

RCET FELLOWS

Research Proposal

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Finding "New Literacy" In Action

Synopsis of Research/Executive Summary

This research study has been part of an ongoing attempt to find and profile “new literacy” classrooms across the United States and Canada. We often see persuasive calls for a broadened definition of “literacy,” [Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Eisner, 1994, 1997; Flood & Lapp, 1995; Kress, 1997; Luke & Elkins, 1998; New London Group, 1996; The Technology and Cognition Group at Vanderbilt University, 1994 as reported by Reinking, 1997).

Based on a review of the “new literacies” research—focusing on the varied symbol systems that humans have used over time both in and out of classrooms, and how, particularly in this era of rapidly developing technology, our definition of "literacy" is expanding--five “characteristics” of “new literacies” classrooms were developed (Kist, 2000).

This almost two-year long process has led to the following “case studies” that have been performed for this study.

- An alternative high school outside of Montreal that utilizes a “new literacies” curriculum to reach out to “at-risk” ninth and tenth graders who come from a variety of backgrounds, both English- and French-speaking..
- An interdisciplinary, Western Civilization class outside of Cleveland, co-taught by a language arts teacher, a music teacher, and an art teacher.
- A self-contained eighth grade classroom in extreme rural Manitoba, Canada that uses multiliteracies to have students conduct real-world interdisciplinary projects.
- An interdisciplinary focus in an affluent middle school outside of Chicago, held together by a media specialist who helps her teams of teachers infuse multiliteracies throughout the school.
- A social studies/computer teacher in the San Fernando City part of the Valley area of Los Angeles who has utilized digital media to inspire pride in students in themselves and in their community.
- A high school English Department in Calgary, Alberta, Canada that has done away with “tracking” in their classes and moved toward students reading various media texts revolving around a theme and responding to those texts utilizing a

great variety of media, even in the face of provincial exams, embedding student choice of form of representation into every assignment.

Thick descriptions of these “new literacy” classrooms have been developed and will be developed, including sample assignments and assessments used (with sample assignment sheets and rubrics.) Additionally, students and teachers have provided and will provide their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of “new literacy” teaching.

A Brief Lit Review

Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself. And in the self-direction thus given, nothing counts as much as the school. (Dewey, 1899/1980, p. 5)

One hundred years after Dewey spoke the above words, young people are living in a world outside of school that is increasingly rich and varied in forms of literacy. These multimodal forms (New London Group, 1996) that encompass print, graphic art, music, mathematics, drama, and cinema to name a few, may inspire more than ever before “the full growth of all the individuals” of which Dewey spoke. The growth of the Internet alone has led to a re-conceptualizing of “reading” (Reinking, 1997). “Reading” is now something that is done in a non-linear fashion, encompassing more than just the medium of print.

Much of the call for a “new literacy” has been in response to the breathtaking development of new technology--from these new technologies will come a “new literacy” (Buckingham, 1993; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Eisner, 1994, 1997; Flood & Lapp, 1995; Kress, 1997; Luke & Elkins, 1998; New London Group, 1996; The

Technology and Cognition Group at Vanderbilt University, 1994 as reported by Reinking, 1997). "Book- and print-based literacies, and the industrial model of schooling built around book culture, are no longer wholly adequate in a changing information, social, and cultural environment. In light of the accelerated shift toward electronically mediated communication and social exchange in almost all facets of everyday life, there is a need for an expanded form of literacy" (C. Luke, 2000, p. 424).

"Literacy," then, might be as defined by Eisner:

In order to be read, a poem, an equation, a painting, a dance, a novel, or a contract each requires a distinctive form of literacy, when literacy means, as I intend it to mean, a way of conveying meaning through and recovering meaning from the form of representation in which it appears. (Eisner, 1997, p. 353)

The emphasis for literacy educators in a "new literacy" classroom would be on enabling students to fully "convey meaning" and "construct meaning" regardless of the medium being utilized. Indeed, students would be expected to utilize the multiple forms of representation that new technology makes available.

This is all very tempting, but what would the new literacy "look like" on a daily basis? How do teachers utilize technology in order to broaden their (and their students') conceptions of "literacy"? This study seeks to continue the work of documenting "new literacy" classrooms as classroom teachers begin to embrace new technologies and "new literacy." Persuasive notions of a broadened definition of literacy have addressed possible influences on human cognition and affect, yet little is known about how "new literacy" might actually "happen" in the context of a classroom. How could classrooms honor "cognitive pluralism"? And to what "effect"? How can teachers emphasize in their teaching that "language is but one of several codes that constitute human thought"? How

do events play out in a classroom that explicitly and implicitly places equal value on the ability to utilize "different" forms of expression in all forms of new media? How can students read these symbols and new tools, these "available designs" (New London Group, 1996) and use them to think through problems and express themselves?

We have some notions already about "new literacy" classrooms. First and foremost, by definition, they must utilize new technology and all of the multiple forms of representation that the new media make available. Analogous to the "print-rich" environment advocated by literacy educators, "new literacy" classrooms would be "technology-rich," and, therefore, "media rich" environments.

There are other possible qualities of these "new literacy" classrooms. They may be interdisciplinary (Eisner, 1997; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). They may put an emphasis on utilizing the arts to teach content and meaning-making (Greene, 1997; Leland & Harste, 1994; Wicks, 1997). Students may become apprentices to the teachers who would be engaged in real work themselves (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989.) As teachers work through problems or challenges, they could model for the students by stating out loud, in a kind of verbal stream of consciousness their thinking processes.

Some descriptions of a "new literacy" classroom focus on "media literacy" or "media studies" or "critical literacy" and teaching students to look at texts socioculturally which becomes necessary in this kind of technology-saturated environment (Delpit, 1995; Gee, 1997; Lankshear, 1997; Luke, C., 2000; Willinsky, 1990). Lankshear, with Gee, Knobel, and Searle (1997) suggested using pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities that allow students to explore how a text "constructs reality textually and positions readers" (p. 53). Students should be taught to ask "What version of

events/reality is foregrounded here? Whose version is this? From whose perspective is it constructed?, etc." (Lankshear et al., 1997, p. 54). This should be done even in the context of pleasurable activity such as fandom (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). The New London Group (1996) suggested that any semiotic (symbol-making) activity be taught within context with the repertoire of design elements (linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal) that are available within that context. Carmen Luke (2000) suggested combining media, cultural, computer, and technology studies together.

Overall, however, the problem that this study seeks to address is the dearth of real descriptions (as opposed to hypothetical ones) of what actual "new literacy" classrooms might look like overall, on a daily basis. We have very little that deals in a systematic way with how this kind of teaching can be implemented or what may be some outcomes of instruction that features a broadened definition of literacy. How are "new literacy" teachers teaching students to utilize the smorgasbord of multiple forms of media and technologies in order to think critically about complex authentic problems/tasks? How can students utilize technology and all of its multiple forms of representation to represent their thoughts to a diverse world? What are the assignments that "new literacy" teachers are making? How is technology being utilized in these assignments? What do assessments look like in a "new literacy" world?

If representationally diverse classrooms currently exist, they should be documented. As Flood and Lapp (1997) point out, "Teachers and students who already use and know the visual arts, whether through electronic technology or personal artistic talent, represent the vanguard of a new paradigm. They can bring colleagues and

students into action with the visual arts, so that changes in beliefs and motivations can follow" (p. 344).

In sum, the purpose of this current proposal is to lay the groundwork for the eventual case studies of classrooms that exhibit characteristics of an embraced broadened definition of literacy and to begin to document how such classrooms utilize technology and how such classrooms may influence students cognitively and affectively. By "affectively," we mean that a long-term goal of this study will be to look at student and teacher perceptions of the affective, emotional side of learning in a "new literacy" classroom. Before these case studies can be conducted, the "new literacy" classrooms must be correctly identified.

B. Major Questions Addressed

- How do teachers teach who teach in a "new literacy" classroom?

(How are "new literacy" teachers teaching students to utilize the smorgasbord of multiple forms of media and technologies in order to think critically about complex authentic problems/tasks and ultimately to represent their thoughts to a diverse world? What are the assignments that "new literacy" teachers are making? What do assessments look like in a "new literacy" world?)
- What kinds of technology do "new literacy" classrooms utilize?
- What are student and teacher perceptions of the role of "new literacy" in their thinking processes (cognition)? How do "new literacy" classrooms use technology for problem solving, inquiry, and critical thinking?
- What alternative assessments are utilized in a "new literacy" classroom to measure student learning?

- What are student and teacher perceptions of the affective dimensions of learning within a new literacy environment--how do they feel about learning in such an environment?

C. Methodology (Subjects, Data Collection, and Data Analysis)

Methodology, Subjects

The methodology utilized for this preliminary phase of the study was the use of two refined survey instruments, one administered via U.S. Mail and email, the other administered in follow-up phone interviews. The participants in the initial survey phase of the study were be educational leaders in the field. The participants of the follow-up phone and email interviews were the nominated "new literacy" teachers.

This almost two-year long process has led to the following “case studies” who have been profiled for this book.

- An alternative high school outside of Montreal that utilizes a “new literacies” curriculum to reach out to “at-risk” ninth and tenth graders who come from a variety of backgrounds, both English- and French-speaking..
- An interdisciplinary, Western Civilization class outside of Cleveland, co-taught by a language arts teacher, a music teacher, and an art teacher.
- A self-contained eighth grade classroom in extreme rural Manitoba, Canada that uses multiliteracies to have students conduct real-world interdisciplinary projects.

- An interdisciplinary focus in an affluent middle school outside of Chicago, held together by a media specialist who helps her teams of teachers infuse multiliteracies throughout the school.
- A social studies/computer teacher in the San Fernando City part of the Valley area of Los Angeles who has utilized digital media to inspire pride in students in themselves and in their community.
- A high school English Department in Calgary, Alberta, Canada that has done away with “tracking” in their classes and moved toward students reading various media texts revolving around a theme and responding to those texts utilizing a great variety of media, even in the face of provincial exams, embedding student choice of form of representation into every assignment.

Methodology, Data Collection

Based on my previous published work (Kist, 2000), several characteristics of "new literacy" classrooms have been described. These characteristics were developed from a review of literature, and a pilot study that was conducted in 1998. To be considered "new literacy" classrooms, a classroom would need to exhibit some if not all of these characteristics. "New literacy" classrooms would feature daily work in multiple forms of representation. In such classrooms, there would be explicit discussions of the merits of using certain symbol systems in certain situations with much choice (Eisner, 1994, 1997; Greeno & Hall, 1997; New London Group, 1996). There would be meta-

dialogues by the teacher who models working through problems using certain symbol systems (Tishman & Perkins, 1997). Students would take part in a mix of individual and collaborative activities (John-Steiner, 1997). Finally, "new literacy" classrooms would be places of student engagement in which students report achieving Csikszentmihalyi's (1990, 1991, 1993) "flow" state. Forming the foundation of the research was the following broadened definition of "literacy" adapted from Eisner (1994, 1997): the ability to encode and decode multiple forms of representation and the ability to choose the best form for thinking and communicating depending on the situation.

To find "new literacy" classrooms for a research study conducted in 1999, an identification process was developed. This current study refined that process. The first step, in the 1999 study, was that a "New Literacy Nomination Form" was submitted to a peer group of educational leaders to solicit nominations of "new literacy" classrooms. The items on this instrument matched the identified "new literacy" characteristics, and asked respondents to think about one or more classrooms with which they were familiar that exhibited one or more of these characteristics. This form of sampling is known as "snowball," "chain," or "network" sampling (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). After being corroborated by researcher observations and follow-up interviews with nominated teachers, two classrooms were selected for case studies--a first grade classroom and a high school Western Civilization course co-taught by a language arts teacher, music teacher, and art teacher.

To further support the validity of my choice of the first grade classroom and the high school classroom as "new literacy" classrooms, I constructed a survey instrument that asked the selected classroom "new literacy" teachers to rate themselves on a five-

point scale on eight items corresponding to the same characteristics of "new literacy" classrooms. This instrument will be referred to as the "New Literacy Self-Identification Survey."

The instrument was administered to the four teachers involved in the 1999 study. It was also administered to a convenience sample of 22 teachers of varying backgrounds teaching at a variety of levels in two different school systems, different from the districts where the four case study teachers teach. The four teachers scored a mean score that was higher on six of the eight items. This gave support to the assertion that I had identified four teachers of the "new literacy" although the N-size is too low to provide for generalizability.

The 1999 study employed case study methodology. The investigation was qualitative in nature, because I sought discovery, insight, and understanding about the implementation of a broadened definition of literacy in the classroom and the implications for student cognition and affect. The purpose of the 1999 study was to get data-derived insight into a concept (what a broadened definition of literacy could mean for classroom instruction including possibly student cognition and affect). To be considered "new literacy" classrooms, a nominated classroom had to meet three criteria. First, the classroom had to be nominated by a peer educator based on the five described characteristics of "new literacy" classrooms. Secondly, follow-up observations and phone interviews were conducted and analyzed so that evidence of at least three of the five "new literacy" characteristics was present. Finally, selected teachers responded to the "New Literacy' Self-Identification Survey." This

This study refined this identification process. The original "New Literacy Nomination Form" was refined to reflect the findings of the 1999 case studies. Some survey items were rewritten to build upon the previous work. Also, with the assistance of a research assistant, educational leaders from around the world were identified (via publications, listservs, mailing lists, web sites) for potential participation.

Based on the preparation described, the revised "New Literacy" nomination form was mailed (via U.S. Mail and email) to educational leaders to provide "network sampling" in the effort to identify "new literacy" classrooms. The refined "'New Literacy' Self-Identification Survey" was then administered via phone interviews to selected "New Literacy" classroom teacher nominees. Selected "New Literacy" classrooms were then visited for classroom observations and teacher and student interviews.

Methodology, Data Analysis

Because doing a case study is a recursive, interactive process (Merriam, 1998), my observations and questions were influenced by issues that arose from the data. I directed the focus of my observations and refined questions after I looked at part of the data. I was open throughout to uncover categories and refine categories via the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method was utilized because this study began with certain ideas about the characteristics of "new literacy" classrooms, and yet I was also searching for new ideas that will arise from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using this method, I began with a particular unit of data and sorted it into categories with the categories constantly being refined and uncovered. The categories ultimately reflected the purpose of the research; they were exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998). Investigator

triangulation was also be utilized by asking two peer raters to code some of the data. Also to insure validity, a chain of evidence was kept through my field notes and observer comments, serving as a kind of "member check" on ourselves as researchers (Merriam, 1998).

To summarize, complete data sets were collected for each nomination. These data sets included the completed "New Literacy Nomination Form," the "New Literacy Self-Identification Survey" and data from the phone interviews and observations. Data was be prepared and reduced. Inductive analysis took place throughout and after the data collection process to identify data congruent with the research goals and to uncover categories and refine categories via the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

D. Findings

Thick descriptions of these "new literacy" classrooms have been developed and will be developed, including sample assignments and assessments used (with sample assignment sheets and rubrics.) Additionally, students and teachers have provided and will provide their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of "new literacy" teaching. Some preliminary analysis of the data has also provided the following trends:

- Assignments in these "new literacy" classrooms tend to be inquiry-based.

- Assignments in “new literacy” classrooms tend to be assessed utilizing rubrics. Both teachers and students utilize the rubrics to reflect on what has been learned and experienced. Both product and process is assessed.
- The “product” of the inquiry process is always presented utilizing alternative media in addition to print.
- Assignments (inquiries) tend to cross disciplinary boundaries.
- A substantial portion of the teaching and learning dialogue revolves around the challenges of working in “new media”—learning the grammar of nonlinear video editing or web page design, for example.
- There appears to be an intended balance of individualized and collaborative activities designed by the teacher for the students.
- Multiple forms of representation are utilized in these classrooms on a daily basis, not as one-time stunts or “special assignments.” Alternative media are part of daily life in the classroom.
- The teacher is a worker himself/herself in alternative media and models how different symbol systems may be utilized to think through problems and

communicate in different situations. There is a blurring of the lines between traditional teacher/student roles.

- The teacher challenges students to examine texts socioculturally.
- Many students appear to be often engaged in the “new literacies” classrooms (losing track of time, wanting to continue to work on assignments after school).
- Students and teachers report “new literacies” influences on their thinking, from utilizing them to help them learn “content” as well as using alternative media to “see new worlds.”
- Students say conflicting things about work load in “new literacy” classrooms, some calling classwork an “easy A,” while others report working harder than they do in more traditional classes. Sometimes, the same respondent makes these same contradictory points.
- Teachers report feeling somewhat isolated from teacher colleagues in the school, who view them as “pioneers.”

E. Conclusions

Some overall conclusions can be drawn from the study.

Students work in multimedia on a daily basis

In these classrooms, working in video or graphic design or audio files are all daily occurrences. They aren't one-time stunts or "special assignments." They become part of the students' daily lives, just as they are in the outside world.

Kids are engaged for a new millennium.

In these classrooms, kids tend to be very engaged. They stay during lunch and very late after school working on projects. "You realize it more," said one student in Montreal, referring to his greater engagement with story and plot in the multiliteracy classroom. Roger described going into a kind of "zone" as he would visualize what he was going to put on paper: "The ideas are in my head. I can, like, . . . I see what's going on. I . . . go into, like, a zone, for lack of a better, less-corny word. And, . . . I can actually feel what I'm writing."

Kids Collaborate and Form a Community

In many of these classrooms, students become a family, because they tend to work on projects collaboratively. "Everybody is better at something than somebody," Angie, a student, said, "so you may be better at one aspect of something, but somebody else can give you another idea." In Los Angeles, the students who have graduated are attempting to maintain their family feeling, working together on new projects as they create their own corporation.

A student named Colin perceives that learning how to work with others is one of the main things he got out of the class. Another student singled out this type of teaching

as having even more potential for improving the general level of tolerance in the high school.

Active Learning

Students in “multiliteracy” classrooms rarely sit and listen to the teacher lecture. Students are usually engaged in collaborative projects that end in some kind of presentation to the class. Listen in on some students I observed in Cleveland as they worked to design a three-dimensional monument to Dr. Seuss. Their assignment was that their monument had to be abstract—it could not be a literal statue of Dr. Seuss, for example.

A group of seven high school students sits around a table in a dusty classroom. Gary is talking animatedly about their project with the other students. "The setting is almost supernatural. I want to create that," he says. The other students are quiet. Hal speaks up: "I think what we had was a decent idea." A quiet student named Bruce says, "We were going to use those balls--the biggest one goes on top. His own world is way over there." Bruce gestures out into space, high into the air. "So it makes sense, but at the same time . . . we need a base. . . It's not going to hold it up." Tom says, "Color is another thing we have to decide." Now all the students talk on top of each other:

"Having it on the top shows the importance . . ."

"We're allowed to fold shapes, too."

"The top one should be neon, hot pink."

"Why is 'love' above 'friendliness'?"

"We can't assume what his emotions were."

"(We can) . . . from his books."

"The top one could be his love for education."

"It would make a lot of sense then."

"We should label each ball."

This last comment leads to a spirited discussion of whether each ball should be explicitly labeled, or if that goes against the spirit of the assignment. Instead of listening to a lecture about the concept of abstraction, these students were living it, as they attempted to design an object that would represent concepts in an abstract, rather than literal, fashion.

"I think I learn a lot more because of the groups and the projects we do, " said student Colin. "I think it's because you're putting all the information in your own hands and you're doing something with it." Colin felt they learned about abstraction from actually making an abstract object--students have stepped inside the shoes of the artist and seen his or her point of view. "You realize all the time and the work and the effort that the artist put into something like that," Colin says. "So you get a better conception of what they mean."

Students learn “real-world” skills

In several of these classrooms, students are already becoming entrepreneurs, putting to use skills they have learned immediately. In the Montreal school, the students run a video production business. In Los Angeles, former students have created their own

nonprofit organization that will provide. These students are already performing tasks that are valued by the communities in which they live.

Students Exhibit Personal Growth

Students exhibit personal growth and new identities emerge. In reaction to their ability to utilize forms other than print, it appeared that some students found a level of fluency they had never attained before. For these students, it was enabling to be free to communicate using alternative forms. One of the teachers described one of his students who was extremely shy and had great difficulty communicating until he sat down at the piano.

The multiliteracies curriculum shows students how to succeed in the world on their terms, breaking down impediments to success. It frees the child to be all they can be, using all of their talents. In describing working on the virtual museum project, Robert said, "It was like I knew what I was doing there. We all knew what we were doing, and that was important."

Students become politically aware

As students become proficient at creating in different media and in different formats, they become aware of the way they view the media. One student in Manitoba told me that she noticed, as she was watching television at home, that she was timing commercials to see if they were 30 seconds in length. She was also paying attention to animation that was used in commercials as she had been working on an animation project herself.

Role of the Teacher

In many of these classrooms, the teachers participate themselves as “readers” and “writers.”

The term “letting go” comes up often. This "letting go" includes letting go of preconceived notions and old ways; teacher control of projects; traditional forms of assessment; traditional notions of time; and always having to have the right answer. Ralph expresses some difficulty at “letting go” also of more traditional forms of assessing student knowledge that are based around writing.

II. Strengths and Limitations of the Study

An obvious limit to the study is that one can never really be sure if one is seeing a “new literacies” classroom. This is especially the case in that most of the teachers studied have never heard of “new literacies” research. A strength of the study is that the classrooms profiled did exhibit characteristics that have been associated with “new literacies” writings. And this study has gathered data from these actual classrooms, attempting to move this line of research out of the purely theoretical.

III. Major Implications for Educators and Decision Makers

Certainly students have been creating projects in different media for many years. My father still talks about a three-dimensional model of the Globe Theater he made in high school. What makes this different is that the stakes are higher. What a

“multiliteracies” curriculum says to kids is that it’s OK to work in non-print-based media, that their schools can be as limitless as their dreams. Educators and decision makers are going to need to be more inclusive when they think of “language arts.”

There are certainly challenges to creating “multiliteracies” classrooms? Teachers spoke of challenges they have met in obtaining technology, overcoming administrative resistance, coping with the challenges of setting up and grading collaborative projects. Students spoke also of the challenges of working in collaborative groups and said that there was a nagging perception that these classes were “easy.” Still, they reported working long hours on their projects. And, during the interviews with the students, I began to note the variety of references they made to “content” they had learned, from the elements of an atom, to the elements of an advertising campaign, from the periods of Absolutism, Cubism and Abstract Expressionism to the components of Grimm’s fairy tales. They also mentioned a wide variety of people about whom they had learned—a long list that partially included Jackson Pollock, Alfred Hitchcock, Dr. Seuss, Mozart, Fred Astaire, Steven Spielberg, Emily Dickinson, Jim Henson, Walt Disney, Grand Master Flash, Steven Sondheim, Rembrandt, Sir Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, Andrew Marvell, Beethoven, and Picasso. Students and teachers must work to create these types of classrooms, but the effort seems to be worth it on both cognitive and affective levels.

IV. Major Implications for Educational Researchers and/or Evaluators

We have more and more teachers who are teaching “new literacies” whether they know they are doing so or not. We must continue to study these teachers and their

students. What exactly are students learning in these classrooms? More long-term studies need to occur. Of course, at some point, a value will be assigned by policy makers as to whether a broadened definition of “literacy” is appropriate. Meanwhile, we must continue to search for and document those pioneers who are stretching our conception of “literacy” on a daily basis.

V. Suggested Related Studies or Resources for Further Exploration

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