* (16 February 2003) entitled: ‘Caves and Caving in Davely Dale – Visitors’ Guide.’

Here is a sample of text from the SATs paper, quoted by Rosen.

> And I was struck by the beauty you can only see underground. Etched on a wall, as big as my hand, are the delicate fronds of a soft coral. Further on, a long expanse of wall seems to have been covered in melted candle wax: in fact it’s rock and the surreal effect is produced by the same process that makes stalactites.

Rosen analyses the SATs sample text and accompanying comprehension questions in detail; commenting as follows:

> What kind of child is this booklet easy for? What kind of child is this booklet difficult for and why? I’ll tell you what kind of child this booklet is easy for? The child I once was. And this is why:

1. I was read to every night from the time I was one or two, till I was about seven or eight.
2. One or other of my parents still read to me regularly and on appropriate occasions until my father stopped writing at the age of about 85.
3. With a combination of library books, bought books, comics, annuals, magazines, sports programmes, catalogues, I and my brother were surrounded with print material – texts, if you like – for the whole of our lives in our parents’ house.
4. Most of these texts were talked about and argued about, performed and played with almost every day.
5. Though we didn’t go caving before I was 11, we were taken for most of the holidays on the kind of outdoor camping holidays, which brought us into contact with people who talked about landscape in terms very similar to the ones used in this booklet.
6. We had a very same hinterland of art, history, zoology [and] architecture being talked about in our house or on trips that would have made most of the passage fairly comprehensible.

My parents were both teachers who would go on to become teacher trainers, (my father a professor) but who were also committed to the process of learning about human beings in the environment which this passage and the whole booklet exemplifies.

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6 See [http://www.satsguide.co.uk/what_are_sats.htm](http://www.satsguide.co.uk/what_are_sats.htm)
7 Rosen’s full critique can be found online on the Times Educational Supplement forum at [http://community.tes.co.uk/forums/p/488574/6732581.aspx#6732581](http://community.tes.co.uk/forums/p/488574/6732581.aspx#6732581)
Rosen concludes:

In other words, the eleven-year-old me (and of course there is a tiny minority of eleven-year-old ‘me’s’ in the cohort who’ve just done this SAT paper), would have been at a fantastic advantage tackling this paper.

Consider your reactions to Rosen’s critique. If you agree with his analysis, what do you think the likely reaction might be of a child taking this examination whose primary Discourse is very different to that of the writers of the article (or that of the young Rosen)?

Discuss what type of literacy text might be a more appropriate choice in this context than an extract from a newspaper, in order to provide a fair assessment of reading and comprehension skills.

If you disagree with Rosen (and plenty of people do), articulate the arguments you would make in response to his critique.

This excerpt is from the Year 3 Test Reading Magazine available on the NAPLAN website as an example of test materials. What kind of child is this booklet easy for? What kind of child is this booklet difficult for and why?8

Some children are by a river, with a parent, hoping to see a platypus. On the fifth afternoon, when I think even Daniel’s dad was getting a little impatient, we definitely saw a platypus. It came right under where we were. We’d changed where we sat, gone downstream a bit to a kind of fishing platform that old Mr Beatty had built on the riverbank.

Comment

You may agree with some of the criticisms offered by Rosen of the SATs test paper above, but still consider that it is an appropriate test of literacy for 11 year olds. You might argue that even if the style of the extract is not a close match to a child’s primary Discourse it does nevertheless represent the dominant Discourse and it is important that schools teach children how to interpret and use this Discourse to help them get on in life.

On the other hand, you might feel that this Discourse represents a narrow view of our society and that success in life can be achieved by many routes. You might believe that children with backgrounds that differ enormously from that of Michael Rosen will be so daunted by this Discourse that they become alienated and unable to access the benefits of education at all.

The position you take on this argument is less important than your ability to identify underlying assumptions and critically evaluate the different perspectives in order to arrive at your own point of view.

So far you have considered the socio-cultural ideology behind the concept of new literacies and thought about the extent to which educational practice is influenced by events and ideas beyond the classroom. In the following section you will begin to identify just what else is new about new literacies.

Key idea: **Texts: range and meaning**

You have already come across a number of definitions of literacy drawn from a variety of sources and here is one more: Lankshear and Knobel define literacies as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses” (2010, 64).

By this definition, they explain, three concepts are implied. Firstly, individuals can be said to engage in literacy when they apply their knowledge and skills to accomplish tasks in purposeful and socially recognised ways. This includes through the use of technology, as well as via the printed word. Secondly, texts are defined as consisting of any idea is encoded in a form that allows it to be retrieved even when the ‘encoder’ is not present in person. So, for example, “someone who ‘freezes’ language as a digitally encoded passage of speech and uploads it to the Internet as a podcast, is engaging in literacy” (2010, 225).

Thirdly, they emphasise the discursive nature of literacy. Literacy is not a standalone skill but is dependent upon meaning and meaning is always socially negotiated. You are probably familiar with ‘textese’, the abbreviated form of writing used on mobile phones and in instant messaging, designed originally to fit long messages into limited character sets. An example is “CU l8tr 2nt m8” that can be decoded as “see you later tonight, mate”. If you are a confident texter, you will not only know at once what the message means, but also will probably be able to tell straight away that it has been written by someone who is not entirely at ease with textese. If you come across textese in a socially inappropriate context, such as a job application or examination paper, then you will draw conclusions about the writer, without even having met them. If a teacher uses textese in your assignment feedback or when marking a child’s homework you will draw conclusions about them too.

**Critical thinking exercise 4**

**Think** of an occasion when you have misinterpreted a message or been misinterpreted by someone else. This might be an occasion when the actual words used convey a message that is different to the literal meaning. For example, a parent asking, “What time will you be home tonight?” to a young teenager might really be saying, “Please take care while you are out because I am worried about you”. Think about what the meaning received by the teenager might be.

**Discuss** how many different meanings may be intended or received, depending on context, by the simple question “Would you like a coffee?” You might also consider whether there is any cultural or contextual significance in being offered a coffee, rather than ‘a nice cup of tea’. 
Chapter 1: What’s new about new literacies?

Critical thinking exercise 4 continued

Discuss examples, from your experience in schools, of ‘socially constructed meaning’. In the classroom teachers often say things like, “I’m looking for someone who is being sensible”. What do they mean by that? What do you think children think they mean?

Comment

The point is that ‘texts’, in the sense of encoded messages, always carry meaning embedded in their style, presentation and context that goes beyond the literal, e.g. see you later tonight, and that meaning will be interpreted differently by different people. Differences between intended meaning and received meaning can cause problems for children not yet fully ‘en-cultured’ into the secondary Discourse of their school or classroom. Their misunderstandings may be attributed to a range of causes, such as lack of ability or lack of application.

Key idea: New technologies, new thinking

Lankshear and Knobel divide the concept of the ‘new’ in new literacies into two parts, which they call ‘new technical stuff’ and ‘new ethos stuff’.

New technical stuff

Literacy is no longer solely about print, we are surrounded by information in many varied forms and the term ‘literacy’ itself has become associated with skills that are far removed from encoding and decoding text. Visual literacy, information literacy, emotional literacy, digital literacy; no doubt you can find many more examples of the ways that the word ‘literacy’ has been invoked to describe competencies with which we are sometimes told we should equip ourselves in order to succeed. New literacies researchers are interested in exploring these new modes of literacy and especially in analysing the impact of digital technologies on literacy practices.

Digital technologies can support us to do existing tasks in new ways. For example, a few years ago you might have bought a train ticket by calling at the railway station or ringing the ticket office, now you can book online and pay by credit card. You might have met up with friends in person or sent letters and postcards to them, now you can use text (SMS) and social networking to catch up on news and gossip in your social circle. Equally, digital technologies can be integrated into social practices that in some significant sense represent new things to do. The podcasting example from earlier in the chapter is a good example of this. It is important to note, however, that new, when applied to technology, does not necessarily mean the most up-to-date technology, for example email is already considered to be an ‘old’ new technology.
New ethos stuff

The ethos of a society has been described as its distinctive character and the set of fundamental values that is accepted by the majority of its members. New Literacy Studies theorists argue that the contemporary world is different in important ways than how it was even 30 years ago and that the difference in part is related to developments in technology. They identify two distinct opinions about the impact of technology.

One view is that essentially things are the same and that technology is merely an add-on that helps us to do the same types of tasks more quickly and efficiently, such as buying a train ticket. The opposing view is that technology has fundamentally changed the way we think about things, as well as the way we behave. This view holds that, because of technology, society itself is now more participatory, collaborative and less hierarchical in nature. For example, making your views heard in public was, 30 years ago, a very difficult thing to do. The gateway to public media, books, newspapers, television and radio, was in the hands of a very few people. Now anyone can reach a wide audience through self-publishing their blog on the Internet, starting a Facebook group or having their video ‘go viral’ on YouTube.

To summarise, the new in new literacies takes into account the new skills, strategies and practices prompted by the introduction of new technologies and acknowledges that as technology changes other new practices are invented and old ones are modified. The literacy in new literacies implies that being able to deal with and adapt to technology is central to full participation in our global community, just as reading and writing print has been central for previous generations. In other words, the emphasis of “new literacy studies” does not reject the print-centric skills of reading and writing but seeks to “provoke new skills as well” (Baker et al. 2010). New literacies are multifaceted: they take into account multiple Discourses, multiple methods of communication and multiple points of view.

Critical thinking exercise 5

Whether or not you have come across the term ‘Web 2.0 technology’, you almost certainly use it in your everyday life. Web 2.0 technologies combine the new technology stuff and the new ethos stuff discussed by Lankshear and Knobel. Web 1.0 technology has been used to describe (in retrospect) Internet-based services that support distribution of information, for example, web pages published by individuals and organisations that allow only one-way interaction with the content. What one gets from the website is what the publisher(s) put there. In contrast, Web 2.0 applications enable interactive and collaborative engagement; content is contributed and controlled as well as merely consumed by its users.

Compare the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 activities and resources in the following table. (Use the Internet to locate and explore any terms or resources from the table below, that are unfamiliar to you.)
**Chapter 1: What's new about new literacies?**

### Critical thinking exercise 5 continued

**Articulate** the extent to which Web 2.0 services provoke new skills by offering us new things to do, as well as new ways of doing existing things.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Web 1.0</th>
<th>Web 2.0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image gallery</td>
<td>Image sharing, e.g. Flickr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference encyclopedia</td>
<td>Collaborative encyclopedia, e.g. Wikipedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal website</td>
<td>Blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Downloading music</td>
<td>Social music sharing, e.g. Spotify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal website</td>
<td>Social networking, e.g. Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word processing</td>
<td>Collaborative real-time text editing, e.g. Google docs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video archive</td>
<td>Video sharing, e.g. YouTube</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key idea: Pedagogy and the new literacies

In the Australian Curriculum, Literacy is defined as a process that involves "students in listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts".

This interpretation is incredibly important, as traditionally only reading and writing skills have defined literacy. Children’s reading skills cannot be developed in isolation but are underpinned with their understanding about language, which is developed through conversation and interaction with others. This is a socio-cultural approach to literacy.

For an example of where an autonomous theory of literacy has an impact on day-to-day practice in the classroom, we can turn to one of the key recommendations from the Teaching Reading report published in 2005 by the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005):

> [...] teachers provide systematic, direct and explicit phonics instruction so that children master the essential alphabetic code-breaking skills required for foundational reading proficiency. Equally, that teachers who provide an integrated approach to reading that supports the development of oral language, vocabulary, grammar, reading fluency, comprehension and the literacies of new technologies.
This recommendation led to an emphasis on the teaching of *synthetic phonics* in some early years reading classrooms.

This system breaks down the sounds of words into discrete units (phonemes) and links them with their written symbols (graphemes). These phonic units are then ‘synthesised’ or linked together to make words. The context of the words themselves is not emphasised, indeed some synthetic phonics schemes discourage children from interacting with actual books for the first few weeks of tuition. Most teachers and schools will not apply one approach or another rigidly, no matter how much they are encouraged to do so. They will make decisions and choose approaches that take account of the needs of their individual students.

As literacy commentator Henrieetta Dombey (2006, 6) observes,

> The most successful schools and teachers focus both on phonics and on the process of making sense of text. Best practice brings these two key components together, in teaching that gives children a sense of the pleasures reading can bring, supports them in making personal sense of the texts they encounter and also shows them how to lift the words off the page.

To summarise, the examples above are not intended to demonstrate that one literacy approach is always right and one is always wrong. The key idea is for you to be able to *identify* when one method is chosen over another, to *interpret* why this may be so and to *evaluate* the assumptions behind these choices. To engage in this process is to engage with pedagogy and to exercise your responsibility as a teacher to make informed decisions on behalf of the children you teach.

*Reading this book*

Tony Eaude (2011) points out that many parents and politicians believe that teaching is just a matter of common sense and are suspicious of educational theory. However, what seems to be ‘common sense’ may not be supported by experience or research evidence. Eaude describes pedagogy as “far more complicated than rocket science” (2011, 13). The pedagogical ideas underpinning this book are set out below. We encourage you to identify our assumptions and to question and challenge them as you go along.

We consider that teachers should recognise and value the Discourses that children bring to school, even where these are very different to their own. This includes children’s literacy development in areas that are important to the children but that are not traditionally encountered in school, for example texts mediated through the use of technology.

Children from a young age are already engaging with technology for education, entertainment and social activities, yet relatively little if any time in school is spent exploring these literacies. If it is, then it tends to be negative attention, as part of a ‘cyber-safety’ or ‘e-safety’ programme. While we wholeheartedly agree that it essential to teach children how to keep safe when encountering
the challenges and complexities of the online world, we do not believe that this should be the dominant discussion. Raising e-safety awareness in both children and teachers is a theme addressed continuously throughout this book, but it is approached in the context of encouraging critical literacy. Online texts are real-world texts, not reading primers. They are subject to hidden (and open) agendas, some of which may be damaging to children whether they are deliberately ill intentioned or not, through bias, inaccuracy, advertising and provenance and mutability of content and so on. We do not believe, however, that a critically literate approach to online content can be achieved without engaging with it and where better for children to do this than within the secure environment of the classroom?

There is a further reason why we believe that widening the curriculum in schools to include the ‘new literacy’ approach is a good idea. As Gee notes, children need to learn to interpret "multimodal" texts critically in order to operate successfully in society. This can have a number of benefits. Jennifer Stone (2007) analysed the literacy level of popular children’s websites and found that in terms of complexity of ideas, vocabulary, sentence length and grammar many are at least equivalent to school texts. She suggests that children are motivated to read online texts related to their interests and will persevere when they would have given up on school texts.

Conclusion

To return to the case study at the beginning of this chapter, you will now be able identify in it some of the key ideas discussed in this chapter. The teachers involved in KidsMeet are taking a child-centred approach that is inspired by some of the technologies and practices that children are engaging with outside school, for example, the use of hand-held 3G mobile phones, tablet computers and online gaming. They are making use of the collaborative and interactive nature of Web 2.0 technologies to promote social approaches to literacy. These technologies and practices are skilfully drawn into the classroom and integrated into what might be regarded as more traditional literacy skills, such as sequencing sets of instructions or publishing writing to a real audience. Children are challenged in ways that seem relevant to them, for example where a group of Year 4 boys create instructional videos to demonstrate to other children how to make their sentences more exciting. There is also recognition of children’s primary Discourses through celebrating their naturalistic presentation style, compared by the children to “a bit like hanging out on the playground”.

The chapters that follow this will provide further case studies of how new literacies, together with new technologies, are broadening the horizons of both teachers and children and will, we hope, prompt you to think further about the pedagogies involved and inspire you to try out some of the ideas in your own practice.
Further reading


Some examples in this chapter are taken from ‘Writing systems and the development of reading are explained clearly’ in Flynn, N. and Stainthorp, R. (2006) The Learning and Teaching of Reading and Writing. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.


For further details about models of literacy, particularly socio-cultural approaches, see Street, B.V. (1995) Social Literacies: Critical approaches to literacy in development, ethnography and education. London: Longman.

Further reading about the Four Resources Model includes:


For a fuller discussion of systematic synthetic phonics as an approach to teaching reading see Jolle, W., Waugh, D. and Carss, A., Teaching Systematic Synthetic Phonics in Primary Schools. London: Learning Matters/SAGE.