Multiliteracies and meaningful learning contexts in the primary classroom

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Literacy has become central to educational policy and curriculum development as new technologies increasingly intervene in the everyday practices and development of society. With new technologies come new and embodied communication systems for social and cultural participation. Through these new communication technologies, meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal and diverse (Kress, 2003). Texts of popular culture such as websites, film and interactive media are fundamentally changing the way children engage with literacy and meaning-making systems within the world (Marsh, 2005). However, this reconception of a *new literacy* has not fully transcended into curriculum documentation in the United Kingdom. The *National Literacy Strategy* stressed the importance of set programmes for the acquisition of literacy skills, which has been instrumental in delivering a certain narrow conception of literacy (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). Furthermore the way in which texts have been framed within the primary curriculum to privilege a *canon* of particular genres and authors has led to a sense of uniformity in primary literacy teaching (Marsh, 2004). *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies* asserts the need to focus on designs of meaning as opposed to teaching rules of standard use and constricted programmes of study (New London Group, 1996). Multiliteracies recognises that children bring vast and diverse experiences of literacy to the classroom which can be built into the curriculum to accommodate difference as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005). What I describe in this paper is a journey I have taken over the past year with a class of twenty-four fantastic Year 2 children to embed multiliteracies in our curriculum through film, animation and the use of a social networking system.

The first project to be explored is a film-making project that lasted for four weeks and revolved around a text of popular culture, while addressing key objectives from the *National Curriculum* and *Primary Framework for Literacy*. We decided to select a text from a different culture to that of the children and one that was not part of the *primary canon* as the basis of the project. Although children sometimes experience texts of their own popular culture at a subconscious level and can benefit from further work in school (Bearne and Wolstencroft, 2007), it was evident that the children's engagement with some texts such as *High School Musical* and *Hannah Montana* was reaching saturation point and would restrict creativity. The text 'KiKi's Delivery Service' by Elko Kadono was selected as it was available as an engaging picture book and anime film by Studio Ghibli (a world renowned Japanese animation studio). The story revolves around an apprentice witch (KiKi) who moves to a new town and sets up a delivery service using her broomstick. Our project linked with the four areas of multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996) and began with a *situated practice* phase where the children took part in activities that immersed them the world of *KiKi's Delivery Service* through character profiling, drama activities, illustrations and retelling of the story. We then progressed to *overt instruction* which involved the children looking at the narrative and how it relates to other texts that they had experienced in the past, particularly fairy-tales. During the *critical framing* phase we looked at the purpose and audience of the text and how we could reinvent the text for a western audience. The final phase of *transformed practice* was achieved through the children inventing their own version of the story by incorporating western fairytales. The children extended the world created by Kadono by including landmarks from fairytales such as forests, castles and cottages. They created a shared narrative where KiKi delivered items to characters such as Cinderella, Peter Pan, the Little Mermaid and the Billy Goats Gruff. The children created their world using digital technologies by drawing their own backgrounds of the settings then using 'green-screen' techniques to appear in front of them on-screen. The result is an impressive cross-cultural narrative which the children have created themselves and are exceptionally proud of.

Our animation project embeds not only a multiliteracies pedagogy but also a critical literacy approach towards text analysis and production. Although there are several versions of critical literacy pedagogy they all involve an active, challenging approach to reading and textual practices. Barbara Comber describes a number of core principals of critical literacy including subverting taken-for-granted texts, focusing on cultural texts and examining how power is exercised and by whom (Comber, 2001). Our focus for the project was literacy as a critical practice, with work based around the *Uncle Remus* (Brer Rabbit) stories, which were told by African American slaves on plantations in Southern America. We also used the film *Song of the South* which Disney has not released in its entirety in the USA because they fear its portrayal of slavery, and some of its content, may be misconstrued. The oral stories and film provided a good basis for examining the meaning behind texts and considering their meaning in the world (Comber, 2001). The texts also opened up discussion to the area of slavery and prejudice in an open and contextually driven manner. The children followed a similar process to that of our KiKi project whereby they moved through the different phases of multiliteracies pedagogy with immersion in oral, written and multimodal versions of the Brer Rabbit stories. This helped to develop an understanding that literacy embodies a vast array of modes and textual practices. As the children progressed through the project they began to design their own Brer Rabbit narratives and reinvent the texts for a modern audience. The children also designed and painted the backgrounds for the settings and animated the characters using stop-motion techniques. Technology was not the emphasis of the project but rather the development of critical literacy skills achieved through the embedded and meaningful use of technology.

Another embedded way that we use technology on a daily basis is through our use of the social networking system *Twitter*. Web 2.0 applications such as Twitter are becoming increasingly prominent in society because of the way they have transformed how people engage with literacy and the world (Davies and Merchant, 2009). Twitter is a micro-

blogging service that allows users to 'tweet' and document snapshots of their life or views using one hundred and forty characters. We use Twitter in class to provide snapshots of our work and reflect on learning. As Jackie Marsh states *reading in this context means not simply decoding, but involves taking part in the construction of social networks where knowledge is co-constructed and distributed* (Marsh, 2010- in press). We regularly receive feedback from followers who offer praise and comments about our work. Therefore the children are reading and writing for a real purpose and audience as well as bringing the world into our classroom.

The use of technology in the projects and practices described in this paper are embedded within meaningful contexts as opposed to a 'bolt-on' within an already crowded curriculum. The children have drawn obvious pleasure from working with multiple modes of communication and developing multiliteracies and critical literacy practices over the past year. Parents of the children have also commented on the improved engagement and enjoyment with literacy. All of the projects meet the requirements of the *National Curriculum* and can be linked to guidance from the *Primary Framework for Literacy*, as well as developing skills that the children will need to succeed in a world with constantly changing horizons.

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