



# Snapshot

The Australian National  
Schools Network -  
a network that leads and  
supports rethinking  
teaching and learning for  
a socially just world

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## Multiliteracies for 21st Century Schools

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Human  
Dimension

Foundational  
Dimension

Critical  
Dimension

Creative  
Dimension

Snapshots are occasional papers about areas of interest for Network members. The ANSN is committed to making available quality resources to help teachers and schools improve their work.

# Multiliteracies for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools

**Author: Maureen O'Rourke**

## Introduction

The demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century require complex and multiple literacies. The proliferation of technology and the capacity to easily record, store and send moving images, sounds and text will continue to change the way we communicate and challenge the ways we create meaning from different forms of communication. Globalisation in its broad sense (i.e. not just the economic but also the social, political, cultural and geographical, Sugden & Wilson, 2001) and our increased capacity to transcend borders in a wired-up world with increasing people flows have also created a need for more complex '*readings*' and processing of information. This in turn requires both a broad knowledge base and a strong capacity for critique and analysis, with consideration of the factors that may affect the form, content and meaning of messages and information.

The term 'multiliteracies' was coined by The New London Group<sup>1</sup> in 1996 in response to these changes in the world and our capacity to communicate through new media. The word is a helpful response as the term 'literacy' has become increasingly narrowly defined as education systems are gripped with the need for data, testing and comparison regimes. A young person growing up in a digitally connected,

media-rich world is disadvantaged if their literacy development is mainly judged through the narrow strand of reading and writing in print media. The New London Group reminded us that we communicate linguistically, aurally, spatially, visually, through gesture and in multiple modes. The multiliteracies perspective combines these broad modes of communication and meaning-making with the diverse practice (situated, social and cultural) of individuals, families, communities, workplaces and the broader global society. Additionally, each situation an individual encounters involves values, beliefs, attitudes and opinions that may affect their 'reading' or sense making (Barwind & Piecowye, 2002) and therefore requires flexibility and openness to more relaxed forms of language.

Multiliteracies therefore acknowledge the diverse forms of literacy practice required for work and leisure, citizenship and community participation, personal growth and cultural expression. This concept:

- broadens literacy from an emphasis on 'reading the word' to reading multi-modal texts;
- includes the assumption that in the process of becoming literate, students are making sense of the world and themselves in the world;

<sup>1</sup> The New London Group is named after the place where members of the group first met in New London, New Hampshire, USA. In 1994, the group developed the ideas that became the core of the jointly authored paper, 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures', which was published in the Spring 1996 issue of the Harvard Educational Review. The paper takes the form of a manifesto, a series of hypotheses about the directions literacy pedagogy might take in order to meet the radically transformed communication demands our students are likely to encounter in their near futures. (<http://edoz.com.au/educationaustralia/archive/features/mult3/html>)

- assumes that literacy is also about communicating with, and understanding the communication of others;
- assumes that part of becoming literate involves developing the capacity to understand the influences of social, cultural, historical and political contexts.

Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian literacy educator, likened literacy to an onion where the more literate we become, the more we see the complex layers within. This holds true for multiliteracies, as those with a skill and knowledge base in a particular discipline, area of knowledge or communication mode will see beyond the surface of a message and have the ability to communicate their ideas through increasingly effective means.

Schools are currently working through the challenge of identifying the new learning and literacies that are required to successfully participate in and contribute to 21<sup>st</sup> century society. This requires consideration of how best to prepare young people for the technological, social, cultural and political changes they face in a world that is increasingly characterised by local diversity and global connectedness. Thus, in addition to developing the skills to make sense of multiple communication modes and communicate with diverse audiences, we must engage children and young people in observing and critiquing the communication systems to which they have access. For both teachers and education systems, this requires a shift and broadening in terms of what we value

as literacy practice. This in turn will affect how children see themselves as literacy learners. The broader and more complex dimensions of multiliteracies enable children and young people to more accurately demonstrate their ideas, learning and knowledge. When provided with these opportunities, there is often a clearly demonstrated change in the confidence of young people, their status among their peers and their view of themselves as successful learners

## Dimensions of Multiliteracies

One way of understanding multiliteracies is to consider four dimensions of literacy that are applicable regardless of the communication mode – the human, foundational, critical and creative dimensions. The modes of communication referred to are the common forms of communication used in schools, such as language and print, still and moving images, music, performance, gestures and constructions in space (see Figure 1). The dimensions of literacy articulate broader planning and assessment considerations for teachers as they expand the literacy repertoire of practices in their classrooms.

The Human dimension of literacy is a reminder that literacy is not a simple technical endeavour. It is shaped and influenced by the individual sense maker and communicator and the sum total of his or her knowledge and life experience. This includes not only discipline knowledge, but knowledge of

others, situations and contexts. It also refers to the little considered affective or emotional aspect of communication which is particularly highlighted in multiliterate practice when music is used to create a mood or feeling associated with a message.

The Foundational dimension refers to the particular skills and knowledge that generally need to be directly taught to students then practiced in order for them to become proficient. While huge emphasis has been placed on the foundational skills associated with reading and writing and to an important but lesser extent on listening and speaking, the communication modes associated with visual, aural, spatial and gestural forms has mostly been addressed through specialist or elective subjects such as the Arts and Design. In order to expand existing literacy practice, the wealth of knowledge that exists in these disciplines needs to be mined and linked to everyday literacy practice. The Moreland City College multiliteracies project described in the next section illustrates an attempt to do this.

The Critical dimension of literacy has serious implications for educators' pedagogy and a series of questions thus arise. How do we examine the educational intentions of the tasks we set students e.g. are we aiming simply

to engage students with the technology or are we providing opportunities for critical engagement where students are encouraged to use higher order thinking and develop deep understandings? Do we encourage students to



Figure 1: A Moreland City College student learns first hand how to manipulate and edit video footage.

reflect on the content of their work, its relevance at a local and global level, as well as the appropriateness of the mode of communication they have used to exhibit their knowledge and ideas? Is the learning environment designed physically, socially and culturally to be a place where students regularly give and receive feedback and is there time provided for them to revisit their initial ideas and reshape with such feedback in mind? Teachers' ability to question effectively, provides scaffolding and support to stretch students in their thinking

is also a contributing factor to how well the critical dimension of literacy is developed.

The Creative dimension provides opportunities to genuinely assess how well the other dimensions of literacy have been assimilated as they are adapted, adopted and innovated on for the individual’s own purposes. This is where the expression, testing and elaboration of ideas takes place, with learners creating their own opportunities as they manipulate and reconstruct situations and make their creative experiences meaningful - “something new is created and there is significant change or ‘transformation’ in the pupil” (Jeffrey & Craft, 2003, p. 2).

A conceptual framework for understanding multiliteracies as part of the schooling experience is summarised in Table 1.

When educators become more conscious of these dimensions and actively plan to include them in the curriculum opportunities they provide their students, they foster the holistic development of individuals and at the same time gain deeper insight into their capabilities, competencies, attitudes and thought processes.

### Examples of Multiliteracies in Action

#### Primary Schools and Animation

Table 1	Modes of communication				
Dimensions of literacy	Print and linguistics	Visual e.g. Still and moving images: Photographs, graphics, drawings, animation, video	Spacial and Gestural e.g. Performance, body language, constructions in space	Aural e.g. Voice, music, sound effects	Mixed mode
Human dimension	Drawing on contextual knowledge (e.g. social, cultural, historical, political context) and own life experiences. Creating meaning, sense-making, making connections, understanding and reading audiences. Alternative ways of knowing and seeing, using own life experience and understandings of the world. Identifying what’s worth pursuing in a human sense.				
Foundational dimension	Foundational skills and knowledge. Techniques, principles, composition strategies, spelling, grammar, technical, editing and production skills etc.				
Critical dimension	Thinking and analysis. Reflecting on what worked, why, how it could be better. Identifying different interpretations and meanings and what influences are at work. Noticing the dominant. Noticing what’s missing. Identifying ways forward and how to improve. Audience reaction – was the intention communicated?				
Creative dimension	Using new learning to transform existing practices, new combinations, new ways of seeing and doing. Making a difference. Creativity and innovation.				

\* This framework builds on the work of The New London Group (1996); Lankshear, Snyder & Green, (2000); Cope and Kalantzis (2000); Kalantzis and Cope (2001), (2004).

Over the last 5 years I have been fortunate enough to work with a number of primary schools that have explored the medium of animation as a narrative device for children. Teachers were attracted to animation because it clearly encouraged children's creativity and the use of handcrafted artwork was the basis for digital images.

There are different forms of animation that have been used in schools, with stop motion animation the most commonly used. This consists of successive digital photographs that are replayed at a speed that gives the impression of movement. Students create sets and figures from a range of natural and synthetic materials, such as paper, cardboard, plasticine, clay, twigs and leaves.

Animation is essentially about well-constructed narrative and a helpful starting point is providing children with the opportunity to observe and critically reflect on animations they have encountered. They also need time to develop a foundational understanding of how the technology works, with play, technical experimentation and direct instruction all assisting them to engage and plan effectively for its use.

Once the new technology thrill is satisfied, time needs to be spent working together to tease out ideas and establish a concept that will be the basis of children's narrative or story telling. Then comes the challenge of working

out the best way to communicate their concept to a particular audience. Storyboarding and scripting are necessary (with scripts including movement, camera angles, sound effects and voice-overs) and animation requires children to distil their story to key messages and ideas. During this stage, children also need to work out how image, text, sound, movement and timing can be combined to communicate their message in a manner that directs the audience's attention and gets their message across clearly. Direct teaching of the basic principles of visual design and camera work quickly increases control over equipment and the medium. This means learning new vocabulary (e.g. wide shot, mid shot, close-up etc.) and how best to combine a sequence of shots based on film making principles. This experience and knowledge provides children with the power to critique their own and others' work.

Animations that communicated most powerfully with their audiences were those where teachers had focused strongly on supporting students to develop their ideas and storylines effectively and to work together collaboratively as a team. The planning, drafting, editing and refining processes were all highlighted by teachers with noticeable increases in student control and responsibility. This contrasted with classrooms where the technical aspects of animation predominated, resulting in animations which were technically clever (i.e. evidence of well developed foundational literacy) but not necessarily

communicating a message of interest or worth in the eyes of the audience (neglect of some aspects of the human dimension). However, the very fact that the human dimension was not initially well developed in a literacy sense stimulated teachers to highlight this as the next phase of children's development:

*I felt the children needed guidance, as they were coming back very excited about stories of space battles and explosions. When I thought about this later, it dawned on me that this is the type of story these children would mostly be exposed to when watching animation. They were relating animation to video games and found it difficult to go past the combat idea. I then put aside the whole animation idea and pulled the children together to have a discussion about what the children were concerned about in the world. It was then that we started to get some base concepts for them to work from.*

*(Year 2/3/4 Primary teacher reflection, 2001)*

An interesting trend that arose in several schools was the change in status of some students who traditionally struggled with print literacy, but were able to produce products judged as high quality by both their teachers and peers. The majority of these students were from low socio-economic backgrounds and many had a first language other than English. In a multiliteracies environment, they were no longer the 'strugglers' but able to operate on

more equal terms with their peers. Although these children may have had limited exposure to print resources in their home environment, they were on a much more level playing field with their access to visual and music resources from their early years. The construction of animations has something for all learning styles, with kinaesthetic learners well catered for.

Regardless of whether the final products were effective in communicating a message of interest and worth to their audience, the teamwork required during the construction process inevitably facilitated the development of such skills as communication, negotiation, decision making, time management and general organisation. Any product at all was a starting point for the development of critical literacy, providing teachers and students with opportunities to gradually focus on increasing aspects associated with a quality animation. The breadth and depth of literacy and learning possibilities was highly valued by both teachers and students alike and demonstrates the multiliterate richness of a well constructed animation task.

### **A Secondary College and Film Making**

In 2004 I was invited to join the Melbourne-based Moreland Soundhouse team as critical friend to a film making project with Year 7 and 8 students. Students were nominated for the project by their class teachers, based on whether they were perceived to have talent

in this area, would enjoy the program, were quiet and needed a confidence boost, or struggled with literacy in the mainstream.

A film-maker/multimedia specialist and two musicians made up the SoundHouse team of specialists engaged to work with the students. A veteran film director also spent one session with the students sharing his mode of working. The work was conducted over two terms, with one day per week allocated to the program and students generally spending at least a half day per week with the team. The natural approach of the film maker and musicians was documented and analysed in the context of the multiliteracies framework.

The starting point for the program was the human dimension of literacy - identifying what the students were interested in, something they were passionate about or saw as problematic or sufficiently important that they wanted to devote their time and energy to it. They offered a range of ideas based on their experiences, most notably racism, bullying and the future. This starting point, involving the encouragement of free flowing ideas then a focusing in, was also designed to fire students' motivation. Consultations with the film maker resulted in the bullying focus being selected. The reason for this was that bullying was a more concrete and 'filmic'

concept for the students to respond to in terms of their own experience, while racism (which students also believed they had each experienced) would have been extremely challenging to develop for a first time film.



Figure 2: Students gain valuable insights from a specialist film-maker from Soundhouse about location selection and lighting.

The next stage of the program addressed aspects of foundational literacy. Rather than teach skills formally, the film maker and musicians worked off the ideas generated by the students and introduced vocabulary and skills as they saw a need. Script development began after development and agreement of a general concept. The film maker was clear in his intentions that the story needed to be simple but include dramatic content and some conflict. He saw a good film as being based on this, together with interesting characters and a unique vision.

The unique vision in this case was the issue of bullying being addressed by a multicultural group of students, all of whom had been bullied at some stage and some who admitted to engaging in bullying. The personal attributes of being able to concentrate, synchronise and follow instructions were also seen as necessary if a quality film was to be produced. This demonstrates how inextricably linked the dimensions of literacy are and how students must cycle back and forth between them.

Script development involved development of the following foundational skills:

- Developing a sense of narrative structure and pacing
- Developing interesting characters
- Contributing to dramatic content and conflict ideas
- Working towards clarity of the message

The script development phase immersed students in the process. Initially it seemed chaotic and fuzzy, but each week students would return and the narrative improved in clarity. The film maker had a high tolerance for such fuzziness and likened the process the students were engaging in to ‘an ABC script writing session’. Most noticeable about his approach was his ability to create a sense of student ownership and clearly it was their ideas that were being developed. He was not absent from the process, but created a space for all voices, listened respectfully to all ideas and contributed suggestions as to how the

students’ ideas could be incorporated into the dialogue. To help the students, he helped them to develop a sense of order by chunking ideas, then doing a one-line scene synopsis that indicated the action and dialogue.

Story boarding and camera work also developed students’ foundational literacy associated with the techniques of film production. For example, students had to think of the type and angle of the shot, how best to frame it and the sequence of shots that would best communicate their message. Vocabulary was introduced naturally as students embarked on a new aspect of script, storyboard development or camera work. Rather than a chore to learn, the incidental short explanations provided by the film maker on a need-to-know basis resulted in him establishing his credibility and gaining the respect of the students, leading one student to remark to him ‘you’re good at this...you know a lot’. Towards the end of the filming, the students were using the vocabulary naturally with the director saying “*Standby for a take, camera rolling, and action....That’s a print!*”

Students were also taught an efficient technique for obtaining a range of shots that would give them maximum flexibility when determining the final cut. For example a scene between a victim and a bully was shot firstly from the perspective of the victim, then the bully, then a two shot involving them both. Editing later enabled a mix from each of these takes to create a sequence that communicated powerfully.

The critical dimension of literacy was also fostered throughout the process, beginning with the sifting of ideas. After encouraging the generation of ideas, the film maker challenged students to identify which were the best ideas and justify why. This raised the issue as to whether the strongest ideas or the strongest egos were winning! Students also warmed to the culture of ‘tossing ideas around’ and being listened to and they became increasingly confident in offering their perspective. For example, one student who was to play a character in the film pointed out during a script writing session that “*I don’t have enough time*” meaning my character doesn’t have enough time to motivate this last line of dialogue. This was accurate and the further elaboration was agreed to by the group. At another stage, one of musicians prompted critical thinking through the question “*why does Rob (a character) now have friends?*” This identified a discrepancy in the script that the students agreed with and they then generated ideas to clarify what was being communicated. The editing room also provided numerous opportunities for students to think about what they were communicating, how best to do this and why.

The creative dimension of literacy goes hand in hand with the development of confidence. One example of this to emerge was observed in the work of the student director of the film. The professional film maker had structured the process so that he played a secondary role, but was generally at the elbow of the student

director to support and coach. During one shoot, after a particularly good take, the film maker asked the student director “is that a print?” with his body language and tone of voice indicating that all was fine. On this occasion, the student director said no, he needed one more take and requested that one of the actors be more boring (as per the script). The professional film maker noted that this particular student director seemed to be able to see the film running in his head. While readily taking on ideas from the film maker, he was also willing to back his own judgement. The creative dimension of literacy was mostly expressed as expansion on new ideas and approaches to the work; development of new ways of seeing things (in this case students experienced quite a profound change in their understanding of bullying, stating that they didn’t realise how long the effects stayed with a person and the physical and mental effects of bullying); and innovations on what they had been taught.

Students needed to cycle between the different dimensions of literacy throughout the film making process. For example, the human dimension was important in the making of the film, particularly for the student director. He had to learn how to give instructions to his peers, how to be encouraging and give feedback and how to prepare actors. The film maker constantly coached students in both the social and the technical aspects of film making, making comments such as “*What I would do is go up and talk to those guys so they don’t*

get bored” (during a lull in filming) or “Tell everyone you liked it but you need to do another one” or “Did (actor) do really well? Then you need to tell her”. The students also commented upon this dimension of literacy when asked what they had learned. All commented upon the relationship aspect of the work:

*Getting along was hard, because we weren't friends in the beginning. We didn't even know each other. But as we got to know each other, it got better...We got better at working as a team...giving people a chance and letting them tell us what they want to do. And what ever they want to do, to discuss it with other people. Before this, it was like 'I want to do this and I'll do that. But this time round, you can't do it by yourself. You have to work with other people, respect others, listen to one another so we can cooperate.*

Critical literacy can only develop with experience and the film maker was clear that he wasn't aiming for the students to produce a perfect product, but rather one that considered the limitations of the context. In his view, the second film the students would make was far more important, as they would have been through the process once and have developed a much stronger sense of what they wanted to aim for. For a first film, this was mostly expressed as students discussed how and why things occurred; what worked, why and how it could be better; noticing dominant views and challenging these; identifying what was missing

in a technical, social, cultural or emotional sense and learning from audience reaction.

One of the most interesting outcomes of this project was the students' response when asked what they had learned through the experience. Almost all focused on the human dimension of the learning – a better appreciation of bullying and the impact on the victim and the importance of their own ability to co-operate, listen and get along in order to realise their ideas. They also commented on the importance of patience and having to cope with the boredom that accompanies a film shoot that requires multiple takes of the same scene with involvement of each student varying at different times. The technical aspect was also mentioned, particularly in relations to the skills in directing and camera work. The artists working with the students noted that the prevalence of talk about what worked and what was good increased over time, signifying the importance of creating the culture and environment for this to take place. The final product, while not perfect, was of a very high quality and drew very positive feedback from a range of audiences, including a group of school Principals.

## **Implications for Teachers and Teaching**

A multiliteracies approach encourages a broader perspective of the student as a learner and values diverse ways of knowing, thinking, doing and being. It encourages us,

as educators, to see the whole person and to make judgements through this broader lens rather than cumulative sub-sets of skills.

What clearly emerged from the work with skills was that the following teaching approaches were effective both in engaging the students and generating work of high intellectual and technical quality:

- emphasising the importance of tapping into students' lives and experiences
- finding out their existing knowledge and interests
- considering the social, cultural and emotional dimensions of a person's experience
- designing authentic learning experiences that relate to real life
- immersing students in an authentic task
- providing them with expert instruction in specialised skills
- opportunities to reflect upon and critique their work and process along the way
- creating a safe space for students to use their new knowledge to experiment with and test out their ideas.

If a multiliteracies approach is to become mainstream practice, it is important that teachers have the opportunity to develop their understanding and proficiency in multiliterate approaches. Generally, teachers are skilled in the human and critical dimensions of multiliteracies – what is different about this approach is the way we plan specifically to

ensure these aspects of literacy are considered for each child. One of the greatest barriers to multiliteracies development is the time required for teachers to develop their technical proficiency in communication modes other than print. The prevalence of technology means that access to computers and digital cameras is now greatly improved. We have to ask ourselves how do we ensure that students' use of such equipment goes beyond being technically clever so that high quality thinking, processes and products are in evidence. The learner perspective in relation to this way of working deserves the final word from a Year 8 student:

*Students always got like a power to do anything. A program like this should be in other schools so that every kid can have a chance to show what they can do. Those that are not good at English and Maths, they can do music or other activities. I would suggest they not only pick the kids that are good at classes but some kids that are trouble as well. They may have a talent inside them... If we did something wrong on the first day, they [film maker and musicians] didn't see us as a bad person all the time. They can see the other side of you. The good side of you. They became like your friend. They listen to us.*

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## About the author

Dr. Maureen O'Rourke is Director of Global Futures (Aus). She works strategically with key educational reform and innovation organisations both in Australia and internationally. Four major areas of her work are program leadership and management; local, national and international research (with an emphasis on collaborative and participatory research practices); professional learning programs for teachers (particularly long-term programs that broaden from classroom change to whole school change); and specialist consultancy (multiliteracies, social ecology approaches to reform, ICT and educational change, new learning and pedagogical change). She has worked with the ANSN for over five years as a National Project Manager for the KidSmart Early Learning Program and Authentic Learning and Digital Portfolios research circle. She has conducted professional learning programs for teachers in the Asia Pacific region and was the lead evaluator of the Asia Pacific KidSmart international evaluation. For the past three years she has also worked with the Victorian Schools Innovation Commission to scope a major initiative focusing on developing creativity and subsequently implement a pilot program. She has also facilitated the formation of a unique partnership to address educational issues and provision for refugee students.

The ANSN is committed to making available quality resources to help teachers and schools improve their work. Listed below are three resources currently available.

## **HEAD, HEART, HANDS**

### **Digital Portfolios and Student Work**

Head, Heart, Hands shows the story of several schools piloting digital portfolios. It all began when the ANSN developed a research circle and teachers came together to learn about digital portfolios, share ideas and develop plans.

The teachers went back to their schools and put the ideas into practice.

This DVD contains:

1. the 15 minute video Head, Heart, Hands (viewable on a PC with DVD drive or standalone DVD player).
2. Authentic Learning and Digital Portfolios - a report from research circle (PDF file accessible by a PC with a DVD drive).
3. sample digital portfolios from students (web pages accessible by a PC with a DVD drive).

Cost of kit:

ANSN members.....\$55.00 + p&h

Non-members.....\$88.00 + p&h

A postage and handling fee of \$8.00 applies

## **HABITS OF MIND**

### **A Resource Kit for Australian Schools**

How do we help students to develop intelligent behaviours? A number of Australian schools have been working together with the Australian National Schools Network in a research circle to explore the use of the 16 Habits of Mind in their classrooms. Their aim: to help students become better thinkers and know how to draw from a repertoire of strategies when they don't know what to do and develop the habit of doing so. The school stories included in the kit describe the pedagogical practices that have been used as teachers develop classrooms and schools where thinking is encouraged and valued. This kit is appropriate for primary and secondary teachers. The kit includes written materials and a 60min DVD.

Cost of kit:

ANSN members.....\$250.00 + p&h

Non-members.....\$300.00 + p&h

A postage and handling fee of \$10.00 applies

## **ASSESSMENT BY EXHIBITION**

### **Student Exhibition Teachers' Kit**

The aim of the Assessment by Exhibition Kit is to make available practical information to help teachers develop and implement an Exhibitions Program, including Roundtable assessment.

The Exhibitions Kit is comprised of two components: a Teacher Booklet of written and text-based materials that provide teachers with a framework for developing Assessment by Exhibition and a DVD disk (or a video) that expand on the approach.

Cost of Kit:

ANSN members.....\$250.00 + p&h

Non-members.....\$300.00 + p&h

A postage and handling fee of \$10.00 applies