

Literacies

Social, Cultural and Historical Perspectives

Colin Lankshear
Michele Knobel

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Preface

In his *History of Western Philosophy* (1961: 463), Bertrand Russell affirms the Socratic value of “following wherever the argument may lead.” Of course, what the argument is and, hence, where it may lead, has a lot to do with contingency. Arguments are situated. They are impacted by frames and by evidence, by what is considered important and relevant in different times and places. As a person’s circumstances change, so it is likely that the arguments they follow and the places they follow them to will change. Underlying core principles may remain intact—such as trying to keep an open mind, trying to support what seems right and fair, and so on—but maintaining such principles in conjunction with following wherever the argument may lead is consistent with one’s views and positions changing over time and place. To invoke John Dewey (1944: Ch. 4), along with Russell, one may hope—and it may be one’s best hope—that the changes that come from following arguments wherever they may lead will reflect growth (in Dewey’s sense). That has been the enduring hope—indeed, aim—we have individually and jointly sought to maintain throughout our academic lives.

This book contains sixteen essays, all about literacies, ranging over a period of twenty-five years and over diverse circumstances, places and influences. We have both written individually as well as together, although the great majority of our work, since first meeting in 1992, has been joint. “Wherever the argument may lead” has predominantly been a matter of negotiation. Indeed, for each of us,

meeting the other has significantly influenced what we see as worthy of argument in the first place, as well as the considerations that shape an argument's "leading."

In many ways, where this book ends up could scarcely be more different from where it began. Both of us experience not a little embarrassment over some of the positions taken and the tracks our arguments have taken. But those will surely be the facts of life for any thinking person who sustains an interest in a particular topic or concern over a long period of time. The chapters in this book collectively comprise an ongoing argument about the natures, roles and significance of literacies understood as social practices—as social phenomena. They trace a path that follows the leads of the individual constitutive arguments, which in turn follow leads shaped by times and places and circumstances. When these essays began there was still a Cold War, an East and a West. Poststructuralist thinking was yet to significantly impact thinking in the social sciences and humanities in New Zealand. In Australia and New Zealand policy was gearing up to respond to local "discoveries" of a "literacy crisis" that just happened to emerge around the very time politicians and economists perceived a need to begin responding to evident deep changes in the conditions and practices of economic production; changes that would require—in places like New Zealand and Australia—getting used to the fact that the days of full employment might be over and that for many people the quality of work they aspired to and the kind of work that was available might increasingly diverge.

Even at that time "literacies" did not have to reckon with the digital electronic revolution—at least, for most people and most schools. But that was just around the corner. Colin, in New Zealand, did not "drive" a computer until 1988. By contrast, Michele, in an Australian private school that was already alert to what would become rapidly changing conditions of reading and writing, first "drove" a computer—at school—in 1980–81, and began programming in Logo within her teacher education program in 1984. But we both had to wait until 1993 to "get on the internet." Not surprisingly, however, our respective experiences of "getting on the internet" were very different. It was Michele who grasped what the arrival of a graphic internet browser interface would likely mean—and who snail mailed a money order to the U.S. to buy Mosaic, only to find that by the time Mosaic arrived it had already been scooped by Netscape Navigator, and we could download that (but s.l.o.w.l.y).

Such were some of the ingredients that shaped where arguments began leading by the time we got to what now comprises the middle sections of the book. Issues of access to "powerful literacies" that might help make "learning outcomes" "more equitable," were the order of the day in Australian literacy education and literacy studies, within and across print and digital literacies, respectively. How well prepared were teachers to integrate new technologies into classroom learning?; how well prepared were teachers to help students learn how to master "genres of

power”? What needed to be done to enhance literacy education in these respects? New arguments; new places for arguments to lead.

Six years of that proved to be more than enough for our temperaments and dispositions, and we left Australia for the Americas, south of the Rio Grande. Mexico was wrestling with the “new capitalism” and, as part of this, pulling out all the stops to keep abreast of the “revolution” in computing and communications technologies. The internet assumed a new significance in our lives—indeed, we experienced it increasingly as a necessity; an everyday mediator between lives we had known and future lives we were having to forge on a moment-by-moment basis. Reflecting on this, and on the relationships between our own appropriations of the internet and those of other people—including the scores and hundreds of young Mexicans who lined sometimes three and four deep awaiting turns at the machines in their preferred internet cafes—tuned us into the theme of “new literacies,” in all their variety. The argument took a new turn. This was not so much within the pedagogies of the educational institutions we interacted with in Mexico as within the everyday lives we encountered.

By 2003 we were both back into regular contact with Australian and North American universities as well as having regular contact with our Mexican lives. Once again the argument became open to new shapers, most notably, the opportunities and constraints associated with integrating internet technologies into learning within formal educational settings. Like many other academics interested in new literacies we found ourselves surfing the interfaces between nonformal kinds of learning mediated by the internet—especially within popular cultural affinity spaces—and our daily workbound experiences of formal learning mediated by the internet. The interactions and intersections between these varying experiences have dominated our thinking and researching and writing over the past several years. This is where we have got to today.

Assembling this book has been a personally interesting and intellectually challenging experience for us both, and we hope that readers can in turn share some of this interest and challenge as they follow the argument we trace through the sixteen chapters below.

— Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel
Mexico City

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