LITERACY, LANGUAGE AND LEARNING


DEFINING LITERACY AND MULTILITERACIES

Literacy has to do with having the skills, strategies and knowledge to create, locate, analyse, comprehend and use a variety of written, visual and aural texts for a range of purposes, audiences and social contexts. Literacy requires an understanding that there are different types of texts and the choice of text depends on the context, purpose and audience required for it. It includes the integration of critical thinking, speaking and listening with reading, writing and viewing (DEETYA, 1998). Fellowes & Oakley define literacy as ‘a flexible group of skills and strategies that are closely linked to context and purpose’ (2014, p. 3). The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) offers the following definition:

Literacy conventionally refers to reading, writing, speaking, viewing, and listening effectively in a range of contexts. In the 21st century, the definition of literacy has expanded to refer to a flexible, sustainable mastery of a set of capabilities in the use and production of traditional texts and new communications technologies using spoken language, print and multimedia. Students need to be able to adjust and modify their use of language to better meet contextual demands in varying situations (2009, p. 6).

The rapid development of technology has impacted the way we communicate and thus the definition of texts has broadened to include digital texts that may include one

ACARA defines ‘texts’ as the way we communicate ‘in written, spoken or multimodal and in print or digital/online forms’ (2015a).
or more of the following communication modes: written language, spoken language, sound, movement, gesture and image. Texts that combine two or more modes are referred to as **multimodal texts**.

Literacy is embedded in the context of our everyday lives and involves more than acquiring literacy skills that apply to every situation and purpose (Winch et al., 2014, p. xxxvi). It is not just about learning to read and write print. It is not the acquisition and use of static skills and knowledge but rather is the employment of a range of dynamic literacy practices, strategies and knowledge to effectively use texts within socially and culturally defined situations for a variety of purposes (Alloway & Gilbert, 2002; Bull & Anstey, 2010).

Literacy involves a range of practices (see pp. 8–12 for further information) that are shaped by culture, society and situation, the language mode, the roles and relationships of the participants, and the sources of knowledge brought to, or gained from, the interaction with texts within a given context.

The term ‘**multiliteracies**’ refers to the multiple kinds of literacies used (written, visual, emotional, financial, technological, digital, subject-specific, critical etc.) to effectively communicate within diverse cultural and social settings and the modes of delivery of the communication (Healy, 2008). Fellowes & Oakley define multiliteracies as ‘the communicative practices of diverse cultures. The role of technology is foregrounded’ (2014 p. 4).

As teachers we need to help students to access and use the many forms of literacy encountered in our society and support them to be literate in multiple ways. We need to provide a range of authentic contexts and communication purposes in which the students employ appropriate literacy practices, texts and communication modes to effectively function in a range of sociocultural settings.

Students need to be able to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct text using the new technologies that are increasingly part of everyday life.

To be multiliterate means understanding, using and critically evaluating multimodal texts that are constantly developing and evolving because of cultural and societal changes and the use of new information and communications technologies. In order to gain meaning from multimodal texts, students need to understand the elements of linguistic, visual, spatial, audio and gestural design that may be used in these texts (Cope & Kalantis eds, 2000; Walsh, 2011). They need to use technology to create, alter/modify and use texts in a variety of ways in a range of situations.

Each subject or discipline has its own specific vocabulary and way of using language for specific purposes and audiences. Subject-specific literacy requires the user to understand the content, language purposes, text types and linguistic features that are commonly used within the subject.

We need to help students ‘navigate the specific literacy demands of the subjects they are studying’ (Henderson, 2012, p. 21). As teachers we need to identify the literacy
challenges within each subject or task and plan appropriate literacy teaching experiences that address the needs at whole class, small group or individual student level.

**VISUAL LITERACY**

*Visual literacy* requires the user to understand the purposes, types and elements of visual texts, both still and moving, and the ways they are constructed and used in order to gain or convey varying levels of information. It is the process of using, reading, interpreting, creating and understanding visual texts (Stafford, 2010). Visually literate people draw upon their knowledge of the semiotic system (meaning-making elements) when using visual text. The elements of the semiotic system associated with visual text include image type (still or moving) and the use of space, as well as framing, placement, shape, line, light, colour, scale, texture, shape, angle, focus, symbols and style. While there are common elements for both still and moving images there are elements that are specific to each.

Researchers and educators, such as Callow (1999, 2013), Moline (2008, 2012), Anstey & Bull (2006, 2009) and Bull & Anstey (2010), provide valuable insights into how multiliteracies and the multimodality of texts impact teaching and learning, both theoretically and practically. Their work emphasises the changing nature of technology and what teachers need to know and do in order to help develop multiliterate students.

Teachers can help students understand and use the elements included in the semiotic system for still images and moving images. Through modelling, discussion and questioning we can draw the students’ attention to visual texts, the elements within them, and how they relate to written text.

Students need to understand:
» that visual texts are not neutral; they represent an interpretation of information and there are many different interpretations
» the types, composition and design elements of visual texts, as discussed above
» how visual texts are made—the work (process, knowledge and skills) of the text creator
» how to gain information from visual text—what is seen, the main message, what is implied, what is missing
» how and why the text evokes specific feelings, reactions and responses.

**CRITICAL LITERACY**

*Critical literacy* requires the understanding that written and visual texts are neither created nor used within a vacuum. The texts are products shaped by a range of influences, for example:
» the situational context in which the text is created and used (including intended purpose, subject matter, text type, roles of and relationship between text creator and the audience)
- the sociocultural context (including the text creator’s and user’s backgrounds and views of the world, society and culture and the language choices made by the text creator when creating a text that meets the intended purpose)

- the multiple meanings embedded in or taken from the text.

Texts are not neutral; they are created as a result of the choices the creator makes and these choices can be influenced by the situation in which it is created and the broader sociocultural context that shapes and influences; for example, the text creator’s values, beliefs, assumptions and biases.

Students need to explore, think about, respond to, analyse, question and challenge written and visual texts and to understand that there are many factors that impact on the choices the text creator makes. In particular, they need to know that text creators:

- present views of the world that may prioritise certain views over others
- represent content (e.g. facts, people, places, events, characters) in ways that may privilege or silence certain views, voices or perspectives, or that may contain falsehoods or misrepresent information
- use written or visual language (structures and devices) to manipulate the reader in specific ways.

Based on Department of Education and Training of Western Australia, 2004, p. 59.

They need to understand:

- Representation in texts—how people, places, events etc. are represented or depicted in written and visual texts.
- Reader/viewer positioning—how texts are constructed to position the user.
- Ideological practices—how attitudes, values, beliefs, cultural and societal influences shape and are embedded in texts.

They need to question, analyse and critique a range of visual and written texts to detect, for example:

- the content of the text and the author’s intent
- cultural and societal influences
- the use of data to support evidence, opinions and hypotheses
- the possible differences in interpretation and construction of the text according to personal, social and cultural backgrounds and contexts
- the possible purposes or intent (e.g. social, political and cultural) of different text types and formats
- the perspectives, representations and biases in texts.

As they create or use visual, written and multimodal texts, students can be guided to think critically about texts through teacher questioning. The ultimate goal is that the students will independently and automatically question texts as they read, or question
themselves as they create texts. The following examples of questions to ask when reading or viewing a written or visual text are based on the work of Bull & Anstey (2007):

» Who produced this text?
» What is the purpose of this text?
» Who is the intended audience?
» What is it about? Does it make sense? What are the main messages? Do you agree/disagree? Why?
» What do you think about this text?
» How does this text make you feel? Why? Would all people feel this way? Why?
» What information has been left out? Why?
» Whose point of view is presented?
» Who might have a different point of view?
» What information or points of view have been left out? Why?
» Have you read other texts like this? What connections can you make?
» What have you learnt as a result of reading this? What questions do you have?
» How are (the people or group of people) portrayed in this text? Are all (a particular group of people) like this?
» If you only knew about (groups of people/events/places etc.) from reading this text, what would you know?
» What does the author say about (people/events/places/characters etc.) in this text?

Examples of questions, also based on Anstey & Bull (2007), to ask when creating a written or visual text:

» Why am I creating this text?
» For what purpose am I creating this text?
» Who is my audience?
» What do I want to say/communicate?
» What is my main message?
» What do I want my audience to know/feel/do? How will I do this?
» What influences my point of view?
» How will I present the information? Why?
» How will I make it easy for the reader/viewer of my text?
» What will I include/use to make this text effective?
» What will I do to make sure my message is clear?
» How am I representing people, places, events, characters etc.? Is this fair?
» What will the reader/viewer learn about (people/events/places/characters etc.) from this text? Is this fair/true?
» Have I left out important perspectives/information etc.?
» Have I over-emphasised specific information/perspectives etc.
LITERACY PRACTICES

Luke & Freebody’s work (Freebody & Luke, 1990; Luke & Freebody, 1999) has influenced how we view literacy teaching and learning. They identified four interrelated dimensions of language use that include the sets of resources or literacy practices that literate people draw on and use. Their model, referred to as the Four Resources Model of Literacy or the Four Roles of Literacy Learners, describes the sets of resources and acknowledges the complexity of literacy learning. It is important to note that all four sets of resources or literacy practices are interdependent. Further, they are not hierarchical and they develop concurrently. All are necessary for students to become literate and all need to be taught explicitly so that students integrate them and can independently and effectively use them in a wide range of contexts. Tables 1.1 to 1.4 are based on the work of Harris, Turbill, Fitzsimmons & McKenzie (2001, 2003); Luke & Freebody (1999) and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (2002).

TEXT ENCODER AND TEXT DECODER PRACTICES

Text encoder and decoder practices involve using the conventions of written and visual language to create or decipher written or visual text. Text encoders/decoders consider the conventions of the written language system such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, handwriting, text layout and directionality. They draw on the concepts of print at letter, word, sentence and whole text level, and on their phonological, alphabetic and visual knowledge. They consider the elements of the visual language system (still and moving) such as image types, the use of space, framing, placement, shape, line, light, colour, scale, texture, shape, angle, focus, symbols and style and so on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT DECODER ASKS WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT DECODER DOES WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do I crack this code?</td>
<td>Decodes the codes and conventions of written and visual text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did I/do I work out the word/the group of words?</td>
<td>Draws on the relationship between spoken sounds and written symbols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What elements/words are interesting, difficult or tricky?</td>
<td>Uses knowledge of print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I work out the words that I don’t know?</td>
<td>Draws on knowledge of grammar (syntax)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I know another word that looks/sounds the same?</td>
<td>Understands and applies elements of visual text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I know a word that has a similar meaning?</td>
<td>Draws on knowledge of written and visual text structures and conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is this word used in this context?</td>
<td>Uses knowledge of elements of visual text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which reading strategies did I use to understand this text?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHAT THE TEXT ENCODER ASKS WHEN CREATING WRITTEN OR VISUAL TEXT

- How do I use the code to create my message?
- How do I put my thoughts into writing/visual text?
- How do I write this correctly?
- How do I work out how to spell the words?
- Which convention (for writing or visual text) will I use?
- Do I know a better word to use?
- What would be the best way to present this information?

WHAT THE TEXT ENCODER DOES WHEN CREATING WRITTEN OR VISUAL TEXT

- Encodes written and visual text
- Uses knowledge of print
- Uses knowledge of elements of visual text
- Pays attention to conventions of writing and visual text
- Applies knowledge of visual or written text structures and features

Teachers can assist students to understand the codes and conventions of written and visual text by developing their knowledge of:

- Conventions of written text—e.g. phonics, spelling, grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, text structures and language features
- Elements of visual text—e.g. salience (a strategy of providing emphasis to the important aspect in a written or visual text), structure, framing, placement, line, colour, texture, shape, space, distance, size, contrast, angle etc.

TEXT PARTICIPANT PRACTICES

Text participant practices involve gaining meaning from or composing meaning into written and visual texts, both still and moving. Text participants apply their knowledge about the topic and their understanding of how written and visual texts are structured and organised to effectively create or convey meaning. They consider the purpose of each text and how the information in each is presented to meet the purpose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT PARTICIPANT ASKS WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does this mean to me?</td>
<td>Gains meaning from written and visual texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the text remind me of something, someone or another text?</td>
<td>Makes meaning by drawing on own experiences, prior knowledge, and knowledge of the structure and features of text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can I make connections between the text and my life, the text and other texts, or the text and the wider world?</td>
<td>Knows there may be other possible meanings of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What message is the author presenting?</td>
<td>Expects the text to make sense and reads to gain meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the main ideas?</td>
<td>Knows that the purpose for using the text affects the interpretation of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What might happen next? What visual or written conventions used give me this idea?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has the author used to help provide information? [Visual text type and elements, written text type and features]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did I feel as I read?</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

(continued)
TABLE 1.2  EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES AND QUESTIONS TEXT PARTICIPANTS MIGHT USE (CONTINUED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT PARTICIPANT ASKS WHEN CREATING WRITTEN OR VISUAL TEXT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How will I compose this text so that my meaning is clear to the reader or viewer?</td>
<td>Composes meaning into written and visual texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the other possible meanings the reader or viewer might gain from this text?</td>
<td>Uses topic knowledge and knowledge of grammar to create text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is my meaning clear?</td>
<td>Creates text to meet the intended purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What am I trying to say?</td>
<td>Draws on and links experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I need to do to create this text?</td>
<td>Pays attention to written or visual text organisation and layout</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do I know enough about the topic/subject matter to make the text clear?</td>
<td>Creates visual and written text with the reader in mind [makes the meaning clear]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which visual and/or written text can I use to suit my purpose?</td>
<td>Uses visual text that clearly meets the purpose and conveys the intended message</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers can help students to make meaning and gain meaning from written and visual texts through explicit teaching and questioning that focuses and develops their knowledge of:

» written texts—context, topic or subject, purpose and audience for reading and writing, text structure and grammar at whole text, paragraph, sentence and word level (use and meaning of words)

» visual texts—context, topic or subject, purpose and audience for viewing and creating, structure and elements of still and moving images.

TEXT USER PRACTICES

Text user practices involve selecting and using written and visual texts for specific purposes, audiences, contexts and subject matter. Text users draw on their knowledge of different written and/or visual text types (structure, organisation and language features) and the social purposes of each so that they select and use texts for their intended purposes.

TABLE 1.3  EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES AND QUESTIONS TEXT USERS MIGHT USE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT USER ASKS WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT USER DOES WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I do with this text?</td>
<td>Uses written and visual texts for a range of social purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of text is this? How do I know?</td>
<td>Understands the purposes of different written and visual texts for different cultural and social functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the purpose of this text?</td>
<td>Knows that different types of texts have different purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How is the information organised?</td>
<td>Knows that the purpose shapes the way written and visual texts are structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I find the information in this text?</td>
<td>Uses knowledge of text purpose, structure, features, and cultural and situational contexts to select, read/view and respond to appropriate texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sort of written or visual language is used in the text? Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Uses knowledge of text purpose, structure, features, and cultural and situational contexts to select, read/view and respond to appropriate texts.
Teachers can assist students to use written and visual texts effectively by helping them build knowledge of:

» how texts are used in everyday life and for which purposes and audiences
» text structure and features
» the language used to talk about written and visual language.

**TEXT ANALYST PRACTICES**

Text analyst practices involve thinking critically about the way written and visual texts are created and how written language features and visual text elements are used to put forward points of view and to position the reader or viewer. Text analysts understand the interrelatedness of reading and writing and that written and visual texts can be used together to create and enhance meaning and to meet specific purposes in a range of contexts.

Text analysts understand that texts are not neutral; they are culturally constructed, thus they read or view texts critically, with the text creator in mind. They read and/or view texts as if they were the text creators. They understand that text creators use written or visual language to position the text user and, as the text users, they evaluate the effectiveness of the text.

As text creators, text analysts produce texts with the user in mind. Drawing upon their own reading and viewing experiences and knowledge about effective written or visual texts, they create texts that position the user to believe and/or value the information represented in the text.
TABLE 1.4  EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES AND QUESTIONS TEXT ANALYSTS MIGHT USE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT ANALYST ASKS WHEN READING OR VIEWING</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What does this text do to me?</td>
<td>Reads and views texts critically</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who does the text favour or represent?</td>
<td>Understands how written and visual texts position readers and viewers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who might have a different point of view?</td>
<td>Knows that texts are crafted to represent the views and interests of the text creator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would the text be different if told from another point of view or if created in another time or place?</td>
<td>Identifies the devices used in the text to manipulate the user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the purpose for writing/creating this text?</td>
<td>Questions what is read or viewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How has the text creator used written and/or visual language in this text?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For which purposes?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does this text claim authority (consider language, structure and content)?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>WHAT THE TEXT ANALYST ASKS WHEN CREATING WRITTEN OR VISUAL TEXT</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do I want the reader/viewer to do, feel, believe or value as a result of using this text?</td>
<td>Constructs texts that draw on underlying values, beliefs, views and that 'position' the text user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can I best use written and/or visual language to manipulate the user of the text?</td>
<td>Uses knowledge of how text creators manipulate text for own purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How will I present my information?</td>
<td>Creates texts that 'position' the reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I want the text users to know about my viewpoints and values?</td>
<td>Selects written and visual text elements to suit own purposes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which words and images shall I select to best position the text user?</td>
<td>Selects and manipulates written language devices or visual elements to create effective texts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teachers can assist students to understand how texts are created with a specific purpose in mind by building their knowledge of:

» representation—how authors construct or represent things (people, places, events, things etc.)
» reader positioning—how texts position the user to suit the author’s purpose
» values and ideologies—how cultural, political, social and/or economic situations and identity, roles and power affect the choices that the text creator makes.

Literate individuals are able to effectively participate in the culturally defined social practices of society using the literacy practices that are appropriate to the situation. They are able to select and use literacy practices that enable them to act effectively within society and to enhance their own and others’ lives. The literacy practices are shaped by the situational and cultural context, the roles and relationships of the participants, the language mode used, and the participants’ knowledge of the subject or topic for which the literacy practice is required. Literate people draw upon four interdependent roles or resources (text encoder/decoder, text participant, text user, text analyst) to create, compose, interpret and respond to written and visual texts.