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Language literacy and diversity @ 21st century: a new basics for designing global learning

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Abstract

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Keywords

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Language, Literacy and Diversity @ 21st Century: A New Basics for Designing Global Learning

Koo Yew Lie, Peter Kell and Wong Fook Fei

This volume examines learning and the learner as situated in a range of social and institutional contexts in Australia and Malaysia. This is the second volume in a special themed collection of two volumes on language, literacy and education in changing times. This volume explores the intersections between ICT, globalisation and institutional change with the issue of multilingualism and literacy (ways of reading, writing, speaking, listening and communicating in two or more languages) in environments of complex multiple and intersecting agendas of change.

The collection of contributions explores the complexity emerging from an increasingly globalised, social context that is subject to continued radical social change and technological advances. Within this complexity, there is a transformation of the worlds of learning and the notions of what work and citizenry means, as the combined effects of globalisation and internationalisation have seen a steady economic integration of markets and this has had an effect on the mode and nature of communication. With these changes come opportunities and possibilities but there are also conflicts for multilingual and multicultural peoples in how diversity is recognized and used to develop productive global relationships (Cope and Kalantzis, 1997; 2001). This complex scenario requires a process where diversity is recognized and profiled as productive rather than as threatening. This is particularly important at a time when there is a heightening of global tensions, xenophobia and fear in the post September 11 environment. In this context, Kell, Shore and Singh (2004) have called for educational strategies and products that promote high multiculturalism where multilingualism and pluralistic perspectives are valued. This optimistic response to globalism is in contrast to the pessimism and narrowness expressed in the products that Kell et al (2004) see as representative of monoculturalism. The new era of the 21st Century according to them requires a new fluidity and critical awareness about the relationship between literacy, language and the opportunities for "global optimism". This is the new basics for a new century and replaces the restricting and instrumental approaches of learning developed in the 19th century and consolidated in the era of the nation state in the 20th century.

New Sensibilities, New Times, New Contexts

Fluidity of thinking, adaptability and living with ambivalence are arguably requisite sensibilities for meaning-makers @ 21st century to cope with difference

dramatically exaggerated by space-time compression. However, the constant need to live with complexity, ambivalence and difference may not be obvious to some educationists, policy-makers, communities and families, learners, individuals (especially those who are institutionally powerful, and satisfied with the status quo of deference and compliance).

The general unawareness of the 'value' of multilingual resources may be true for large groups of Malaysian learners who perceive disconnection with their vernacular resources when learning English due to the standardisation and essentialisation of such diversity and difference (Koo, 2004a). This dominant view is discursively reinforced by some state and official documents on English language policy and educational policies which essentialises questions of English to skills and education in nation-state discourses concerned with global competitiveness that whilst important, are limited in opening up spaces for new learning and new social engagements.

Indeed, perhaps to be nationalistic in a pluralistic sense requires a person to be global informed, aware and globally participatory and responsive. Connections between the local and the global are the new basics with globally economic compressions, internationalisation, migration and communication being enduring features of the new world. With space-time compression characteristic of this fast moving century, Koo (2004b) emphasizes the intercultural, educational and language literacies (genres and linguistic codes, language styles and register) needed to move in-between various social-cultural and political spaces. Bridges must be provided by governments, education and community to link between minority groups with diverse contexts to help communities and learners.

Diversity has to be negotiated, represented and contested in various spaces and strategically. The crucial perspective of looking at the significance of diversity in human development and productivity is largely absent, ironically in educational spaces which are both sites of reproduction-transformation but some tend to neglect their transformative role. Farish Noor (2002), for example, sees reproduction discourse dominating state and educational discourses, constraining other ways of looking at issues and providing spaces for exploring alternatives.

The invisible multilingual resources may be viewed as impediment. However, there are other views like Hornberger's (2004) that sees it as funds of knowledge in a broad ecological view of multilingualism and educational diversity. However, within this latter view where the multilingual is seen as a resource (embedded within larger multi-cultural perspectives), it has to be interrogated and mediated in education – through the interpersonal, interlingual and intercultural in classroom interventions, educational policy and planning. Such a view is articulated by Koo (2005) who argues for looking at language and literacies as situated, pluralistic and heterogenous webs of meaning-making and knowledge production rather than overly with the narrow pursuit of so called language proficiency.

Literacy is now widely accepted, especially by advocates of the new literacy studies, as pluralized in contrast to previous view of literacy which views it as singular, discrete and monolithic. The expanded view of literacies see practices which are closely related to situated meanings, texts, language, popular/everyday culture with the politics of recognition of powerful languages, the role of critical literacy (Gee, 1996) and vernacular knowledge from primary and secondary life-worlds.

Embedded in these pluralistic literacies are values and ways of behaving that may be privileged which are not visible especially to outsiders or novices who need to learn the ways of behaving in these communities of practices. There are identities associated with the literate ways of behaving marked by ways of valuing-seeing-communicating including use of particular language forms, styles, and genres.

Embedded in multilingual languages are rich multicultural resources (which are sidelined or ignored in decontextualised views of literacy) including the philosophical, linguistic and semiotic resources which belong to them as members of primary life-worlds. These vernacular ways of being and languages offer possibilities for creating new knowledges, new ways of being, new ways of interacting, new ways of doing and what Anthony Reid (2003) has described as multiplex identities.

Hornberger (2004) describes biliteracy as an attempt to bring together work on bi-multilingualism and literacy. In an ecological and inclusive view of literacy, Hornberger suggests how educationists should provide inclusive educational and language opportunities for people who are bi-multilingual to enter literacy programs and practices. In the past, there has been a privileging of particular Discourses and language roles without considering the role of vernacular languages and discourses, and a failure to recognize the significant social capital of multilingual speakers in dominantly monolingual environments. The growth of English as a global language has contributed to the amnesia about the existence of multilingualism as the dominant way of life for most people on the globe (Singh, Kell and Pandian, 2002).

Increasingly, theories on literacies focus on literacy as social practice which offers a more inclusive philosophy of social and educational perspectives (Street, 1993; Gee, 1996; Hamilton, Barton and Ivanic, 1994). contrasting it with decontextualised views of literacy where literacy is viewed as principally at the hands of the individual and/or her community and where there is illiteracy, the blame rests on the individual or her community. Social practices are socially and historically constituted aggregates of worldviews, ideologies, values, attitudes, behaviors and thinking of particular communities in situated contexts. These practices are in part expressed through socially sanctioned performances and situated displays like listening, speaking, reading, writing and production of texts through which particular identities are constituted and membership into cultural communities recognised. Literacy practices are also embedded within the social

practices or Discourses of particular communities. In this case Discourses is spelt with a capital d' to convey its importance. These Discourses are recognised as socially recognisable-ways of thinking, believing, feeling, meaning-making, talking, reading, writing interacting and valuing in particular situated contexts (Gee, 1996).

Literacy practices are conceived of at various levels of abstraction that are embedded in as well as manifested by Discourses that represent shared norms, values, beliefs, ideologies, attitudes and behaviors of particular communities. Literacy practices heretofore emerge from multiple ways of meaning-making based on what people value in thinking, acting, reading and writing. Literacy practices may also include the participants' perceptions of what count as knowledge, who and which institution has rights to legitimise knowledge.

Further, literacy practices are embedded and located in ideological and power relationships. Underlying reading and writing practices are assumptions, ideological commitment, beliefs and values of the particular social-cultural contexts from which it emerges. Some literacy practices are more dominant and visible compared to others because they are valued by powerful hierarchies. The learning and mastery of these endorsed literacy practices that are valued by hierarchies and often represented as the values of mainstream communities and/or institutions allocate the status and power and the resources that go with these and overwhelm other perspectives. In this climate, we see the growth of the "English only" movement in such countries as Australia and the US where other languages such as Spanish in USA and Indigenous languages in Australia battle for resources and recognition.

Yet, the acquisition of vernacular and everyday literacies are necessary for the affirmation of particular identities particularly those from one's primary life-worlds, those from the family for example. Here the 'life-world' is understood in terms of Jim Gee's definition (1996: 181) 'that space where people can claim to know things without basing that claim on access to specialised or professional Discourses with their special methods for producing knowledge'. Differences between primary (involving family and community) and secondary life-worlds (involving schools, bureaucracy, religious institutions, economic institutions, governments and work spaces) may lead to a conflict of identity and roles. Continuities between primary and secondary life-worlds need to be explicated and conscientised (in the Freirean sense), or at least critically engaged with, by teachers and literacy mediators to help participants whose primary life-worlds are markedly different from secondary life-worlds.

A strand in a pluralist perspective comprises the pedagogy of consciousness-raising in and the phenomena of crossing and/or of mixing life-worlds, often invisible to novice participants themselves. This, it is argued, is crucial in empowering multilingual peoples become meta-aware of the reasons, processes

and effects of traversing and hybridising life-worlds. This will help engage their meta-awareness for strategic participation in contemporary local-global spaces, a requirement of new spaces of learning and work where plurality and difference are salient characteristics. Multiple and hybrid interaction patterns, communication styles, ways of speaking and self-presentation are now required for teamwork involving culturally diverse members of different life-worlds and disciplines. The creation of new knowledges is a requirement at Post Fordist work sites where the 'new' involves among others, new ways of looking at a problem, and where hybridisation of Discourses is limited in the way that new forms of interaction can be accommodated. The pluralisation of literacies represents multiple, and overlapping forms of literacies that individuals and communities now have to encounter. These are often complex and contradictory and depart from what was formerly described simply as language and numeracy literacies. Other literacies such as information, critical, visual and technological literacies are also needed as a consequence of some of the new technologies that characterise globalisation. Gee (1996) and Lankshear (1998) argue that increasingly there will be an emphasis on situated repertoires of language and literacy engagements that incorporate these new forms of literacy as well as the linguistic codes, styles and genres in spaces characterised by different cultures, languages, life-experiences and ideologies, literacies which typify what is referred to as multiliteracies.

The notion of a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New England group, 1996) focuses on situated learning where sociocultural perspective on learning, include both a commitment to critical literacy and the exploration of multiple meanings of texts, that engages diverse ways awareness and participation in both private and public spaces (Hornberger, 2004).

New Learning and New Design

Kalantzis and Cope (2005), through the multiliteracies project and the more recent New Designs for Learning Project, describe a fundamental change in human relations of learning. This project, involving a global terms of researchers, investigated the implications of what multiliteracies might lead to in terms of digital learning environments through the use of tools to support such environments to exploit future types of learning which are consonant to possibilities of ICT, digital identities and life-styles of learners. In this, they distinguish between conventional designs of learner where the classroom was typified by teacher exposition, question and answer involving one learner at a time and whole-class recitation in unison. They also suggest that the classroom was a place which inculcated a rudimentary 'basics' of reading, writing, mathematics and civics. At other times it was a place of passivity, boredom and failure. They argue that this would have been appropriate for traditional work characterised by deference to authorities, fixed and limited skills within the space of the largely homogenous group of citizens.

They suggest that the emergence of the knowledge society requires new dispositions and new sets of skills. This knowledge society places values "in the intangibles of human capacity, organisational flexibility, business processes, customer relationships, brand identity, technological know-how, product aesthetics and service values. This represents a shift away from the old grounding of value primarily in fixed capital and basic skills." Such a scenario provides opportunities for learning, a space where learners are citizens and workers who can operate.

They describe New Learning as learning environments which foster a culture of innovation based on calculated risk, require learners to think and act in teams, reward problem posing and creative solutions, and respect and shape persons who are local and yet globally engaged. New learning is deemed to encourage thinking which draws upon diverse sources of knowledge, engaging in diverse perspectives, knowledge orientations and approaches to problems; develop a capacity for lifelong and lifewide learning, develop the ability to communicate using the new multimodal information and communication media, and to critically interpret their messages. To support such sensibilities and skills in learners, Kalantzis and Cope propose New Designs for Learning that "imagine(s) and test(s) innovative tools and learning environments in which the blackboard, textbook, exercise book and test are augmented and at times replaced by digital technologies.

The critical point, however, is not the technologies. The technologies present a wide range of potentials but need to be applied within a design process that heightens capabilities and not just repeat the mistakes of passive and compliant "old learning". Indeed, the first phase of the so-called 'e-learning' environments that came with the advent of ICT in education only replicated and accentuated all that was inadequate about the traditional classroom with the transmission of received knowledge question and answer routines, narrowly focussed tests and uneven access to learning resources. Some of the first phase e-learning environments even represented a reduction in the quality of traditional classroom. Despite their aura of newness, they are just as irrelevant to the needs of the knowledge society as the traditional classroom.

The significance of the new technologies is that, as media, they allow for very different ways of engaging, relating and communicating. The New Designs for Learning Project is currently exploring the potentials of the digital technologies to transform learning environments. It has developed two principal tools: a Learning Design Space and a Learning Design Framework to enable educators and learners to realise the full potential of new learning environments. Kalantzis and Cope (2005) argue that this will fundamentally change the human and knowledge relations of learning: suggesting that learners will be autonomous and responsible, working at their own pace and following learning pathways determined by their own prior knowledge and lines of interest. They say learning will be localised, relevant and engaged, connecting with the learner's social

environment, personal interests and experience, whilst making powerful links between local or specific knowledge and global or general knowledge. Collaborations and joint work will be easily managed and using devices such as emails mirrored in a message pool each time a collaborator makes a change to a work, and capturing the conversations and negotiations around the evolution of a work. The audience for a student work will be increasingly lateral, communicated not just to the teacher but also to fellow students, the wider learning community and parents. The direction of knowledge flows will be bottom-up more than top-down: learners will use a variety of sources to build their own knowledge and teachers will translate broad curriculum goals into locally engaged curriculum.

Digital environment enables tools and spaces where multiliteracies can be taken to new heights. One of the challenges facing educators in such a society is how to provide meaningful learning experiences for our learners so that they acquire not just knowledge but more importantly through their engagement with the task, they acquire applied knowledge that they need to succeed in the 21st Century. Lori Lockyer and Barry Harper in their contribution, *A Technology-Enhanced Multiliteracies Learning Design for Geography Education*, describes a project that involves the design of a K-12 Geography education excursion program. The design is based on two ideas that include firstly, a contemporary view of pedagogy that scaffolds be provided to students engaged in real world task and secondly, some "emerging views of multiliteracies". Lockyer and Harper further explain how the multiliteracies learning design that has been developed is applied and implemented within a technology-enhanced environment which provides learners with access to the multi-modal texts and tools through learning designs which have taken into account the use of linguistic and visual, technological and other signs. Their learning design around the Sydney Olympic Park Geography Challenge is conceptualised around an integrated series of tasks with supports and resources. The paper provides an intriguing broad and detailed analysis of tasks which involve problem-solving, critical literacy and multiliteracies. The paper provides broad and specific design exemplars of how pedagogy must dynamically link ways of knowing to ways of representing meaning which are valued in the particular discipline of geography. The writers citing from Gerber (1995), sums up the relationship between literacies and geography education in saying "... the greatest benefit of injecting technological and graphic literacy into the geographical education process will be the empowering of the learners... evidenced through enhanced problem-solving capacities of the learners using more relevant data in a more skilled manner" (p. 56). For the project design team, this statement underpins the pedagogical design of learning experiences.

In the Multiliteracies perspective (New England Group, 1998), a critical engagement is seen as a basic requirement, where reflexive meaning-making involves the interrogation of texts and the contexts that produce those texts. In

Interdiscursivity In Leadership Discourse, by Idris Aman and Mohammad Fadzeli Jaafar, the authors study how leadership discourse is constructed, produced, and used to lobby for support for the government. Idris and Mohammad Fadzeli analysed the content and context of the 1982–1999 New Year messages of the fourth Malaysian's Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad and found that the leadership discourse is constructed and produced through the use of four main discourse types: informative, expository, argumentative and expressive. According to Idris and Fadzeli, the aim of the addresser in using the interdiscursivity of these four-discourse types is "to ensure that the addressee knows, understands, believes, and comes together in the leadership process of the addresser". Critical literacy requires readers of discursive texts to understand and problematise the histories, contexts and structures upon which these texts are constructed rather than accept them at face value. This is critical literacy in concept and action.

The other articles in this volume are grounded in theoretical and empirical case-study research. These specific research cases are related to the broad contexts of pedagogy and the broader frameworks of intervention and change.

Supporting Learner: Teacher Mediation and Teacher Talk to Provided Opportunities

The teacher is one of the prime agents and actors in the processes of learning and influences on the learner. The identity and approach of the teachers is important in relation to the choices that she/he makes about not only the languages of the classrooms but the scaffolding and support that are given in relation to the reading, writing, speaking and listening activities of the classroom. Although language policy at the macro level determines what teachers may or may not do, there is significant autonomy regarding the interventions and scaffolding that are used as well as options around language in a multilingual context.

Appropriate scaffolding is considered an important form of mediation or action which can be focused on the broad needs of the learner. Mohamed Ismail Ahamad Shah and Normala Othman's paper, *Students' Output In Communicative Language Teaching Classrooms* assesses whether "the production of modified output by learners in a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) classroom encourages communication and enhance language learning". Their respondents were beginners and intermediate level learners studying in a university in Malaysia. They audio taped the class teachers' interactions with these students in the classroom and found that in a language class "opportunities for the production of output were not always available to the students". They suggest that teachers make "adjustments" when interacting with their students in class to encourage communication and

enhance language learning. This paper highlights the collaborative learning through purposeful, designed talk and inputs provided by experts to novices initiating these novices into members of communities. Taken to a broader level, studies grounded in theoretical and empirical study of a case has implications for program and policy interventions in terms of design of teacher talk and tasks for effective learning processes and outcomes.

Most Malaysian degree programmes, even at the undergraduate level, require the writing of a thesis or at least a project paper. In *Investigating Students' Personal Constructs in Writing Research Proposals: A Case Study*, Jamilah Mustaffa, Siti Hamin Stapa, Lee Siew Chin and Bahiyah Dato' Abdul Hamid look at the academic writing constructs of Malaysian undergraduates. Their study aims to find out how students mediate between their own writing construct and that of their tutor's when developing their research proposals. Instead of a construct-based writing approach used for teaching academic writing, the contributors propose a learner-oriented, bottom-up approach which "work(s) within the parameters of what students know of the subject matter, as well as what they can do and not what the tutors and course developers think the students should know and should do". According to the writers, such an approach will benefit both the academically weak and strong students as planned transitions and pathways are provided to engage the varying constructs between tutors (the experts) and learners in academic writing. Inquiry based learning around learner and tutor constructs would provide important conversations for building common grounds.

Related to these contributions, Rosniah Mustaffa explores the effects of culture and learning styles in her paper, *The Effects of Culture on Students' Learning Styles*. Here she reports on a study to investigate whether low proficiency students could "stretch" or adapt to visual and auditory learning styles, the dominant style used in higher learning institutions. She found that these learners had difficulties in expanding their normal cultural learning styles to adapt to the visual and auditory styles. She attributes this inability to the cultural background of the students and to the fact that they have been educated in a comparatively traditional, hierarchical system. The writer argues that since, shifts in learning styles may not be as easily learnt in adult life, that teachers socialise learners into learning styles at a younger age.

This paper highlights the diversity of learners in learning environments and the cultural expectation about learning that many learners bring to learning experiences. The difference between learning styles and backgrounds has to be consciously negotiated and this will require reflexivity, creativity, flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity and difference.

Supporting Learning in Diverse Learning Settings

Pramela Krish in the contribution, *The power of feedback in an online learning environment* takes a closer look at human interaction between the instructors and learners and among learners during learning in the online environment. Using learner responses to statements via a questionnaire and interviews, the paper shares the reflection of learners to oral and written feedback received during their online tutorials and discusses how instructor feedback helped learners improve their language literacy. The main findings of the study suggest that feedback has a positive impact on the online learners. The feedback of the instructors was much valued. Like the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning, it is clear that feedback on the electronic mode can also help to enhance the language learning literacy. Given the tremendous potential of the distribution and management of knowledge in ICT environments, the findings here have implications on how knowledge gained from teacher feedback is itself managed and distribution through e-channels.

Literacy in a Foreign Language: The Learning of French Pronouns by ESL Learners by Wong Bee Eng and Lim Sep Neo looks into foreign language learning literacy. The study investigates the French pronoun paradigm in the non-native grammars of adult university L1 (first language) Chinese speakers who have learnt English as a dominant L2 (second language) and French as a foreign language. Specifically the study seeks to identify the types of inter language structures produced by first language Chinese speakers in their learning of French pronouns. She found that some French pronouns were more problematic than others for the learners. An explanation is provided as to why this might be the case and what the findings mean in terms of language literacy in a foreign language.

This grounded empirical work is situated within broad awareness of contemporary life where there are demands for inter lingual negotiations between communities. Broadly, it would be helpful to look at the discourses within which such interlingual structures are formed so that learners engage in comparative understanding of discursive patterns of interaction, cultural ways of being for communities of practice in French. A comparative discussion would add value to what may be viewed as intercultural and interlingual crossing and/or mixing as significant processes of engagement in diverse cultural contexts.

Taken together, the case studies reported here by researchers in Malaysia can be viewed broadly, as empirical engagements with language and literacy issues in diverse contexts. In a macro and micro discursive sense, pedagogy, advocacy and commitment to diverse cultures of learning and diverse literacies need to be planned as policy and implemented at grassroots level. In the 21st Century, good policy needs to be carefully distinguished from rhetoric, from tokenistic multiculturalism or meaningless rhetoric about recognising multilingualism.

Educationists, activists and community leaders in Malaysia as in Australia face particular challenges in the closing in of critical open discussion and the perceived divides especially at a time when these perceived divides around religion and nationalism create a volatile and combustible mix on the world scene. Recently in Australia, riots at Cronulla beach in December 2005 have identified the tensions around the differentiated impact of globalisation where some racists and reactionary groups are trying to reclaim outdated notions of a monoethnic and monocultural nation unified by common values. In the Australian case, these values are intolerance, hatred and racism. They foreshadow the changes that are needed in developing projects that promote global optimism and develop a critical engagement with the forces that promote division and intolerance. Likewise in Malaysia, Farish Noor (2002) challenges dominant state and party-owned media and unreflexive educational machinery as articulating essentialised views on ethnicity, religion and values. What choices are available to disrupt these narratives that promote anxiety and hatred? The contributions in this volume suggest that the complexity of globalisation requires responses that engage with diversity and complexity rather than instrumental and reductionist approaches that have narrow perspectives and options around culture, language and society. This volume has identified the importance of the possibility in the heterogenous, narratives, micro stories and classroom interventions (mediations and actions) of teachers who disturb the master narratives of policies at the ground level. These literacy agents choose to work with master narratives of and experience in mediating the needs of the state with those of grassroots communities.

This volume has identified the need for a more pluralistic, networked and organic approach to literacy and numeracy that is often advanced as the way ahead. Networks that explore the possibilities of collaboration and interaction between policy-makers, policy planners and the other important agents of learning, such as the teachers, families, community leaders and the learners, is an essential part of the designs for new learning in the 21st century.

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