Negotiating Spaces for Literacy Learning

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Negotiating Spaces for Literacy Learning

Multimodality and Governmentality

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Regimes of Literacy

Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope

This book is about regimes of literacy – an ancien régime of print literacy, and an emerging regime of multiliteracies. It is about changes in our social practices of meaning-making and changes happening in the institutions of education where learners are socialized to mean. Or, more to the point, it is about changes that might happen, or are not happening but perhaps should, as well as changes that are in fact underway. Regime change is an opportunity to think prospectively, to imagine something different from, and better than, pasts which have been less than ideal.

We'll start with a brief sketch of the old regime of literacy, by way a counterpoint to our case for multiliteracies, a story which we tell at length in our book, *Literacies* (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). Not until the rise of compulsory, mass-institutionalized education in the nineteenth century was literacy posited as an essential capacity for workers and citizens. Of the proverbial three 'r's, reading and writing were two-thirds – literacy was that important. Its purposes were in part functional to the world of industrial modernity – so that workers could read signs and memos in the workplace, and so that citizens could share a common civic and cultural life through newspapers and books. Literacy served an essential functional purpose, and this often translated into moral and nation-building imperatives in the discourse of educators.

The substance of literacy consisted of the phonics of transliteration of speech into writing, correcting spelling and grammar, reading texts in order to comprehend what the writer meant to tell, writing as a memory aid and to communicate with immediate others and developing an awed respect for the greats of the national literary canon. The characteristic modes of acquisition of literacy were a bureaucratic apparatus that prescribed content areas to

be learned in the syllabus, the textbook which laid out the content, teacher recitation, teacher–student question and answer routines, filling out answers in workbooks, reading texts and answering comprehension questions, writing short texts and literacy taking tests to check what had been learned. The patterns of practice were predictable and straightforward. Often today, we find that not much in schools has changed.

If we are to ascribe to this literacy setup the full weight of the word 'regime', what do we make of it? What are its roles, rules, structures of governance and disciplinary logics? The teller (the teacher) is positioned over the told (the student). The teacher, in turn, is positioned in a bureaucratic line of control (syllabus, to textbook, to recitation). Administrative audit requirements are put in place, checking that both students and teachers have performed (the test). This is essentially a regime of epistemic discipline, a moral economy. We characterize this mode of literacy pedagogy as 'didactic'.

It is also a regime that systematizes inequality. Students are rated in such a way that they are spread across a normal distribution curve, where normal means that a few can excel because the centre is mediocre and the tail must fail outright. This maps perfectly onto a very unequal society, rationalizing that inequality. If you didn't excel at school, you only have yourself to blame and live with the consequences. This disciplinary regime of literacy mapped onto labour markets, where very few skilled and highly paid workers are needed. The majority could get by at work with only the most basic of functional literacies. It mapped well onto the domineering states of the twentieth century – 'welfare' states as well as totalitarian ones. It mapped well onto the textual relations of mass media and literature, where most were readers, consumers of mass culture, and only an elite few were writers. It is hardly surprising that, when the all-important time came to test literacy, reading 'comprehension' often became a proxy. The reason for this was partly pragmatic – it was cheap to mark reading comprehension with standardized bubble tests. However, this also aligned with a narrow view of literacy's moral purposes, to test whether the student has heard what the author must really have meant to say without interpretation.

The school also standardizes culture. It creates the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) of the homogenous nation-state. Through literacy, colonized people and immigrants learn the standard form of the national language, and if to excel proves too challenging, it becomes their own fault, and so according to the logic of schooling, they are further marginalized.

Foucault's notion of 'governmentality' can be made to work for us as we interpret this regime (Foucault, 1982/2011) – a regime in which literacy is complicit. It explains how people are positioned and position themselves in structures of power. In Gramsci's terms, it becomes part of a 'common sense' of resignation to inequality (Gramsci, 1971). In Althusser's terms, it explains

how people become 'bearers' of roles in unequal structures (Althusser, 1970). Or, in Lukacs' terms, it is part of a process in which people assume passive stances in relation to social structures which are contrary to their objective interest (Lukács, 1923/1972). Foucault, however, is bleaker than his twentieth-century peers. He describes in graphic detail the mechanisms by which the prison of modernity incarcerates. He shows the microdynamics of power at work in ordinary social institutions and everyday practices. However, in his archaeology of power he offers no suggestion that there could be a way out, no suggestions of strategies for resistance nor more broadly that there might be a way to ameliorate the cruel injustices of modern life.

Now, stuff is happening in the twenty-first century that is dramatically different. The shapes of the changes are at times unclear, as we are caught in cross-currents from the past. To make sense of the new takes some effort because the present is complex, fluid and emergent.

The notion of multiliteracies is designed to capture two aspects of the new in the realm of human meaning-making, as a counterpoint to the characteristic features of the old regime of literacy. The first aspect is the substance of literacy – the things we do to mean in an era where communications are increasingly multimodal. The second aspect is a new regime of social power, and new structures of agency emerging in the meaning-making process.

To address the first of these aspects of multiliteracies, a key issue in our contemporary communications environment, is the phenomenon of multimodality. On the one hand, with the rise of the new, highly personalized media, we see the proliferation of still and moving image as modes of expression, displacing messages that would once have been expressed in oral or written language. Gunther Kress has characterized this as the rise of an image culture, displacing at least to some degree an earlier modern culture dominated by language and literacy (Kress, 2009).

At the same time, we also witness a dramatic extension of the sites of writing and reading, and in new or hybrid genres. Our television screens, our shopping malls and our smart phones are full of writing. We navigate both virtual and physical worlds with writing, from the 'tags' that support discovery to the requests and responses we get from GPSs. Arguably, we are doing more writing and reading than ever; and it is taking new forms.

Despite these convergences, we have a limited range conceptual tools for describing the shared and integrally connected aspects of meaning-making across modes. Grammars of various sorts describe the structures and functions of language. The psychology of perception and the analytic techniques of arts analysis help us to account for the workings of the image, to mention just two of a range of conceptual frameworks for analysing visual meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). But rarely do our analyses of the

parallels and the differences between these modes of meaning break out of disciplinary confines of 'linguistics' or 'visual communications'.

Why do we need to extend the grammar and interpretative frame of print literacy, with a grammar of multimodality? To answer this question, let's take a brief historical journey through modern technologies and media for the transmission of meanings across distances of time and space.

Letterpress printing technology, invented in the mid-fifteenth century, positioned the character the smallest unit of manufacture of machine-reproducible meaning (Eisenstein, 1979). For five centuries, the typesetter laid out these 'types' one by one on the printer's forme. Images could be reproduced by lithographic processes, but this was a different technology. Text could not be easily brought together, which is why until then newspapers had no photos and books needed separate sections for 'plates'.

A centuries-long enforced separation of formal, written-textual meaning from other modes followed. This did not significantly change until the application of the new technologies of photolithography in the mid-twentieth century, when image and text could conveniently be overlaid – hence the rise of magazines and illustrated books and the near-complete eclipse of letterpress in the third quarter of that century. But still, reproducible sound and orality happened in their own technologies (and thus cultural spaces): the gramophone record, radio, telephone.

Digital technologies for the production and transmission of meaning bring the modes together. Digital characters are made of little dots, which are now the smallest elementary modular units in the manufacture of writing. Digital pictures are made of the same thing – pixels or picture elements. As still and moving images and fonts are now made of the same raw materials, they can easily be combined. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, we had digital video that streamed more and more writing over image, in business or sports television, for instance, further extending effects that had only commenced with photolithography.

In these ways, the digital intensifies the multimodality in our contemporary media for representation and communication. We can now do all of text, still image, moving image, sound and calculation/data manipulation together, on one recording/transmitting device. The common elementary modular unit in the manufacture of meaning is binary encoding. So, we can speak, write and image across time and space using the same tools we have for listening, reading and viewing. We are now more appropriately called generic 'users' – writers and readers – when we interact with communicated meanings, writing over them, reusing them, manipulating them in cases of datasets and apps.

Taking this half-millennium long view, we can see that technological shifts in our meaning-making tools underpin the deep multimodality of today's

communications environment. The social processes that follow we call 'affordances' – a 'can' rather than a 'must'. But because we 'can', we mostly find that we do.

In this understanding of the context of contemporary meaning-making, for the most pragmatic of reasons, we need to expand the focus of traditional literacy learning to encompass multimodal meaning-making. We do this by revising Halliday's three semiotic metafunctions (Halliday, 2004) and extending them with two more. All meaning-making, across all modes, operates at five levels, with five purposes. We to *refer* to things, events, processes and abstractions (Halliday's 'ideational' function). We *dialogue*, with ourselves and others (Halliday's 'interpersonal' function). We *structure* our meanings in ways which are both conventional and always innovative to the extent that every remaking is uniquely modulated (Halliday's 'textual' function). We *situate* our meanings in contexts, or at least find that they are situated by default (what we call a 'contextual' function). And we *intend* when we position and/or encounter meanings in webs of intention or agency (a metafunction we call 'interest').

What do meanings refer to? This is the first of five questions we want to ask about meaning-making. Referring may delineate particular things, in writing or speaking in the form of nouns to represent things or verbs to represent processes. In images, particular things may be delineated with line, form and colour; in space by volumes and boundaries; in tactile representations by edges and surface textures; in gesture by acts of pointing or beat. Referring may also be to a general concept for which there are many instances: a word that refers to an abstract concept; an image that is a symbol; a space which is characterized by its similarity with others; or a sound that represents a general idea. Referring can establish relations: prepositions or possessives in language; collocation or contrast in image. It can establish qualities: adjectives or adverbs in language; or visual attributes in images. It can compare, including juxtapositions or metaphors of all kinds, in words, image, sound or space.

These are the parallels. 'The mountains loomed large', says the sentence, then the image provides an entirely similar yet entirely different expression of the same thing – complementary, supplementary or perhaps disruptive. However, we also want to highlight the irreducible differences that account for the variations and disruptions, and offer evidence of the complementary value of multimodality. Writing, for instance, consists of sequential meaning elements, moving forward in English one word relentlessly at a time, left to right, line to line. It requires of us a composing and reading path that prioritizes time, because the progression of the text takes us through time. The image, by contrast, presents to us a number of meaning-elements simultaneously. Its viewing path prioritizes space. When we do both, we may attain a fuller, more nuanced meaning, or for that matter, a less settled meaning.

How do meanings connect the participants in meaning-making? Interaction is the second of our metafunctions. Here we establish roles: speaker/listener, writer/reader, designer/user, maker/consumer, gesturer/observer and sound-maker/hearer. We direct or encounter orientations: in language first/second/third person and direct/indirect speech; in image, placement and eyelines; in gesture, pointing to self, others and the world. We also encounter agency: in language, voice, mood and transitivity; in image, focal planes of attachment and engagement; in space, openings and barriers. And we discover a range of interpretative potentials: open and closed texts; realistic and abstract images; directive or turn-taking gestures; spaces which determine flows deterministically and others that allow a range of alternatives.

How does the overall meaning hold together? Through this metafunction we analyse the devices used to create internal cohesion, coherence and boundedness in meanings. Each mode composes atomic meaning units (morphemes, picture elements, physical components, structural materials in the build environment, strokes in gesture) in a certain kind of order. This order is both conventional (using what we call 'available designs' for meaning) and inventive (the process of 'designing'), a consequence of which no two designs of meaning are ever quite the same. There are internal pointers: pronouns or connectives in language; keys and arrows in images; wayfinding markers in space; cadence and rhythm in sound. There is idea arrangement: sequence in text; positioning of picture elements in images; the functional mechanics of tangible objects. And there are the tangible forms of media: handwriting, speaking, drawing, photographing, making material objects, building, making music or gesturing. Here we also want to highlight some of the enormously significant and underplayed differences between the grammars of speaking and writing, as well as the hybrid forms of speaking-like writing and writing-like speaking that emerge in the new media.

Where is the meaning situated? Meaning is as much a matter of where it is, as what it is. To the extent that context makes meaning, it is a part of the meaning. A label on a packet points to the contents of the packet, and speaks to the supermarket where it is for sale. A text message speaks to the location of the conversants and the images that are posted with it. A kitchen relates to living areas in a house which in turn fits into larger patterns of everyday suburban life. Bells and electronic 'dings' can mean all manner of things, depending on their context. Across all modes, meanings are framed. They refer to other meanings by similarity or contrast (e.g. motif, style, genre). They assume registers according to degrees of formality, profession, discipline or community of practice.

Finally, whose interest is a meaning designed to serve? In this metafunction we interrogate the meanings we encounter or make for evidence of motivation. How does rhetoric work, in text, image or gesture? How do subjectivity and objectivity work in written and visual texts? In these and other explorations of interests, we might interrogate meanings for their cross purposes, concealments, dissonances or a variety of failures to communicate. We can explore the dynamics of ideologies, be these explicit or implicit, propagandistic or 'informational'. For this we need critique, or the methods used to uncover interests that may have been left unstated or deliberately concealed in text, image, gesture, sound or space.

This multimodality also involves the process of mode shifting, or transitions in our meaning-making attentions from one mode to another: oral, written, visual, audio, gestural and spatial. We use the word 'synesthesia' to describe this mode shifting, defining the word in broader sense than is commonly the case in psychology or neuroscience (Ramachandran, 2011). We conjure up an image, and then say the word for the same thing. We describe a feature of the natural world in scientific language and then show a diagram of that process. Each time, the meaning is both the same, irreducibly different by virtue of the affordances of each mode (and to that extent, each mode supplementary or complementary to others). Mode shifting is an integral part of our thinking. It is also an invaluable thinking tool when used in support of learning.

If the cognitive business of switching modes is to be called synesthesia, then the practical process of transferring meaning from one mode to another is called 'transliteration'. To be practical, the logistics of transliteration are now central for students reading and writing in science; designers creating products that 'speak to' their users; teachers who want to develop and implement contemporary academic pedagogies; web designers and web users … indeed, in all manner of meaning-making situations in today's deeply multimodal communications environment.

So, multiliteracies is a much bigger agenda than traditional print literacy. But to turn now to its second aspect, how might it represent a change in regimes of power? At this point, we move from the pragmatics of 'getting on' in the new communications environment to a phenomenon that we call changing the 'balance of agency'.

Let's examine just one aspect of the new media, as an instance in a change in the balance of agency, compared to the old, mass media. Journalists, television producers, radio announcers and authors were the producers of cultural and informational messages in the old media, a small creative elite in the 'culture industries', in the employ of a small controlling and owning elite. The consumers of their products were their readerships, audiences

and patrons. Culture flowed from a few producers to many consumers, a relationship that had been prefigured in the epistemic relations of the didactic classroom.

The new media, the social media, are by comparison 'participatory' (Jenkins, 2006). The balance of cultural and epistemic agency is transformed. Tweets and smart phone images become the news because everyone is a reporter. No need to send a camera crew to a news event. (They'll get there too late most of the time, anyway.) Someone will be there to take a picture, or make a video or tweet an observation, and share it with the world. Everyone is a reporter now. And it's not just the big news. It's the micro news of the meal I am just having, the people I am with, the thing-of-note I just saw or read on the web and my opinions and my feelings of the moment. The old, hierarchical role divisions of cognitive and cultural labour are blurred. Readers are simultaneously writers; viewers are simultaneously image makers.

New reciprocities, new sociabilities emerge: to like in order to be liked; to follow in order to be followed; to friend in order to be friended – a discourse that is by turns, mutually affirmatory and narcissistically exhibitionist. Of course, the situation is not all good, only different and complicated. After all, these same new media that invite us to participate also watch our every move – cravenly in order to sell us stuff, or chillingly as they watch us with suspicion. They take our intellectual work and our lives and make piles of money out of us. Divide today's Facebook or Twitter capitalization by the number of users and you'll be surprised what you're worth to them. You're doing the cultural and epistemic work. They're not paying you for the work you do, but your participatory fortune has become their monetary fortune.

Foucault's pessimism about governmentality – a regime without exit, without opening for agency – may have been in part a product of the horrors of twentieth century, when dreams of societies of more equal association were also shattered. The shapes of governmentality in the twenty-first century reflect the fact that the domineering state has withered away, to be replaced by the minimalist state of neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005) or no state at all, where totalitarianisms have been replaced by collapsed states, which brings us back to a pedagogy of renewed agency, of resilient self-governance. How do we infuse resilient agency into learning, such that learners are meaning makers not just meaning receivers, knowledge producers and not just knowledge consumers?

In multiliteracies theory, we use the word 'design' to describe the patterns of meaning and action that constitute representation, communication and interpretation. We use this word because it has a fortuitous double meaning. On the one hand, any meaning that is made has a design. Its parts can be identified, and these parts fit together in distinctive ways – nouns and verbs, hyperlinks and navigation paths, visual frames and focal points. Design in this

sense is the study of form and structure in the meanings that we make. This is 'design' used as a noun. We spoke about these kinds of design when we described the phenomena of multimodality.

On the other hand, design is also a sequence of actions, a process motivated by our purposes. This is the kind of design that drives representation as an act of meaning-for-oneself, message-making as an act of communication oriented to others and interpretation as a process of making sense of communications. Design now refers to a certain kind of agency. It is something you do. It is a form of governance, of taking control in a more widely distributed balance of agency. This is 'design' used as a transitive verb.

In this conception of meaning-as-design, we move away from meaning-as-artefact, either intrinsic to the world or attributed to it by persons. Rather, it is about making-making as an activity. It is an act of agency. In this activity, we use our minds as well as our bodies (for instance, to speak, to see, to move, to use media). We use socially inherited cognitive tools (for instance, language, imagery, gestures, spatial movement). And we use physical media (for instance, voices, text-entry tools, cameras). The result is an effect on the world, a transformed meaning and a transformed world.

These meaning-making activities can serve a range of purposes. One is to communicate – we are by nature social creatures. Another is to represent without necessary communication – to undertake these activities and use these meaning-making tools as a kind of cognitive prosthesis, either as a preliminary to communication, or simply to provide support for our thinking. Still another activity is to interpret, or to add re-represent communicated meanings so they make sense to oneself. Still another is to refigure oneself as an agent, as someone who can change the world in small ways, and participate with others to change the world in larger ways.

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