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Review: Multiliteracies

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Cope, Bill, and Mary Kalantzis, eds. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Reviewed by Lisa Lebduska

If this book were to be re-subtitled, it might be called “The Writing Center Challenge.” Although none of the anthology’s essays refers to writing centers, the collection’s theoretical frame, multiliteracies, has long been at the core of much writing center work and will most likely sculpt writing center futures for years to come.

The multiliteracy project began with the “Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” manifesto, which was published as a 1996 *Harvard Review* article that engaged the pedagogical, political, and theoretical issues that writing center directors know well: transformative practice through the celebration and production of social, cultural, linguistic, and textual diversity. To their credit, the editors do not make grand claims of newness for their pedagogy, and at various points admit that aspects of what they propose sound a “remarkable ring of familiarity” (230). They do, however, bring together uniquely the multitude of concerns informing what making meaning in the twenty-first century entails, and writing center scholars will find the essays useful for thinking about their own practices and for acquiring a language to help them articulate the complexities of what they do.

Written by the New London (New Hampshire) Group, an interdisciplinary international group of educators, *Multiliteracies* responds to the changing nature of literacy. The multiliterate world is postmodern in its recognition of plurality, but it also insists on a commitment to social justice, and the inextricability of form and content. A multiliterate pedagogy promotes teachers, students, and workers as “designers” who produce and consume meanings that connect lived and learned experiences.

The editors have organized the book’s seventeen essays into five parts: an introduction to the theory of multiliteracies; an explanation of its emergence; an analysis of the theoretical issues involved; a discussion of pedagogical considerations, and examples of multiliteracies in practice. They identify four key elements to multiliterate pedagogy: Situated Practice (direct use of students’ firsthand experiences); Overt Instruction (collaborative learning that enables students to form metalanguage of experiences); Critical Framing (social contextualization); and Transformed Practice (recontextualization in which students place potentially

conflicting discourses against each other). These four elements constitute the basis for the essays that follow.

For the most part, the book practices what it advocates by unifying theory and praxis. The most notable exception is the dearth of graphics; for a collection promoting multimodality, this is a print-heavy/privileging text. I wondered if the editors had originally conceived of a more multimodal presentation that was ultimately stymied by material constraints—again a familiar refrain to writing center directors with visions bigger than their wallets. If they did, I would like to have seen a frank discussion of these constraints because while multimodality does not necessarily require added expense, it can, particularly when newer technologies (software, hardware, personnel, etc.) are involved. I also found myself wondering what a web version of this anthology might achieve.

Multiliterate pedagogies confront the same challenges with which writing centers have long grappled: successfully weaving students' work, civic, and personal ("lifeworld") lives together in the face of technological change. Working from Husserl, editors Kalantzis and Cope posit the lifeworld as a site of agency rooted in the experiential, but they recognize a plurality that escapes Husserl ("Designs for Social Futures" 206). Ultimately, they seek teaching practices that will offer self-reflective transcendence.

According to James Paul Gee, one of the contributors, multiliterate classrooms prepare students to live in a "postFordist" or "fast capitalist" world that encourages worker participation (as opposed to the alienation of modernism). Workers and students are constituted as "portfolio people," collections of skills (as opposed to individual occupations) that readily adapt to the rocket-ride marketplace changes. The teaching challenge is to prepare students to thrive in such an economy while also investing them with the power to critique. Gee carefully distinguishes between teaching students to think "critically" (flexibly) and teaching them to think "critiquely," which involves identifying and challenging systemic inequities (63). Using "Situated Practice"—active learning that engages students and connects them to their lives—teachers can respect diverse backgrounds while devoting special attention to children who are disenfranchised by current education systems. How, in classroom and work environments that value rapidity, does the teacher "design" a space for slow reflection? The trick to all this, it seems, will be developing students' skills that make them more employable without becoming complicit with systems that exploit.

Carmen Luke's "Cyber-Schooling and Technological Change" (69) celebrates cyber-education potential while cautioning against technologies that perpetuate cultural inequities—identities remade through intertexts. Readers involved with cybertutorials will recognize Luke's

supporting arguments for cyber education: egalitarian learning, increased student authority, marketplace preparation. According to Luke, the multiliterate pedagogy required by cyber-education is an inevitability for the socially responsible educator.

Multiliterate pedagogy also engages the changes wrought by the globalization of English. One of the collection's most intriguing articles, Joseph Lo Bianco's "Multiliteracies and Multilingualism," explains that the globalization of English has contributed to its diversification as well as a "linguistic genocide" in which "90 % of the world's presently spoken languages are on the verge of extinction" (94). LoBianco acknowledges the contradictions of developing a multiliterate metalanguage on the one hand, and emphasizing linguistic plurality on the other. At the most pragmatic level, such tensions start to be resolved through the development of institutional assessments that recognize literacies in addition to English. In England, for example, the recognition of multilingual practices in Punjabi families; in Australia, the recognition of traditional literacies that read "signs, gestures. . . . landforms, and art" (105).

Multiliteracies in action are most clearly explained in the book's final section, which provides curriculum in practice. These examples include a course involving nontraditional Cape Town Management students and other courses in the US and Australia that used autobiographical narratives. These essays offer ways to begin thinking about multiliteracies in action.

The New London Group is to be commended for its bravery and its desire to be proactive. I hope that at some point they undertake the challenge of fitting it all in. As most of us know, increasing the attention of one type of literacy inevitably replaces the depth devoted to others. Additionally, the nanosecond world in which we are all converting ourselves into bytes will demand "designers" who can place themselves as transformers—bulwarks against exploitive speed who can create space and respect for all cultures, races, classes and identities.

Ultimately, however, the book provides a platform that one can challenge or enhance in an effort to find and create meaning with, through, and for our students. Writing center folk would do well to try it out.

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