

## Book Review

# New Literacies: Changing Knowledge and Classroom Learning

C. Lankshear and M. Knobel (ed) 2003 Open University Press ISBN 0-335-21066-x

What it means to be literate in a world which seems to be changing beyond all measure is a challenge haunting literacy studies. What should be expected to pass for literacy in a world where email and text messaging may be direct modes of communication as significant to individuals as face-to-face conversation? Lankshear and Knobel are of the view that literacy theory as it has been does not yet adequately address this challenge, and set out boldly to move thinking about literacy issues forward by a substantial degree, or at least to point it in the direction in which it should be moving. They begin with a brief overview of the development of notions of literacy, and make a distinction between New Literacy Studies and the study of new literacies. The “New Literacy Studies” have taken the study of literacy forward from a focus on psychological notions of competence in reading and writing to an understanding that such activities happen in a social and cultural context, and are created and sustained by factors within that context. But theorists in this area have not, it is argued, addressed sufficiently the implications of the new literacies that are called into being by technological, economic and other changes, including globalisation:

The category of ‘new literacies’ largely covers what are often referred to as ‘post-typographic’ forms of textual practice. These include using and constructing hyperlinks between documents and/or images, sounds, movies, semiotic languages (such as ... emoticons (‘smileys’) used in email, online chat space or in instant messaging), manipulating a mouse to move around *within* a text, reading file extension and identifying what software will ‘read’ each file, producing ‘non-linear’ texts, navigating three-dimensional worlds online and so on. (pp. 16-17)

To these structural new literacies, which do not all necessarily involve ICT, they add further literacies which are new in a chronological sense, or new to being considered as literacies. The authors interests lie with this latter group, and the next chapter, focusing on proposed new literacies, offers an interesting range of examples: scenario planning, zines, multimediated, e-zining, meme-ing, blogging, map rapping, culture jamming, and communication guerrilla actions. The third chapter considers the characteristics of cyberspace, a new domain for human action created by the digital revolution that is significantly different from physical space; for instance, unlike many physical items, information is not consumed as it is used. The notion of mindsets is then developed to differentiate those who can ‘read’ the new literacies from those who cannot: ‘insiders’ as opposed to ‘newcomers’. Lankshear and Knobel begin to develop their thesis that many young people are able to deploy the insider mindset and hence master the literacies of cyberspace, whilst institutionalised education largely neither recognises nor responds to this new reality. As an indication of how ICT-based education can address the wrong mindset, and thus fail to deliver what most pupils need, there follows an analysis of the British “National Grid for Learning”, focusing on its structure and the offerings available

for early years education. One has to admit that this is the most enjoyable part of the book: well-written, incisive, and relentless in its critique. The NGfL is shown as structured upon a teacher-centred control didactic and containing material that is trivial and unchallenging. The authors conclude that,

It appears to us that in its current and foreseeable states of development, the Grid is more likely to impede than enable efficacious learning. The mindset informing its design and construction militates against its being ‘reformed’ in ways likely to support expansive educational goals and to attract and sustain the interest of learners with alternative access sources to online environments. Unfortunately, the Grid and the mindset it betrays are things we think teachers and learners with an eye to today and tomorrow would be better off without. ... Our arguments incline us personally to regard the practices and literacies coalescing around the Grid as ‘faux new’. They replicate long-established practices and prejudices in a context of using new technologies. Aspirations that the Grid will transcend the logic of preparing learners for tomorrow’s needs by teaching yesterday’s skills seem misplaced. The Grid is ‘faking it’. It is an outsider imposition on what should increasingly become insider spaces. (p. 105)

They then move on to the fascinating topic of attention economics, arguing that in a world where information is in almost infinite supply, what becomes a limited commodity is our ability to attend to it. Attention is by its very nature scarce. A new attention economy is therefore developing in areas like the Worldwide Web, where information, unlike physical commodities, does not dwindle in quantity as it is used, with new structures – focused on gaining and holding our attention – and methods of operation, and concomitant new literacies. Examples given include wearable display jackets, building scenarios, and attention transferring (using some one or thing well-known to draw attention to oneself). The emergence of such new literacies presents a challenge for schools:

What we might call postmodern worlds of the Web, channel surfing, and ‘playing the future’ and postmaterialist worlds of the attention economy *openly embrace* tendencies that currently constitute problems for schools. It may well be time in formal education to rethink the issue of education. The interface between digital technologies and new literacies offers a promising place to start. (p. 130)

They then turn to the ratings feedback systems used on such websites as *eBay*, *Amazon* and *Plastic* as a new literacy, that is, “a new way of reading and writing aspects of the world that are important to participants in these online activities” (p. 132). The ratings systems are so important because they form the basis of the relationship of trust that develops between members of particular online communities (which thus lack the intuitive, visual and other behavioural cues that enable trusting relationships to develop between community members). Being able to read the ratings thus becomes a central activity for committed community members, and maintaining good ratings of their own (e.g. as buyers or sellers on *eBay*) becomes vital to their continuance as members of the community. This activity is a characteristic of digitised communities, and only exists

because of the digitised nature of those communities. Having purchased a book recently from a third party source through Amazon, and then been pressed (very politely) by the seller to complete the feedback form, I'm aware of how important the ratings are. The practices surrounding ratings and feedback in web-based communities are described in some detail, and the authors conclude that, "In the end, online community feedback and ratings systems are often an illuminating microcosm of literacy and social practice at large." (p. 151)

The final section of the book focuses on the implication of new literacies for the classroom. Literacies as social practices rest upon epistemologies, and Lankshear and Knobel argue that it is time to develop the notion of 'digital epistemologies' as a basis for new approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

We believe it is not simply our *literacies* that have been powerfully impacted by the information technology revolution. More profoundly, the entire epistemological base on which school approaches to knowledge and learning are founded is seriously challenged and, we think, made obsolete by the intense digitization of daily life.

Intense digitisation affects the nature of the world. Our conceptions of music and of photography are changed by the character and the possibilities offered by digitised musical instruments and digital cameras. Ethical and social norms are threatened by the demise of traditional (alphabetic print) literacy at the hands of digital literacies. Conceptions of knowledge are also radically changed: 'truth' is less meaningful, and creating knowledge is becoming more important than discovering it; imagined worlds can now be made real. The way we acquire knowledge changes too: for instance, search engines mediate the process of finding relevant knowledge, and we trust in the artificial intelligence processes which they employ. Digitisation challenges the way that knowing happens: thus, moving in virtual worlds, software objects may be indistinguishable from real people, and multimedia experience presents a more complex 'reading' challenge than the parsing of alphabetic text. The belief in truth and reality is shaken.

To apply these to school practice, a project is discussed which addresses the discontinuity of perspective between teachers as digital outsiders and those learners who are becoming digital insiders, by bringing them together in ICT-based work clusters. One of these clusters is described in some detail, in which four 14-year-old boys who are seen as 'having problems with literacy' are brought together with a teacher, a postgraduate student and two researchers, to develop a website on motorbikes. The process provides, as we might expect, learning and confidence gains for the boys, and they are revealed as intelligent and reflective users of digital tools, who can become involved in a further project in which they pass on their skills to other students. Lankshear and Knobel conclude that although it may not be easy, and there may be practical obstacles, including the way in which school systems organise schools and learning, teachers should be encouraged to adopt new literacies and ways of learning focused on them, into their classrooms.

As will be evident from the overview above, there is much in this volume. Perhaps too much, as each chapter leaves one with a sense that the discussion has only just started,

that issues are raised but not fully explored. Maybe this is because the book itself is based on a collection of articles – this is admitted in the acknowledgements – this would account for the abrupt changes of topic between chapter and the repetitions that occur from one chapter to another. The authors might have been wiser to have published the book openly as a collection of papers written by the same authors and with the same broad context of focus, and would then only have needed to write a substantial introduction drawing the pieces together in a theoretical context.

As it is, it does not succeed completely as a single statement. In particular, an solid account of the theoretical position which the authors adopt and its linkage to other work in the literacy field would have been welcome. The word ‘literacy’ itself is frequently used, but it is not clear how the authors regard it; and at times they seem to be suggesting that any social practice is a literacy. Literacy is certainly a social practice, but there is something strategic about literacy, or literacies, that make us distinguish them from other social practices. ‘New’ is also problematic, and it is not always clear in what sense some of the literacies cited are different from their non-virtual counterparts. Thus, what makes the ratings systems used on websites significantly different from feedback systems in the non-virtual world (including real-world distant communities)? A clearer statement of the argument running through the book would also have been helpful, especially as the authors’ language is not always as clear as it might be for those who are not swimming in the same theoretical currents. It is presented as a work on classroom learning, but for long stretches the classroom is left behind, and we do not encounter it very often. If change in classroom practice is being advocated, more convincing evidence needs to be presented than a single project with a small group of individuals luxuriating in special treatment from teachers and researchers. We need to see how articulation with new literacies will work in average classrooms with average teachers and average students.

However, this is not a book to be dismissed. The authors are clearly attempting to push the boundaries of literacy debate firmly into the digital age. If they do not necessarily supply the answers, they raise questions that need to be addressed, by literacy specialists and by educationists. There is much enthusiasm, rhetoric and neologising in the debate about the effect of information and communication technologies upon what we regard as literacy, but this does not diminish the centrality of the questions which are raised. It will be some while before a perspective emerges which allows the significant and the trivial to be clearly distinguished, but this will only happen because both have been stirred up and pushed into the window of debate.

Perhaps a part of literacy in the digital age is to regard every work as a work in progress, as ICT enables it to be, in contrast to a traditional view of a work as a finished product, published when the statement it contains is regarded by the author as in some sense complete. This book reads very much like a work in progress, and perhaps therefore should have been published only on the internet, as part of the authors’, and their community’s, discussion of the legitimate themes of literacy theory. Instead it has been published as a traditional text product, drawing upon itself a promise of completeness which it does not yet deliver. I would have preferred to spend my £17.99 on the version that will appear in two or three or five years time, when Lankshear and Knobel have a substantive theory of the new literacies to offer us, as I’m sure that sooner or later they will have.

Allan Martin  
IT Education Unit  
Faculty of Education  
University of Glasgow  
11 Eldon Street  
Glasgow

E-mail: [a.martin@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:a.martin@educ.gla.ac.uk)