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The new symbolic space: the use of popular culture as tools of engagement

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Abstract
This paper will argue that young children are rapidly becoming the ‘new rich’ in regard to engaging with, understanding and exploiting the many forms of popular culture found in Australian society. While politicians, teachers and administrators argue and debate ‘skill acquisition’ and mastery over conventions, we will argue that children are tending to ignore school based texts and are engaging in reading texts that represent a ‘new interiorisation’ of cultural understanding and are using a new set of associated reading skills. At the turn of the new millennium Brockmeier predicted that reading as a skills based approach is only the entrée to what he termed literacy as ‘symbolic space’ and that a new approach was needed. We believe that children are now ahead of teachers in terms of accessing this approach and in many instances teachers have missed the boat altogether. In this presentation we aim to demonstrate and discuss the nature and elements of what Olsen and Torrance have termed the new ‘societal literacy’ and the nature of the engagement with popular culture and ‘community based texts’.

1 Popular Culture as the New Literacy– A conceptual framework
In the field of language education we now live in age that has become characterised by ‘radical instability’. That is, all of the traditional boundaries that defined the various aspects of literacy have collapsed. What were once talked about as discreet genres in the nineties and early years of this millennium have given way to notions of ‘hybridity, overlap and mutation’. All of the lines and boundaries that informed parents and teachers and identified the borders surrounding the various literate practices have merged with what appears to be the seemingly indescribable and so for many, feared. As we see it the main reason for this is that the demarcation boundaries between popular culture and what was once considered to constitute sound literacy elements and practices have also become blurred. Blogs, graphic novels and podcasting are the new literacies, and all dominated by the visual.
Even simply ‘surfing the web’ has become passé and now itself encompasses all forms of multi-modal usage.

Those who once could be described as users of signs and signifiers are now signs and signifiers themselves. Books themselves as text only or those that have a graphics emphasis are now only one form in a myriad of text types. But this could change before the e-ink dries on this screen. What was once foregrounded, as a possibility has now become the norm, that is the non-linear, multi-modal and organic signage of the new literacy.

Deeply embedded in engagement with popular culture, for many children and adults, this is not only the means by which they communicate, relax, reflect and play; it has become their raison d’etre. Lyden argues it has become the ‘new religion’⁶. We would argue that through this ‘Niagara of engagement’ with popular culture, Generation X, Y and Z have developed a completely different framework of reading and understanding the world around them. The visual generations have created an understanding pattern similar to what Lakoff and Johnson have termed ‘sensorimotor domains’⁷. That is the world around them is conceived and couched in language terms of a “physical logic of grasping to reason about understanding.”⁸ In other words their worldview is a metaphor of affective movement. The term ‘surfing the web’ is a case in point. It is a polysemic movement metaphor that also denotes time, space, location and distance. We believe this is a very different way of thinking and language use as compared to the linear, hierarchical and lockstep worldview and associated language use of these children’s parents and teachers.

More importantly, just as the current forms of popular culture touch on the liminal elements of morality, ethics and the notion of what is truth, so too are the children engaged in these facets also concerned with these issues. While children can view all forms of human behaviour on wide screen televisions with surround sound, they can with the flick of a switch then participate in realistic games where they are required to make similar choices while discussing these with other like minded players via email. Not only can they view the liminal nature of what it means to be human, they can be participants as well.

Unless teachers and parents realize this and use their children’s natural engagement with these forms of popular culture they will be relegated to an even further space of generational distance. Current school literacy practices may become the fossilised remnants of a bygone era unless it is recognised
that radical literature is a natural part of cultural literary growth and overall development.

If we are in a state of ‘radical instability’, where are we situated in the current debate with the elements our children are engaging with and what are the elements of this textual plethora that are now impacting on our culture?

2 Text in Popular Culture – The Supposed Symbolic Space

Trying to define the textual aspects of popular culture is difficult because it is so much a part of our everyday lives. As Taylor and Overmier describe it, this text overload involves such mundane aspects as the visual signage on food and beverage choices such as McDonald’s, Pepsi, Coke; our clothing, Nike, Reebok; the types of entertainment we choose, Football, Wrestling, Video, Internet; the types of commodities we select, mobile phones, cars, beer; the types of lifestyles we aspire to, a Sea-change or a Tree-change. In fact the literary myriad in popular culture impacts a great deal more than the life choices we make. It has been argued that part of the problem is that we are now inundated with choice and flooded with signs and signifiers and as such fail to recognise that these textual facets are more than communication, but rather represent a different form of understanding; one that is being accepted by Generation X and Y but rejected by the Baby boomers. As we see it, in attempt to alleviate this cultural angst one of the main problems has been the linear thinking reflected in the linear formats that popular culture has been described by the older generation in order to hold it down and discuss it.

The key issue has become the creation of a dichotomy or scale in which in current language popular culture as a whole has been compared adversely to ‘high culture’. As discussed by several researchers such as Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter, and Marsh & Millard there are certain types of cultural markers that are considered to be high culture. These are identified as certain types of writing such as those for example of Dickens and Shakespeare. Then there is low culture that is the type of cultural texts that appeal to the masses. This is viewed as non-educational, linked to leisure and often advocated and delivered by mass media that Taylor & Overmier cite as akin to watching a soap opera. The assumption here is that high culture is intrinsically of more value and worth in our society and that the audience lacks the ability to interpret the types of messages that the mass media produces.

Another aspect of the popular culture continua is the tendency to discuss current cultural aspects as folk culture. Alvermann, Xu & Carpenter link this aspect to a particular cultural world-view of denigration and oversimplification, or “…a naïve, simple and unsophisticated set of practices.”

Another view is that of popular culture as a whole, and associated literacy
practices in particular, as ‘everyday culture’ where younger consumers are simply being manipulated by mass media marketers. These unsophisticated target audiences are then seen to perpetuate this shallowness by deciding to purchase, forming the ‘shopping mall generation’.

“Children are agents in the construction of their own culture at the same time as being subject to hegemonic discourses of profit and consumerism.”

Related to the previous point, popular culture and its related visual literacies also appear to be strongly divided into a valid but still relatively superficial sense with advertising and products such as Barbie and My Little Pony and those such as Spiderman and X Men. Marsh & Millard believe that these have been obviously marketed towards specific genders. Millard, and Tavin & Anderson further suggest that this textual and ontological division in popular culture assists in building and maintaining the gender regimes that children construct as they grow and develop. Of late, tele-visual texts such as ‘Bob the Builder’ appear on the surface to be less gender specific until the roles performed by the female members of the team are examined, then we see that they are still relegated to such female tasks as mixing and organising to feed and care for other team members.

Also of concern to some teachers are issues connected to racism and the way this is represented in popular culture texts. Tavin and Anderson identify the ways by which Disney animated films create this impression by portraying non-White characters

“...as stereotypical representations of “the other” who are often inferior, grotesque, violent or unscrupulous. Dark skin usually signifies “dark” intentions.”

They go on to detail this racial stereotyping as occurring also via the use of the accents and inflections assigned to the characters such as those in The Lion King and Aladdin. According to Marsh & Millard, the baddie in these animations are also often racially and stereotypically identified and assume a minor role in the storyline.

There are also other issues connected with the ‘Disneying’ of the world as it occurs through popular culture that have been deemed a concern. These include those connected with the revision of history, for example the way the Disney version of Pocahontas re-storied the narrative to create a romantic link between the main characters. Of issue also in connection with Disney is its
powerful corporate role as oligopoly that impact upon its popular culture offerings across a diverse range of products that connect to consumerism. Due to Disney’s powerful and complex corporate connections, “…Disney promotes itself through spirals of referentiality. In this sense, Disney refers back to itself through its own media outlets and subsidiaries in an effort to advertise and advance its own cause.”

We see this often of course beyond Disney where the latest video uses a discourse of consumerism with references to the website, action figures, fast food outlet, clothing companies and collectables. Elements of these such as Pokemon have moved into a realm of discourse that is often incomprehensible to parents and teachers, but are based on a high degree of intricate language use.

3 Popular Culture – The actual symbolic space

While the above points are certainly present in the texts that children engage with, we would argue that they are perhaps noticed but not noteworthy for young readers. Previous research suggests that fully engaged readers view the texts at hand in a more holistic sense. That is their reading process actually involves a more visceral interaction in which they become part of the reading territory and associate emotionally with the characters in the text. While they notice the elements detailed in the previous paragraphs, these are viewed as being secondary to the actual readability and believability of the text. Fully engaged readers appear to have a more engaged approach to text reporting that they actually can see, or visualise the actions of the characters. As can be seen in the comment, ‘It’s like a video in my head’, they report the engagement in terms of a conceptual metaphor that reveals a focus on time, space and motion. Our interview data has consistently revealed a constant reference to and usage of this form of comparison. This metaphor is not poetic but reveals a frame of thinking.

Thus, as the forms of popular culture are more visually based they allow a much greater access to the visceral and emotive engagement discussed in the previous paragraphs. Current research indicates that children engage with these new text types not because they provide more than a passive mesmerising set of movement, colours and light, but that they also provide opportunity for ‘high self monitoring, …the cueing of personal thoughts and emotions.” In other words, the pleasure of reading has morphed into mainly the pleasure of non-linear screen engagement, a symbolic space that is more ideologically and value laden than any form of text only literacy practices. As Blessing and
Tudico see it, popular culture now gives answers to the meaning of life to these generations.

“... all of these things involve me. I am central to the story line. I am so to speak the star of the show.”

As we see it, it is this latter point of children being active central participants in the construction of their own literacy and culture as a whole that is the critical facet. Genuine learning only occurs when children are genuinely engaged in the process. The elements of popular culture at this point of time facilitate genuine engagement as the authority for engagement and learning is invested in the child. It is not ego centric but ego confirming. Text, in all its shapes and varieties is more than a reflection of life, its has become life. While the traditional forms of book literacy allow for engagement because of the ‘tell tale gaps’ where by the reader has to fill in the narrative with their own interstitial understandings, the new forms of narrative provide for longer and deeper ‘gaps’. As intimated, the most important of which is that children are no longer being told a story, they are the active story teller. Even movies and dvd’s demand a greater depth and appreciation of narrative devices and cultural understandings. However, when coupled with the myriad of other ‘viewing’ or storying formats available to young children, they develop a richer power to create and recreate their own understandings. Thus, the engagement process is not based purely on the appeal of fun, but on a process of becoming a story teller, one that is able to utilise all of the senses to makes sense of the increased array of ambiguities that the new literacy’s and their content present.

As also stated, the new narrative formats are also non linear, thus the child has at their finger tips the power to unearth the discontinuities not only between the words on a page but also between their voice, and the vast set of choices that are available to them. The engagement process is therefore one of fusion between their tacit understanding, their intertextual elements or triggers on the screens before them and the sense of the range of possibility. As Sergei Einstein predicted, children must now evaluate, critically examine and create their own understandings in a textual world that is a ‘montage of attractions’.

We would argue that rather than being a slave to fashion, the new millennial reader has to draw more heavily on memory, engage with cultural elements more deeply and draw on the coexistence of memories. Being able to manouvre through games machines and programs of all kinds is a case in point. Thus they have developed a much more focussed co-existence and
connectedness to text as they must understand text as position, place and movement. In doing so they are no longer spectator-listeners, but have become the protagonist, the reader-narrator and the omnipresent director.

Notes
1  Brockmeir, Jens et al., “Literacy as Symbolic Space.” In Minds in the Making, edited by Janet W. Astington, 43-61, Oxford: Blackwell, 10
3  Pauline Harris et al, Writing in the Primary School Years. (2nd Edition), Sydney: Social Science Press, 2006
5  Creeber, Glen. The Television Genre Book. London: British Film Institute, 6
8  Ibid., 9
12 Ibid. 22
13 Fitzsimmons, Philip. Kick starting the inner site: Reading to See and Feel. [On line Data Base] (Australian Association for Educational Research, 2002, accessed 22 December 2006); available Australian Association for Research in Education database :http://www.aare.edu.au/02pap/abs02.htm#02492; Internet, 2
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15 Einstein, Sergei. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Orlando, Fl: Harcourt Brace, 1977, 175

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