

Hard Work, Good Learning: Multiliterate Pedagogies and Possibilities

When we were invited to write to you about The Multiliteracy Project, a major multi-year study of multiliterate pedagogies that has been taking place over the last three years in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, we asked ourselves what would potentially be of interest to you. From our perspective, we want to let you know about the work of teachers in the Vancouver School Board and the increased student engagement they've observed when working with students across multiple modalities. We want to tell you how students from the intermediate to the senior grades think it's 'hard work' when asked to *read* and *write* texts that are academically, visually, culturally and linguistically complex, but that they also describe themselves as really learning when they engage in this work. However, we are also aware that as a leader within your school community, you can't escape the drumroll of literacy announcements and initiatives. You've probably been told more times than you care to remember about new worlds and the new literacies they require, while quietly noticing that just as many voices are clamoring for a return to basics. So why then do we believe that you and your school will be interested in this project?

We believe you will be interested because it addresses your concerns about the changing literacy demands on students in our society. Because while many of the fundamentals of established literacy pedagogies remain centrally important, they are no longer sufficient for developing the kinds of literacy or, more accurately, literacies already practiced in our highly globalized and ever-evolving knowledge economies. Schools have little option but to keep abreast of these changes if they are



rich, you know literacies pedagogies need to be equally so. Right now too many students, particularly adolescent immigrant students and our aboriginal children, are not making it through our school systems successfully. Now and in the foreseeable future, schools in the Lower Mainland will be among the most diverse in Canada. Our students come to our schools with knowledge to share and with literacies from which their classmates and teachers can benefit, and yet our pedagogies often don't afford opportunities to benefit from this wealth. We believe that the principles being articulated as a result of this research, drawn from an analysis of teachers' rich multiliterate practices, address these issues that you care about so passionately.

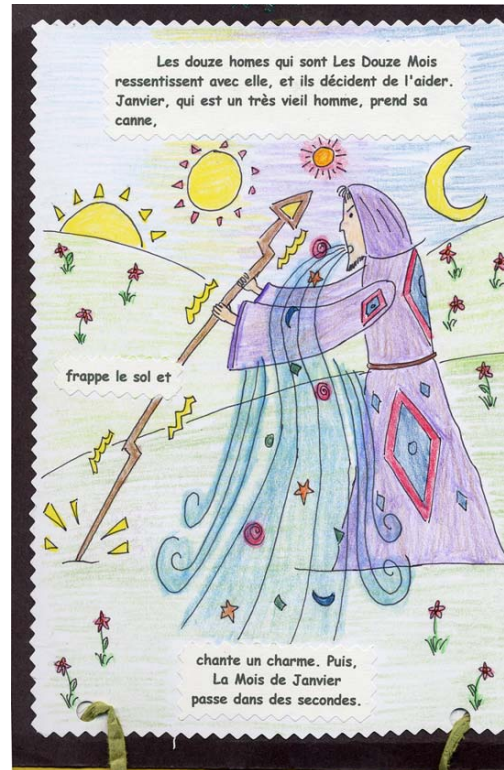
The Multiliteracy Project is a joint research effort of The University of British Columbia, the University of Toronto, the Vancouver School Board, the British Columbia Teachers Federation, York Region District School Board and McGill University as well as researchers and educators from other public sector and non-profit organizations interested in literacy. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's (SSHRC's) "Initiative on the New Economy",



the focus of the Research Alliance is multiliterate pedagogies and what they offer our students and our schools. More specifically, the researchers have set out to explore: how multiliterate practices might benefit Canadian students; how educators currently engage students in multiliterate practices; how assessment practices impact upon the teachers' engagement with multiliterate pedagogies;

and how systemic structures facilitate or impede the practice of multiliterate pedagogies.

In undertaking this project, we fully recognized that schools don't get more hours in the day to deal with these increasingly important literacies. And so while literacies theorists in Australia, Britain and The United States as well as Canada have been developing theories of multiliteracies and what it means to be multiliterate, our aims have been decidedly more pragmatic. Academics always seek to contribute to theory, but our focus has also remained squarely on pedagogy, the "what", "why" and "so what" of the classroom. "How does this



apply to my classroom context?" is the question that responsible educational practitioners ask when the latest theory or research finding is offered up to them.

If one is interested in classrooms, then one begins a research project by going to classrooms. In Vancouver, our work began with an invitation to teachers. We invited educators interested in expanding their literacies practices to work with us to develop a research claim. Each teacher's research claim was different, but each involved engaging their students in multiliterate practices and explicitly stated the benefits it would deliver their students. Each classroom-based research site, investigated by one or more teachers and a research assistant from The University of British Columbia, provides the basis for a case study. These case studies are still being written and the data analyzed for overarching themes. However, there are points we can share with you now and that we would like to touch on here: the multidimensional character of the teachers' literacies work; the cognitive complexity and emotional engagement

reported by the students; the challenges presented by assessment; and the work still to be done regarding students' multilingualism.

The teachers we worked with were talented professionals. Given the opportunity to participate in the research design, they didn't strike out to add something to their already busy days. Instead, they sought to explore practices that added greater richness and depth to what they already did, to increase the layers in a task or unit. Thus, teachers' multiliterate work was dense; a mix of academic, multimodal, critical and cultural literacies were inherent to each lesson/unit. These literacies scaffolded each other. That is, each student strengthened multiple literacies within each activity, often working from their strength to scaffold those literacies in which they were less proficient. In engaging in multiliterate pedagogies, the teachers were helping students to achieve more with the same available time resources.

The lessons and units that were the focus of these investigations were sometimes deceptively simple on the surface, but tremendously complex and rich in the thought and structure that brought them into being. The students felt that complexity. As we have scanned the hours and hours of individual and focus group interviews, it is the word *hard* that has struck us again and again. The



students found this work challenging and *valuable*. They talk about thinking and learning and being fully engaged in heart and mind. We are learning that multiliterate pedagogies construct an image of the child as

intelligent, imaginative, and linguistically talented; individual differences in these traits do not diminish the potential of each child to shine in specific ways. We

also see that multiliterate pedagogy promotes metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness in a discipline and its discourse, so that students “learn their way around in it”, and understand its norms, values and structures. Our analysis needs to go further before we make too many comments in this area, but it seems that students are telling us again and again that they and/or their classmates found this way of learning worked for them.

What, then, might limit teachers from engaging in such pedagogies? However rewarding such practices might be for teachers and students, they don't show up in formal scoring systems. The narrow literacy measurements that comprise the FSA's, and that underpin many districts' accountability plans do not assess the broad range of oral, critical, linguistic, visual and technological literacies that are increasingly valued in the world. To be fair, our work shows that all provinces are struggling with responding to these new challenges in their assessment. In the meantime, however, teachers who engage in such multiliterate pedagogies do so because they believe they contribute to their students' overall educational achievement, not because they will be formally rewarded for doing so.

Of course, as with any research in to complex areas of literacies, there are things we didn't find. While dual language books are in schools, are frequently read by students, and are promoted as family literacy practices, we did not see systematic or sustained use of children's multilingualism, either as a scaffold to traditional academic content/literacies achievement or as source of linguistic and cultural capital to be honed and harnessed to the benefit of all students.

The outcomes of the current research project will take us in several directions. Just like schools, just like kids, there isn't one question and there isn't one answer. However, we are seeking to explore with rigor the validity of alternative forms of accountability measures to draw stakeholders into democratic conversations about what it means to be a literate citizen in these new times. We see a knowledge exchange system (www.multiliteracies.ca)

designed as part of our current project as having tremendous potential in portraying the rich literacies, old and new, that our students are enacting. We are also continuing to work collaboratively with teachers to design and research multiliterate practices that draw on more than one mode of representation but which also explicitly draw more fully upon students' prior cultural and linguistic knowledge in the form of their home languages. And, of course, we will be reading and writing and letting you know more about what we find. Like you, we know the conversations about literacies are not going to end.