

Multiliteracies

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Multiliteracies is a term coined by scholars who met to reconceptualize literacy and literacy pedagogy in the mid-1990s in New London, New Hampshire. This group, called the New London Group (NLG), convened to respond to changing communication technologies, issues of power, and the importance of cultural and linguistic diversity in a globalized world. As a result, they wrote an influential article that argues for pedagogy that centers on supporting learners in using multiple languages and modes of meaning-making as *available designs* in constructing and interpreting multimodal texts and as a way of negotiating multiple identities and power dynamics in a rapidly changing world. This entry provides an explanation of the terms *multiliteracies* and *available design*. Next, it describes pedagogical practices based on these terms. It concludes with a discussion of how the NLG's contribution has been critiqued and developed by others.

The Concept of Multiliteracies

The NLG argues that reading and writing cannot be taught authoritatively as the coding and decoding of a stable print-based language system. Rather, they maintain that the acts of interpreting and producing texts are increasingly becoming multimodal processes in which people use multiple languages, print, images, and sounds to communicate using computer-mediated means and drawing on their resources as members of diverse communities. The NLG's discussion predated the use of wikis, blogs, and social networking tools such as

Facebook but prophetically advanced the idea that when technologies change rapidly, schools should not be committed to teaching one national language and print-based set of skills. Rather, they maintain that schools should incorporate a much broader range of meaning-making practices into the curriculum because the traditional emphasis on print and a single national language, as opposed to multimodal texts and multiple languages, is not just outdated but detrimental to the growth of equitable and vital economic and political systems. They propose that a multiliteracies approach to pedagogy can provide students with both access and a critical apprenticeship to using new literacies that will enable them to play a more active role in constructing their social futures in a changing economy and social order.

Available Designs

To support a multiliteracies approach to teaching and learning, the NLG developed the metaphor of *available designs*. This metaphor captures how members of diverse linguistic and cultural communities draw on representational resources in communicating within and across cultural boundaries to construct meanings and participate in designing their social futures. Available designs include the various meaning-making systems at a learner's disposal. These systems are the conventions of home and school languages, images, sounds, and physical spaces, which can be configured as design elements to accomplish particular purposes for targeted audiences in specific contexts. For example, design elements include noticing patterns regarding how information is presented (e.g., rhetorical structures, screen formats, spatial positioning of objects, angles of perception) and use of styles or voices (e.g., dialects, colors, and sound effects). The NLG writes that in designing communicative practices, people are both inheritors of patterns and conventions and at the same time active designers of new meanings. They maintain that as designers, people can participate in constructing their social futures because they can actively participate in creating new social practices and learning communities through their use of new multimodal resources.

Pedagogy

In developing pedagogical practices based on these concepts, the NLG advocates that teachers enact a pedagogy that has four parts: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transforming practice. First, during situated practice, teachers immerse learners in using authentic texts for real-world purposes. Second, teachers provide overt instruction in how

experts produce and interpret these kinds of texts. For the NLG, overt instruction does not mean direct transmission and memorization. Rather, it involves explicit scaffolding to focus learners' attention on the salient features of texts and text production practices. It also includes collaboration between teachers and students to support learners in accomplishing more than what they can on their own and in developing a metacognitive awareness of how specific texts are constructed. Third, teachers support students in critically framing their work by exploring the ideological aspects of the texts they are interpreting and producing as a way of gaining distance from what they have learned and to innovate future work. Last, teachers assist students in using newly learned literacy practices and insights from critical reflection in producing texts in their local contexts and for their own purposes. The NLG maintains that at this stage, students should be in a position to draw strategically on existing design elements to create new designs as a way of applying and transforming knowledge.

Critiques

NLG's manifesto has been critiqued by a number of scholars. For example, Allan Luke maintains that the ability of nondominant language users to use dominant discourses does not alone eliminate inequitable power dynamics related to race and gender. In addition, Jim Gee, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear have raised concerns regarding workplace literacy programs that attempt to capitalize on diversity to meet the needs of the global economy as opposed to addressing issues of power and injustice within workplaces. Despite these critiques, scholars have developed the constructs of multiliteracies and available designs in influential ways. For example, Jim Gee has continued to challenge print-based schooling practices by analyzing the failure of schools to support students in learning to read relatively simple texts when compared to the more complex literacies these same students accomplish when participating in online gaming environments outside of school. Last, researchers such as Eva Lam have drawn on the construct of available designs to research how immigrants and transnational youth use multiple languages and multimodal resources in online spaces to construct more agentive identities and conceptions of self than are available in traditional classroom spaces or in face-to-face interactions. In sum, the NLG's proposal has been contested in ways that relate to conceptions of power and the reproductive forces at work in institutions. Nonetheless, their work has given rise to new ways of approaching literacy research and classroom practices that relate to issues of multimodality, multilingualism, and multiculturalism.

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See also

- [Critical Literacy \(n148.xml#n148\)](#)
- [Language and Identity \(n418.xml#n418\)](#)
- [Linguistic Hybridity \(n445.xml#n445\)](#)
- [Literacy Education and Diversity \(n448.xml#n448\)](#)
- [Media, Curriculum, and Teaching \(n465.xml#n465\)](#)
- [Social Reproduction \(n636.xml#n636\)](#)
- [Third Space and Sociocritical Literacy \(n683.xml#n683\)](#)

Further Readings

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