

The International
JOURNAL
of
LEARNING

Volume 16, Number 5

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LEARNING

<http://www.Learning-Journal.com>

First published in 2009 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1447-9494

Publisher Site: <http://www.Learning-Journal.com>

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Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.commongroundpublishing.com/software/>

A Multiliteracy Intervention in a Contemporary “Mono-Literacy” School in Greece

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to describe an intervention developed in an urban secondary school in southern Greece, and discuss it in terms of the pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group 1996, Cope & Kalantzis 2000) in order to examine what can be achieved by such interventions that are developed in traditional school settings, in centralized school systems that use only homogenized curricula and educational materials. After presenting a theoretical framework that combines the pedagogy of multiliteracies with relevant notions such as multimodality, interdisciplinarity, intertextuality and constructivist learning, the intervention is described and discussed within this framework. The paper shows that the intervention follows the pedagogy of multiliteracies as it gave the involved teachers and students the opportunity to negotiate complex and various discourses through texts constructed in the contemporary multicultural and multilingual social context where multimodal communication (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996) is dominant. Procedures that made use of students' and their families' various lived experiences and knowledge that derived from their multi-ethnic communities were organized and implemented at school. The final product of the intervention was a multimodal album, full of texts, photos and drawings, all made by the students, titled “Popular Theatre in Countries of the World”. Data collected from the researcher's field notes, from the interviews from involved teachers and students and from the album itself, show that this intervention, adopting certain elements from the pedagogy of multiliteracies, succeeded to overcome certain dysfunctions created by the specific school settings, while at the same time it was limited by the restricting context in which it took place.

Keywords: Pedagogy of Multiliteracies, Multimodality, Interdisciplinarity, Intertextuality, Socio-Constructivist Learning, Design

1. Introduction

THE GREEK SCHOOL system pursues homogeneity (see Dimaras 1995). It is a national curriculum centered school system that focuses on the content taught and uses the same homogenized educational material for all students throughout the country. In secondary education, the outcome of teaching is controlled through exams, gradually turning schools into exam-tutoring centers (e.g. Skourtou & Kourtis-Kazoullis 2003: 1329-1330). These conditions call for a standardization of teaching, which on the one hand supports and is supported by the standard Modern Greek language, while on the other hand endorses Greek civilization, which is promoted as the dominant civilization due to its classical past (e.g. Fragoudaki & Dragona 1997). Such a homogenized framework disregards the students' experiences, language and culture, along with their subjectivities. Moreover, since teaching is mainly based on the schoolbook and, in some cases, on added printed educational material, the use of new technologies is rare, giving the impression that written speech is the dominant mode of communication.

The only opportunity to escape from this strict centralization is to participate in optional educational programs (cultural, environmental, European programs, etc.), now implemented in numerous Greek schools. In the context of such programs, which take place outside of the official timetable and curriculum, both teachers and students often try out substantial, creative and genuinely innovative interventions (Bagakis 2000).

Yet optional programs cannot change the deep homogenized character of the Greek educational system, which comes in contrast with contemporary social conditions in general, such as the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity characterized by local diversity and global connectedness, and the proliferation of multimodal ways of making meaning (Cope & Kalantzis 2000: 5-6). Education must reflect these social changes; schools cannot remain monocultural and monolingual. Contemporary social conditions dictate the need to redefine literacy and its teaching. The pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group 1996, Cope & Kalantzis 2000) offers an interesting proposal, as it focuses on the increasing complexity of what constitutes literacy in a constantly changing, socially and culturally diverse, globalized and technological world (Anstey & Bull 2006: 19).

In this paper, I discuss the potential of multiliteracies within a traditional homogenized school environment. By presenting a project implemented in a Junior High School of a town in Crete (southern Greece), during the school year 2007-08, and by identifying the elements that place this project within the practice of multiliteracies, I discuss both the potential offered to education by the pedagogy of multiliteracies and the conditions and limitations of its implementation in a traditional and homogenized school system. Before entering into a description of the actual project, I will outline my theoretical background – the multiliteracies framework – illustrating how this relates to the concepts of multimodality, interdisciplinarity, intertextuality and socio-constructivist learning.

2. The Pedagogy (Theory and Practice) of Multiliteracies

The two basic recent social changes emphasized by the scholars-members of The New London Group (NLG) (1996: 64), are the rapid change of new communications media and the proximity of cultural and linguistic diversity (due to migration, multiculturalism and global economic integration), which force us to rethink literacy learning and teaching. The literate person has to interact effectively using multiple “languages” and communication patterns that more frequently cross cultural, community and national boundaries (Cope & Kalantzis 2000: 6). Consequently, it is inappropriate for schools to focus on “a singular, canonical” (NLG 1996: 63) language form and a single national culture. The pedagogy of multiliteracies has broadened the definition of literacy, viewing many types of expression and communication as literacies, whether formal or informal; spoken, gestured, written or graphic; official or unofficial. This broad definition is a vital necessity for contemporary schools, as it opens the way for us to see who the students really are and what kind of literacies they practice. It can help schools show greater respect to all students and to the literacy they bring from their communities, as well as to build on the students’ strengths and interests in popular culture and media literacies as a way to develop more traditional forms of literacy (Rowse et al. 2008: 112).

Anstey (2002) defines a multiliterate person as flexible, strategic and able to understand and use literacy and literate practices with a range of texts and technologies, written, spoken or multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996); in socially responsible ways; in a socially,

culturally, and linguistically diverse world in order to fully participate in life as an active and informed citizen, a goal that presupposes critical literacy. A multiliterate person must be able to critically analyze texts and contexts, recognize the dominant literacy forms and take informed action (Anstey & Bull 2006: 24). In the multiliteracies framework, learning is considered a process of meaning making, during which learners continually reshape themselves. Meaning making and any other semiotic activity are treated as a matter of Design (NLG 1996).

A fundamental concept associated with multiliteracies is multimodality. The term refers to the multiplicity of communication channels and media that dominates contemporary western societies. It focuses on the complex interactions between various different sources, media and modes, which are combined during communication in order to produce meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). In this context, literacy teaching aims at the development of abilities and skills necessary for the understanding and production of various text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies (NLG 1996), which generally combine different semiotic media for meaning making. The “multiliterate” subject possesses a range of literacies (e.g. visual literacy, techno-literacy etc.), reads multimodal texts in an integrated fashion (paying attention to the relationship between the different semiotic modes being deployed) and produces multimodal texts managing various resources (Kress 1995).

Yet the concept of multimodality cannot be of importance to education, unless combined with the concept and practices of interdisciplinarity. Multiliteracies focus teaching on the process of design of various texts, by pointing to the variety of spoken and written discourses which feature in these texts. For the students to be able to understand the plethora of composite discourses, they first need to familiarize themselves with disciplinary discourse, practices and concepts, and utilize this process and the acquired discipline knowledge in interdisciplinary projects aiming at meaning making (Albright et al. 2007: 101-102, 97). In this way, multiliteracies are connected to interdisciplinarity, without implying the downgrading of the students’ discipline based studies, but rather they propose the redefinition of the relation between specialization in one discipline and common work across disciplines in the contemporary complex social conditions, stressing the requirement for a plurality of disciplinary approaches in meaning making.

A main element of the pedagogy of multiliteracies, coupled with multimodality and interdisciplinarity, is intertextuality. Intertextuality draws attention to the potentially complex ways in which meanings are constituted through relationships to other texts, text types (discourse or genres), narratives and other modes of meaning (such as visual design). Any text can be viewed historically in terms of the intertextual chain it draws upon and the way it transforms this chain (NLG 1996). The intertextuality of a text mediates the relationship between the text’s social context and its language (Fairclough 2000: 173). Therefore, the intertextual analysis of a text illustrates the linguistic choices (or the choices of other modes) in the text. Furthermore, the recent domination of new technologies in communication has radically changed the concept of intertextuality. Electronic textuality and the hypertext have changed the terms of intertextuality and have had a considerable impact on how we define and teach literacy practices.

A socio-cultural approach to literacy, such as the one underlying the theory of multiliteracies, is naturally complemented by a social-constructivist perspective of learning (Rogoff 1990, Vygotsky 1986). Learning is not a decontextualized activity; it is rather a complex process, taking place in specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (Wertsch 1991). It is

based on the interaction between the experienced and the less experienced members of society (Vygotsky 1978: 90), pointing to pedagogies that are underpinned by scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross 1976, Bruner 1983). Multiliteracies propose a pedagogy that aims to provide students with the opportunity to become “active designers” (NLG 1996: 64) through the creative use of the available designs; students achieve this by working on the available designs with the help of experienced others (educators) during overt instruction, which actually constructs the scaffolding of their learning.

3. An Intervention Entitled: “Popular Theater in Countries of the World”

Context

The project was designed and implemented within the framework of a European Program for Intercultural Education, which started as a training seminar implemented in three stages, during the academic year 2007-08. Two teachers of the school in which the project was implemented participated in the seminar, in which I also participated as coordinator and trainer. Stage A’ of the seminar (November 2007) was completed with the design of interventions at school level, aiming at sensitizing the school community on issues regarding co-existence in a multicultural society. The two teachers decided to work with the students of their school, in order to implement a project entitled: *Popular Theater in countries of the world*. They developed their intervention by reflecting on their initial design and modifying their action. Their reflection was based on feedback from stage B’ of the seminar (February 2008), and on continuous interactions with me. My role was consultative: I aimed to assist in their decision-making, by discussing with them the difficulties they faced and the issues that came up, as well as possible solutions and alternative suggestions.

The School

The project took place in a Junior High School (age range: 12-15) with a highly multiethnic student population. Around 70% of students are Greek while the other 30% come from 12 different countries. Some students are not sufficiently fluent in Greek, the language in which all classes are taught, which often leads to low academic performance. Furthermore, it has been observed that groups of ethnic students or individual adolescents of ethnic minorities are isolated. No incident of ethnic or cultural violence has been observed in the school. Within the homogenized Greek educational system, this school seemed to function without conflicts, imposing the traditional pedagogy of the classical canon and transmitting “the fixed and constant facts and the moral and social truths of the world” (Kalantzis & Cope 1993: 42), while at the same time veiling its diversity.

Project Subject and Goals

The subject was chosen by the teachers, who deemed it could live up to the goals of an intercultural exchange. According to the project’s design, some students of non-Greek origin would cooperate with Greek peers in order to study their countries’ popular theater, creating an album of pictures and texts on the popular theater of the 13 countries of origin of the school’s students.

The project aimed at:

- Changing the social relationships of students both within the school and with their communities,
- Promoting and utilizing the diversity of the students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds,
- Legalizing the experiences of students and their families, as well as their community knowledge,
- Supporting students in developing the range of literacies that are highly valued in globalized and technologically linked societies.

Project Implementation and Final Results

The project was implemented by a group of 26 students and the two teachers mentioned above. The “travelers in the roads of the art of theater”, as they called themselves, worked for five months (December 2007 – May 2008), off the official timetable. They drew their material from the Internet, Greek books and books from their countries of origin. They asked their parents, relatives, countrymen living in Greece or abroad, and representatives of their ethnic communities in Crete. They studied a variety of texts, discussed on them, compared them, used their native languages, translated excerpts in Greek, presented their findings to the rest of their group, received feedback, and continued working. In the end, they made an album consisting of texts they wrote both in Greek and in their native languages and of relevant pictures they had collected or drawn, with the corresponding captions.

4. Research Questions and Methodology

As the intervention was being developed at school, I conducted a study aiming mainly to understand to what extent the intervention managed to adopt the principles of the pedagogy of multiliteracies and which difficulties it faced in the monoliteracy context it took place. My research questions were:

- To which extent did the project meet its goals, which embody the principles of the pedagogy of multiliteracies?
- To which extent did the developed processes (teaching and learning) meet the terms of the pedagogy of multiliteracies?
- Which factors helped and which hindered the development of the intervention in the school?

Essentially I assessed the intervention based on qualitative criteria (presented in the structure of the next section), which, in my opinion, come from the pedagogy of multiliteracies. These criteria were shaped not only by the theory of multiliteracies but also by the intervention itself, as it developed in the school. At the same time, the criteria shaped the intervention, as I discussed them with the teachers in our meetings.

My research approach was qualitative (Creswell 1998, Denzin & Lincoln 1994), since a single “case” was studied; a unique and complex case, which I endeavored to study in depth. The study was field focused and was based on qualitative data collected from: a) my research notes, taken during our meetings with the teachers, aiming at designing and reviewing the

intervention, b) my observations from the implementation of the project in the school, c) interviews with the teachers and participant students, d) the final product, the leaflet produced by students and teachers when the intervention was completed. The data were elaborated in order to answer the above research questions, making a point of taking into account the participants' perspectives and their meanings.

5. Discussing the Intervention in Multiliteracy Terms

The intervention managed to adopt basic principles of the multiliteracy pedagogy and was judged successful in the following aspects:

1. Its design gave students the opportunity to negotiate with various composite discourses, that came from the students' own multicultural, multilingual and technologically literate background. They used a variety of texts of great linguistic and cultural diversity, displaying knowledge in multiple forms: in print, in images and in combinations of forms in digital contexts. The intervention focused on meaning making and emphasized understanding, supported by illustrating the intertextual relations of the texts under study.

“The students learned how to seek information, by asking their relatives, or looking it up online or in the library. And they learned how to move from one text to the next” (teacher interview).

Students moved from text to text to make meaning, which is not always easy. Hypertextual reading practices are non-linear and involve active readers making their own distinct reading paths and “navigating” in a web of interconnections. Given the opportunity to navigate in hyperlinked environments and create multimodal texts, students realized that electronic texts are fluid and dynamic. Writing became “multi-vocal” and intertextual (Snyder 1996). Thus students took their first steps towards becoming critically literate about the texts and social practices in cyberspace and engaging in intercultural communication in global virtual communities (Luke 1997).

Students came in contact with texts written in their native languages, attempting to retrieve the information they needed (reading for meaning). The texts displayed a variety of registers and discourses: some were multimodal, others monomodal, some were spoken and very simple and others were written and difficult to understand – this endowed the project with a comparative perspective (Mercado 1998). For instance, the group's Bulgarian students found useful information on Bulgarian websites, after a Bulgarian historian-ethnologist provided them with a book on the history of Bulgarian theater, written in the 1960s. The students compared the texts from the two sources, noticed the book's “*formal language*” and asked for more time, in order to “*translate it in their language first, and then see what it means in Greek*” (own field notes).

Images were decisive for the meaning making process, helping the students' comprehend the accompanying verbal texts and simplify and understand the description of popular heroes: “*Pictures always helped me. By comparing pictures and texts, I could leave out everything that made a text long and tiring*” (Bulgarian student). When images were not available, the verbal text was the sole source of information, based on which students would use their imagination to draw the popular heroes, producing multimodal texts themselves.

2. The intervention created links between different subject matters: arts, history of art, language (students' L1 and Greek language), new technologies. When students studied multimodal texts, featuring the incorporation of a variety of media types, practices and genres, they studied and analyzed the multimodal discourse that draws on a range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary intersections. The process of meaning making during the project required interdisciplinary textual study, and interdisciplinary study of the larger cultural contexts that framed both text and reader. Texts were not studied in isolation, but to a certain extent, in their social context and from a range of contemporary social perspectives (e.g. Moore 1997, Pope 1998).

“An English teacher helped us with difficult English texts that were incomprehensible to the students, even to English students. Who else helped us? The Computer Science teacher provided great help with the computers. He often explained stuff to the children. Ah! There was also M., the historian. She would tell them of the historical framework regarding their findings, when it all began, under which conditions. But only what she knew. About a few countries...” (teacher interview).

3. To a large extent, the project brought out the subjectivities of both students and teachers. The students experiences, either personal or community experiences, were greatly utilized.

“Some children shared with us their lived experiences, and I was greatly impressed. For instance, S. from India. There is no way he would have spoken of his homeland experiences in class. But he spoke in the project. And he spoke without fear or pressure” (teacher interview).

In fact the project was developed in such a way that students had the opportunity to creatively blend knowledge coming from their experiences (both personal and collective) with school's academic knowledge, since the two participating teachers checked all the students' findings and notes, helping them correct their texts.

4. Both teachers and students had the opportunity to learn with and from each other, co-constructing knowledge in school. The students learned through processes of interacting with experienced others, adults from their environment (teachers and parents), as well as their classmates: *“Today I., a Bulgarian student who struggles with writing in Greek, looked for E., a Greek girl who is a very good student, and asked her to help him. They worked long together, with patience. It was impressive!”* (own field notes). They enjoyed working with friends:

“I got in the group because I thought I could skip some classes. But then I saw that in the group I could learn many things that interested me. Most importantly, I learned with others, with my friend J., we would find information together, talk about it, about what the text meant. J. could even draw what we understood from the text. These are her drawings” (Norwegian student).

Also, parents gained new opportunities to interact with their children and the school:

“This is what seems important to me: that this project forced parents to spend time with their children. They work too much, and they don't get the chance. Now they had to spend time with their children, because they had to work it out together, they had to

find their popular heroes, and they knew their children couldn't find help elsewhere" (teacher interview).

Through a process of guided participation, partners creatively and jointly constructed new understandings, drawing on their previous knowledge of society's cultural tools. Learning was an active, transformational and productive process, in a constructivist framework that advocated the student's active construction of knowledge and meaning (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson 1999).

5. The project brought out minority and marginalized voices. Students became acquainted with theater heroes and popular narratives of their home culture, unknown to most students. Suddenly a whole culture was revealed, the existence of which they had not even suspected. Sometimes the revelation came unhindered:

"My parents told me of Panch and Judy. But all they could remember was their names. They told me the names and I looked them up online. They must have been very famous back in the day" (British student).

In other cases, it was quite hard for students to obtain information. In the case of Albanian popular theater, there was no information online, nor did the parents remember anything – or so they said, initially. The students contacted a center frequented by Albanian immigrants in Athens, found the name of an Albanian journalist who lived in their city, and called him. He collected information and visited the school on a Saturday, to present his findings. He spoke Albanian to the group's Albanian students:

"At first the children looked embarrassed at the journalist. Was it awkward for them to hear their mother language at school? Perhaps, because many in the group always spoke Greek to each other. Yet gradually they got used of it. In a while they looked pleased. They were listening carefully and laughing" (own field notes).

The use of their native language in school legalized their culture and encouraged them to refer to it:

"I really liked it when the Albanian journalist visited our school. He knew a lot. He told us that the Albanian people would always laugh with the stories of Dordolets. Even today, in South Albania, people laugh with his stories. We have a classmate in the group, from South Albania, who came to Greece recently. When the journalist spoke of Dordolets, he told us that when he was going to elementary school, someone showed up dressed up as Dordolets and made everyone laugh. He was funny. He was lame and was dancing" (Albanian student).

The students who had immigrated to Greece recently were the most interested in the project. Their homeland memories were more recent, and they could use their native language fluently:

"The children attended our meetings with joy. At some point I realized that all these children were isolated from the school. They didn't speak the (Greek) language very well... And suddenly this happened, bringing them to the limelight. They enjoyed it" (teacher interview).

6. To a lesser extent, the project created room for individuals to remake themselves, to reconstruct and renegotiate their identities, by producing knowledge on their homeland culture (“*I didn’t know anything. How could I? I wasn’t even interested. I live here. Before the project, I never read anything in Rumanian*”, Rumanian student), comparing the various types of popular theater in the countries under study, identifying similarities and differences (“*All peoples have theater, and they are alike. Sometimes the heroes are different, but the themes are the same. People everywhere make theater for the same reasons: for instance, to make fun of politicians*” Norwegian student), and comparing their country’s popular theater with that of Greece, which they knew well (“*...like in Ancient Greece. The Ancient Greeks also made fun of politicians through theater, take Aristophanes for example*” Norwegian student).

In contrast, the intervention failed to help students understand and critique systems of power throughout the world. The Albanian students reproduced the journalist’s account, explaining that no information on their popular theater was available because “*the new government burned all the records. They gave orders to burn everything, so that no one could find information on anything*” (Albanian students). No student attempted to challenge the journalist’s account, treating him rather as an authority. Nor did they wonder why any government would issue such orders. The opportunities for nurturing critical literacy, offered by the project, were not utilized. Moreover, the students who participated in the project uncritically accepted Greek culture as most important (*the* most important): “*Norway has a culture but it isn’t like Greece. Greece has a great culture!*” (Norwegian student), “*Albania doesn’t have much of a culture, it’s not like Greece*” (Albanian student). It seems that the project failed to make students more aware of the ideological, political and other forces that privilege certain cultures and literacies over others (Rowse et al. 2008: 112).

It also failed to help students represent their knowledge in complex manners, by producing texts of different discourses, dialects, and types. Students wrote all album texts using a homogenized, school discourse. In this respect, all texts were identical. Although the students actively participated in the construction of this knowledge, and their texts were the testimonies of their communities’ different lived experiences, in the end they all wrote using the same impersonal distant style, as if their writings concerned only the school, not themselves: “*I wrote like this because I was writing for school. If I wrote for my friends, I would write differently, like how I speak, not formally. But I wrote mainly for my teacher. I was thinking of her reading it*” (Rumanian student).

6. Conclusion

In terms of design, the project started off from available designs, and the students’ resources, such as grammars, styles, genres, voices, and moved on to designing, a process of shaping meaning that involved transformation of the available meaning resources. By the end of the project, the available designs were redesigned, making a new, intercultural and intertextual meaning. During the transformation of available resources, students tried to recontextualize their knowledge, but school context and discourse proved dominant during the designing. The intervention did not succeed in helping students develop a literacy, identity and way of life that would be distinctively their own.

One of the greatest benefits for the students is that they understood, valued and drew on their home and local literacies. They began to view themselves, their families, their communities and their peers as sources of knowledge. They began to see knowledge as something constructed by the members of a social group through action and interaction, and not as given data, as abstract or transmitted information. In this sense, by making this album, students managed to produce text (new text), thus upgrading their role in the school. Yet although they created a new, original text, they opted for a language that was school-like, homogenized and neutral. While they lived authentic experiences of reading, writing and learning, this choice was imposed on the students by the limitations of their school experiences.

Moreover, they failed to develop a critical stance towards the knowledge of the “official” texts. During their design, the students used available resources, utilized immersion in meaningful authentic learning environments and elaborated available designs with the help of experienced others; yet they were unable to gain insight into the social, cultural and historical reasons underlying the production of these experiences, discourses and meanings, and did not manage to place learning within broader contexts, nor to critique and extend it.

These shortcomings prove the existence of a school context of acceptance, reproduction, compliance, and adoption of a standard common language. This context proves strong, even when attempting to induce learning through the students’ engagement in activities that prepare them for the literacy challenges of our networked, globalized and culturally diverse world. Certainly, learning activities inspired by the multiliteracies theory have internal value, since they implement a pedagogy of pluralism, much needed in the schools of postmodern societies.

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