

Textual diversity: Who needs it?

Literacy and textual diversity: English as Cultural Studies Strand keynote address, IFTE, Melbourne, 7 July 2003

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ABSTRACT: This paper argues the value of cultural studies for English/literacy education. It draws on a longitudinal study of one boy's literacy learning between school grades 3 and 6. Examples of the textual diversity of Joseph's hybrid visual-verbal texts produced during that time are used to develop two main points. First, I suggest that some children who are not highly successful at school (as measured by standardised tests) are nonetheless accomplished users and producers of a diverse range of cultural artifacts or texts. Secondly, I explore the proposition that adopting a cultural studies approach to the English/literacy curriculum might enable teachers to design a more inclusive curriculum.

KEYWORDS: Literacy and popular culture, hybrid literacies, cultural studies and education, inclusive literacy curriculum, classroom-based research.

THE RELEVANCE OF CULTURAL STUDIES

A question we asked in our strand at the IFTE conference in July 2003 is: Why is cultural studies important for English/literacy education? One reason is that cultural forces such as the global cultural economy, and public policies which are infusing ICTs in the home, work and school, are in many places shaping a “new landscape of communication” and “new learning environments”. The practice of cultural studies can help us to reflect on how we are positioned by these cultural forces and how they shape our work as teachers. It can also help us to understand how these forces intersect with the reading, writing and other meaning-making practices of our students, and in turn, perhaps make this the subject of our curriculum.

A second reason why cultural studies is important is that it explores the politics of unequal power relations within everyday life. Its early exponents had a commitment to studying the politics of education, and a commitment to the education of the less privileged (Threadgold, 1995). For many years now the field has helped educators to grapple with some of the educational implications of class, race and gender politics.

Of particular interest to this strand was the fact that the school English/literacy curriculum had inherited from cultural studies the displacement of literature by the concept of text (see Eagleton, 1985; Easthope, 1991). This has led to an expansion in the repertoire of texts our students are allowed to read in school – at least in some states and in some year levels.

However, less attention has been paid by cultural studies and within literacy education to two things:

- 1) the textual diversity of children's writing and production, and how this might be particularly important for children who have been marginalized within schooling
- 2) the limitations of the concept of "text" when it comes to understanding children's engagements with the media (e.g. Darley, 2000; Green, 2003; Morgan, 1996). Bob Morgan (1996), for example, has long argued the inadequacy of reducing complex media events to textuality, and I think we need to continue to explore this point.

In this paper I will address the first point – the textual diversity of children's writing.

TEXTUAL DIVERSITY OF CHILDREN'S CULTURAL WORLDS

Studies of children's cultural worlds show that from the very early years through to adolescence, children engage with a diverse range of texts. In one UK study Jackie Marsh (2003) notes that the literacy diary of a four-year-old British girl (kept by her parents) shows that over a four-week period she engaged with computer games, games manuals, magazines aimed at older readers, two books and many televisual texts. In places like Australia, Europe, the UK and North America, this is a common pattern. Television is the most watched medium, most children spend some time on computers, and many adolescents say that they would spend more time on the internet if they could (Knowledge Networks, 2002).

What is particularly interesting – and this perhaps goes against the grain for many English/literacy teachers – is that children rarely see a dichotomy between print and media texts. Rather, children move seamlessly from one mode to another in their quest for meaning-making (cf. Robinson, 1997), as they establish their social identities and social relations with others. On this point, the work of David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green has been particularly important (e.g. Buckingham, 1993, 2000; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994). Thus children engage in a rich semiotic world in which texts of many kinds are conceptually linked (cf. Kress, 2000).

THE TEXTUAL DIVERSITY OF CHILDREN'S WRITTEN TEXTS

Research with children in the early years shows that they learn to write by producing hybrid visual-verbal texts. Because drawing is understood to inform the writing process (Millard & Marsh, 2001), children of this age are encouraged to develop their visual representations.

However, our research shows that at a certain point in the middle primary years, children are no longer encouraged to develop their visual representations as a means for future communication use (Comber et al., 2002). Rather, teachers in these years tend to privilege "continuous, uninterrupted prose texts" (Millard & Marsh, 2001, p. 55). However, the lack of official encouragement in school does not stop some children from continuing to demonstrate textual diversity in their writing. My point is that we need to look more closely at the textual diversity of what children write and produce.

This may be particularly important for two reasons:

1. If it is true that in today's cultural conditions the visual mode of communication is becoming more dominant than it has been in relation to the verbal mode of communication (Kress, 1997), then children of *all ages* are more likely to communicate using the visual mode, and
2. the encouragement of the visual elements of communication and hybrid visual-verbal texts may be particularly important for children who are marginalized in schools, or seen to be failing in schools, because of a perceived lack of facility with the printed word.

A CASE FROM A LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH STUDY

I want to illustrate this point using some written texts produced by Joseph, a school-card holder who was a case study child in a longitudinal study of children aged 7 to 11 years which we conducted between 1997 and 2000 in three South Australian schools located in communities living with poverty (Comber et al., 2002).¹

With colleagues Barbara Comber, Jenny Barnett and Lynne Badger from the University of South Australia, and Jane Pitt from the Department of Education and Children's Services in South Australia, I explored different children's take up of the literacy curriculum on offer to them in three or four years of their middle primary schooling. We observed children across a range of learning areas and during one unit of work each year. We also interviewed their teachers and the students themselves about their interests and their reading, writing and computing practices. The range of writing we collected in this school most often included spelling lists and pages of "speed writing" or "power writing" – bursts of writing produced quickly in short, time bursts.

As early as grade 3, Joseph was considered to be "at risk" in relation to literacy achievement. According to the standardized test known in Australia as the Year Three "Basic Skills Test (BST): Aspects of Literacy", Joseph "required considerable assistance in literacy". Between grades 3 and 6, Joseph was also rated poorly by his teachers in speaking and writing. According to their assessments, he needed to learn to speak up in class and group work, improve his spelling, and learn to write more quickly and in greater quantities.

However, this focus in his report cards on suggested areas for improvement masks the textual diversity we found in Joseph's work samples collected for our study. In this paper I can only gesture towards this diversity to be found in texts other than spelling lists and speed writing. However, I will describe typical examples we collected from each year level to give a sense of how this different kind of visual-verbal writing

¹ The study, *Socio-economically disadvantaged students and the development of literacies in school: A longitudinal study*, was a collaborative research project (no. C79804522) between the Commonwealth Literacy Program Team, in the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) and the Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures, University of South Australia between 1998 and 2000. The research was jointly funded by a grant from DETE and an Australian Research Council (ARC) Strategic Partnership with Industry Research Partners scheme. The views herein do not necessarily represent the views of DETE SA (now DECS SA).

persisted in all the learning areas, even after the early years of schooling, and wherever Joseph could manage it – even where it had not been asked for encouraged.

Example 1: Year 3 – “This is a map of my room” (Project – Me in My World).

Joseph was 7 years old when he produced this drawing. This sequence of work involved locating his suburb on a page in a street directory, drawing a picture of his house, doing a floor plan of his house, and then drawing this “map of my room” (see figure 1). The boy depicted in this text is presumably Joseph, but this map has been made from the perspective of someone looking down on the room. This kind of drawing is common among children in the early years and there is probably nothing very remarkable about it when considered on its own.

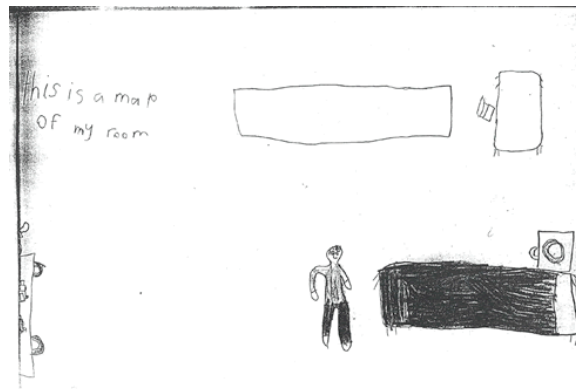


Figure 1.

Example 2: Year 4 – Fish farming (Project –Oceans)

From looking at many samples of his writing, we learn that Joseph was a keen fisherman. This perhaps explains why the writing he produced during a Year 4 project on Oceans was very carefully done. It included many drawings of fish and people fishing, and

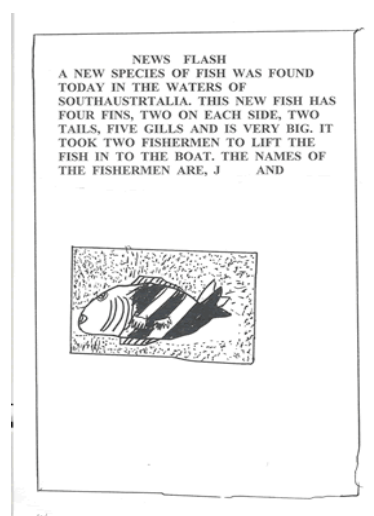


Figure 2.

included visual and written details of boats and fishing nets, and so on. That year his mixed Year 4/5 class was also spending time on computers so much of the work in this project was word processed rather than hand-written (see figure 2).

In the second example from this unit (see figure 3) – which is very typical of the texts he produced – what interests me is that the visual element is more than an illustration. The size of the drawing of the drift net serves to emphasise the written meaning of the text that “drift nets endanger fish.” Joseph’s drawing of the boat includes a typically whimsical feature: the steam from the funnel of the boat forms a large cloud that floats very close up to the word-processed letters of the word “shouldn’t”. Examples like this show how some of Joseph’s writing uses visual metaphor, combines print text with visual images, and combines computing with drawing. It is very much a hybrid of modes.

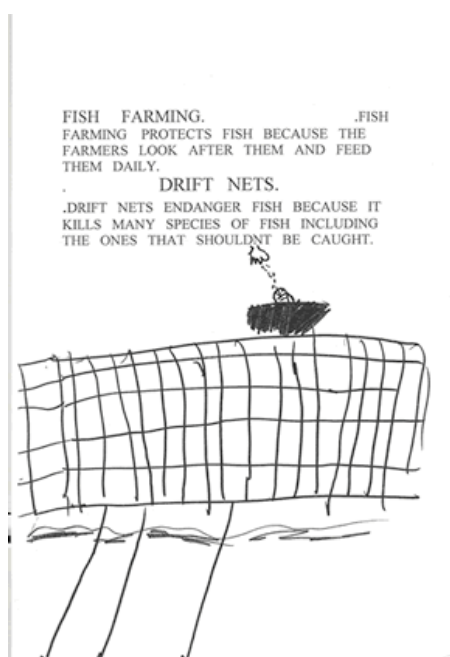


Figure 3.

Another element which is not obvious from the reproduced classroom artifacts is the importance of the *material* aspects of these texts such as the kind of pen or pencil used, the colour and texture of the markings, and so on. You can see how this spilled over into his story writing where he uses different tools of inscription (Ormerod & Ivanic, 2002) such as felt pens to add drama and texture to his pieces (see figure 4).

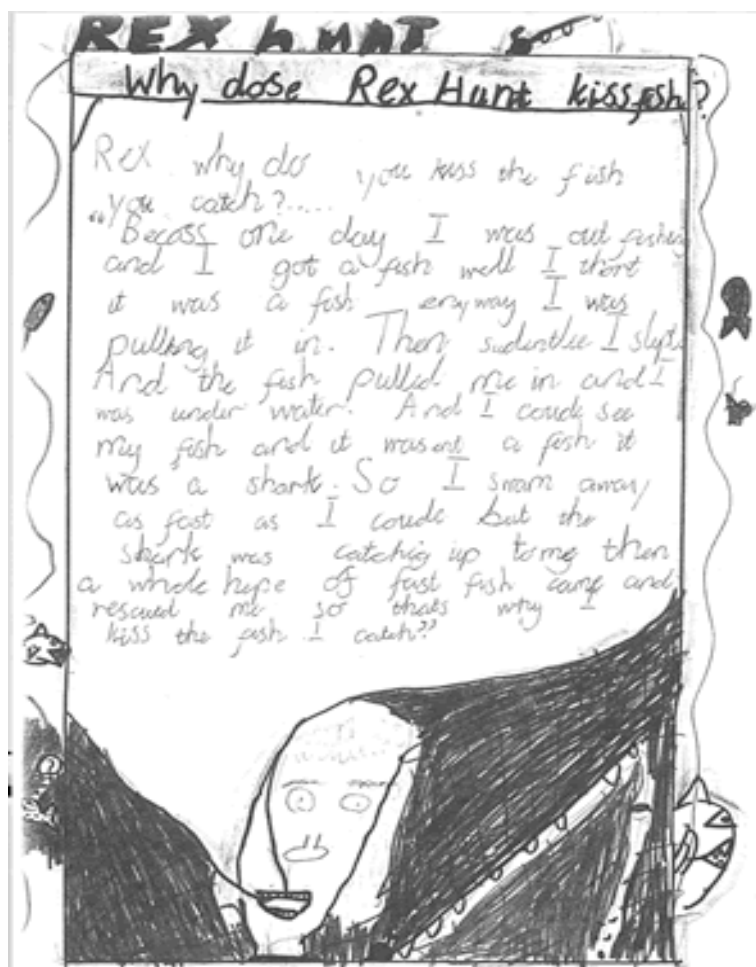


Figure 4.

Opportunities to draw and to use computers in his writing obviously meant a lot to Joseph who wrote in his end of year report that: “I am good at art and using documents on the computer, like Claris Works, Kid Pix and Art Work for kids. I know how to use the internet and CD ROMs”. The trouble for Joseph was that at this time these things did not “count” as literate competencies and indicators of successful literacy achievement.

Example 3: Year 5 – Teacher for sale and Translog (Unit of work - Advertising)

When he was 9 years old and in Year 5 Joseph produced a number of very interesting pieces during a unit of work on advertising.

The first is an ad (see figure 5) for the sale of his teacher, Mrs D. “She teaches smart and she does your daily jobs”. At a cost of \$35.95 a buyer could save herself \$15 and would also get “free a whole pencil case full of pens and pencils and all her accessory (sic). If you are not happy with in 6 months will return it.” Here Joseph shows that he understands this kind of text because he is able to reproduce its features.

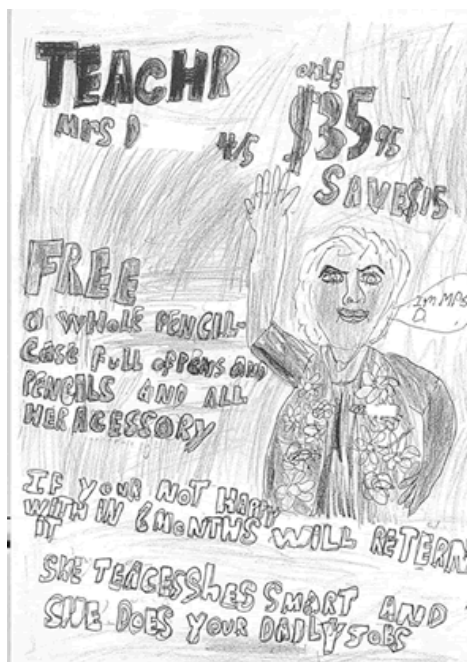


Figure 5.

The second piece is an ad for a translog (see figure 6), an invented product, which – as you can see by the logo – is made in Australia. It comes with a free solar-powered calculator. The key feature of the translog is that it “Makes your life a lot easier” by acting as a “detector for anything”, including metal, burglars, robbers, hijackers and home invaders.

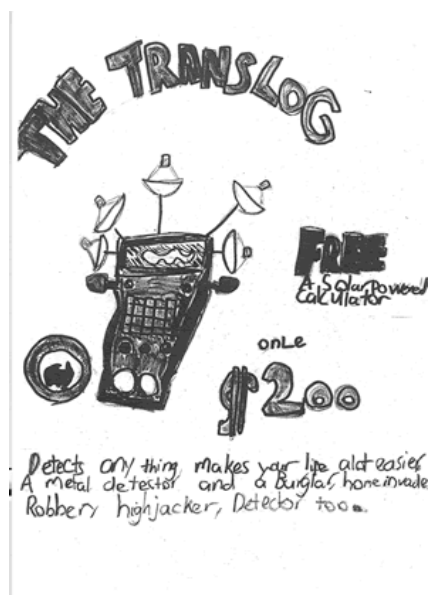


Figure 6.

This kind of hybrid mode of writing produced during the unit on advertising allowed Joseph to demonstrate his knowledge about popular culture and the language of television and print advertising. It also allowed him to be inventive, and to use visual metaphor and other skills to express his sense of humour, a quality that was generally rendered invisible in the classroom by the dominant perception among his teachers that he did not talk much or “speak up” in class.

Example 4: Year 6 –House of the future (Project – City and House of the Future)

Finally, in Year 6 a cross-curriculum project about future city planning and housing was conducted across the learning areas of Studies of Society and Environment, English, Technology and Maths. In English it involved producing a written argument for the location of a future section of the city to be presented orally to the class. In Technology it involved producing a design for “your future house” (see figure 7). This design draws on Joseph’s familiarity with advertising and integrates that with his interest in gadgets. His imagined future house includes such innovative conveniences as fold-up beds and a food transporter.

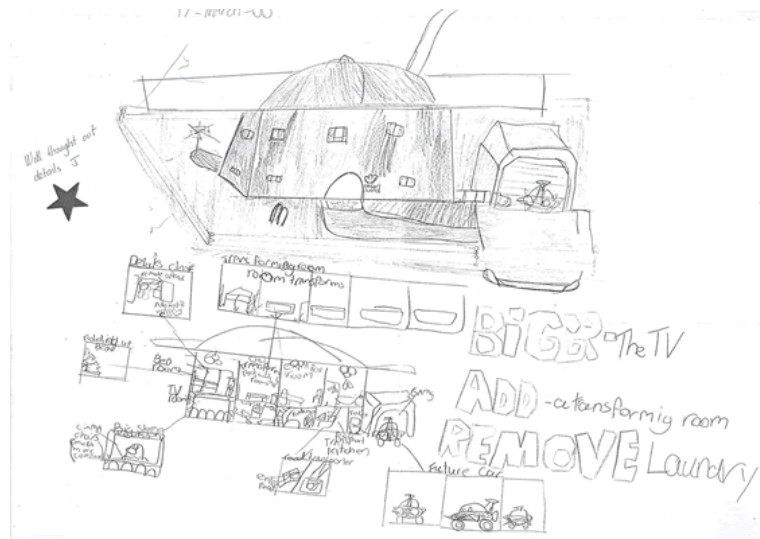


Figure 7.

It also includes a fancifully named “transforming room” that presumably becomes whatever you want it to be at the time. In the future house, some of the objects and their descriptions incorporate terms from advertising or from Joseph’s own leisure-time pursuits: the “deluks closet” that is “remote open” (original spelling); and the TV room that has “big skren cinema TV” and “cinma chairs” that are “much more comfatable” (original spelling). There is also a “future car” which is drawn from three different views – front, rear and side-on – as could be found in an advertising brochure for an expensive car.

Joseph’s imagination and attention to detail came together very productively when he was doing these kinds of tasks which gave him the freedom to build on his interests, to imagine and to speculate, and to draw on his broad knowledge of gadgets and machinery, popular culture and his fanciful worlds of the imagination.

One thing to notice is that these examples are generally taken from “project work” which is an important site for the study of children’s culture because:

- it seems to engage the children’s own interests and enthusiasms
- it spans the divide between home and school
- it puts children more in control of their own work

- it allows for much greater variety of approach than more traditional schoolwork (Ormerod & Ivanic, 2002)².

ASSESSING JOSEPH'S LITERACY ACHIEVEMENTS

As I have already noted, Joseph was assessed as having considerable difficulties in literacy. His poor spelling, supposedly small volume of written work, and his reluctance to speak up in oral work were cited each year in his report cards as the main reason for this.

However, part of our political project as researchers was to look closely at what Joseph *could* do rather than at what he could *not*, and then to try to foreground this as a counter to the deficit discourse that was beginning to build up around children like him. We also wanted to think about whether and how these non-valued practices might be made more *visible* in the classroom and more highly *valued* in assessments of the child and his achievements.

One way of doing this is to emphasise Joseph's keen interest and competence in drawing, painting, model-building and computing. As early as Year 3, at a time when schools did not have many computers, he showed a facility with text-based computer-mediated modes such as email, as well as graphics-based computer programs such as Kid Pix.

His teachers certainly noted that by Year 3 he could "use a number of computer programs for illustrating, labelling, mapping and word processing". This fits remarkably well with comments on his Year Three "Basic Skills Test (BST): Aspects of Literacy" which noted that he "did better on questions about pictures, labels and headings than on questions from the main part of the text" in reading.

This points to the fact that the visual media, including computers, may have offered lots of potential for the development of Joseph's future communicative competence. There might have been considerable pay-off for Joseph if this textual diversity was encouraged into and beyond the middle primary years, although we are unable to say whether this is indeed what happened for him.

CONCLUSION

My argument has been that studies of the cultures of schooling, and studies of children's culture and their culturally acquired resources, are both important sources of information for English/literacy educators. In particular, when taken together, such studies can assist us to see "some of the ways in which our current system of schooling is foreclosing on children's culturally acquired resources for communicating meanings to others" (Millard & Marsh, 2001, p. 50). We have a good deal of evidence now that foreclosing on these resources has differential effects on

² Of course in today's classrooms some three years later, a larger proportion of this kind of writing produced by children is likely to be computer-generated.

different children, and for some children, exacerbates their experience of marginalization and failure in school.

For example, studies of writing in the early years show clear gender differences “in the way in which drawing relates to the written word” (Millard & Marsh, 2001, p. 57) In a UK study by Millard and Marsh, boys:

used drawing to portray key events and action in their work ... [They] used graphics as a means of enhancing printed text and they appeared to have an implicit understanding of the role usually played by pictures in illustrated stories (p. 58).

They [also] embedded drawings or diagrams within their texts, conceiving graphics more dynamically as part of the overall design (p. 60)

Further, this study found that “more boys than girls are uncomfortable with the current discipline of writing imposed in school” (p. 60).

It is paradoxical that boys should be feeling uncomfortable about and failing in school because of this, at a time when the new work order and the information economy are supposedly valuing the same kinds of attitudes and skills – using graphics to enhance communication and conceiving graphics as a dynamic part of design.

A related and important finding from studies of children’s culture is that many children construct their representations from an “intertextual patchwork” of representations found in other sources (Ormerod & Ivanic, 2002, p, 84). Anne Haas Dyson’s finely-grained ethnographic work in US classrooms, for example, demonstrates the complexity of children’s appropriation of the media in their school writing, and the social work that goes on alongside this.

However, researchers’ close observations of how children make representations of their world, and how they choose to make sense of their social and cultural contexts, needs to be coupled with greater flexibility in *responding* to what they create, and an acknowledgement of complex achievements in *diverse forms* of writing as well as in modes *other than* traditional print writing.

There are several points to be emphasized here:

1. It is important that we find ways to make sure that *all* children experience feeling “at home” in the semiotic landscape (Millard & Marsh, 2001). This means allowing and encouraging not only the *reading* of a diverse range of texts, but also the *writing* of them.
2. For some children, this might mean giving them permission to produce a range of hybrid visual-verbal texts way beyond the early years.
3. It may also mean providing a great deal *more* access to the means of production of digital texts than has been the case so far within schooling.
4. In political terms, it would require teachers and teacher-educators to continue to work with colleagues and with school communities and education departments to explore and debate what can be *identified* and should *count* as indicators of literate competence in today’s world. It would require a larger proportion of us taking seriously the idea that important literate competencies today include more than reading and writing print texts, and exploring what

curriculum and teaching and assessment would look like if they were genuinely built around an understanding that modes of meaning-making are changing, multiple and fluid.

In conclusion, it might be helpful for us to think about the experience that a boy like Joseph brings with him to Year 7, and to imagine what he is likely to find in the middle school English curriculum. What kind of writing will be encouraged there? What kinds of practices *around* writing will be fostered and tolerated? And, most importantly, what might be the potential consequences of what happens there for Joseph and his future? Cultural studies of both schooling and children's culture have a potentially powerful role to play in ensuring that such questions continue to be explored.

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