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# Afterword: popular literacies in an era of 'scientific' reading instruction: challenges and opportunities

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To read a good book, Japanese pull out their cell phones.  
(Kageyama, 2005)

'Go to your room!' sends many kids to multimedia hub.  
(Armas, 2005)

... today's students have grown up in a deregulated attention economy  
and have been living by its rules.  
(Lankshear and Knobel, 2003)

Imagine trying to reconcile the gist of the foregoing references to popular culture, media, and new information communication technologies with the current definition of what constitutes 'scientifically based' reading instruction in the USA. When I initially agreed to take on such a challenge by writing a short chapter that would examine the themes raised in *Popular Literacies, Childhood and Schooling* from a US perspective, the impact of the federally legislated No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) had yet to be felt – at least not widely. Since then the critique of this piece of legislation and its narrow definition of what counts as reading has reached epic proportions, with a broad array of newspapers, professional journals, organizational newsletters, and reports from state legislatures (NCSL Task Force, 2005) drawing attention to the difficulties associated with implementing NCLB.

My focus here is not with the critique itself, but rather with an examination of the challenges and opportunities which present themselves in the course of introducing textual practices in popular literacies to classroom teachers – specifically, to literacy teachers in the USA whose every lesson must now pass the litmus test of 'scientific' reading instruction. That this examination has implications beyond the NCLB Act of 2001 goes without saying. For even if some of its sanctions were lifted in the foreseeable future, the fact remains that educators in the USA have been (at best) lukewarm to the idea of connecting students' popular literacies with language arts curricula (Alvermann and Xu, 2003; Hagood,

2003; Short *et al.*, 2003). That this is not a phenomenon peculiar to the US seems evident in many of the chapters in *Popular Literacies, Childhood and Schooling*.

Why this is so, in my view, is largely attributable to what Dyson (2003) has described as ‘the “nothing” assumption – the decision to make no assumption that children have any relevant knowledge’ (p. 101) when it comes to knowing things that are pertinent to literacy-learning outside an idealized, print-centred environment. At a time when reading a book on one’s cellphone or being sent to one’s room is no longer viewed as a punishment but as an opportunity to engage with media of various kinds, the notion of an idealized, print-centred existence seems an anachronism. A holdover from earlier times, the printed word will survive and rightfully so, but it is quickly becoming just one among several other textual practices vying for children’s attention. As Heim (cited in Lankshear and Knobel, 2003) puts it,

[the] word now shares Web space with the image, and text appears inextricably tied to pictures. The pictures are dynamic, animated, and continually updated. The unprecedented speed and ease of digital production mounts photographs, movies, and video on the Web. Cyberspace becomes visualized data, and meaning arrives in spatial as well as in verbal expressions.

(Ibid.: 170)

## **POPULAR LITERACIES AND THE CHALLENGES THEY PRESENT**

What are the textual practices of popular literacies, what distinguishes them from conventional forms of literacy, and what challenges do popular literacies present in an era of ‘scientific’ reading instruction? Readers need but skim the chapter titles and contents of the present volume to answer the first of these questions. The second and third questions, however, deserve attention here. In my view, the main distinguishing characteristic of textual practices of popular literacies is the association of these practices with low culture. As I have discussed elsewhere (Alvermann *et al.*, 1999; Alvermann and Xu, 2003), traditionally the idea of low culture, as contrasted with high culture, serves to identify what people think of as appealing to the masses, or common people. Low-culture textual practices are thought to have a coarseness that makes them undesirable (at least among high-brow elites). It is this presumably that sets them apart from certain kinds of paintings, books, music and the like that are dubbed high culture.

A second distinguishing characteristic is the association of popular literacies with mass media. As Hagood (2001) has noted, those who find a culprit in the intersection of mass media and the textual practices of popular culture believe that ‘the culture industry socializes people in common ways by exposing them to mindless drivel’ (ibid.: 254). This perception of popular literacies tends to propagate the notion that people (and especially children) lack the ability to interpret for themselves the messages that mass media produce; in short, that they are consigned to a lifetime of engaging in substandard textual practices which, in addition to duping them, will do little to improve their minds or status in society. Although I personally do not subscribe to this view, the fact remains that it has a large and vocal group of supporters among those who advocate for ‘scientific’ reading instruction as defined under the NCLB Act of 2001. And, understandably so, especially if the assumption is that popular literacies are somehow inferior to traditional print literacy and thus best ignored – a perspective that is challenging and troubling for the very reason described next.

One of the goals of NCLB is that *all* children, regardless of skin colour, ethnicity, disability, immigrant status and wealth, will make annual yearly progress at a rate determined sufficient for producing a society in which everyone is educated to her or his full potential. A noble goal on the surface, but it has its darker side. For example, when the ‘all’ children are in Dyson’s (2003) terms ‘almost always syntactically linked or semantically associated with that other category, the “different” children – not middle class and not white’ (ibid.: 100), then there is cause for concern. This is especially the case when teachers act on ‘the assumption that “diverse” children come to school without literacy [and in effect ignore] the resources they bring from popular media texts’ (Dyson, 2003: 1–2).

A third challenge, one that will grow in magnitude as NCLB-driven policies make their weight felt increasingly at the middle- and high-school levels, is how to reconcile the narrow definition of ‘scientific’ reading instruction with the need to develop older students’ critical awareness as they engage in textual practices that make use of popular literacies. A review of the literature on new information communication technologies among secondary students in the USA (Alvermann, forthcoming) revealed only a handful of studies that analysed in depth how young people develop a sense of critical awareness about their own implication in the production and consumption of popular literacies.

With few exceptions (e.g. Dillon and O’Brien, 2001; Chandler-Olcott and Mahar, 2001; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 1999; Moje, 2000; Myers *et al.*, 2000), researchers in the United States interested in adolescents’ critical awareness have worked in classrooms where the curriculum is primarily print driven and necessarily constrained by school-based norms for teaching and learning. Thus it remains unclear as to whether developing

students' critical awareness of textual practices that employ conventional print within the confines of a school curriculum will transfer to textual practices that make use of popular literacies outside of school.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

Do the opportunities that popular literacies present in an era of 'scientific' reading instruction outweigh the challenges? I believe they do, and for the following reasons. First, I sense that there are several motivating factors for taking into account textual practices in popular literacies and that these factors will increasingly find their way into US teacher education programmes, professional journals, and eventually into mainstream thinking about instruction in grades K through 12. One such factor is the massive, multimedia realm of digital information communication technologies that is all pervading and shows no sign of abating. As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have cogently argued, this realm of ICTs troubles the very notion that knowledge is primarily conveyed through printed words and

makes *normal* the radical convergence of text, image, and sound in ways that break down the primacy of propositional linguistic forms of 'truth bearing.' While many images and sounds that are transmitted and received digitally still stand for propositional information, many do not... Meaning and truth arrive in spatial as well as textual expressions.

(Ibid.: 171)

Not trusting to theory alone, literacy scholars with a background in public schooling are gradually beginning to locate their work in spatial theories of young people's digital practices. For instance, Leander (2002, 2003) and his colleagues (Leander and McKim, 2003; Leander and Sheehy, 2004) are making use of current thinking in the fields of social and cultural geography to generate insights for imagining the place of ICT-related literacies within a school's curriculum. Their work represents an important shift in the study of online literacies among US youth both in and out of school. It also represents richness and complexity in what can be learned by moving away from a fixation on technology as a tool toward using it to map what Lemke (2003) refers to as ecosocial systems – that is, digital spaces in which learners produce and perform new literate identities.

A second factor that may motivate US educators to explore more aggressively the potential connections between popular literacies and the language arts curriculum is the research on popular culture coming out of Australia, Canada and the UK. In these countries, especially, there is

a growing trend among some educators to view popular culture as folk culture wherein common people are indeed capable of making their own meanings of popular literacies – meanings, however, that are never entirely devoid of what mass media producers may have intended as the message. There is also some evidence that in acknowledging the appeal of popular literacies in children’s everyday lives, parents (Guzzetti, 2005) perhaps more so than teachers (Xu, 2004) in the USA are beginning to recognize that these literacies are not something to be shunned, set aside, or kept at a distance. At the same time, textual practices that position children as simultaneously incorporating both pleasures and critiques in their use of popular literacies (see Hagood, 2003; Marsh and Millard, 2001; Tobin, 2000) are finding it a bit more difficult to gain a foothold within the narrow definition of ‘scientific’ reading instruction that currently prevails.

**AQ2**

**AQ3**

Whether (or more likely to what degree) US educators will take up Hull and Schultz’s (2002) call ‘to think again and anew about teaching and learning in the schoolroom’ (p. 3) is open for debate. Views vary about what constitutes valuable use of classroom time and how much time should be spent in ‘scientific’ reading instruction. For example, in NCLB-backed Reading First schools a minimum of 135 minutes of ‘scientific’ reading instruction is required each day. Often this leads to shortchanging the time spent in teaching other subjects – a reality which in some states has led to the discontinuation of student assessments for writing, social studies and science (Rado, 2005).

Despite one’s personal view about the emphasis currently placed on ‘scientific’ reading instruction, it is encouraging to note that textual practices in popular literacies are not limited to decoding the printed word. In popular literacies, the ability to analyse media messages presumes that one is at least visually (if not sound) literate. Becoming visually literate involves expanding print literacy skills by developing a greater awareness of how things come to have the meaning that they have and why those meanings vary from one individual to the next. As Muffoletto (2001) explained, ‘Being “visually literate” means more than having the ability to produce/encode and read/decode constructed visual experiences; it . . . is to be actively engaged in asking questions and seeking answers about the multiple meanings of a visual experience’.

Strangely enough, visual literacy is one of the new literacies that ‘scientific’ reading instruction and the Institution of Old Learning (IOL) – a tongue-in-cheek term coined by O’Brien and Bauer (2005) to denote historically situated practices and rigid organizational structures of US schools – largely ignore. Pre-dating the No Child Left Behind Act and ‘scientific’ reading instruction by nearly one hundred years, the IOL attempts to fit new information communication technologies into its century-old rigid structures and goals. And, while it is easy to critique the IOL in relation to popular literacies, it is quite another matter to loosen

its stranglehold on US educators at large. Perhaps the best course of action presently is to conduct inquiries of popular literacies within the IOL, as O'Brien and Bauer (2005) urge, in order to 'gain and maintain the insider status that we need to inspire ourselves, our preservice teachers, our school-based colleagues, and future students in gradually transforming the IOL' (p. 130). Toward this end, I can think of no better place to turn initially than to the chapters in *Popular Literacies, Childhood and Schooling*. By offering insights into the importance of popular culture, media, and new technologies for contemporary children and young people's literacy education, the chapter authors have in effect joined O'Brien and Bauer in the call to transform the age-old Institution of Learning. A question that remains for us, the readers, is this: are we prepared to heed that call?

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