

University Literacy: A Multi-literacies Model

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Abstract: Literacy teachers in schools and universities share a common goal: to prepare students with the 'literacies' they need to succeed *in* and *beyond* educational settings. In a 'widening-participation' era universities must increase and expand their literacy offerings to help students make the most of their university experiences. At Flinders University in South Australia we have set out to design a first-year literacy framework to equip students with the foundational literacies they need to succeed. Once implemented, the framework should help to increase retention and completion rates and give 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' student cohorts a more empowering education experience. It will also help students from diverse backgrounds make the transition to tertiary study. Our 'multiliteracies' framework explicitly addresses four key tertiary literacies: (1) institutional literacies, (2) critical literacies, (3) traditional literacies, and (4) academic literacies. The framework endeavours to make explicit many of the literacy requirements that were previously assumed, and should help equalise differences in 'cultural capital' and literacy levels of students arriving at university. This paper will unpack the multiliteracies framework and explore the nexus between cultural capital and literacy practice.

Introduction

The challenge for schools [and universities] is to develop students' literacies so that they reflect the diversity of social, technological, cultural, linguistic, and economic contexts of which they form a part. Recognition must also be made of the importance of providing for, building upon, and accommodating the diverse linguistic, cultural and learning needs of individual students, particularly with respect to gender, disability, socioeconomic disadvantage, race and geographic isolation. Decisions that are made about the very nature of literacy and the appropriate approach to be taken to literacy teaching and intervention give shape to what it means to be a participant in a particular literate society and to what counts as literate performance. (Ludwig, 2003)

Secondary school literacy teachers prepare students with the 'literacies' they need to succeed *within* and *beyond* the school environment, such as employment, university, and social engagement. Tertiary literacy teachers prepare students with the literacies they need to succeed *within* and *beyond* the university environment. To succeed at university students need access to 'literacies' specific to universities (i.e. academic literacies) and specific to their chosen disciplines and career paths (i.e. discipline-specific literacies) (Thies, 2012). They also need access to generic literacies more applicable to society at large (i.e. traditional literacies and social and cultural literacies). In other words, students need access to – and competency in – a range of literacies to participate in a range of overlapping literacy contexts; in this case, the university system, the subject area, and the world at large. There is no *single* literacy that can adequately fulfil this task; rather, students need *multiple* literacies to meaningfully participate in the university context and broader community. If anything, the range of literacies required of a student entering school or university in the 21st century is increasing with digital and online media and the migration of teaching resources to online platforms and interactive forums (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 166; Goodfellow, 2011). School and university students need a blend of 'traditional' literacies (e.g. reading, writing, and English proficiency) and 'contemporary' literacies (e.g. digital, visual, critical, etc.) to succeed in a range of educational, vocational, and societal contexts.

At Flinders University in South Australia we have set out to design a literacy framework to equip students with the foundational literacies they need to succeed in the university system. This framework, once developed, will underpin a proposed new literacy and communication topic for first-year students. Recommendations for the new 4.5 unit topic were presented to the Vice-Chancellor's Committee (VCC) in 2012 by the First Year Literacy Expert Group after consultation with faculty and student support services staff. According to the recommendations, the planned topic would be (1) university-wide (i.e. ensuring as many students as possible get access); (2) semester-long (rather than piecemeal, as in academic orientation programs); (3) curriculum-based (i.e. carefully designed, scaffolded, and research-based); (4) credit-bearing (i.e. ensuring institutional weight and credibility); (5) workshop-driven (i.e. students learn through collaboration with others); and (6) mandatory (i.e. normalising the topic while avoiding the possibility of stigmatising 'at risk' students). According to the VCC, all students with ATARs of (something like) 59 or less (or the equivalent) would be enrolled in the topic, and include 'arts' and 'science' students equally. Students enrolled in courses with 'embedded' academic and/or vocational literacy components would be exempted. The proposed topic and enrolment/exemption processes would be monitored and adjusted over time to ensure students most in need gain access. Those students with exemptions could also enrol in the topic as an elective. In all, the VCC would coordinate the logistical components of the topic while staff from the Student Learning Centre and the English Department would collaborate to design a first-year literacy framework to support it.

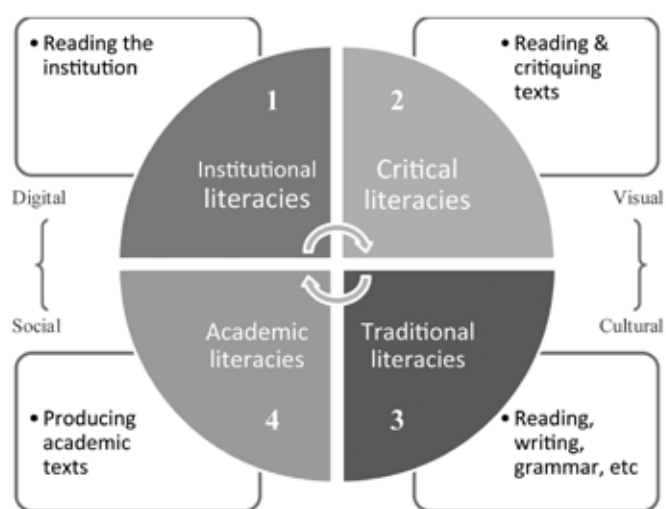
Once implemented, the framework should increase retention and completion rates and help students from diverse backgrounds – with diverse literacy repertoires – make the transition to tertiary study (e.g. school leavers, mature age, international, LSES, rural and remote, Indigenous, NESB, non-traditional, first-in-family, etc.). After all, as the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) reminds us: '... it is widely acknowledged across the Australian tertiary education sector that many students are ... unprepared for university study. This is evidenced by difficulties in meeting academic requirements such as critical analysis and essay writing and in communicating effectively in oral and written English. This is not only the case for international students but also local students of English and non-English speaking backgrounds, and

mature age students' (Australian Government, 2013). The University has therefore adopted a university-wide 'collaborative' approach to address this issue (as advocated by Thies (2012) and Webb (2012)).

Part one of this paper will explain and justify our multiliteracies framework, and part two will explore the nexus between cultural capital and literacy practice.

A multiliteracies framework

The multiliteracies framework we advocate covers four key university literacies: (1) institutional literacies; (2) critical literacies; (3) traditional literacies; and (4) academic literacies (see Figure 1). Embedded in these four literacies are other essential literacies: digital literacies, visual literacies (Callow, 1999; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), and social and cultural literacies. Together, these literacies combine to give students the cultural capital and multi-literacies necessary to participate in the university system. Our framework endeavours to make explicit many of the literacy requirements that were previously assumed, implied, or invisible altogether. While most of these literacies are used together or in combinations at different times and in different contexts, the framework first aims to identify and differentiate each type of literacy for the sake of explication.



1. Institutional literacies: reading and understanding the institution

People aren't born in universities. In order to 'play the game' (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 97) and know how to think, act, and communicate in university settings, students need access to a range of literacies. Institutional literacies help students

transition to university from a range of backgrounds by giving them 'insider knowledge' on how to play the game. The following list gives a sample of the institutional literacies needed to participate and succeed in the university system. They include:

1. Reading and navigating the institution (i.e. understanding layouts, structures, hierarchies, policies, jurisdictions, timetables, values, etc.)
2. Knowing the spoken and unspoken rules of participation (e.g. procedures, processes, protocols, etc.)
3. Respecting and tolerating social and cultural differences and alternative perspectives
4. Using non-discriminatory discourses and behaviours in university settings and topic assignments
5. Locating and accessing institutional facilities and personnel (e.g. admissions, enrolments, health, counselling, student services, libraries, scholarships, child care, parking, transport, tuition, accommodation, employment, etc.)
6. Accessing academic and professional staff (e.g. administrators, coordinators, lecturers, tutors, librarians, mentors, etc.)
7. Understanding the role and function of lectures, tutorials, workshops, seminars, practicals, examinations, etc.
8. Making and following timetables (e.g. enrolment deadlines, year planners, semester dates, class registrations, tutorial and lecture times, exam timetables, etc.)
9. Balancing commitments between family, work, leisure, and study
10. Understanding assessment processes (e.g. policies, procedures, due dates, extensions, exemptions, etc.)
11. Accessing digital resources: library catalogues, academic databases, email facilities, staff contacts, online resources, topic forums, university policies, lecture recordings, etc.

In *Metaphors and Meanings* (1988, p. 162), Garth Boomer makes the point that teachers can be so accustomed to educational settings they forget how alien and alienating such environments can be for students. The same goes with university settings. Academic and professional staff can be so accustomed to the inner workings (and psychologies) of institutional life they forget how mysterious and arcane these environments (and thought processes) can be for students. University settings and systems rely on so many processes and protocols – discourses and practices – rites and

rituals – nudges and winks – that students can feel overwhelmed, confused, alienated, or even intimidated. Students without the cultural capital necessary to read and navigate the system cannot be expected to participate on equal terms with those who do.

As passports to participation, institutional literacies act as 'keys' enabling students to unlock the university system and, once inside, open doors to possible futures.

2. *Critical literacies: reading and understanding texts*

Students also need the *critical capacities* necessary to engage with the university system, course content, and complex social and cultural practices (Goodfellow, 2011). This means reading assessment tasks, topic readings, and lecture materials with a critical eye; it also means reading people and social contexts with a critical eye (including the views and values of academic staff). The capacity to read and unpack texts to discover their divergent meanings and strategies is called 'critical literacy' (Feeney, 2013; Misson & Morgan, 2006; van Haren, 2013). Critical literacies go beyond literary criticism and critical comprehension to questions about how texts defend and/or disguise positions of power, prejudice, exclusion, and vested interest. According to Wadham, Pudsey, and Boyd (2007, p. 266): 'Critical literacies involve developing a critical perspective on literacies, on particular texts and on different social practices. The aim of critical literacies is to 'de-naturalise' the taken-for-granted character of language in particular contexts.' Students need to think deeply about how language is used and manipulated for different contexts, purposes, and audiences (Misson & Morgan, 2006). To 'de-naturalise' something is to make it new and unfamiliar all over again. This allows the language user to 'read' (critique, decipher, decode, and interrogate) otherwise familiar texts in hopefully new and revealing ways, including the texts they produce.

'Critical literacy involves the analysis and critique of the relationships among texts, language, power, social groups and social practices. It shows us ways of looking at written, visual, spoken, multimedia and performance texts to question and challenge the attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface' (Tasmanian Department of Education, 2013). That is, critical literacy is more than just reading texts closely; it has a socially critical edge and involves complex interactions and social practices. It's about reading *all* texts – whether written, spoken, performed,

photographed, filmed, etc. – to discover the attitudes and ideologies that underpin them and the ways different codes and activities have been manipulated to serve particular agendas and social groups.

The Tasmanian Department of Education (2013) offers a useful guide to the sorts of activities a critical literacies approach might take. These include:

1. Examining meaning within texts
2. Considering the purpose for the text and the composer's motives
3. Understanding that texts are not neutral, that they represent particular views, silence other points of view and influence people's ideas
4. Questioning and challenging the ways in which texts have been constructed
5. Analysing the power of language in contemporary society
6. Emphasising multiple readings of texts ...
7. Having students take a stance on issues
8. Providing students with the opportunities to consider and clarify their own attitudes and values
9. Providing students with opportunities to take social action.

3. *Traditional literacies*

Students also need to employ 'traditional' literacies when viewing, engaging, or responding to face-to-face, digital, and paper-based texts. This means writing assignments and presenting material using grammatically correct expression (i.e. in accordance with the English language proficiency (ELP) standards advocated by TEQSA and the Australian Government (2011, 2013)). In our model, the capacity to read and write effectively and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in multiple contexts is called 'traditional literacies'. Traditional literacies include:

1. Reading
2. Writing
3. Listening
4. Speaking
5. Grammar
6. Punctuation
7. Spelling
8. Syntax
9. Diction.

Obviously, the capacities to speak fluently, listen attentively, write clearly, and read accurately are

essential foundational literacies for anyone wishing to participate in the contemporary world. According to TEQSA, ELP in the tertiary sector includes: (1) the ability to communicate in English (i.e. language proficiency); (2) the ability to participate effectively in courses delivered in English without significant language support (i.e. academic language proficiency); and (3) the ability to use English to gain entry to further study and/or the labour market (Australian Government, 2013). For Jacinta Webb (2012, p. 3), 'Current good practice in the sector, which is reflective of the EL (English Language) standards, are systematic university-wide approaches to ensuring that all students have the necessary academic language ability (oral and written communication) to complete their studies.' Given the importance of traditional literacies to tertiary access and participation, they underpin our framework.

4. *Academic literacies*

Finally, students need the academic acumen to design and present written, spoken, and multimodal texts for a range of contexts, purposes, and audiences. This means presenting work and engaging in learning activities (tutorials, workshops, practicals, etc.) according to academic conventions and discipline-specific guidelines (Thies, 2012). The capacity to use accepted academic conventions is called 'academic literacies'. Academic literacies include:

1. Reading, writing, and speaking academic prose
2. Understanding academic genres and discourses
3. Planning and producing academic texts
4. Researching and locating academic resources (and data)
5. Unpacking and understanding university assessment tasks
6. Understanding referencing, plagiarism, and academic integrity
7. Editing and proofreading academic texts
8. Following guidelines when presenting academic texts.

According to Lea and Street, 'From the student point of view, a dominant feature of academic literacy practices is the requirement to switch their writing styles and genres between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of literacy practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes' (2006, p. 368).

Implementation (theory into practice)

The next challenge in our design is to implement these ideas in a manner pedagogically consistent with the ideology informing a multiliteracies approach. As suggested, students have a stake in literacy and should have opportunities to engage in meta-level conversations about literacy theory and practice (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008). They also need opportunities to engage with and enact these literacies in meaningful contexts and through multiple media (e.g. digital, paper, live, etc.) (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008). A 'social constructionist' approach is consistent with this undertaking (Burr, 1995). To that end, we plan to avoid the default university teaching model: lecture, tutorial, examination. To challenge this model and incorporate a more nuanced balance between explicit instruction (teacher-centred) and active engagement (student-centred) we intend to invert the template. One of our team, Professor Gus Warby (personal communication, 2012), suggested the 'lectorial' as a means of bridging the gap between lectures and tutorials (and 'teachers' and 'students'). As the name suggests, the 'lectorial' combines the lecture with the tutorial and integrates explicit instruction with collaborative engagement. The lectorial would happen in a workshop environment rather than a lecture hall, and each workshop room would need a bank of computers, a whiteboard, a projector, and enough space to do group work. The 'teacher' (or student) would present material that is then engaged through activities and collaborative practice. The whole premise of social constructionism is that people build knowledge and understanding in collaboration with others (Burr, 1995). The lectorial can be tailored to specific classroom contexts and particular student cohorts (i.e. differentiation from group to group). The lectorial would be informed by what is now commonly referred to by teachers and scholars as the 'flipped classroom', where the teaching model is reversed by delivering lectures at home through multimedia presentations while moving homework to the classroom (Restad, 2013; TechSmith, 2013).

In short, the topic teaches multiliteracies by using multiliteracies in its design, delivery, and reception.

Why multi-literacies?

The second part of this paper will explore the social and technological context shaping our understandings of literacy in the 21st century while also making the case for a multi-literacies approach. Our initial

conversations with stakeholders, for instance, revealed that many staff still viewed literacy in terms of reading and writing (i.e. skills, drills, and proficiency standards) and not in terms of *social practices*. We were also surprised to discover that many stakeholders did not readily associate literacy with access and cultural capital, but rather with skills students 'lacked' (i.e. deficits). We therefore need to convince staff of the need for a more nuanced and critically engaged approach to literacy education (as advocated by Lea and Street (2006)) if we mean to give *all* students access to the literacy practices necessary for full participation.

The multimedia age

We live in a multimodal, multilingual, and multimedia age surrounded by 'texts'. These texts are everywhere: online, on TV, in books, on t-shirts, in the streets, on buses, and in our schools and universities. These texts come as written words, visual images, live performances, websites, songs, lectures, conversations, posters, advertisements, textbooks, and tutorials. In the digital world most of us access texts online. We visit websites, send emails, contribute to social networks, make purchases, play games, listen to music, upload documents, receive text messages, share information, access databases, and submit assignments. We both *produce* texts and *view* texts. To enter this multimodal world we need certain 'keys' or literacies (i.e. social and cultural capital especially as it is embedded in semiotics and texts). These keys enable us to read, engage, interpret, and produce a range of texts for a range of purposes and a range of audiences using a range of discourses and semiotic components (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). There are multiple levels of literacy at play here (far beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic).

As Professor James Gee notes:

literacy must be studied in its full range of contexts: cognitive, interactive, cultural, historical and institutional. Literacy is always part of a specific practice and that practice always involves lots more than just literacy or even than just language ... As literacy is so married in today's world with digital technologies, the boundaries between 'literacy' and 'technology' as areas of study, especially in education, are coming down – as they are between 'literacy' and 'content' (e.g. science, literature, math), since content is always carried by language (or some other symbol system) and shapes distinctive language and literacy practices. (as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 96)

Put simply: we need a *collection* of literacies to enter

this multimodal landscape (The New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2012). What's more, we have only just scratched the surface of the literacies and knowledges needed to access, understand, and communicate in this highly 'textualised' world. A student lacking any of the literacies outlined here would struggle to enter the school or university 'game' on something like an equal footing with those already in possession of the cultural capital necessary to participate fully (Miller, 2013; Thies, 2012, p. 16). As ever, literacy matters – and *multi-literacies* matter even more in such a language-rich and multimodal 'textual' world (Unsworth, 2001). It is our job as university teachers to give students access to these literacies and, through these literacies, access to the knowledges and credentials on offer in universities. These literacies are keys to jobs and lifestyles and inclusion more generally (Luke, 2004; Zipin & Brennan, 2001).

This isn't to say that students don't already have extensive literacies at their disposal when they arrive at university. They do. Most students produce a range of texts using a range of technologies and social practices to communicate with others. Most students read and unpack a range of face-to-face, digital, and paper-based texts every day of their lives. The vast majority of students are therefore capable communicators who use a range of literacies without even thinking about it (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 96). *Our job is to make them think about it. We need to add to this bank of literacies and build on this foundation by making explicit the link between literacy and social participation (and power and wealth more generally) (Lea & Street, 2006; Luke, 2004). Our literacy framework isn't so much a deficit as development model, whereby we build on the literacies students already have and link these back to the university context and the various literacy demands expected of them (Thies, 2012, p. 25).*

Cultural capital

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) uses the term 'cultural capital' to describe the importance of certain knowledges to social engagement and success. Whereas economic capital buys access to commodities (and power), and social capital buys access to people (and networks), cultural capital is about knowing how to *participate* in different cultural forums, such as schools and universities, based on the skills, knowledges, values, dispositions, and literacies we bring to the context at hand. We gain this knowledge from what

Bourdieu calls our 'habitus'; that is, from our social surroundings and lived experience (i.e. enculturation).

Students who already have the 'know-how' to participate in university systems are said to have more cultural capital than those who don't. They already know how to operate in university settings without having been to a university. They don't need to learn the 'secret' knowledge to play the game. As university teachers we must provide students with this secret knowledge so that all students – whether school leavers, mature age, international, LSES, first in family, Indigenous, NESB, rural and remote, etc. – can 'play the game' (to use James Paul Gee's expression) on something like an equal footing as those students already possessing the knowledge necessary for full participation (Thies, 2012, p. 17).

Virtual backpacks

Linked to cultural capital is Pat Thomson's concept of the 'virtual schoolbag'. In her book *Schooling the Rustbelt Kids* (2002), Thomson uses the story of 'Vicki and Thanh' to demonstrate how each student's virtual schoolbag influences their schooling trajectory. A child's virtual schoolbag contains all the things s/he has learned from family, friends, media, and the world at large. This means children enter school with different knowledges which influence how well they do in school. Those students with *school-friendly* knowledges are better placed to succeed than those who don't have them (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 95; Thomson, 2002). Just because all students start on the same day doesn't mean they start from the same place. Some students have a head start (Thies, 2012, p. 16).

The same can be said of students starting university. Students enter university with different knowledges and literacies in their virtual schoolbags (or, in this case, their *virtual backpacks*). Some students have fewer literacies in their virtual backpacks while others have more. Unfortunately, the game is stacked in favour of those students who have the knowledges and literacies that universities *value*. Our job as university teachers is to redress (where possible) these inequalities by filling students' virtual backpacks with the various literacies they need to succeed.

Meritocracy

Universities are also (in principle, if not reality) merit-based. This means students compete for places, marks, opportunities, and credentials on the basis of merit. The guiding principle of a meritocracy is that all

students have the same opportunity to succeed. We are judged on the merit (or quality) of our work rather than judged on our wealth, lineage, or background differences. Obviously, the basic premise of a meritocracy collapses if all students don't start with the same cultural capital in their virtual backpacks. Research tells us that universities inadvertently (and often quite deliberately) disadvantage some while advantaging others (Gale, 2011; Goodfellow, 2011; Schulz, 2012). They do this through the ideological frameworks they use to determine selection processes, pedagogical approaches, curriculum offerings, assessment methods, institutional discourses, financial costs, class numbers, and so on. Not to mention the conscious and unconscious prejudices and values governing the decisions and behaviours of individual teachers. By definition, the 'hidden curriculum' advantages some while disadvantaging others (Brim & Lie, 2009; Giroux & Penna, 1983). As educators, we must do everything we can to militate against these obstacles (while acknowledging that no teacher can stand outside his or her social conditioning and/or complicity in maintaining the status quo at different levels).

Given this, our framework invites students into *meta*-level conversations about the hidden curriculum itself, and the unspoken and invisible processes that stack the game in favour of reproducing inequalities already present in society (Boomer, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986; Miller, 2013; Putnam & Gill, 2011). This, in turn, leads to meta-level conversations about what literacy means (and does) in the 21st century (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 93).

Thinking 'critically' about the multiliteracies framework

Before concluding, we will reflect critically on the proposed framework and its place within the contemporary Australian tertiary sector. Firstly, while we have stressed that ours is not so much a *deficit* as *development* model, some issues associated with using cultural capital as a theoretical device must be acknowledged. For example, we have stated that for students lacking the 'right' literacies (or capital) to engage fully in academic life, our job – as multiliteracy advocates and academics in the current widening participation era – is to 'top up' their virtual backpacks. And while we stand by the view that universities continue to reinforce existing social inequalities by valuing some capitals and literacies over others (i.e. capitals typically experienced as natural by groups with traditional

university entrant backgrounds), we also admit to the limitations of this view.

As outlined, cultural capital is a useful concept for subverting naturalised assumptions about schools and universities being equitable spaces. Whereas it was once thought (and often still is) that education settings are equitable based on the fact students are judged, not on 'lineage', but on 'scholastic aptitude', Bourdieu destabilises this view when highlighting the often hidden linkages between 'scholastic aptitude' and 'cultural inheritance' (Bourdieu, 1998). Put simply, cultural capital describes the affinity between an individual and, in this case, the cultural codes and habits of the dominant group which are embodied in schools and universities. Thus, rather than signal innate intelligence or scholastic 'giftedness', educational success often points to this affinity with bourgeois culture, 'the unequal distribution of which helps to conserve social hierarchy under the cloak of individual talent and academic meritocracy' (Wacquant, as cited in Mills & Gale, 2003, p. 146). In this regard, 'socioeconomic class remains a formidable barrier to widening participation because class determines cultural capital' (Reid, 2007, p. 3).

A standard response to this situation constitutes a 'deficit' approach: to top up the student's virtual backpack (where the student is seen as lacking something critical to success). Academic staff members in student learning centres (such as ours) are faced with these 'deficits' on a daily basis. Academic advisors may end up feeling 'sucked dry' given certain student populations are especially reliant on staff members, who themselves represent access points to the cultural capital students need to succeed (Mills & Gale, 2003, p. 150). While we attempt to avoid stigmatising marginalised students by making the multiliteracies topic compulsory for *all*, there remains a degree to which our approach continues to locate the problem of deficit *in* the student given our focus on what their 'backpacks' *lack* – this is the risk associated with the lens of cultural capital, which can thus reproduce the very problems we seek to redress.

We acknowledge that 'the problem' (of academic underachievement) is not located in the marginalised student, though students of non-traditional university entrant backgrounds are habitually burdened by this assumption. We also acknowledge that our attempts to 'top up' students' backpacks are, in some regards, futile, because the process of acquiring cultural capital constitutes the work of generations. As Reid attests,

cultural capital is accumulated 'through a long process of acquisition or inculcation which includes the education of the family or group and institutionalised education' (2007, p. 2). Similarly, as Bourdieu explains, the embodiment of these prized capitals – their transformation into habitus – does not happen instantaneously (as cited in Mills & Gale, 2003, p. 151). Indeed, in some circumstances – for example when referring to 'whiteness' – this process of embodiment can never be complete and, as such, no amount of explicit instruction can hope to remedy alleged 'deficits' in cultural capital in a mere semester (if at all).

Given these complexities, we recognise that the work of assisting students to successfully navigate university life (in months rather than years) is fraught with tensions. Part of our agenda as it relates to the multiliteracies topic is, as explained, to adopt an abundance approach: to focus upon that which the students bring that is of value and to use this as our starting point. We also aim to make visible – to ourselves as much as to students – the invisible operations of privilege and disadvantage described in this paper, 'as a way of making available the possibility at least of democratising the product and processes of the field' (Grenfell & James, as cited in Mills & Gale, 2003, p. 146). In addition to focusing upon *all* students rather than a 'problematic' underclass, we also incorporate a critical literacy approach, because the critical thinking underpinning it 'presupposes no extensive accumulation of cultural capital [... and] is acquirable in a relatively short period of time' (Reid, 2007, p. 4). What's more, the critical thinking required of students entering university is a 'leveller', at least insofar as our work with undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts tells us, in that even students from privileged backgrounds may not have been systematically introduced to it.

Conclusion

In the 20th century a literate person was said to be proficient in 'the three Rs': reading, writing, and arithmetic. In the 21st century a literate person needs far more than 'the three Rs' to meaningfully engage with the world around them (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Ludwig, 2003). This is why many teachers and scholars have sought to expand the idea of literacy to take in the demands of digital media, social and cultural practices, and globalisation (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Freebody & Luke, 1990, 1999, 2003; Goodfellow, 2011; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Ludwig, 2003; New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2012).

Consequently, our multiliteracies framework places students at the centre of literacy *practice* rather than position them as passive recipients of literacy *skills*. This is not a 'skills-and-drills' model (Gee, as cited in St Clair & Phipps, 2008, p. 97). We are not here to simply 'up-skill' students in readiness for university study and/or professional participation (Miller, 2013). In the words of the great Brazilian literacy educator Paulo Freire (1996/1970), our students are 'co-creators' and 'co-intentional re-creators' of language and literacy development. This means that students – as users, shapers, and stakeholders of literacy – should have meta-level involvement in the theory and practice of literacy. Or, to paraphrase Boomer (1988), students need to 'act' rather than be 'acted upon.' In turn, students should not only learn the values, skills, dispositions, and practices of literacy, but also examine literacy as a loaded and contested concept complicit in shaping social discourses and the distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity in society (Freebody, 2001; Lea & Street, 2006; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Luke, 2004).

As a concept and practice, literacy is a *horizon* rather than a destination. We are never literate enough. Nor is literacy ever finished or complete. Literacy is fluid, slippery, multiple, and context-dependent. Our framework is itself a template, a beginning, an ambition. It too will change to serve different contexts and audiences. We have named and categorised the different literacies as a means of understanding rather than dividing literacy, when in fact most literacies work in constructive collaboration (or opposition) depending on context and circumstance.

In a multimodal and multimedia world filled to the brim with texts and textual practices, multiliteracies make sense. We need to span the literacy spectrum from *book*-level literacies to *screen*-level literacies while not ignoring the *social* and *cultural* literacies in-between. We also need to keep in mind that while people make and shape literacies, *literacies make and shape people*. Literacy is not an innocent or innocuous idea; as a concept and form of exchange, literacy is *made flesh* as it is embodied and enacted with real people and in real contexts, thus producing real outcomes and real consequences in the worlds we live in. Literacy, as ever, matters.

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Australian Association for the Teaching of English

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