
POST-LITERACY, A SCHOOL, A WEBSITE, AND LIFELONG LEARNING IN A REGIONAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the potential impact that visual literacy or post-literacy in the postmodern age has on traditional educational structures. It follows a collaboration between an academic and a Central Queensland regional school in a learning journey that initially culminated in a website but then became a lifelong-learning experience for all participants.

INTRODUCTION

According to Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000), "New technologies have radically altered our everyday modes of communication. They are becoming so fundamental to our society that most areas of social practice in day-to-day life are affected by the so called 'information revolution'" (p. 1). Combine this explosion of information with the advent of postmodernism, and educators at all levels of schooling are, increasingly, becoming expected to engage with more complex and uncertain learning that also incorporates lifelong-learning discourses (Drucker, 1995).

This paper embraces the concept of planning for uncertainty by outlining how one regional school considered current educational discourses around planning for uncertainty and engaged in a collaborative partnership with an academic from a regional university in order to engage Year Seven students with futures-oriented learning. The next section of this paper maps out the global world in which the participants operate in terms of a postmodern world by engaging with visual media in terms of post-literacy generally, and the development of a website, specifically.

POSTMODERNISM AND POST-LITERACY

According to Klages (2003) "Postmodernism is a complicated term, or set of ideas, one that has only emerged as an area of academic study since the mid-1980s" (p. 1) The era known as postmodernism has several characteristics. First, as Simons and Billig (1994) stated, "every claim to truth [in a postmodern age] is immediately placed under suspicion" (p. 1), which raises key questions concerning the multiple ways in which

we as a society construct understandings of media in an attempt to become literate in a visual sense. The need to pursue postmodern versions of visual literacy is reinforced when we look at the notion that today's generations are becoming more and more immersed in media (Giroux, 1997; Luke, 1999).

What I argue in this paper is that, specifically, the "postmodern" context (however it is understood) is undeniably complex. Children are also undeniably complex. Therefore, neither children nor teachers will be served by the construction of "simple" frameworks for responding to this situation. I argue that this paper can be seen as the starting point for the development of a new, "meaningful" and sustainable "understanding" of visual literacy such as post-literacy that must include an engagement with the "big" ideas and with the difficult concepts discussed throughout this paper (Walker-Gibbs, 2003).

The term post-literacy, is a term I have coined as a more appropriate term than visual literacy to describe the "visual" skills I believe are needed by contemporary children, because it encompasses and extends beyond the multiple definitions of visual literacy explored previously in the educational field. Established definitions of visual literacy (Walker-Gibbs, 2001) remain centred on a print-literacy understanding of visual media where specific examples are taken as texts that can be "read" and analysed as static images linked to skills associated with semiotics and comprehension. The concept of post-literacy is one that I am developing to encompass the visual and the virtual experience that is not necessarily linked to comprehension but which, in fact, problematises the very notion of comprehension itself.

Post-literacy suggests the way in which we establish how we are literate has changed because the understanding we have of the visual and the virtual is fleeting, ever-changing, and evolving, and that there is no time in which we can be literate in the sense that literacy relates to the future; but people may be able to develop a kind of literacy that engages them in an analysis of their present states and prepares them for the differences they may experience in their futures. The challenge becomes how we can “do” this in a “real” classroom.

I would argue that if we as educators are to fully embrace a post-literate world, the role of the teacher and researcher will change. For example, a result of the assertion that the teacher is no longer holder of all knowledge, is that they are less able to help children come to diverse understandings of these ideas. If we accept that the world has changed and the way in which education is viewed has also changed, the concept of lifelong learning may be vital in helping to build bridges between the more modern structures of the traditional classroom and the post-literate world that helps us to engage with various realities such as web-based environments. The next section of the paper outlines a specific example of how the participants in the project tried to take initial steps towards developing a post-literate understanding of media

A RURAL SCHOOL, A RURAL ACADEMIC, AND A LIFELONG LEARNING EXPERIENCE

As Morris (2000) stated, “Success in school, the workplace and everyday life now depends on knowing how to access and use information. Knowledge workers have been second only to management workers as the fastest growing occupation since the early 1970s” (p. 29). There is also increasing rhetoric in the research that links these global changes to the concepts of work and lifelong learning. As the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2000) posit, “Linear careers are disappearing and by 2010 many of today’s 18-year-olds will be doing a job that has not yet been invented. Moreover, they will be using skills that do not currently exist” (p. 19).

The changing context of work has directly impacted on the three main divisions that “govern” the participants’ work. Education Queensland has developed a *Rural and remote*

education framework for action 2003-2005 in which it is argued: “School environments in rural and remote areas are often characterised by ... creative partnerships with local community organisations, businesses and industries for building innovative learning environments and experiences for students” (Education Queensland, 2003, p. 10).

Higher-education institutions are also undergoing their own changes, with the role of the academic being revised. The faculty in which I am employed introduced a new undergraduate teaching program called the Bachelor of Learning Management (BLM) in 2000 that “focuses on the collaboration between school and university staff, in the design and implementation of the degree” (Thompson, Smith & Mienzakowski, 2002, p. 1). At the same time that this new degree was being developed, Education Queensland (n.d.) was also encouraging teachers to engage with the concept of productive pedagogies. “Productive pedagogies are effective pedagogy, incorporating an array of teaching strategies that support classroom environments, and recognition of difference, and are implemented across all key learning and subject areas” (p. 1). So, we have a local context that not only has to respond to more global changes to education, but also education directives to make education more relevant in multiple contexts – including the regional and the remote.

As a consequence of a previous research partnership (see Cooling, Graham, Moore and Walker-Gibbs, 2003) I was introduced to “Polly” early in 2003. Polly is an innovative Year-Seven teacher who has embraced Education Queensland’s *Productive Pedagogies* and was looking for a project that would help her Year-Seven students engage with new literacies and new technologies whilst simultaneously producing something productive for not only the school but the rural community in which the school was situated. The decision had been made in consultation with the students that establishing a website for the school that also highlighted the region in which the children believed would be one way of achieving these goals. The next section of the paper considers how lifelong-learning discourses helped to frame this project.

LIFELONG LEARNING

A key component of this project was a commitment to lifelong learning. As Morris (2000) argues "... lifelong learning is needed to ensure all individuals have the opportunity to participate in society to the fullest extent Without an increased emphasis on lifelong learning, the earnings gap between levels of educational attainment may continue to widen. (p. 29)

As an academic who is committed to a post-literacy approach to media information and communication technologies (ICTs), it was important for me to ensure that we were able to embrace multiplicities of meaning and outcomes. There is no suggestion that engaging in postmodern research and post-literacy concepts is something that is "easy" and able to be fully embraced within formal educational settings. As the journey unfolded it became clear that restrictions placed on us from the formal educational setting meant that, at times, we had to embrace predetermined outcomes. For example, a website that was public and not just part of an assignment meant that we had to adhere to school and Education Queensland policy, copyright laws and privacy issues as well as school term deadlines. The emphasis in this project was on not only the teacher providing the students with opportunities, but also the students themselves taking responsibility for their own understandings within these contexts. There can no longer be an understanding of children as having no power within the visual world and that teachers are there to protect them and guide them to come to understand "the error of their ways" in terms of dealing with their understandings.

A proposed way forward for helping today's educators become better equipped for dealing with the complexities of the postmodern world is by engaging with the concept of moving "Towards transformative classrooms", which I have adapted from Rowan (2001) into the following, develop a vision; plan ahead; make a start; practice [post-literacy] every day; have some fun (pp. 94-102). I will use these five "steps" to provide an overview of how the project came to be organized.

Develop a vision

I had already begun to develop a vision around the concept of post-literacy. For example, for

me, the post-literacy classroom is multifaceted and multidimensional. The educator is one who embraces change and understands that her or his understandings will change and be ephemeral and fleeting. The post-literate student does not seek the grand meta-narrative that uncovers a view of the world. We all celebrate the complexity and diversity of the postmodern world in which students are saturated and subsumed by visual imagery; and they recognise that each journey towards understanding the visual world is fraught with danger, uncertainty with no final destination.

The first step was to bring together all the participants to discuss what this project might look like. The participants came with a variety of experiences. My contribution included the role of "expert" web designer (one role I fill at the Educational institution where I am currently employed). We knew that we all needed to be committed to the global and local contexts of learning and knowledge, and to embrace the multiplicities of the participants. Besides the classroom teacher, and myself in the role of academic and web manager, the students, the student teacher, and the technical-support liaison and multi-media producer from the university, were all involved and brought multiple perspectives and subjectivities with them that enhanced and complicated the project at hand. The first step in developing the vision was to brainstorm and collate information using concept and mind mapping a variety of options for the project. This was not only undertaken at the beginning of the project but continuously throughout the term in which the website was developed. The "how to" of enacting this vision is considered in the next subsection on planning ahead.

Plan ahead

Post-literacy as outlined previously will not just suddenly appear in classrooms or indeed the wider community, there is a need to plan ahead (Rowan, 2001). Initial planning involved discussions with a university multimedia producer to organize an excursion where the children were able to interact with and question a variety of people whose professions involved website construction, design, and programming. After this visit the students negotiated and were assigned key roles to help them with their website construction. These were; 1. video/audio recorders; 2. graphic designers; 3. course developers; 4. producers; 5. field crew. A

questionnaire based on a brainstorming and mind mapping session around what the schools' website should or could look like, was devised by the students to distribute to the community. The producers were responsible for distributing and collating this information.

At the core of the planning ahead was the need to ensure that multiple exits and entries into how the website could be constructed were considered. The next step towards undertaking a post-literacy framework is to devise activities and/or strategies to assist teachers and students to begin to embrace and celebrate a post-literate world. How we began to do this is outlined further in the next subsection.

Make a start

According to Rowan (2001), "Students need to learn new ways of thinking, responding and talking in relation to difference. It is often up to teachers to model new language" (p. 96). I not only had to help the teacher with the language involved in website construction but also help students with digital cameras; uploading and downloading of graphics to the website; framing pictures; hypertext; non-linear text; discussions and explanations of progress with the school principal; interviews with community and school members; trailing of designs; negotiated meanings; testing theories; different levels being catered for; and responsibilities given. All participants negotiated the different languages involved in the construction of the website. Just as importantly, in the beginning, some of the language was modelled in terms of listening to, and encouraging, a variety of perspectives. This became a model that was used by the students during the weekly debrief and timetable meetings.

Practise [post-literacy] every day

This step is fairly self-evident, in that it is important to engage with notions of post-literacy every day. For me, this is also linked to the idea that it is important within a postmodern framework to be continually self-reflexive and constantly attempting to make explicit my subjectivities that I may take to be natural and normal. It is also about continually trying to uncover ways in which post-literacy ideas may influence my own as well as others' teaching practice. The practice of post-literacy changes its parameters and hence how it is re-conceptualised. This was negotiated every week

with all participants either face-to-face, or by email or phone.

An important lesson the adult participants had to learn was to know when to take a large step away from what was happening and let the students take more responsibility for the development of the website. This was difficult when there were deadlines to meet and disagreements amongst the different groups. It was also a test of the shift in the changing role of the teacher mentioned earlier in this paper. By already having established roles and responsibilities, and having modelled appropriate languages, this became easier. If there was a disagreement about the design of an image for example, the designers discussed the design principles with various members of the school and regional communities behind the image and the producers reminded the group what the outcomes of the questionnaire were.

The adults in this situation had to embrace what we knew theoretically: that power relations were changing; we were facilitators but, more importantly, we were also transformed as learners on the journey with the students. We had to be willing to make mistakes and learn from them along the way, as well (Willmore, 2003).

Have some fun

As Rowan (2001) stated: "This may sound like an obvious point to make However, as with most things that we try to teach, there is a much greater chance that students will take the ideas on board if they have some fun while they are learning about them" (p. 102). The children organized an event and had fun, had parties, played around with graphics, trialed ideas. Perhaps the most fun aspect of constructing the website was that the students helped organize a community event where, besides presenting a movie of the processes they went through and the challenges and successes they faced, they also launched the website for the school, the regional community, and the global community to interact with. Each parent and community member was presented with a business card that contained the new school website address and they were encouraged to make comments and suggestions. The learning adventure continued.

CONCLUSION

The point of this paper has not been to present the view that this project was successful in a lock-step way. What this paper has attempted to illustrate is on one example of how one regional school has begun to engage with lifelong learning that incorporates current global discourses. The rural context in which this school and university are located provided some unique opportunities to engage the broader community to make some inroads into engaging with technology in meaningful and productive ways.

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