

## Putting the Cart before the Horse: Interrogating Media Literacy Education in School English Lessons

Lynde TAN Lee Wee

*National Institute of Education, Singapore*

### Abstract

*Background:* In response to the changing demands of new times, media literacy has been incorporated into the current English Language Syllabus 2010 in Singapore. Although media literacy is mentioned in the syllabus, what this term means needs more clarification. What is clear from the current English Language Syllabus 2010 in Singapore is the notion of media literacy as skills only. When teachers rely on such a narrow perspective of media literacy without understanding how young people participate in the reading, viewing and production of media texts in their literacy practices, they may fall into the danger of putting the cart before the horse.

*Aims:* This paper argues that in order to effectively incorporate media literacy education in school literacy lessons, the learners must first be understood with all their ideological practices. Such a perspective argues for a social view of literacy to illuminate the situated nature of engagement with media texts. This means that how learners participate in media text production, what values they place in such text production and how they negotiate their participation in their media practices inside and outside school are necessary considerations for teachers to better understand their learners' engagement with media texts.

*Method:* The findings presented here are drawn from an ethnographic study of 10 adolescents' literacy practices in Singapore. In this paper, I focus only on a group of 5 students working together on a group school project that required them to recast Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in contemporary times using a 3D animated learning environment called *MediaStage*.

*Results:* When engaging in the production of a media text, young peoples' production practices problematize the purpose of incorporating media literacy education into the school English lessons.

*Conclusion:* This paper argues that a social view of literacy gives teachers more insights on the pedagogical implications of incorporating media literacy education into school English lessons than a narrow view of literacy as skills only.

**Key words:** media literacy, social view of literacy, text production

## 本末倒置：審視學校英文課的媒體素養教育

陳麗煒

新加坡國立教育學院

### 摘要

**背景：**為了適應新時代的變化與要求，新加坡在目前的英文課程提綱2010中融合了媒體素養教育。儘管課程提綱提到了媒體素養，但是這個名詞定義並不明確。顯然目前的課程提綱將媒體素養僅視為一種技能。如果教師僅依靠對媒體素養的粗淺理解而不瞭解學生在素養實踐中如何閱讀、觀看及創造媒體文本，這會帶來本末倒置的危險。

**目標：**本文認為，為了在學校語言課上更加有效地融合媒體素養教育，學習者必須先理解所有的意識形態的實踐。這種對素養的社會觀點可以闡明學習者與媒體文本互動時是有情境的。

**方法：**文中的結果來源於一個對於新加坡10個青少年進行的人種學研究。這篇文章是關注於在一個小組項目中的5個學生，這個專案要求他們使用名為MediaStage的一個三維動畫學習環境來在現今時代重塑馬克白的形象。

**結果：**學生們創造媒體文本的實踐為結合媒體素養教育于學校英文課提出了一些課題。

**結論：**本文認為，素養的社會觀點比狹隘的認為素養是技能的觀點可以更好地教師們瞭解在英文課中結合媒體素養教育的教學法含意。

**關鍵字：**媒體素養、素養的社會觀點、文本創造

The advent of digital media has increasingly put pressure on educators and literacy researchers to rethink the notion of literacy and deliberate on a literacy pedagogy that is appropriate for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. To respond aptly to changing notions of literacy, it is a common practice in some countries like the UK, Singapore and Australia to regulate access to literacy through the use of the national curriculum. Street (1995) uses the term *pedagogization of literacy* to refer to the “socially constructed link between institutionalised processes of teaching and learning and literacy” (p.106). It can be argued that pedagogization of literacy (Street, 1995) can take place through the national curriculum whereby what counts as literacy for schools is translated as literacy instruction and measurable skills to be taught by teachers. In this paper, I focus on how Singapore responds to the changing notions of literacy in its English Language curriculum, with specific attention drawn to media literacy. Using examples from my study on adolescents’ literacy practices; I argue that a social view of literacy gives teachers more insights on the pedagogical implications of incorporating media literacy education into school English lessons than a narrow view of media literacy as skills only.

### **Incorporating Media Literacy into the Singapore English Language Syllabus**

The current Singapore English Language Syllabus builds on its previous syllabus with a continuing emphasis to be a “Language Use Syllabus” and retains effective communication as the central focus point of its syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.7). By language use, it stresses on the use of language according to purpose, audience, context, culture and text types (Ministry of Education, 2001). What has been added to the current syllabus is the

development of “*media literacy and visual literacy* skills in the teaching of listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and representing” (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.9). Based on its emphasis on these skills, it can be argued that the current syllabus acknowledges that texts that students encounter today are no longer language dominant, that is, primarily based on the written language (Bearne, 2003; Coles & Hall, 2001; Kress, 2003; Millard, 2003). Language, therefore, becomes one of many semiotic resources for meaning making (Goodman, 1996; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Jewitt, Kress, Ogborn, & Tsatsarelis, 2000; Unsworth, 2008). Hence, it can be argued that the current syllabus is responding to the changing literacy demands in the new communication landscape by broadening its notion of literacy beyond the traditional four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to include media (and visual) literacy. Yet, the definition of media literacy offered by the current syllabus raises two key concerns (the same can be argued about visual literacy but my focus here is on media literacy).

First, with no explication of its underlying theoretical assumptions, the current syllabus offers a one-liner definition of media literacy as the “ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create information in a variety of forms and media” found in the glossary section of the syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.95). It is noted that this notion of media literacy is akin to that offered by the Center for Media Literacy (2003). Such a notion, as claimed by the Center for Media Literacy (2003), enables students to gain not only “knowledge about the content of contemporary media but perhaps more importantly, they learn and practice the skills needed to navigate one’s way in a global media culture” (p.28). Nonetheless, it is not clear whether media literacy is intended as

such in the way it is defined in the current English Language Syllabus in Singapore. Specifically, it is unclear whether media literacy is concerned with teaching and learning about the media or has it been misunderstood as teaching and learning through or with the media. This is a noteworthy point raised by Buckingham (2003c) in his argument on incorporating media education in school curriculum.

Second, I am reacting against the idea that media literacy, as with the notion of literacy, is understood as skills only in the context of teaching English Language in Singapore. Building on the seminal works of Scribner and Cole (1981), Heath (1983), Street (1995), Gee (1992), and Barton and Hamilton (1998), a body of literature has been established that points to the notion of literacy as social practices. This is a social view of literacy which Barton and Hamilton (1998) succinctly explain as such (p.7) :

- Literacy is best understood as set of social practices; these can be inferred from events which are mediated by written texts.
- There are different literacies associated with different domains of life.
- Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relationships, and some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others.
- Literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices.
- Literacy is historically situated.
- Literacy practices change, and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making.

When applied to media literacy education, this means that understanding media literacy as skills only implies that the essence of media literacy as cultural,

critical, transformative and creative is ignored (Burn & Durran, 2007b). In short, young people's everyday knowledge and uses of media have been discounted. For instance, Bortree's (2005) cited an example of an Iraqi teenage girl who wrote her blogs in English for audience beyond Iraqi while she continued with her practice of blogging using her native language for targeted local bloggers. In Bortree's (2005) study, the teenager's use of literacy was not for improving her competence in English or native language; Rather, her use of literacy was for identity construction to gain membership to particular social and cultural communities she would like to find herself in. I argue that such a use of literacy may not be one that teachers are in favour of if school English lessons are purported to meet the syllabus requirements with the goal of preparing students adequately for national examinations (Cheah, 1998; Sharpe & Gopinathan, 2002). Put it another way, there is a tension between young people's literacy practices and what counts as literacy and language learning in school. This paper highlights some of these tensions which bear pedagogical implications for teachers who are interested in incorporating media literacy education in their school English lessons.

In this paper, I add on to the body of literature that attends to what can be learnt from young people's everyday engagement with media texts in and out of school (e.g. Dyson, 2003; Robinson & Turnbull, 2005; Sefton-Green, 2006; Sefton-Green & Buckingham, 2003; Wan & Gut, 2008; Willett, Burn, & Buckingham, 2005). My intent is to raise pedagogical implications that teachers may wish to consider when incorporating media literacy education into their school English lessons. Because of space constraint, my way of achieving this in this paper is to first foreground the lived experience of young

people's engagement with media texts in their school literacy practices although some of their out-of-school literacy practices are mentioned when appropriate. I shall focus only on the creation of media texts which I argue is the tension point for incorporating media literacy education into the English curriculum in school.

### **The Study**

The data presented in this paper is drawn from my study on 10 adolescents' literacy practices in and out of school in Singapore. My research study on adolescent literacies is based on Barton and Hamilton's (1998) four aspects to an ethnographic perspective to studying literacy practices (p.57):

- i. It focuses on real-world settings;
- ii. Its approach is holistic, aiming at whole phenomena;
- iii. It draws on multiple methods of collecting data;
- iv. It is interpretive and aims to represent the participants' perspective

My data was collected from May 2007 to January 2008 and it drew from the main research methods in ethnography-participant observation, in-depth semi-structured group and individual interviews, and document analysis such as the adolescents' artefacts in their literacy practices (Papen, 2005). I also made use of my research participants' diaries (Jones, Martin-Jones, & Bhatt, 2000) and by extension, the students' blogs which served as their online journals. For this paper, I concentrate on a group of 5 Chinese students working on their group project in their school language arts lessons. These students were 14 years old when my research study was conducted and the students were high achievers academically. In the words of the

Singapore Ministry of Education, they were known to be "university bound" (Ministry of Education, 2002).

At the point of my research, the students were undergoing a series of lessons which constituted their multiliteracies curriculum within their language arts instruction (Tan, Bopry, & Guo, 2010; Tan & Guo, 2009). Specifically, the students and their language arts teacher were learning how to engage in a shared metalanguage to read and view multimodal texts, such as advertisements, websites and videos from the Web. These students learnt how to be critical readers/viewers of multimodal media texts by deconstructing the constructed message by the text producer (such as the intended audience of the message, the possible meanings of the message, the assumptions, perspectives and values of the text producer), and the techniques used by the text producer to act on them as readers/viewers.

In my study, the adolescent students were gradually positioned from text consumers to text producers. The students were tasked to recast Macbeth Act 1 Scene 7 in contemporary times. In addition, they had to cast their production based on a theme they had learnt from their Macbeth readings using a software called *MediaStage*. *MediaStage* is an animated environment with a range of backdrops, props, sounds, images, recording facilities, text-to-speech technology, lighting and camera work made readily available for creating 3D productions such as short films, television news, pop music video and other media production work. It was developed by Futurelab for the intended use of UK General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) Media Studies (Owen, 2003). This paper focuses on the "create" component of media literacy, as defined in the Singapore English Syllabus 2010. The discussion points raised in the next section focus on Zac, Sally,

Jay, Wendy and Xin who were working together to produce their MediaStage production as a group project in 4 weekly English lessons (or what the school called the language arts lessons) dedicated for this purpose.

### Media Production Versus the “Englishness” of Learning English

Burn and Durran (2007b) and Buckingham (2003c) suggest that media production is as equally important as reading and learning about the media in media literacy education. Many literacy researchers note the range of production skills demonstrated by the students which are impressive but have been underemphasized or unacknowledged by the school assessment systems (Burn, 2009b; Reid, Burn, & Parker, 2002; Sefton-Green, 2005). Others cite collaborative learning and creativity as desirable outcomes when young people engage with media production (e.g. Buckingham, 2003b; Loveless, 2002; Sinker, 2000). In this section of the paper, I would like to add on to these accounts of how complex the creation aspect of media literacy can be. The excerpt below shows the conversation among the focal group of students when they first started their discussion about what to do for their MediaStage production:

Sally: But then if we use chat shows, who are going to be the characters?

Jay: But if we use chat shows we cannot play any music.

Sally: That’s right. Chat shows cannot play music.

Zac: Can. Starting.  
[...]

Wendy: But if you do chat show let’s say you can bring Shakespeare back to life and

then if you ( ) (1.0s) whatever

Zac: How do you bring Shakespeare back to life?

The conversation presented here raises a number of tension points when media literacy education is incorporated into the English lessons:

#### What Counts as an Acceptable Text

From the excerpt shown above, the students were considering a few meaning making choices which were inevitable in creating a production. First, they were thinking about the genre for their production, specifically whether a chat show would be feasible. To answer that question, they had to consider what sorts of production choices could be realised, such as the characters to be featured and whether these characters could be depicted from the repository of characters available in the software, MediaStage. Second, there was also a consideration of whether their production could integrate with their out-of-school interests such as the music they listened to. Not shown in the excerpt, the conversations continued and the students grappled with the production choices related to the genre, the plot, issues of characterisation, and making connections of their production choices to the scene in their Macbeth reading. Subsequently, the students went on to discuss production choices that helped them to create an appropriate mis-en-scene, which involved the “careful planning of every single element in a shot to create a specific meaning” (Carter-Bland & Esseen, 2004, p. 28). These included selections of backdrops, set building, scripting dialogues, actions, movements and emotive states of the characters, setting of camera angles and lighting.

Eventually, the group of students decided to

anchor their MediaStage production on the theme of fate versus free will. The characters available in MediaStage were dressed in modern times, so were the majority of the props for set building. This forced the students to recast Macbeth in contemporary times. As with Macbeth whom some might argue as destined to murder the king to get the throne or others could have argued he made his prophesy come true, the group of students had to create the metaphor of fate versus free will in their modern production. After much deliberation, the group of students decided they wanted to portray a teenage girl who struggled to be a professional singer but with much disapproval from her mother. Below is the excerpt which shows Wendy's and Sally's explanations of their group production choices:

- Wendy: This one is like, erm, to show that she's a very normal teenager, ah. Then also has dreams.  
[...]
- Sally: But then she starts singing but her mother (.) discourages her because she//
- Wendy: //A lot of times//
- Sally: //The mother thinks that she's not cut out for singing.  
[...]
- Wendy: Yea. They don't like them having a singing career or something.

In this interview excerpt, it could be heard that the students indexed their classroom study of Macbeth and school production to their out-of-school lives. The identity of being an adolescent with dreams could be inferred from their MediaStage production and this was heard in the interview as well. Their

production choices also showed that the students leveraged on their cultural knowledge of membership from their everyday lives, specifically memberships in families and their relationships with their parents. The knowledge was commonsensical, tacit and shared as the students accounted for their production choices in the interview. It was the cultural knowledge that they had about the adolescents' world that was used to act on their targeted fellow classmates through their MediaStage production. It can be argued that this was how the students made the text-to-world connections or what Freire and Macedo (1987) might call "reading the world" (p.35).

When they made such a text-to-world connection, they benefited from the genre study, questioning of perspectives, characterisation study and other well-received benefits of including media studies in English lessons (C. Luke, 1997). Nonetheless, I contend that it may also invite resistance from teachers who prefer canon texts from the production work, rather than the lived culture represented in the students' production (Buckingham, 2003a, 2003b; Burn & Durran, 2007a, 2007b; A. Luke & Luke, 2001). Teachers may not appreciate how adolescents leverage on their identity as adolescents and their cultural practices as resources for the production work. The students' production based on their contemporary culture and negotiation of identity as adolescents may not provide the teachers with enough evidence of learning that has taken place.

In the case of the group of students I focus in this paper, the teacher did not find a strong connection between the students' production and the theme on fate versus free will which supposedly to be based on their reading of Macbeth. In the end, it was decided that their MediaStage production would not



be graded. As part of their school assessment of the subject English, the students' test scores on Macbeth Act 1 Scene 7 would be considered instead.

### What Counts as Writing

Creating a multimodal production using semiotic modes beyond language is not the same as writing a composition on paper although similar considerations such as cohesion, consideration of genre and register are involved in both forms of work. Jewitt (2006) argue that each semiotic mode has its own modal affordance, which she defines as "a way of thinking about what it is possible to express and represent easily with a mode" (p.25). From the students' MediaStage production, I inferred that they could manipulate various semiotic modes to mediate the perceptions of their targeted viewers. Creating a MediaStage production necessitates *transduction* as the process involved "shifts across modes" (Kress, 2003). Transduction attempted to make the verbiage work (the ideas generated in the group discussions) work visually. Instead of thinking only in words, they had to think in terms of images, actions, movements and sounds and how to put them together in a coherent way. The excerpt below shows the discussion the students had in considering the cohesion from screens to screens for their MediaStage production:

- Wendy: Ya, she's not supposed to walk to the house but suppose to sit on the bicycle.  
[...]
- Sally: Put her in the window.((Sally chuckled.)) Oh my god! (Very difficult.)
- Jay: Just put her in some house.

- Sally: It's like even if you put her//
- Wendy: //If you click on the window, then //
- Sally: //There
- Wendy Then we just put her in the house.
- Sally: You just put her here and then definitely she (will walk in).

Before their conversations shown in the excerpt, the students were thinking about having Charlotte, the protagonist in their production, travelling from one place to her house. There were ideas about her taking a car or a bus or riding a bicycle. In the end, the idea of her riding a bicycle was favoured. The students wanted their production choices in their MediaStage production to depict what they regarded as realistic actions i.e. the actions were close to that of a real person... They wanted Charlotte to ride her bicycle but realised that this could not be done technically in MediaStage. They changed their mind and wanted Charlotte to push her bicycle but this could not be done as well. In the end, they changed their mind and had in mind Charlotte sitting on her bicycle and then had it against the wall as an indication that she rode home from somewhere. They had in mind a girl walking through the door into her house but this was technically not possible in MediaStage.

Barthes (1978) called such cohesion the hinge points of a narrative or the catalysers which fill in the narrative space between sequences of scenes. This point was also raised by Burn in his work on adolescents' literacies when they used new media for creative production (as cited in Burn, 2009a). In creating a production like the MediaStage production, the students ended up in conversations about making and selecting production choices which were mainly extra linguistic, rather than the use of language which is argued as the dominant mode in

literate practices and assessment which are more valued than other semiotic modes of representation (Matthewman, Blight, & Davies, 2004; Ong, 1982; Tan et al., 2010; Tan & Guo, 2009). Upon studying the students' MediaStage production, the written language became less dominant even though there were dialogues included in their production. The kinds of writing done in MediaStage production (scripting of dialogues) for this group of students was not the same as an expository writing a teacher might expect whereby a student could argue about how fate versus free will could be a possible theme based on their reading of Macbeth. Such writing in MediaStage production was more like what Ivanic (2006) calls *wrighting* whereby "[p]eople's identities are constructed not only by their deployment of semiotic resources but also by the practices in which they participate" (p.20).

As discussed previously, the students draw upon their adolescent identity and membership from different social and cultural practices, such as families, as resources for their production. The text and the semiotic modes that they employed in their production bespoke of their dispositions that were acquired over time through participation in social contexts and which inclined them to act and react in certain habitual ways. It could be argued that their MediaStage production carried with them each of their individual histories and experiences with media texts from their everyday practices. For instance, in my individual interview with Xin, I learnt that Xin made a point to read Harry Potter books before she watched Harry Potter movies. She could articulate the difference between Harry Potter movies and story books to me in my individual interview with her. She could cite examples of how lighting and music could exude the sense of fear in Harry Potter movies.

When I asked her if she had found the lessons about reading multimodal (media) texts useful for her production work, she admitted that she relied more on her commonsensical knowledge of how to produce such texts from her everyday out-of-school literacy practices, such as watching movies and videos from the Web. Xin also had the habit of writing blogs in her out-of-school literacy practices. When I studied her blog posts, there were not only words but emoticons, MSN language, pictures and music posted in her blog - the sort of wrighting using a range of semiotic modes in MediaStage productions, except that the genre, register, purpose and semiotic resources are different.

If media literacy is viewed as skills only with the intent to meet the language syllabus requirements, the representation foregrounded in media texts like the MediaStage production the group of students did is not going to add value to the process of teaching and learning that has the intention to fulfil only the language examination requirement. How students use media and various semiotic modes to represent their identity and build social alliance with other people through media texts is not valued and measured by media literacy education that places a premium on only literacy skills. In short, their everyday practices of engaging with media texts may not count as learning to teachers who are obligated to teach only the skill sets delineated in the syllabus.

### **What Sort of Media Literacy Counts**

As suggested in the previous sections, there is a deep concern that only media literacy skills delineated in the syllabus counts as literacy. Students' out-of-school literacies involving the media texts have been marginalised and perhaps may be labelled as *vernacular* (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Such a



dominant view of (media) literacy as skills only is also embedded in the students' belief on incorporating media literacy education in English lessons.

For instance, in my group interview with the students, the students could relate their production work to the learning of English. It could be inferred that Xin claimed that the production skills could hone her composition writing skills. She suggested creating a MediaStage production was like writing a composition because she had to think about ways to affect people's perspective and constructing the message. She also claimed that by doing the MediaStage production, she had understood the Macbeth text better. Writing a report on how the group made their production choices was like the other report writing she did for her English lessons. She had to be correct in her grammar and know how to put her thoughts into words appropriately. There were similar claims made by the others in the group interview which point to my argument that these students had developed a certain identity to the curricular content (Wortham, 2004). By this, I meant that it could be inferred from the students' interviews that good English learners were those who were good at reading comprehension, writing and grammar. It can be argued that the students' voices imply that media literacy education is sanctioned as part of their English lessons if and only if their traditional language skills are honed in the process of learning about media.

### Conclusion

This paper argues that a social view of literacy gives teachers more insights on the pedagogical implications of incorporating media literacy education into school English lessons than a narrow view of literacy as skills only. From the examples

drawn from an ethnographic study of adolescent literacies, there was a concern that young people's literacy practices bring tension to how media literacy education might be incorporated into school English lessons. Nonetheless, without the knowledge of the young people's literacy practices, English teachers may fall into the danger of putting the cart before the horse. In considering ways of incorporating media literacy education into the English curriculum, it may be wise to meditate upon Beinstein's (1990) argument that "the culture of the child must first be in the consciousness of the teacher" (p.46).

### Note:

1. More detailed clarifications of what media literacy means may be communicated to Singapore teachers in restricted documents or through professional development sessions provided by the Singapore Ministry of Education. Nonetheless, at the point of writing this paper, the only public access to the notion of media literacy intended by the Singapore Education Ministry is found in their online version of the current English Language Syllabus 2010
2. The transcription shown in the excerpts have been edited to ensure intelligibility of the spoken language by the students. I followed the transcription conventions recommended by Freebody (2003):  
 (.) short pause  
 (x.0) pause for x seconds  
 // interrupted utterances  
 ( ) untranscribable utterances  
 (talk) transcriber's best guess of hard-to-transcribe utterances
3. Because of space constraint, I use [...] to show omissions of the group talk in order to focus on my selection of the excerpt that is of relevance to my point of discussion.

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### Arthur:

Lynde TAN Lee Wee  
National Institute of Education, Singapore  
[lynde.tan@nie.edu.sg]

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