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The Changing Face of Literacy Policy in Victoria

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Abstract

In the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, literacy has undergone a fundamental change in the shift from page to screen as the dominant basis for communication. In a communications environment characterised by multimodality – integration of modes of linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning – young people require a broadened repertoire of literacy capacities.

Educational authorities with responsibility for literacy policy have responded in terms of curriculum, and assessment advice within a context of rapidly changing forms of multimodal communication. This paper details the early twenty-first century response of one educational authority, the Department of Education, Victoria¹, in reviewing early years literacy curriculum and assessment in light of the rapid developments in digital communications.

Introduction

At the turn of the third millennium it was commonplace for early years literacy policies and programs around the globe to assume that literacy referred to reading, writing, speaking and listening to linguistic resources—in other words, they were print-focused (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2007). However, theoretical cases for reconsidering this view of literacy, allowing for modes of meaning other than linguistic to be acknowledged and utilised as literacy meaning-making resources, were being persuasively argued (Alvermann and Hagood, 2000; New London Group, 1996; 2000; Reinking, McKenna, Labbo, and Kieffer, 1998; Unsworth, 2001). Perhaps the most persuasive of these was multiliteracies theory (New London Group, 1996; 2000).

Multiliteracies theory addresses two aspects of language use affected by the changing communications environment: the variability of meaning making in different cultural, social or professional contexts and the nature and impact of new communications technologies.

¹ At various times also known as the Department of Education and Training, Victoria; and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Education, Victoria.

Multiliteracies theory argues that contemporary literacy pedagogy needs to engage diverse, multilayered learners' identities so as to experience belonging and transformation in their capacities and subjectivities. Becoming 'multiliterate' involves students in developing proficiency in modal and multimodal meaning-making design, linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and multimodal designs, with multimodal being a combination of the other modes (New London Group, 1996; 2000).

In light of the impact of digital technologies, prevailing models of curriculum organised around discrete key learning areas were increasingly seen as inadequate. As Australian responses which acknowledged the changing social, historical and political context began to emerge (Education Queensland, 2002; Luke and Freebody, 2000), pressure was mounted for a broad renewal in Victorian educational policy.

This paper describes the Victorian early years literacy policy context in the late 1990s and the review of these policies in the opening years of the third millennium. Key influences which impacted on literacy policy development are tracked, and policy development, including the Early Years Literacy Program and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards, is discussed.

Early Literacy Policy in Victoria

Curriculum in the Victorian government school sector in the early years of the twenty-first century had been shaped by earlier reforms, including a devolved model of school administration through the systemwide introduction of the self-managing, government, 'Schools of the Future' (Caldwell and Haywood, 1998).

Within this devolved context, teachers in Victorian schools could select what they considered to be appropriate curriculum foci and outcomes from eight key learning areas to meet the needs of their student community in the first eleven years of schooling (Prep—Year 10). The eight learning areas were The Arts, English, Health and Physical Education, Languages Other Than English, Mathematics, Science, Studies of Society and Environment and Technology (Board of Studies Victoria, 1995, 2000). Course advice (Directorate of School Education, 1995) offered government school teachers exemplars of course outlines, with implementation supported via teacher briefings and workshops conducted by government-funded and directed central and regional offices.

Within this broader curriculum context was the work of the Early Years Literacy strategy, which had been developed to support the literacy teaching and learning of students in the

early years of schooling (ages approximately 5-10 years). This strategy included the Early Literacy Research Project (Hill and Crèvola, 1998a; Hill and Crèvola, 1998b; Hill and Crèvola, 1999a), the *Early Years Literacy Program* (Education Victoria, 1997f; Education Victoria, 1998b; Education Victoria, 1999b) and accompanying training, conferences, parent initiatives, and annual assessment of reading data collection. These aspects of early literacy policy will be explored below.

The Early Literacy Research Project

The statewide Early Years policies and programs were based on advice from the Early Literacy Research Project, a joint research project between the Department of Education, Victoria and The University of Melbourne.

Initiated at the end of 1995, the Early Literacy Research Project involved 27 trial schools from low socio-economically situated areas and 25 reference schools (Hill and Crèvola, 1998a; Hill and Crèvola, 1998b; Hill and Crèvola, 1999a). The design of this joint research project was informed by those characteristics considered to constitute effective teaching (Scheerens and Bosker, 1997), including time on task; closeness of content covered to the assessment instrument; the structure of the approach, embodying specific objectives, frequent assessment and corrective feedback; and the various types of adaptive instruction that can be managed by teachers. Three factors were named as foundational in informing a whole school design (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a): high expectations of student achievement, engaged learning time, and focused teaching that maximises learning within each student's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Nine design elements for facilitating effective teaching and the way in which these elements operated were identified as an effective and cohesive whole school design: beliefs and understandings; leadership and coordination; standards and targets; monitoring and assessment; classroom teaching programs; professional learning teams; school and class organisation; intervention and special assistance; and home, school and community partnerships (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a). In the knowledge that significant variability in student progress can be found in students in different classes in the same school (Hill and Rowe, 1996; Monk, 1992; Scheerens, Vermeulen, and Pelgrum, 1989), the research sought to develop a whole school design approach aimed at minimising these differences and enabling all students to progress at the level of the students in the most effective teachers' classes (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a).

The Early Literacy Research Project involved trial school teachers in a systematic organisation of teaching practices and assessment. The professional development conducted by researchers from The University of Melbourne supported teachers in combining the following teaching approaches within a daily two-hour literacy block: oral language, reading to children, language experience, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, modelled writing, shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing, independent writing. Many of the classroom teaching practices were already known to teachers through their involvement in programs such as the 'Early Literacy In-Service Course' (Curriculum Development Centre, 1987), which drew on practices widespread in New Zealand classrooms (Clay, 1991; Department of Education, 1985; Holdaway, 1979). Key foci for the professional development were also drawn from the assessment strategies developed in New Zealand (Clay, 1993a, 1993b; Clay, Gill, McNaughton, and Salmon, 1983).

Data was collected at the end of each of the three years of the project, using three of the subtests of the *Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery* (Woodcock, 1987), the *Record of Oral Language* (Clay et al., 1983), and the six measures of *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 1993a). Pre- and post-test measures, composite scores obtained from fitting a one-factor model to ten separate measures of student literacy, found an effect size estimated at 0.648 with results described as 'large, positive and statistically significant' (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a, p. 10). Discovered to be most significant features in promoting change were those organizational features which schools had been found to implement differentially and the challenge was for schools to become effective in implementing them all. These included:

- a two-hour, uninterrupted daily literacy block for all students;
- the setting of rigorous performance standards and targets that seek to have all students performing at a high standard by the end of their second year of schooling;
- a focus on data-driven instruction with assessment of all students at the beginning and end of each year on a full range of measures, plus ongoing monitoring on a regular basis throughout the year;
- the use of Reading Recovery as a one-to-one tutoring program for all students in Year 1 who are not making adequate progress;
- the appointment and training of an early years literacy co-ordinator with at least a 0.5 time release in each school.
- ongoing, externally-provided structured professional learning for teaching teams to develop their beliefs and understandings, and promote understanding of use of a range of teaching strategies;
- on-site professional development through observation, team teaching, weekly teams meetings and visits, mentoring and coaching; and
- professional development sessions for principals focusing on the principal as an instructional leader (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a, p. 10-11).

The research measured the extent of improvement in the proportions of students meeting the State-wide Minimum Acceptable Standard of 80% of students (deemed as capable) reading unseen texts with 90% accuracy at or above Reading Recovery level one by the end of their first year of schooling; and 100% of students (deemed as capable) reading unseen texts with 90% accuracy at or above Reading Recovery level five by the end of their second year of schooling. Analysis of both cohorts demonstrated a substantial improvement, with the number of students in their first year of schooling changing from less than half of students underway (level one) to almost three quarters of students underway, with improvement also reflected in the proportions of students performing at higher levels, particularly the proportion reaching level five (Hill and Crèvola, 1999a).

There were high expectations of student achievement as defined by these standards, with professional learning teams taking responsibility for all children's literacy success (not only the students in a particular class) with regular discussion focused on student achievement at the school level. On- and offsite support was given by an outside 'expert' and offsite involvement was furthered by a broader community of practice. There were also additional dedicated resources and the principal and a co-ordinator were positioned as educational leaders whose roles involved attention to the nine design elements. All of these factors contributed to the improvement of student progress in terms of the measures used (Hill and Crèvola, 1997b).

The Early Years Literacy Strategy

The Early Years Literacy Strategy, developed concurrently with the Early Literacy Research Project, was designed to support a statewide focus on raising literacy levels in the Victorian government primary school sector (approximately 1200 schools). The Early Years Literacy Strategy involved teachers in professional learning supported statewide by a multilayered professional development and conferences network and aided by teacher and parent advice materials. Statewide minimum standards for literacy were identified and accountability processes were established for government primary schools (Department of Education and Training, 2003a). In this way a community of practice of early years literacy practitioners from around Victoria was supported by statewide and regional conferences. Attracting as many as 2000 delegates, these involved having teachers present their own contextualised experiences, promoting not only professional dialogue but allowing opportunities to discuss implementation issues.

The Early Years Literacy Strategy involved the development of the *Early Years Literacy Program*, set up to provide practical advice for teachers and teacher leaders. Consisting of a series of books, videos, and other materials that were progressively released in stages, the *Early Years Literacy Program* resources included *Teaching Readers in the Early Years* (Education Victoria, 1997h) in Stage 1; *Teaching Writers in the Classroom* (Education Victoria, 1998b) in Stage 2; and *Teaching Speakers and Listeners in the Classroom* (Education Victoria, 1999b) in Stage 3. Professional development modules included *Professional Development for Teachers, Readers* (Education Victoria, 1997f); *Professional Development for Teachers, Stage 2: Writing* (Education Victoria, 1998a); and *Professional Development for Teachers, Stage 3: Speaking and Listening* (Education Victoria, 1999a). In addition to these there were parent programs, including *Classroom Helpers, A Course for Parents, Helpers and Aides* (Education Victoria, 1997a) and *Developing Literacy Partnerships* (Education Victoria, 1997b).

The *Early Years Literacy Program* recommended the deployment of teaching approaches within an organisational structure for a daily two-hour literacy block. These included whole class, small group and independent teaching approaches to be deployed during the ‘reading’ hour; and whole class, small group and independent teaching approaches to be deployed during the ‘writing’ hour. The teaching approaches recommended for the reading hour included whole class reading to and shared reading; small group shared reading, language experience, guided reading and reciprocal teaching; and whole class reading share time. Students also worked independently at learning centres. The teaching approaches recommended for the writing hour included whole class modelled and shared writing, small group interactive writing, guided writing, independent writing and roving conferences and whole group writing share time. The program recommended the use of a task management board indicating daily student groupings and deployment of teaching approaches (Education Victoria, 1999b; Education Victoria, 1997f; Education Victoria, 1998b). The program was initially developed for students in Prep-Year Two and gradually extended to cater for students in Years Three and Four.

In line with the national goals set for schooling, statewide minimum standards for reading were developed, with teachers undertaking an annual assessment of reading against Reading Recovery text levels:

- 80% of students reading unseen texts with 90% accuracy at or above text level one by the end of their first year of schooling
- 100% of students reading unseen texts with 90% accuracy at or above text level five by the end of their second year of schooling (Department of Education and Training, 2003a).

The reading ability of students improved for each of the seven years of data collection, from 1999 to 2005 for Prep. In 2005, the statewide minimum standard for Prep students was met, and for Year 1 students was almost met. However, results for Year 2 students levelled out in 2003, and year-on-year reading improvement of students in Prep and Year 1 suggested that a ceiling was being approached, as had happened in Year 2 (Department of Education and Training, 2002a).

While the systemic nature of the literacy strategy was applauded as relatively unique in Australia (Luke, 2003), the rigidity of the view taken of literacy, with an emphasis on reading and writing, was seen as narrow given the increased multimodality resulting from digitisation (Comber and Kamler, 2004). The classroom teaching element of the strategy focused on the teaching and learning of reading and writing, or print literacy, and as neither the literature related to the Early Literacy Research Project nor the *Early Years Literacy Program* attempted to offer a definition of literacy, references to reading and writing still dominated. Within the statewide strategy, however, attempts were increasingly made to incorporate advice on technology into the *Early Years Literacy Program* (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002c), and to work with a broader view of literacy more commensurate with the changing times. However this remained somewhat peripheral to the high stakes focus and assessments located in traditional print contexts.

A founding assumption of the Early Literacy Research Project, that there was a close link between learning content and assessment instrument, locked the teaching and assessment of reading/writing-focused literacy into a closed cycle which did not account for teaching and assessment practices that were reflective of a broader view of literacy addressing the prevalent designs of the post-typographical era. This was exacerbated by the requirement that Victorian teachers report on their students' progress in literacy against statewide and national benchmarks using levelled text (text categorised according to Reading Recovery levels). While the results showed improvement in students' ability to read levelled text and other indicators of early print literacy ability, the pervasive emphasis on the level rather than the content and features of a text and its connection to student interests, subject discipline or issue-relatedness created level-led student grouping and teaching focus. The close alignment

of assessment tools and teaching practices continued to support a narrow view of literacy at odds with the expansion of modes of meaning deployed in contemporary texts.

The introduction of a dedicated, daily, literacy-focussed two-hour block was a response to complaints regarding a crowded curriculum and based on the positive impact on student progress of time spent on task. When the Early Literacy Research Project began teachers would complain that:

[f]requent interruptions within the school day, and the over-crowding of the curriculum, restrict the time available for literacy teaching (Crèvola and Hill, 1997, p. 22).

The resultant move to provide for daily dedicated time protected from interruptions often resulted in a segregation of literacy from disciplinary content (Australian Government, 2000). Writings on the Early Literacy Research Project have been published not in the area of literacy literature, but mainly in the areas of whole school change and leadership (Hill and Crèvola, 1997a, 1997b; Hill and Crèvola, 1998; Hill and Crèvola, 1999b; Hill and Rowe, 1996). Perhaps this is because what the authors considered to be salient about the program concerned principles of whole school reform including heightened expectations of students, educational leadership and school and classroom organisation.

Victorian Early Years Literacy Policy in Transition

At the turn of the new millennium, shifting governmental priorities focused on literacy researching and resourcing of middle years (Years 5-9) initiatives, including the *The Middle Years Research and Development Project* (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001b) and *The Middle Years: A Guide for Strategic Action in Years 5-9* (Department of Education Employment and Training, 1999). In the area of literacy, *Knowledge, Innovation, Skills and Creativity: A Discussion Paper on Achieving the Goals and Targets for the Future in Victoria's Education and Training System* (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2001a), and *Literacy and Learning in the Middle Years: Major Report on the Middle Years Literacy Research Project* (Culican, Emmitt, and Oakley, 2001) contributed to insights about changing requirements in literacy education, including the need to address multiliteracies. The Early Years strategy had increasingly prioritised numeracy education, with the *Early Numeracy Research Project (1999-2001)* (Department of Education and Training, 2002b) initiated following recommendations about the application of the whole school design approach for improving learning outcomes from the Early Literacy Research Project in other curriculum areas (Hill and Crèvola, 1999b).

Following a change in government in 1999, the new Victorian Minister for Education launched a statewide review of education, inviting discussion about future directions in public schools (Department of Education and Training, 2000b). Professor Allan Luke, a member of the New London Group that had developed multiliteracies theory, participated in the expert panel discussion on the role of public education (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2000a). The subsequent report made recommendations related to funding, accountability, curriculum, assessment and professional development.

In the area of curriculum provision, the report affirmed the use of a statewide curriculum framework from Prep to Year 12, with local flexibility in curriculum delivery ‘to ensure that all students attain agreed standards in literacy and numeracy and that all students have the skills needed, including skills in ICT, to progress successfully’ (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2000a, p. 41). Acknowledging the changed affordances of digitisation and community expectations, the report argued:

[i]f all young people are to benefit from powerful new tools and possibilities for learning, there is now a need for an imaginative, systemic initiative to widen the scale and increase the pace of innovation, exploring the potential of ICT to make possible new ways of thinking and of bringing creativity to bear on a range of increasingly complex problems (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2000a, p. 34).

The report also framed teachers as active agents within the changing environment.

Apart from enabling teachers to respond to the growth of knowledge generally and in their own areas of specialisation, it [ICT] has the potential to equip teachers to contribute to the creation of knowledge and innovation in the practice of their profession (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2000a, p. 44).

Despite these acknowledgements of the transformative changes and opportunities afforded by ICTs, key targets designed to measure the achievement of government educational priorities remained focused on engagement. The targets developed were that:

- Victorian primary school children will be at or above national benchmark levels for reading, writing and numeracy by 2005
- 90 per cent of young people in Victoria will successfully complete Year 12 or its equivalent by 2010
- The percentage of young people 15-19 in rural and regional Victoria engaged in education and training will rise by 6 per cent by 2005

- The proportion of Victorians learning new skills will increase (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2001, p. 8).

These targets failed to reflect requirements of students living, working and studying in a changing digitised and networked environment, or give an indication of a renewed approach to literacy education characterised by the development of creativity and innovation.

Development of contemporary literacy policy: the Victorian Essential Learning Standards

School and curriculum reform initiatives being undertaken by Education Queensland (Education Queensland, 2000a; Education Queensland, 2000b; Education Queensland, 2002; Education Queensland, 2003) gained the attention of the Victorian Department of Education. Of special interest to many literacy educators was the theory of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996; 2000), which was already threaded throughout the Queensland policy documents due to the influence of the Queensland academic and senior bureaucrat, Professor Allan Luke, a member of the New London Group.

Under this influence Education Queensland had developed a new definition of literacy as:

... the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print, and multiliteracies (Education Queensland, 2000b, p. 9).

A further change of Victorian Minister for Education in 2002 resulted in another review of curriculum in schools, acknowledging that, internationally, curriculum provision models were being challenged by the need to be more relevant for twenty-first century learning (Kosky, 2003).

The result of this review, the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS)* (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004a; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004b; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b) structures curriculum around a triple helix of intertwining strands, *physical, personal and social learning* (including domains of health and physical education, interpersonal development, personal learning and civics and citizenship); *discipline-based learning* (including the domains of the arts, English, the humanities, languages other than English, mathematics and science); and *interdisciplinary learning* (including domains of communication, design, creativity and technology, information, communications technology and thinking processes).

Standards for students are set at six levels and the expected knowledge and skills of students are described for each level, with the following relationships—in Year Prep: level 1 standards to be achieved; in Years 1 and 2: level 2 standards to be achieved; and in Years 3 and 4: level 3 standards to be achieved (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005a). The focus of schooling in the early years, that is Years Prep to 4, is on ‘laying the foundations’, with a particular focus in Levels 1 and 2 on developing that foundational knowledge which, it is suggested, is required for students to be successful learners at school. Students are assessed against standards in the English domains of reading, writing, speaking and listening; mathematics; the arts domain of creating and making; interpersonal development (with an emphasis on socialisation); health and physical education domain of movement and physical activity).

Table 3.1: Example of the Standards Set for English Level 1, VELs

Reading	Writing	Speaking and listening
At Level 1, students match print and spoken text in their immediate environment. They recognise how sounds are represented alphabetically and identify some sound–letter relationships. They read aloud simple print and electronic texts that include some frequently used words and predominantly oral language structures. They read from left to right with return sweep, and from top to bottom. They use title, illustrations and knowledge of a text topic to predict meaning. They use context and information about words, letters, combinations of letters and the sounds associated with them to make meaning, and use illustrations to extend meaning.	At Level 1, students write personal recounts and simple texts about familiar topics to convey ideas or messages. In their writing, they use conventional letters, groups of letters, and simple punctuation such as full stops and capital letters. Students are aware of the sound system and the relationships between letters and sounds in words when spelling. They form letters correctly, and use a range of writing implements and software.	At Level 1, students use spoken language appropriately in a variety of classroom contexts. They ask and answer simple questions for information and clarification, contribute relevant ideas during class or group discussion, and follow simple instructions. They listen to and produce brief spoken texts that deal with familiar ideas and information. They sequence main events and ideas coherently in speech, and speak at an appropriate volume and pace for listeners’ needs. They self-correct by rephrasing a statement or question when meaning is not clear.

An example of the standards, in this case for the art, for level 1 reads:

At Level 1, students make and share performing and visual arts works that communicate observations, personal ideas, feelings and experiences. They explore and, with guidance, use a variety of arts elements (on their own or in combination), skills, techniques and processes, media, materials, equipment and technologies in a range of arts forms. They talk about aspects of their own arts works, and arts works and events in their community.

At Level 2, students are also expected to achieve standards for ICT. This relates to the manipulation of:

...text, images and numeric data to create simple information products for specific audiences. [Students] ...make simple changes to improve the appearance of their information products. They retrieve files and save new files using a naming system that

is meaningful to them. They compose simple electronic messages to known recipients and send them successfully. With some assistance, students use ICT to locate and retrieve relevant information from a variety of sources (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005a).

Students at Level 3 are said to ‘begin to respond to information, ideas and beliefs from contexts beyond their immediate experience’. Students are expected to achieve standards in addition to those already mentioned: standards in civics and citizenship, design, creativity and technology, the Humanities, personal learning, science, and thinking processes (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 4). In relation to those domains in which students are not required to achieve standards at levels 1, 2 and 3, it is suggested that these are ‘nevertheless important areas of learning for children’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 4).

Prior to the development of the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards*, existing policies were acknowledged as outdated and inadequate given the changed communications environment, theoretical responses, and changing teaching practices (Department of Education Employment and Training, 2000a). Contemporary policy advice has moved to close the perceived gaps to better equip students for a rapidly changing communications environment (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005d), including the interrelatedness of learning around multimodal forms of representation as exemplified in the triple helix.

A broad range of texts is now suggested for study in English, including ‘literary, everyday, media or workplace based texts’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 88-9). An emphasis on students achieving standards deemed as essential from Prep onwards includes not only reading and writing, speaking and listening, but also the creating and making domain within the arts.

Despite these shifts, literacy continues to refer only to language aspects of subjects with students’ literacy learning involving making choices about appropriate language for effective presentation of ideas and information for different purposes and audiences (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 82). This is similar to the situation in the United States where students’ ability to read and use information on the Internet is not measured (Leu, Ataya and Coiro, 2002).

Multiliteracies theory draws on the concept of *design to* offer a reconceptualisation of what constitutes literacy education in the light of the increasing multimodality of texts. Design can refer both to the way in which a text has been designed, or to the process involved in designing (New London Group, 1996; 2000). Multiliteracies theory offers the notion of design to describe the codes and conventions of meaning-making modes and posits that meaning-making can be described in six modes: linguistic, audio, visual, gestural, spatial and multimodal which consists of combinations of other modes. Students are involved in designing by harnessing available designs to make meaning for their own purposes. They produce redesigned or transformations of meaning, which then become available designs for other meaning-makers to draw upon (New London Group, 1996, 2000).

Within the *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* the term ‘metalanguage’ is deployed solely in relation to a language with which to talk about language: ‘a language used to discuss language conventions and use, for example, the terms and definitions used in the various grammars to describe the functions of words in sentences and the terms used to describe and categorise structural features of different kinds of texts’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 84).

These changes mirror the changes in affordances offered by the new communications environment which present ‘strong reasons for setting a quite new agenda of human semiosis in the domain of communication and representation’ (Kress, 2000a, p. 183). However, a multimodal metalanguage, a means of describing and analysing the meaning-making resources and their interplay, is still under-developed, as it was when multiliteracies theory was first developed;

Teachers and students need a language to describe the forms of meaning that are represented in Available designs... In other words they need a meta-language—a language for talking about language, images, texts and meaning-making interactions (New London Group, 2000, p. 23-4).

The design metalanguage would describe six meaning making modes—linguistic design, visual design, audio design, gestural design, spatial design and multimodal design; a means for working on semiotic activities, which would ‘identify and explain differences between texts, and relate these to the contexts of culture and situation in which they seem to work’ (New London Group, 2000, p. 24). .

Metalanguage enables strengthened capacity to explore and analyse, through articulation, the constructed nature of designs. Multimodal metalanguage enables the exploration and analysis of the constructedness of linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial and multimodal designs. .

The *Victorian Essential Learning Standards* uses the terms ‘mode’ and ‘multimodal’, the former to refer to processes such as reading and writing; and the latter to refer to designs, as indicated in the following quote.

In English, the modes of language are reading (including viewing), writing (including composing electronic texts), speaking and listening. Multimodal texts are those that combine, for example, print text, visual images and spoken word as in film or computer presentation media (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 84).

This definition differs to that of the New London Group, who use the term ‘mode’ to describe linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning and the term ‘multimodal’ to describe combinations of the other modes (New London Group, 1996; New London Group, 2000). Clearly the policy advice acknowledges the impact of the changed technologies on textual forms and the importance of teachers and students engaging with these texts of various forms, but the highly articulated essential standards in the areas of reading and writing are accompanied by standards relating to students’ functional use of ICT rather than digital meaning-making. Standards which describe general meaning-making around the gestural, audio (music) and the visual are all situated in the arts. Students are to be assessed in their use of ‘arts language’ in relation to:

‘symbol systems’ developing skills in speaking about arts in terms of content and use of technique, process, elements, principles and/or conventions, media, materials, equipment and technologies’ (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005b, p. 84).

The advice thus leaves modes other than the linguistic isolated in areas outside of language, so suggesting different languages, acknowledged in different parts of the curriculum documents, for talking about differing aspects of text. The domains which could offer further insight here—communication, design, creativity and technology—are not accompanied by standards. In this way, despite efforts towards curriculum renewal, the fine articulation of learning and assessment of linguistic meaning-making systems within the context of literacy policy and practice is yet to be matched by adequate articulation of learning and assessment in other meaning-making systems prevalent in the digitised communications environment.

[T]he pervasive power of an assessment that only measures traditional print literacies profoundly determines what is taught during reading instruction, especially within schools that are under the greatest pressure to raise test scores (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu, 2007, p. 30).

With language still deemed as essential to assessment, it will inevitably attract teaching emphases, leading to the neglect of visual, audio, gestural, spatial and multimodal meaning-making modes. While contemporary Victorian literacy policy advice shows a partial movement towards acknowledging and incorporating the affordances of multimodality, the meaning-making potentials of modes other language have not been fully addressed as literacy concerns and literacy policy and required assessment remain largely linguistic based.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on the case of early years literacy policy in the early years of the twenty-first century to illustrate shifts in policy as a result of a communications environment transformed by networked technologies. Significant development has been undertaken in the area of literacy policy development in the Victorian school sector. Contemporary policy advises teachers to engage students with digital texts in the earliest years of schooling but does not provide advice on developing meaning-making capacities in the multiple modes of meaning present in such designs. Paralleling global developments, tensions remain between high stakes systemic assessment requirements and the new literacy opportunities presented by the rapidly changing communications environment. Under the current curriculum model and in the absence of an explicitly detailed policy on multimodality, student engagement with multimodal designs can remain at a functional level that consistently falls short of an exploration of the deep, complex, combining modes of meaning presented by digital texts. Development of theoretically-informed advice on dimensions of meaning-making of multimodal texts remains an urgent educational need.

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