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# Visions of Possibilities: MULTIMEDIA LITERACY IN TEACHER EDUCATION



The USC Rossier School of Education's faculty and the university's Annenberg Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) have engaged teacher education candidates in interactions that will form a deeper appreciation of the language of multimedia to create and disseminate knowledge that is co-equal with traditional text-based methods. This represents a new kind of language that includes understanding how graphics, color, lines, music and words can convey meaning.

What emerges from this work is a conceptual framework of what teaching for multimedia literacy might entail in educational contexts where linguistic and cultural diversity is the norm and where students are engaged in multiple forms of literacy practices in and outside of their school. This emerging framework includes the concept of multiliteracies; general orientations to teaching, including transmission, social constructivist and transformative approaches; and a cognitive psychology perspective on how people learn. These constructs set the stage for description of a framework for the development of "multimedia literacy" and its potential for fueling sustained literacy learning across all the traditional literacies that form the foundation of our educational undertakings.

## Multiliteracies

The fundamental nature of a multiliteracies approach to teaching and learning is that contemporary schools need to focus on a broader range of literacies than merely traditional reading and writing skills. The term multiliteracies was introduced to highlight the relevance of new forms of literacy associated with information, communication and multimedia technologies and, equally important, the wide variety of culturally specific forms of literacy evident in a complex pluralistic society (Cummins, 2004). From the multiliteracies perspective, the current focus within schools on linear text-based literacy in the dominant language of the society represents a very limited conception that fails to address a global, technologically advanced knowledge-based society. Today's student population is multilingual and is exposed to, and engaged in, many different literacy practices both in and outside the school. Within schools, however, the teaching of literacy is narrowly focused on the dominant language and typically fails to acknowledge or build upon the multilingual literacies or the technologically-mediated literacies that form a significant part of students' cultural and linguistic capital and everyday experience (Cummins).



Most educators agree that students should be given opportunities to engage in meaningful experience and practice within a learning community and the development of concepts and understanding should be supported by specific instruction as needed. Students should also have opportunities to reflect upon what they have learned and examine concepts and ideas critically in relation to their social relevance. Finally, they should be given opportunities to take the knowledge they've gained and put it into play in the world of ideas. They should understand how their insights and ideas can have an impact on people and issues in the real world. The project-based learning entailed in the Rossier/IML initiative on multimedia literacy contains an ideal environment to mediate these types of experiences in the pursuit of deep understanding.

### Pedagogical Orientations

These themes can be viewed in the context of three pedagogical orientations: transmission, social constructivist and transformative.

These are somewhat interwoven rather than being distinct and isolated from each other. Transmission-oriented pedagogy's goal is to transmit information and skills articulated in the curriculum directly to students. Social constructivist pedagogy incorporates the curriculum focus of transmission approaches but broadens it to include the development among students of higher-order thinking abilities based on teachers and students co-constructing knowledge and understanding. Finally, transformative approaches to pedagogy broaden the focus by emphasizing the relevance not only of transmitting the curriculum and constructing knowledge but also of enabling students to see clearly and intuitively how knowledge intersects with authority, control and influence. The goal is to promote critical literacy among students to encourage them to read between the lines of societal discourses rather than skim their surface. The development of critical multiliteracy abilities may be particularly relevant in an era of multimedia overload where carefully crafted multimedia messages can influence/manipulate ones perceptions and attitudes.

Similar to the way the above-mentioned orientations fit with the themes in the multiliteracies framework, the cognitive psychology research on learning and how people learn highlight the limitations of the transmission of information and skills model (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). This research suggests that cognitive engagement and deep understanding are more likely to be generated in contexts where instruction builds on students' prior knowledge and learning is supported by active

collaboration within a community of learners. This research presents a noteworthy consensus among cognitive psychologists concerning how learning occurs and how optimum conditions promote learning.

**Learning with deep understanding** – Knowledge is more than the ability to remember; deeper levels of understanding are required to transfer knowledge from one context to another. This implies that instruction for critical understanding involves the development of critical literacy (reading between the lines) rather than literal comprehension of text.

**Building on pre-existing knowledge** – Prior knowledge, abilities, beliefs and concepts significantly influence what learners perceive about their environment and how they organize and interpret it. This principle suggests that with students from diverse backgrounds, instruction should activate students' prior knowledge and build relevant background knowledge as necessary.

**Promoting active learning** – Learners should be supported in taking control of and self-regulating their own learning. When students take ownership of the learning process and invest their identities in the outcomes of learning, understanding will be deeper than when learning is passive.

Project based learning as undertaken in the RSOE/IML collaborative is one way to put this concept into effect. Learning is not simply a cognitive process that takes place within individual students; it also involves socialization into particular communities of practice. Within these learning communities or what Gee (2001) terms affinity groups, students are enabled to participate in the practices of the community from the very beginning of their involvement. The learning community can include the classroom, the school, the family and broader community and virtual communities enabled through electronic communication and multimedia.

Transmission approaches normally entail one-size-fits-all learning. These approaches are in most cases unable to accommodate the diversity of culture and language that are represented by the new mainstream in urban schools. For example, within a transmission approach it is almost impossible to enable beginning second language learners to participate effectively in classroom life when their knowledge of the language of instruction is at best limited. By contrast, a multiliteracies approach that attempts to incorporate students' culture and language into the curriculum, that provides alternative methods for expression such as multimedia, is more capable of including all students successfully within the learning community. Language minority students can express their intelligence, imagination and literary/artistic talents ►

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through writing in their home language or collaborating with production teams on multimedia projects to create quality offerings. The conceptual frameworks that lie beneath this type of approach have been highlighted in instructional frameworks that focus on building students academic expertise through project-based, authentic learning.

### Expanding the Framework

This emphasis on critical literacy, active learning, deep understanding and building on students' prior knowledge places significant emphasis on identity negotiation and identity investment in teaching for deep understanding. Teacher-student interactions, and other interactions within the learning community, create an interpersonal space within which knowledge is generated and identities are negotiated. Studies suggest that identity investment is a central component of learning for deep understanding and the negotiation of identities is a primary determinant of whether or not students cognitively engage the learning process. Learning will be optimized when these interactions maximize both cognitive engagement and identity investment (Cummins, 2004).

To the extent that students commit their identities to these multimedia projects (which contain written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic or combinations in multiple forms) and review and reflect on efforts in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light, desirable academic outcomes can be expected. When students share these projects with peers, teachers, family, other classes and community, they are likely to receive positive feedback and self-affirmation in interaction with these audiences. Multimedia can enhance the process of identity investment and affirmation. It facilitates the production of these projects, makes them look more accomplished, and expands the listeners and potential for affirmative feedback for student voices.

National, state and local standards guide educators and many

of the standards focus specifically on helping students use technology and multimedia wisely. The RSOE/IML collaborative explores appropriate ways to integrate technology, multimedia and literacy using project-based instructional units that lead to productive standards-based outcomes for students. As an example, both the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) each have standards that call for literacy experiences that fit together nicely with both sets of standards (Valmont, 2003).

### Multimedia Projects

Currently many social scientists, including educators, employ video ethnography, a multimedia visual observational approach to human behavior. It starts by watching people at school, work or play, followed by interviews, review of documents, artifacts and personal histories to which you can react. The process continues until you're sure you have something that makes a significant contribution, or not. Finally you tell the story, visually, graphically, scientifically and artistically (Genzuck, 1999).

Ethnographic research methods help attain local points of view – in schools, classrooms, households and community “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992). It is a means of identifying significant categories of human experience up close and personal by which ethnographers may inform others of their findings to derive, for example, policy decisions or instructional innovations.

When we are young, watching the world around us was a natural, enjoyable way to learn and remember. Video ethnography is an efficient mode of recording and presenting research. Now that the technology is no longer as complex and cumbersome, it is likely to be taken up by more and more educators and social scientists. Video ethnographies provide compelling ways to present concepts and content by students as well as providing an exciting vehicle for integrating multiliteracies into a project-based learning experience. Perhaps most important for those in teacher education, these experiences can provide feedback to help teach-

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ers/educators see and reflect on their own teaching, an important part of their professional development and growth.

The RSOE/IML collaborative teacher education candidate effort has adopted video ethnography with its Video Ethnography Project. The project uses multimedia to create video ethnographies that tell important stories about the students in local classrooms, teaching and learning in the classroom and communities and any additional environments where students live. These stories can be used and shared by teachers, their colleagues, parents and school administrators as a part of “reflective practice” and ongoing professional growth and development.

This particular project is for teacher candidates. It uses video desktop movies to help students see and analyze the diverse kinds of learning, growth and social interactions that occur in the classroom and other learning environments in the home and community of language minority students (students who come from homes where a language other than English is spoken).

Teacher candidate teams use digital movie cameras and multimedia labs at the university to create video ethnographies to capture aspects and characteristics of both classroom and community teaching. The emphasis of this exercise is on the process rather than the final product. One of the main objectives is for teacher candidates to operationalize or pass along this multimedia process and experience to their own students to add to their student’s expanding multiple literacy abilities. This transfer is often accomplished by utilizing the same process teacher education candidates experience in the RSOE/IML collaborative.

We have begun to gather examples of student made movie projects from 4th graders who have used this same process in their classrooms. Students are divided into production teams. Collaborative strategies begin with group discussing the focus of the self-selected topics of the projects. Topics usually focus on one or a combination of curricular areas being covered during the current academic year. The group conducts research on their chosen topic and then writes and edits a “project pitch” to present to a “Project Approval Committee” consisting of the teacher and his/her designees. Once the project has been approved the students gather information online, communicating with experts or by searching for information in libraries and other sources. Production team “jobs” are applied for and assigned. Sites, scenery, costumes and other logistic considerations are now undertaken. Storyboarding is a required activity. Writing of scripts, construction of sets, gathering and development of costumes are finalized. Plans for lighting and sound are also considered. Now the actual filming and editing takes place. Once the final products are completed plans for showcasing the final products are made.

Many traditional literacy skills contained in state and national standards are enhanced through this process. The process contains the traditional literacies emphasized in state and national teaching standards – reading, writing, measuring, calculating, music, art, physical movement, as well as planning, oral language, etc. The process is especially good for highlighting the kinds of conversations and interactions that occur among students as they engage in different kinds of learning, and for helping teachers find evidence of learning that does not always appear on standardized tests or other assessments.

Teaching future teachers to use multimedia means making sure they have the skills to use the technology and multimedia effectively as a teaching tool to inform their instructional decisions and practice so students in their classrooms utilize the power of multimedia to learn.

### Conclusion

A radically different image of the student is implied in the classrooms described than in more typical transmission-oriented classrooms. Within the framework of multiliteracies pedagogy, broadly defined, educators expand the opportunities for students to express themselves, their intelligence, imagination and linguistic and artistic talents. When this kind of expression is enabled, students see themselves as intelligent, imaginative and talented. It is essential that the concept of literacy be expanded to include visual, audio, interactive and combined media, and that we continually ask ourselves what it means to be truly literate and, by extension, educated in the 21st century. ■

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