

Review of Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures by Cope & Kalantzis

UKLA has published several reviews of tried and tested books. These aren't new publications but books which members recommend as practical and accessible.

Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures Edited by Bill Cope & Mary Kalantzis

Routledge, 2000

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September 1994 should be regarded as a landmark in the recent history of literacy studies. Or maybe it should be spring 1996 – either will do, because the autumn of 1994 was when the New London Group first met, and 1996 the date when their jointly authored paper 'A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies' was first published in the Harvard Education Review. To explain: New London is the name of the place in the US where the group met, where Courtney Cazden, Bill Cope, Norman Fairclough, Jim Gee and Mary Kalantzis, joined forces with Gunther Kress, Allan Luke, Carmen Luke, Sarah Michaels, Martin Nakata and Joseph Lo Bianco to discuss how literacy pedagogy might adapt to suit the changing context of the late twentieth century. Despite the impressive range of expertise it was an ambitious undertaking, but one that was nothing if not generative and, with the benefit of hindsight, highly influential. By the time the book *Multiliteracies* was published, the project had gathered momentum, had attracted new voices and was beginning to influence debate amongst literacy educators in much of the English-speaking world, and elsewhere too.

If nothing else *Multiliteracies* is an edited collection which introduces the reader to some of the most influential voices that have shaped, and continue to shape current thinking about literacy and literacy education. For example, two chapters by Kress pre-figure the work on multimodality that was later fleshed out in *Literacy in the New Media Age* (2003), whereas Gee, not yet into

videogames, introduces us to the theme of 'portfolio people', those with what we might now call 21st century skills, a theme that he was to return to in *Situated Language and Learning* (2004). Alongside this there is an excellent chapter by Carmen Luke on new technology, and a carefully articulated defence of language diversity from Lo Bianco, who argues that a multiliteracies pedagogy must also be a multilingual one. But it is the editorial voice of Cope and Kalantzis that gives the book its coherence. It is their emphasis on curriculum design and pedagogy that draws on the ideas of the others, fashioning it into a clear agenda for change. These ideas are still potent and continue to inform their work as well as the work of others, even in the face of successive waves of 'reform' in which highly structured curricula have been imposed on education systems, often with the effect of stifling innovation and professional creativity.

The book is organised into five parts, an introductory section on multiliteracies is followed by a further three that detail the 'why', 'what' and 'how' of the theme. The concluding part – a personal favourite – looks at some early projects that show multiliteracies in practice. Newfield and Stein and then Bond write about their work in South Africa, and Cazden looks at four programmes that embody New London Group principles in the US. Threading through and giving unity to these examples are four pedagogical principles: situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing and transformed practice and these are key to an understanding of what multiliteracies is all about. They can also be clearly seen at work in a fascinating chapter by Michaels and Sohmer who give a detailed analysis of children's learning in science lessons. Despite the attempt to establish unity, the *Multiliteracies* book also provides a platform for some distinct and diverse voices. For example Fairclough, in searching for a foundational theory of language in an era of rapid social and cultural change, flies the flag for critical discourse analysis as a way of understanding the 'dynamic negotiation of cultural and linguistic difference' - a central concern of the New London Group. Fairclough focuses on the tension between conformity and diversity that is engendered by marketisation and globalisation.

In contrast to Fairclough's theoretically dense chapter, Nakata's fine-grained analysis of literacy amongst Torres Strait Islanders is a highly specific and localised account told with a strong personal voice. Nakata draws out the same themes and the same tensions as Fairclough, albeit from a different position. And this is the real attraction of the *Multiliteracies* book – the way in which the individual voices and the different chapters play off each other in different ways over successive readings. In the final analysis I'm not sure that I would frame my work in terms of multiliteracies, but yet I still feel enormous gratitude to the inspirational work of Cope and Kalantzis and the way in which they brought these luminaries together. Even if we can't agree on a landmark date, *Multiliteracies* should be considered as landmark in itself.

Guy Merchant, Sheffield Hallam University

References

Kress, G. (2003) Literacy in the New Media Age London: Routledge.

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