A Room with a View: Revisiting the Multiliteracies Manifesto, Twenty Years On

Abstract. In this article, Collier and Rowsell revisit the multiliteracies pedagogy to speculate on take-up, gaps, and loosened appropriations of the original vision first cast at the meeting of the New London Group and their forging of a manifesto in 1994. Drawing out theoretical and conceptual strands, they present parts of the original manifesto and how these parts have been situated (or not situated) within contemporary research agendas. Offering two case studies as vignettes of multiliteracies-in-action from their own research, the authors contextualize their argument that there has been an over-emphasis on design to the neglect of social-cultural and linguistic approaches to adoption of the multiliteracies pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The term ‘multiliteracies’ has been used in ubiquitous and multiple ways in educational research and this has caused us to pay attention to its history and evolution. Within this article, we speculate on some of the big questions that the NEW LONDON GROUP confronted when they forged the multiliteracies pedagogy, and assess their traction and impact after twenty years. Over time, ‘multiliteracies’ has been connected with many fields, but particularly research that focuses centrally on design and technology. However, the field is more complex than this rendering offers and, building on HALLIDAY and KRESS’ work, it is important to signal such key events as the assembling of the NEW LONDON GROUP in New London, New Hampshire in September, 1994 when they met to flesh out the multiliteracies pedagogy.

It has been nearly twenty years since they cast their charter in the much-quoted manifesto (NEW LONDON GROUP 1996) and tome (COPE/KALANTZIS 2000) and in this article we unravel some of the convening history, the state of contemporary multiliteracies, and some potential directions researchers and educators can consider as they move forward with their research. The article will proceed in four parts: the first part...
accounts for the fall-out from the meeting and resultant publications; the second part documents contemporary multiliteracies; the third part illustrates an argument that we put forth in the article, and the fourth and final part looks ahead at future directions and implications for such research and intellectual work.

The article rests on one central argument: the original mission of the multiliteracies pedagogy offered a coupling of linguistic diversity and attendant commitments to equity and social justice with a push for scholarship on multimodal meaning making and design epistemologies. With the passage of time, the braiding together of these “twin goals of access and critical engagement” (NEW LONDON GROUP 1996: 67) has loosened, perhaps even been fractured, and it is only recently that there has been a return to them in response to various critiques of the ways in which the original ideas have developed and been applied (cf. JACOBS 2013/2014; LEANDER/BOLDT 2013).

2. Late 20th century literacies and the New London Group’s manifesto

A multimodal approach to literacy was at least partly inspired by HALLIDAY’S work on social semiotics (1978) and was followed up on by the New Literacy Studies (e.g. BARTON/HAMILTON 1998; GEE 1996; HEATH 1983; STREET 1984). Originating with SAUSSURE’S notion of language as a sign system of arbitrary relationships between words and their meanings, these ideas were taken up by PEIRCE (1977) who focused on how signs come to mean, and the process of meaning-making rather than the structure of language as a system. PEIRCE proposed how meaning was expanded when language is used. In the 1970s, HALLIDAY’s (1978) approach to social semiotics described how language is socially negotiated and socially constructed.

The elevation of written print text is described by GOODY/WATT (1968), who emphasized the development of literate cultures and the ways in which they are different from oral cultures. GOODY and WATT were particularly interested in describing how a culture’s use of a written literature changes, and how that culture views itself and its history. They also focused on the ways in which history is represented and the interest in, and criticism and representations of facts, in print, that accompany a literate culture. They argued that it is the individual focus, and the social stratification that becomes more apparent in literate culture between the writers and non-writers, that distinguishes many oral cultures from those who have developed a literature.

Brian V. STREET (1984) takes up these interpretations in Literacy in Theory and Practice, a good portion of which is a critique of Jack GOODY and Ian WATT’S work. He introduces the terms ideological and autonomous literacy to describe what he argues as the primary division between schooled, academic literacy (autonomous) and local, specific, literacies (ideological). STREET argues that autonomous literacy, the literacy that he believes that GOODY and WATT, as well as much of the academic world, support, is decontextualised, elitist, and removed from everyday life. He contrasts autonomous literacy with the rich and context-specific literacies related to a particular context or group, including literacy practices that have developed for local pur-
poses and that serve people’s day-to-day needs for both oral and written language and communication.

Similarly, GRAFF (1991) questions the inherent value of a print-based Western version of literacy as a source of social mobility, further probing societal arguments for literacy for all people as a goal that will lead to socially and economically transformed lives. GRAFF, in a history of the 19th century literacy movement in England, *The Literacy Myth*, considered how many other elements, such as social class, gender, and other influences, must be considered in understanding how people’s employment and economic circumstances might be open to change, in addition to the fact of learning to read and write print.

In the years before the meeting of the NEW LONDON GROUP and their pedagogical manifesto of multiliteracies, questions about the authority of print over other modes of communication were being raised in linguistic and educational circles, and the contributions mentioned thus far signal some of the key players who had begun to raise questions of equity and propose other ways of pushing back on dominant literacies. Literacy educators and researchers, according to SIEGEL (2006), have been interested in other modes, besides print, since the 1970s (cf. e.g. CLAY 1975) and the 1980s (cf. e.g. DYSON 1982; HARSTE/WOODWARD/BURKE 1984).

It would seem from the multiliteracies charter that the NEW LONDON GROUP’S overall goals were twofold: 1) to change what counts as literacy; and, 2) an acknowledgement of the multimodal nature of literacy practice. Broadly speaking, they were interested in how language and other modes are undergoing change; more specifically, their work applied to how individuals use modes as communicative resources in texts that they create and in the worlds that they inhabit.

An output from the landmark weeklong conference in the United States were three strands embedded within the multiliteracies framework: 1) linguistic and discursive accounts of language and of meaning making; 2) critical pedagogy, accounts of power, and Freirean values; and 3) digital, design-based, multimodal epistemologies. With the passage of time, the third strand in the framework has been privileged and emphasized in research over the other two. *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*, the edited collection by COPE and KALANTZIS published in 2000, which resulted from the gathering, is evenly structured around the three strands and aspects of the multiliteracies pedagogy.

Gunther KRESS’ work on the multiliteracies pedagogy was central to the multiliteracies mission; his voice, amongst those in the group, leveraged the design/available design/redesign argument. Many of the other voices within the group would contribute to the design framework, but KRESS had the longest history of theorizing multimodality and design from his early work on social semiotics with HODGE (HODGE/KRESS, 1988) alongside his work in the mid-nineties with VAN LEEUWEN and on his own. KRESS’ work with VAN LEEUWEN (1996) on *Reading Images* offered a grammar of visual design and his work on children’s multimodal meaning making stood out as an ideological stance that challenged the status quo.

Over time multiliteracies has been yoked with design and seen as taking a design-
based, multimodal perspective on meaning-making. However, multiliteracies is equally informed by sociolinguistic, social justice, and critical dimensions with whose histories we begin. Design plays a key role in adopting multiliteracies perspectives, but the original NEW LONDON GROUP manifesto equally encouraged critical, social justice framing as it did engagement with design, technology, and multimodality. Some of this more activist work has been lost over the years, with the ascendance and ubiquitous presence of technology and digital worlds.

3. Contemporary multiliteracies research and responses to the NEW LONDON GROUP

Within the broader ambit of contemporary multiliteracies research is research that takes a critical approach to literacy. In particular, critical literacy and the work of such scholars as Peter FREEBODY and Allan LUKE have pushed for research that takes account of power and how text genres leverage power. Indeed, early literacy studies scholars working in critical literacy such as COMBER (i.e. 1994), VASQUEZ (i.e. 1994), and MUSPRATT, LUKE and FREEBODY (1997) challenged cognitive and neuroscience explanations for how literate behaviour is developed by framing different texts socially, politically, and ideologically. Projects such as COMBER’S (2010) Learnscapes project exemplified critical multiliteracies work where students designed a school garden to demonstrate a relationship between environmental communicative practices and literacy education. This kind of work pushes for a situated, ecological, and design-based approach to literacy learning. Rooted in a Freirean approach to learning, amongst other theories, these scholars and others exposed hidden agendas, political overlays, and top-down discourses. These theorists teased out the local and global meanings embedded within the design and content of diverse genres of texts. These scholars engaged with school and out-of-school contexts to examine issues of marginalization and disempowerment, and they interrogated texts as sites of power imbalance (cf. JANKS, 2010). Many of these scholars researched and wrote contemporaneously with the NEW LONDON GROUP and their influential manifesto.

One trajectory of critical research looked at the connection between local and global contexts. In 2002, BRANDT and CLINTON noted that the focus on local literacies may not adequately account for all of the literate activities in which we engage. Building on previous approaches, they argued for a consideration of the global, as well as the local, in a sociocultural consideration of literacy when they pointed to an exaggeration of the “power of local contexts to set or reveal the forms and meanings that literacy takes” (338). Alluding to STREET’s ideological model here, BRANDT and CLINTON contend that it is rare when local practices are not inflected with global ideals, values, and beliefs. In particular, they ask literacy researchers to consider the materiality of literacy, the ways that literacy ideas and objects travel across contexts in ways that they describe as “transcontextual” (343). Similarly, Mary KALANTZIS and Bill COPE describe ‘productive diversity’ as “instead of attempting cultural homogeneity upon people …”
[schooling/education] approaches culture as “variegated internally as the local and global markets it serves” (2000: 130). Within the New London Group’s edited collection, education is critically interpreted as a local-global practice through four fundamental archetypal forms of modern education: exclusion, assimilation, multiculturalism, and pluralism (cf. ibid.: 123).

In addition to the above, and building on the New London Group’s manifesto (1996), a wide range of researchers and educators have considered how educational contexts include local literacies, multiple language groups and ethnicities, and multiple modes of meaning-making as language and literacy practices (cf. Bernard [et al.] 2006; Pahl/Rowsell 2006). The research projects described through Cummins’ work (Cummins 2000, Cummins [et al.] 2005, and Cummins [et al.] 2006) involved teacher-researcher collaborations. In the Bernard [et al.] study, children who were English language learners wrote and illustrated identity texts about their lives outside of school and their experiences moving to a new country, although students were encouraged to write about anything in their daily lives. Multimodal literate identities – traditionally how one might view oneself as a reader or a writer but possibly expanded to include one’s engagement in a range of communicative practices – can be observed or found in texts as traces of literacy practices. Rowsell/Pahl (2007) contend that “identities can be found within practices and […] it is possible to trace the sedimentation of these practices into text making” (393). They elaborate how literacy practices – the kinds of practices that are valued and promoted in particular contexts – become layered in the texts produced.

Following Moll/Dwornin (1996), many have attempted to draw on community funds of knowledge to build bridges between community and school. Family members have come to schools to share knowledge and stories and teachers have researched community interests, ethnic backgrounds, and linguistic resources (cf. Bloome [et al.] 2000). Bilingual schools have attempted to have children develop a second language (usually English) by building on the resources of a first language, often Spanish (cf. Moll [et al.] 2005). Others have attempted to use “authentic” or “real-life” forms and functions of print literacy in classrooms (cf. Purcell-Gates/Jacobson/Degen 2004; Purcell-Gates/Duke 2007).

In addition to the previously mentioned studies, many models of multiliteracies teaching certainly exist in the literature (cf. e.g. Healy 2007; Kalantzis/Cope 2005; Miller/McVee 2012; Unsworth 2001; Zammit 2010). These researchers call for explicitly teaching affordances of various modes of representation. However, these models, sometimes neglect the social justice side of multiliteracies. An influential and important study of multiliteracies-in-use is Chandler-Olcott and Mahar’s (2003) study, in which researchers took a multiliteracies approach to adolescent girls’ use of digital technologies in their literacy practices. At the time, their study was unique and innovative in applying multiliteracies to a particular population in a certain context. There are two major themes that emerged from their well-cited article: 1) the centrality of multimedia and popular culture; 2) the importance of online relationships to young people.
4. Multiliteracies and our research

To illustrate our argument, we draw on two of our research studies – one of an English language learner designing his Facebook page and one of a child designing her digital poster. They are quite distinct portraits, but we believe that they equally portray the strength of combining broader multiliteracies strands, and they represent a commitment to linguistic and discursive diversity as well as to social justice and critical engagement.

4.1 Vignette #1: Thinking about English Language Learners and multiliteracies pedagogy

Jennifer ROWSELL’S vignette draws from a research study that she and a graduate student, Julianne BURGESS, conducted on ways that individuals materialise themselves within digital spaces, specifically social media spaces. ROWSELL and BURGESS interviewed youth in a language college course about how they design their Facebook pages. The young man featured in this vignette is a student at a community college in the province of Ontario who was completing an English-as-a-Second-Language program called LINC – Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada. Data collection for this modest study of four language learners in the LINC program involved in-person interviews and observational fieldnotes collected when ROWSELL visited Julianne’s college class and spoke informally with case study participants. Before each interview, case study participants logged onto their Facebook pages and throughout interviews, participants referred to their pages. Later, BURGESS and ROWSELL met with case study participants to clarify aspects of their Facebook pages. During discussions about Facebook pages, participants pointed out specific parts of their Facebook pages such as photographs and written texts that were germane to interview dialogues and to the theme of sedimenting identity within their particular Facebook designs. Phenomenology played a role in highlighting affect, emotional essence, and embodiment within designed pages. For data analyses, ROWSELL/BURGESS (2014) applied an im/material conceptual framework as a way of isolating and extrapolating themes in the interview data.

By ‘materialities’ and ‘immaterialities’, ROWSELL refers to things that are physically present such as screens, clothing, bodies, objects and things that are more intangible such as memories, histories, feelings, and values. The argument rests on a belief that in order to fully capture the thought and communicative repertoires used to design, researchers should have a closer eye on naturalized processes of combining material effects such as colour, framing, camera angle, and lighting with immaterial effects such as kindness, loyalty, joy, and religious convictions (cf. BURNETT [et al.] 2014). Where the concept of ‘play’ was often associated with material objects, nowadays with sundry devices and technologies, play can be constituted within immaterial contexts and objects. Moving images, sounds, touching, image reception, etc., although clearly possessing material qualities, do not always have concrete, physical features. Even more so, material things such as the image of a rapper on a Facebook page would signal cer-
tain associations, belief systems, and predilections. These material qualities are experienced as individuals view and produce texts. Certainly Sam, in the focal case study below, moves easily in and out of material and immaterial literacy practices.

When looking briefly at one case study, texts produced by Sam (a pseudonym) illustrate what we are attempting to say about multiliteracies as a body of work that benefits from an equal emphasis on linguistic diversity, social justice, and design. Sam is a soft-spoken young man who has faced many struggles in his life and he has, at times, felt marginalised in different environments; yet he remains an idealist and a romantic, and, according to Sam, his music and faith sustain him. Sam identifies as Burmese although his family is ethnically Chinese, having escaped the war in China in the 1960’s. At the age of 16, Sam was forced to flee Burma for Malaysia by himself after a violent encounter with the Burmese military. He lived with relatives in Malaysia and worked while studying network engineering. He completed his program but was refused a diploma because he was not a Malaysian citizen. At the age of 23, Sam left Malaysia and came to Canada on his own. Sam is multilingual; he speaks Burmese, Chinese and Malay. As well, Sam is a dedicated musician and he dreams of being a musician and composer as a profession. His preferred instrument is the guitar and he writes love songs in Burmese and English. He brought his guitar to class often for various celebrations, and he plays his own music with intensity and emotion. Sam changed religions after leaving his homeland, converting from Buddhism to Christianity. His Christian identity is reflected in the large cross he wears around his neck and in his online presence. He is an avid Facebook user and uses the social networking site to keep in touch with friends in several countries and to share his music. Although he faces many challenges as a newcomer, Sam is comfortable with his life in Canada.

We examined how individuals in the same college language class use Facebook to materialize and sediment parts of their identities in social media. Multiliteracies offers a fitting conceptual framework to analyze Sam’s Facebook design in that it: 1) shows how he applies the principles of design, available design and redesign within this extrapolation of the ways in which he plans out his Facebook page; 2) signals his linguistic repertoires and socio-cultural diasporic identity practices; and, 3) demonstrates how Sam leverages both design and cultural/religious/linguistic diversity to materialize a particular identity. In terms of our over-arching argument, Sam exemplifies sophisticated communicative practices by carving out an identity in a new place, while still existing within former ones. That is, Sam relies on his diasporic experiences to design and materialize self in digital worlds (i.e., design enhanced through linguistic diversity and socio-cultural capital).

Sam is detailed, definitive and excited when he talks about how he designs his Facebook pages:

I use Facebook for my (long pause), how do you say, like for my home, my music, or something, like most of the time I use it for my music, and sometime I use for friendship (J – for friendship?) Yeah for friendship, and sometimes I use for, like to for international news. April 2013
He continues in this vein – focusing particularly on music as a source of inspiration within this Facebook profile:

Music is uhhh, the people who share their music, also I comment and I watch their music and I give feedback and I comment some, writing if it is good or bad, and I sometimes also share my own music, and I also want to know what, what the feedback about my music, I want to get the feedback. April 2013

Sam shifts from music to talk about his other inspiration, religion. Sam converted to Christianity after being a Muslim for many years. Sam regularly shares excerpts from The Bible. Quite symbolically, Sam strictly uses his Christian name on Facebook even though many of his friends and family around the world only know him by his Burmese name.

**Figure 1**: Sam’s Facebook Design (page 20)

There is a definite conflation of his experiences within Figure 1. Across his different Facebook pages there are images of Aung San Suu Kyi, who leads a democratic league in Burma – an image of his favourite rapper and movie – images of his favourite food – friends – technology – and more. These are pastiches of his ruling passions (cf. BARTON/HAMILTON 1998). Sitting with Sam in his college classroom and observing him play the guitar and interact with classroom peers, it is clear that he has eclectic tastes and that these tastes are materialized on his Facebook page. There is something important, sophisticated and under-theorised within education about the naturalised practice of taking a physical form and transforming it into an ephemeral, vaporized self. The process of breaking down identity into fractal parts tied to linguistic systems, cultural practices, social class, and aesthetic preferences and then materialising these very same ideologically laden constructs into aesthetic, physical features is sophisticated in ways that are not well understood.

Figure 1 captures a few pages from Sam’s Facebook pages (different pages for different purposes) that have since changed. That is, these designs, although they sediment key ideas, discourses, and ideologies, are temporary, iterative and constantly remixed. As a part of his communicative repertoire, Sam is in the habit of projecting his identity and shifts in identity through designs. But, these designs are far more than simply having savvy with technology or technical design skills, these designs are heart-felt sentiments and deeply held views about his positions and convictions.
Figure 1: Sam’s Facebook Design
4.2 Vignette #2: Reflecting on gender, class, popular culture, and multimodal composition

Diane COLLIER’s vignette describes how a girl in the middle years of elementary school (10 years old) created a digital poster designed to tell “all about her”. Stephanie, the creator of the poster, was a participant in a two-year ethnographic study of children’s multimodal text-making practices at home and at school. The larger study explored how children’s everyday resources (ALVERMANN/HONG-XU 2003), identities, and texts are constructed across time and space at home and at school. The digital poster, using EDUGlogster™, was a culminating task for the research project and was completed in Stephanie’s Grade 4 class, primarily in the computer lab. All of the children in Stephanie’s class created a digital poster, although Stephanie, and one other student who was a participant in the study, had access to the digital images and video generated throughout the study. All students were able to bring images and objects from home and had access to images, video, and websites from the internet. Data for the study was generated at all stages of children’s multimodal compositional processes: introductory exploration of the website, several days of drafting the digital poster, receiving feedback from adults and peers, and presentation of the posters to the class. Children were not taught any elements of design for this project, and no specific models or exemplars were used in preparation for using the digital poster. COLLIER, the researcher, did show the children the features of the tool using posters created for other purposes and then children were give one class session to explore the menu items that they could add to the digital poster – word boxes, images/photographs, video, audio, and graphics.

As well as looking at the textual product, as one would a finished piece of writing, this project highlights the important of textmaking histories (cf. KENDRICK/MCKAY/MUTONYI 2009; SIEGEL/PANOFSKY 2009) and connections to other texts (cf. LEANDER [et al.] 2010; PENNYCOOK 2010). An important consideration in this poster-making process, and the larger study, was how children consume and produce multimodal texts that connect to elements of popular culture, or everyday culture (cf. BUCKINGHAM 2003; ALVERMANN 2012). In this particular case, COLLIER was concerned with how the practices and discourses of low-income girls might be viewed with respect to literacy practices and how certain kinds of texts, related to the interest of some girls and often originating out of school, might be seen as less valuable (cf. BAKHTIN 1981; HICKS 2002, 2005). Starting from a stance that girlhood is socially constructed (cf. MITCHELL/REID-WALSH 2005; WOHLWEND 2009), in this vignette, COLLIER critiques autonomous models of literacy and looks toward the everyday as source for thinking about multiliteracies and multimodal text-making.

Stephanie attended a neighbourhood school that served a public housing development in Eastern Canada. Most of the children in Stephanie’s school received free lunch and the school often scored in the bottom tier in provincial literacy and math assessment. Stephanie lived at home with her parents and had an older brother and sister who no longer lived at home. Stephanie engaged in dance lessons and her participation was
funded through a non-profit organization and she was also enrolled in a free cadet leadership program. Stephanie’s mother worked at a bakery chain, only during the hours that Stephanie was in school. At home, Stephanie’s home was a beehive of activity; her mother had knitting and photo album projects in progress, and the kitchen table often was set up with a craft project that she and Stephanie were engaged in together (bedazzling T-shirts, for example). Stephanie’s bedroom was crammed and organized with sets of Barbies (many still in the package), stuffed toys, posters of boy bands and Miley Cyrus as Hannah Montana, and, in many ways, exemplified pink and purple packaged popular girlhood. In her room, Stephanie played cards and board games, coloured pictures, read joke books, and worked on re-organizing her room. At school, Stephanie found it difficult to get along with her peers, boys and girls alike, and needed a great deal of support with her school work. She was viewed as a child who could follow or imitate teacher models, with little capacity for independent or creative thought. The contrast between Stephanie and home and at school became one of COLLIER’s chief concerns throughout the project.

An introductory analysis of this multimodal text (see Figure 2, page 23), its production, and implied audiences suggests that the identities that Stephanie projects in her digital text are complex. The combined elements of her digital text often display the purple and pink colours of consumer goods targeted at girls. She included a puppy that perhaps looks like a stuffed toy, and a friendly Taylor Lautner (not in his werewolf form from the Twilight book and movie series). The centre-piece of the poster is a video of Stephanie performing an upcoming dance number that we videotaped during a lunch period.

Stephanie’s final poster shows a cross-section of interests, some that represent popular interests and other that represent her competencies outside of formal classroom settings. Although Stephanie had access to many classroom texts that included other visual and print formats, she did not choose any for this poster. One might wonder what images and representations Stephanie might have chosen without access to the images and video from her home and the research project in which she was involved.
Figure 2: Stephanie’s Digital Poster – All About Me
During early poster-making sessions Stephanie frequently asked questions of her teacher and asked her peers to help her save drafts and remove images. Over sessions, Stephanie spoke less and less as she confidently added text, resized images and video, and selected images collected throughout the research study. She also quickly considered and rejected various images as inadequate to the self-portrait she was trying to paint. In contrast to many children’s reluctance to revise print-based texts, Stephanie easily inserted, removed, and rearranged the components of her digital poster.

Although Stephanie and her classmates did not have formal instruction on the features of a ‘good’ poster, they implicitly created work with elements of design in mind. Stephanie included a clear title in a frame at the top of the poster, created spaces between the individual elements, and places the most powerful piece, the dance video, in the centre. With the audio narration, Stephanie guided the future viewer through the piece. Not all children included this element in their poster. Stephanie also appeared to be an audience for her own poster, as she worked through and tried out different possibilities. There seemed to be a desire, on her part, to represent herself authentically by including a range of her experiences and identities rather than only present a glamorous and savvy persona, as Stephanie (and implicitly her mother) often appeared to do with many coordinated and trendy outfits that she often wore to school and that she and her mother picked out each evening.

Stephanie’s consumption of popular culture and concern with appearance are strategically used and rejigged (cf. CARRINGTON 2003) for her own purposes in the identities she presents in her digital poster. Positioning herself inside of this research, the representation that Stephanie presented rang true for COLLIER, and showed sides of Stephanie that were not always apparent in the identities she appeared to inhabit in her classroom or at school. The ways in which multimodal texts are made and remade is not straightforward, especially when the anticipated audience can go far beyond the classroom. Looking at texts through ethnographic observations that considers text-making processes offers information about histories and identities that may be invisible in the finished/final text. As mentioned earlier our main argument is to move beyond design and digital literacies and, here, to consider what might happen when one can’t see a wide-open future for children who might not engaged with text and interests most valued by school (cf. NIXON/COMBER 2006). In order to provide equitable classroom contexts for all children, it is necessary at first to learn about how resources and texts from everyday culture shape their textmaking and social identities. The interests and out-of-school resources of low income girls are sometimes overlooked, sometimes in the shadow of current popular interest in boys’ reading and success at school (cf. EPSTEIN [et al.] 1998; SMITH 2003). In order to learn from all children, it is necessary to look up close and then, to find ways to solicit, validate and include these stories in classroom practices.

Flanking one vignette of a case study next to the other they are quite different: one is an adult male – the other is an adolescent girl; one is a culturally and linguistically diverse language learner – the other is a white monolingual Canadian. Nonetheless, there are some similarities that, admittedly tenuously, can be teased out to illustrate our
point about a more robust multiliteracies perspective. Sam is aesthetically attuned and a self-proclaimed musician and spiritualist. Stephanie feels inspired by dance, popular culture, and fashion. In this way, for both Sam and Stephanie, the arts, aesthetics, design give them power and allow them to emote. They have many interests and these interests are sedimented into texts, but actually more is going on here, as they exist in a sea of texts, images, songs, clothing, etc. They enact themselves as a way of being – not necessarily or always for others but as a response to the figured worlds (cf. HOLLAND [et al.] 1998) that they enter and exit. Sam and Stephanie command attention because they signify themselves both digitally and non-digitally. Sometimes they pull others, such as friends or a parent, into their signifying, but usually they imagine and react through designs.

Certainly looking across both vignettes, we can see a number of intersections and differences but both argue for the importance of design – taught both explicitly and in open-ended fashions. Some of the critique of the centrality of design discourse (cf. e.g. LEANDER/BOLDT 2013) in multiliteracies research focuses on the intentionality of designers and the slippery and watered-down ways in which the original intentions have been taken up by classroom teachers and researchers alike. In these two examples, we see how design might occur in less intentional and more fluid ways and argue for an evolving understanding and application of multiliteracies pedagogy. Like JACOBS (2013/2014) we see schools as often lacking “playfulness and exploration” (272) and encourage less bounded approaches to literacy that engage bodies, objects, and texts. Although textmakers may follow a “conscious and deliberate design process” (STORNAIULO/HULL/NELSON 2009: 386) their design may also be less intentional, more recursive, influenced by relationships, and less designed in advance.

5. Future directions and implications

The multiliteracies pedagogy has a strong following, and is represented by many far-reaching theoretical frameworks. It has come dressed in many clothes and not all of them consistent with the original mission (albeit, how we as scholars read and interpret it). We might ask ourselves if an exact alignment with the original vision or principles or tenets is even necessary or desirable. As ethnographers, we have both conducted longitudinal research with a range of learners, and we both feel strongly that something quite nuanced, embodied, and sensory-led happens when an individual invests in contemporary design work.
Literature


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