Literacies
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We want to thank Chris Myers and colleagues at Peter Lang, New York, for the privilege of being able to publish a collection of essays that encapsulate the main currents of our work since we first began researching and writing in the area of literacy. The question we asked ourselves at the beginning of this endeavor was “which essays do we think best capture what we have tried to do and who we have been as individuals and as a team working in literacy studies over the years?” As we began addressing this question the list of essays grew beyond the scope we originally pitched for the book. Chris, characteristically, said “include the ones you most want and we’ll look at word numbers later.” That generosity is typical of what we have experienced over the years working with Lang—as authors and series editors alike. We appreciate it greatly, along with the careful and cheerful manner the Lang team, to a person, bring with them to their work. Special thanks also go to Bernadette Shade for her exemplary work in the production phase and at so many other points of contact in our work with Lang. In this context we want also to recognize and honor the tremendous work done by Shirley Steinberg and the late Joe Kincheloe in helping to build the success and standing Peter Lang enjoys among U.S. publishers of academic work. Were it not for Shirley and Joe’s unstinting efforts, our own series and several of our books would not exist. We esteem their contribution to academic publishing, and thank them for their role in enabling us to be part of the life of Peter Lang Publishing.
Many other colleagues have encouraged us along the way. Michael Apple gave a mighty push to the paper, “Ideas of functional literacy,” encouraging its development from a conference presentation to a platform for subsequent work. Libby Limbrick invited “Dawn of the people” as a keynote address for a teacher professional development conference, thereby getting this early work into the sights of a very substantial professional readership. Over several pints of beer, Ivor Goodson worked with an early career academic to conceive a project that became the book, *Literacy, Schooling and Revolution*. He persuaded the late Malcolm Clarkson, founder of Falmer Press, to take a chance on a book by an unknown New Zealand academic. The generosity and faith of Ivor and Malcolm is deeply appreciated. And once the book was published, Michael Apple got behind it in the best tradition of academic mentoring, doing his very best to promote it in North America. Peter McLaren and Henry Giroux, in the U.S., Jack Shallcrass in New Zealand, and Kevin Harris in Australia were also generous and encouraging in ways that went far beyond any possible call of academic duty. Allan Levett was pivotal in bringing a perspective on literacy and the changing world of work to our thinking, and Geoff Bull and Michele Anstey were instrumental in getting us together and working as a team and in providing wonderful mentoring for Michele’s early publishing and postgraduate work. Wendy Morgan supervised Michele’s doctoral study with bounteous care and attention and nurtured her independence as a researcher. Jim Gee has been there, constantly, since the early 1990s, as the best inspiration and role model that anyone working in literacy studies could possibly have. His contribution to literacy studies is second to none, and he does collegial friendship with incomparable style and grace. He is all through the pages of this book. We cannot thank him enough for his contribution to our work and sense of purpose. We also want to acknowledge the valued contributions to our work on new literacies themes made over many years by Chris Bigum, Leonie Rowan, Michael Doneman and Donna Alvermann. When our will to go on has weakened we have always been inspired by their ideas and commitments.

A work of collected essays cannot exist without the goodwill of those who have published work in the first place and who allow it to be republished elsewhere. We are grateful to the following journals and publishers for permitting us to republish our previous work, as follows:


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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

Bibliography