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LITERACY AND THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM: MIXED MESSAGES, BUT ONES THAT ARE HARD TO SHAKE

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Abstract

The Australian Curriculum has extensive references to literacy. It appears as not only a core strand within English, but also as a General Capability for the Curriculum as a whole. Such considerable focus leads to the question of what literacy actually means within such a context, and this paper aims to better understand the conceptualising of literacy presented in the rhetoric of the Curriculum.

Beginning with a discussion of conceptualisations of literacy within education systems, we then focus on approaches to understand curriculum as a foundation for examining the discourse of literacy within the Curriculum. We then conclude by interrogating inconsistencies between these claimed and suggested messages.

We find that the *claimed* message of the Curriculum is one emphasising a functional approach to literacy, with less direct (but nevertheless clear) references to the importance of developing a critical perspective. An emphasis on basic literacy, however, becomes very evident in the *suggested* messages underlying literacy within the Curriculum.

Such findings resonate with other literature on the retreat from critical and other forms of literacy within current curricular reforms. This is a trend that we see continuing within the Australian Curriculum, despite being an ostensibly progressive text.

Introduction

The Australian Curriculum has extensive references to literacy. It appears not only as a core strand within English, but also as a General Capability for the Curriculum as a whole. Such a considerable focus leads to the question of what literacy actually means within this context. This presentation aims to examine the concept of literacy as presented within the Curriculum rhetoric.

Beginning with a discussion of conceptualisations of literacy within education systems, we then focus on understandings of curriculum, including 'claimed' and 'suggested' messages. We then conclude by interrogating inconsistencies between these messages and implications for realising the Curriculum's potential in practice.

Literacy and curriculum

Literacy is a term "embedded in different cultural processes, personal circumstances and collective structures", and thus varies according to "economic, political and social transformations, including globalisation, and the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs)" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 6). Definitions of literacy within educational literature tend to fall into one of three main frames: basic, functional, and critical. These, in turn, each conceptualise literacy according to three broad perspectives: literacy as cognitive skills and development, literacy as patterns of social and cultural interaction, and literacy as an ideological practice.

The first, basic literacy, refers to the "ability both to read and to write a simple message in any language" (United Nations, 1948, p. 25); i.e., the ability to encode and decode written texts. As a cognitive skill that can be taught and learned, basic literacy is understood to develop as a series of increasingly complex increments. It thus lends itself to being measured against normative benchmarks for development. Functional literacy, by way of contrast, addresses a focus on "language in use",

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which enables learners to "engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in [their] culture or group" (Gray, 1956, p. 19). The third category, critical literacy, is described by UNESCO (1975) as,

> Literacy creates the conditions for the acquisition of a critical consciousness of the contradictions of society in which man lives and of its aims; it also stimulates initiative and his participation in the creation of projects capable of acting upon the world, of transforming it, and of defining the aims of an authentic human development. (p. 2)

Functional and critical approaches share similar assumptions that distinguish them from basic literacy in several ways. First, both regard oral language as congruent with printed script. As Street (1995) contends, "literacy […] cannot be divided from orality on the grounds either of cohesion, or of connectedness or that it employs paralinguistic as opposed to lexical, features of language" (p. 175). The development of functional and critical literacy thus requires not only a focus on written language, but on oral texts as well. Functional and critical approaches also consider literacy development in relation to its wider social context. Functional literacy, for example, identifies the nature of literacy as changeable to different cultures and time, while critical approaches situate literacy within "the evolving language of work, power, and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment" (New London Group, 1996, p. 60). Both approaches thus break down distinctions between individuals and their surroundings. Individuals are no longer decontextualised but are affected by and capable of transforming their social and historical environment. Third, both draw on the idea of multiliteracies to address the modality of textual forms. As the New London Group explains, "the multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today call for a much broader view of literacy than portrayed by traditional language-based approaches" (p. 60). This notion of multiliteracies thus highlights a dynamic focus on language use across multiple social contexts. By way of contrast, basic literacy emphasises the development of decontexualised skills focused on conventional print text. Separating the individual from his or her broader social and historical surroundings, literacy is understood to be "individual" abilities (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 7), solely determined by the cognitive capability of the learner.

To understand how literacy is conceptualised in the Australian Curriculum in what follows, we situate the Australian Curriculum within Bernstein's (1971) three "message systems" of schooling. Curriculum, along with pedagogy and assessment, can be understood as lenses to examine literacy within broader systems of schooling. Despite our emphasis on curriculum within this presentation, however, we also acknowledge the significance of the symbiotic relationship that exists between all three systems.

Furthermore, curriculum can also be understood in terms of both overt and covert messages; that is, a focus on messages within the *claimed* curriculum, against those of the *suggested* curriculum (Krieg & Sharp, 2004; Vallance, 1973). While the former refers to what the text declares "should be taught and how it should be taught" (Doecke & Gill, 1999, p. 2), the latter concerns "those systematic side effects of schooling that we sense but which cannot be adequately accounted for by reference to the explicit curriculum" (Vallance, 1973, p. 7).

Literacy within the Australian Curriculum

In terms of its "claimed" message, the Australian Curriculum stresses a functional approach to literacy, while also making clear references to the importance of critical literacy. This advocacy centres around three key concepts: *Standard Australian English*, *texts* and *multimodality*.

Standard Australian English, the core of the literacy framework in the Curriculum, dissolves the distinction between oral and written language in the way it has been defined; namely, a "variety of spoken *and* written English" (ACARA, 2011h, para. 1, emphasis added). The rationale behind the use of a *Standard* national language rests with "nation-building and internationalisation" (ACARA, 2011f,

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para. 2), in response to the demand from "global pressures and the imperatives" (Seddon, 2001, p. 319). Literacy, as presented in the Curriculum, thus aims to prepare students for future life and work in Australian society, on the understanding that "all people have the opportunity to develop the skills for and gain access to employment" (Skills Australia, 2009, p. 51).

With regard to its functional orientation to language-in-use, the Curriculum defines texts as "means for communication", and includes "everyday texts and workplace texts from increasingly complex and unfamiliar settings, ranging from the everyday language of personal experience to more abstract, specialised and technical language, including the language of schooling and academic study" (ACARA, 2011e, para. 1). As a "General Capability" in relation to goals for the Curriculum as a whole, *Literacy* is thus positioned as a skill that enables students "to understand and manage themselves, their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively" (ACARA, 2011d, para. 15). This context-bounded understanding of texts also forms the foundation for literacy as a strand within the specific discipline area of English, in which *Literacy* is understood "to develop students' ability to interpret and create texts with appropriateness, accuracy, confidence, fluency and efficacy for learning in and out of school, and for participating in Australian life more generally" (ACARA, 2011e, para. 1).

Finally, the Curriculum embraces multimodality, explained within the Curriculum as texts involving "two or more communication modes (for example print, image and spoken text as in film or computer presentations)" (ACARA, 2011g, para. 1). The Curriculum therefore not only dissolves the distinction between oral and written language, but also promotes the development of digital/online technologies and new communicative forms. ICT is thus positioned as paramount within the Curriculum as another General Capability, as well as being "an important component" within the specialist learning area of English (ACARA, 2011d, para. 9).

The Curriculum also addresses *Critical Thinking* as a general capability, described as a capacity to "recognise or develop an argument, use evidence in support of that argument, draw reasoned conclusions, and use information to solve problems" (ACARA, 2011c, para. 2), thus reflecting an emphasis on language with critical thought and engagement. On literacy more specifically, the English area takes this critical approach further, by focusing on the development of skills to "critically analyse the opinions, points of view and unstated assumptions embedded in texts" (ACARA, 2011d, para. 15).

Teaching and assessing the Australian Curriculum: The suggested curriculum

However, in contrast to this strong rhetoric on the significance and value of functional and critical literacy within the *claimed* messages of the Australian Curriculum, the suggested messages are ones clearly accentuating a basic literacy approach. The Curriculum demonstrates this orientation in at least two ways, both of which are heavily influenced by standardised approaches to assessment.

First, the Australian Curriculum relies heavily on the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) for the assessment of literacy skills. As Hipwell and Klenowski (2011) argue, "while there has been a considerable silence regarding assessment in and of the curriculum, national testing programs have been introduced" (p. 127-8). NAPLAN provides benchmarks for achievement across three domains—reading, writing, and language conventions (spelling, punctuation, and grammar)—at Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. As an assessment method, it endorses a decontextualised, universal perspective on the measurement of literacy skills that can be readily administered across a range of education systems and settings.

Second, the format of NAPLAN tests reinforces an emphasis on conventional, print-based skills. *Reading* and *Language Conventions* are assessed predominantly through the use of multiple-choice items, while the assessment materials themselves are restricted to an exclusive reliance on written texts. Skills are also described at only the most basic level of achievement for each task (i.e., a "National 'Minimum' Standard"), with Year 9 students, for example, being required to write texts with "accurate words or groups of words when describing events and ideas although there are typically errors evident in sentence construction" (ACARA, 2011b, para. 22).

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As a national test, the format and achievement level descriptions thus allow NAPLAN to be an easy measure of literacy as a decontextualised skill. However, the qualitative dimensions emphasised by a functional or critical literacy have had to be sacrificed as a result of this standardisation.

The influence of NAPLAN is further reinforced by *My School*, a website directory of schools' profiles and performance (Alexander, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Hursh, 2008; Rezai-Rashti, 2009; Stobart, 2008). Justifying the use of NAPLAN results as a measure of school quality, *My School* strengthens the influence of a decontextualised, basic skills approach to literacy, even though, as Lingard (2010) for example has argued, the literacy data upon which *My School* relies "fail[s] to recognise the very strong relationship between socio-economic status (SES) and student performance" (p. 130). Put simply, literacy skills are evaluated free from the test-takers' sociocultural backgrounds and circumstances. As NAPLAN results are advanced as a proxy of school quality via the *My School* platform, the test causes "a refocusing on the basics of literacy", becoming "reductive in curricula terms" (Stobart, 2008, p. 116).

Conclusion

The tension between basic and other forms of literacy are not confined to the Australian Curriculum, and has been a point of concern amongst teachers, policy makers, and educational researchers for considerable time (Freebody, 2007; Gale & Cross, 2007; Snyder, 2008). However, this presentation argues that this trend has continued to evolve in the substance of the new Australian Curriculum, and it needs to be recognised how the Australian Curriculum adopts a seemingly progressive text to advance what is nevertheless an ultimate regression "back to basics".

This underlying basic orientation to literacy is powerful and seems difficult to shake, permeating the framework as a whole. The shaping document for the new Languages (other than English) area of the Curriculum, for example, also clearly asserts a pluralistic approach to litera*cies*, by confirming the contribution of other languages to the development of literacy more broadly. Yet the shaping document still closely adheres to a very basic focus in what it means to develop literacy within new languages; namely, "the ability to decode and encode from sound to written systems" (ACARA, 2011a, p. 17).

Basic skills are an important foundation for the development of literacy competence, but the current conceptualisation of literacy within the Australian Curriculum is one that provides space for a broader approach beyond the basics alone. However, the mixed messages in the Curriculum erode the clarity on how different approaches might best come together in practice to complement each other. The incongruence between its claimed and suggested messages needs to be resolved for the Curriculum to fulfil its ultimate potential.

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