Editorial

This special theme issue of the Malaysian Journal of Distance Education provides a forum for multiple engagements with the relationships (or lack thereof) between cultural and linguistic diversity and new information communications technologies, in the context of distance education policies and practices in contemporary postcompulsory education in the Asia Pacific region. The starting point for these engagements is understanding and interrogating the concept of 'multiliteracies', most commonly associated with the New London Group, so-called because of a meeting of group members in New London, New Hampshire, USA in September 1994 that resulted in a seminal paper in the Spring 1996 issue of the Harvard Educational Review (http://www.alea.edu.au/multilit.htm, retrieved November 15, 2003).

In their synthesis of the concept, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis (1996) argued that "The term 'Multiliteracies' highlights two of the most important, and closely related changes" associated with contemporary transformations of personal and public lives, cultures and communication practices. "The first is the growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity". "The second major shift encompassed in the concept of Multiliteracies is the influence of new communications technologies" (http://www.alea.edu.au/multilit.htm, retrieved November 15, 2003, n.p.).

From this perspective, the concept of 'multiliteracies' functions as a theoretical navigational tool for examining and evaluating current distance education provision in formal postcompulsory education. Specifically, multiliteracies constitute a set of conceptual and methodological lenses for addressing the following key questions:

- Which new communication technologies are used to provide distance education in postcompulsory education, and how are those technologies understood and valued by different groups of stakeholders?
- To what extent, and in what ways, do the new communication technologies facilitate and/or inhibit the valuing of cultural and linguistic diversity in universities and colleges?
- How useful and/or limited are multiliteracies as a means of understanding and engaging with ongoing changes in the distance education policies and practices of such institutions?

In seeking to address these questions, the issue is directed also at considering some of the broader implications of multiliteracies that extend beyond either the higher education or the vocational education and training sectors of postcompulsory education. That is, multiliteracies might well help to map and make sense of the globalised and localised dimensions of distance education in countries in the Asia Pacific region, where the intersecting fault lines of information communications technologies and social diversity take on specific forms and particular significance.

Central to our understanding of multiliteracies is the premise that meaning is generated in social and cultural contexts and it is expressed through texts.   Accordingly, there is no one literacy: rather there are multiple literacies (including numeracy) which vary across times and places,

cultures and social groups. Our investigations are predicated upon the notion that it is in and through the practices of our social lives that we appropriate and/or learn different ways of using language and technology. In other words, the uses made of languages and technologies are socially constructed or coordinated practices that occur within differing cultural milieux. The ways of thinking about the intellectual knowledge and skills that are needed to engage in these social practices is identified as the pedagogical work in which all authors in this issue engage.

James Gee (1996) stated that:

> ...When we write or read, speak or listen, we coordinate and are coordinated by specific identities, specific ways of using language, various objects, tools, technologies, sites and institutions, as well as other people's minds and bodies... (p. 6).

Thus the technologies, language and mathematical processes that we use to engage in living in society are given meaning only if they are located within the cultural contexts in which they occur. Furthermore, this means that, as we grow through childhood to adolescence and then adulthood, we become members of an increasingly wide range of social groups. In some instances, it may be common for us to be members of social groups within different cultures, each with its own history, language and ways of thinking, feeling and relating to one another.

> ...Culture may be described as the ideas, customs, skills, arts and tools which characterise a given group of people in a given period of time... (Emmitt & Pollock, 1997, p. 47).

Conceptually, the notion of 'literacies' celebrates the linguistic and cultural diversities of socially human interactions, while the notion of 'multiliteracies' facilitates a conceptual extension to include the multiple modes and media of communication through which these interactions are mediated. It is this latter consideration in particular that has long been the focus of concern for educators working in the field of distance education.

One of the acknowledged architects of earlier industrialised, Fordist models of distance education, Otto Peters (2000), has signalled new pedagogical possibilities and opportunities presented by digital learning environments. It is our contention that the pedagogy is in the text, whether the 'text' be: a face-to-face lecture/tutorial/workshop; audiovisual streams to television sets or computer screens; hyperlinks to electronic networks; print-on-paper learning guides, journal articles or books; or a/synchronous computer mediated communications among individuals, small groups or whole communities of professional practices. The articles in this issue take us into an evolving world of pedagogical possibilities that to varying degrees, each with its idiosyncratic theoretical framework, use the concept of 'multiliteracies' in combinations and integrations of a range of presentation methods, multisensory teaching/learning, social interactions and learning support systems (Peters, 2000).

In the first article, Pandian reports the findings of a study that examined teachers' perceptions towards literacy and technology in their workplace environments, as well as their personal lives, in Malaysia. In the second article, Fleming and Cribb critically reflect upon the design of a digital learning environment for teachers-in-training who were being prepared for the new

technologies and languages of their new workplaces. Scown's transformative work in the third article examines the development of a pedagogy of critique as a model for a multiliteracy approach to studies in the field of change management. Windeknecht's analysis in the fourth article examines the assessment operations and social interactions of linguistically and culturally diverse groups in a virtual learning environment.

In the fifth article, Sutton provides an entrée into simulated electronic worlds of work in a range of vocational areas and, like Windeknecht, recognises explicitly the facilitative role of teachers and the changing responsibilities of learners. Walker-Gibbs's theoretical work in the sixth article offers a new view of the notion of multiliteracies itself through a post–Literacy framing of multimodal learning and teaching in a primary school. In the seventh article, McNaught provides an insightful analysis of the environment of change in which institutions are operating in these new times with a view of Australian universities from an Asian location.

Our own paper responds to and synthesises selected aspects of all seven preceding articles. Here we use the concept of multiliteracies to challenge and expand current thoughts on the field of distance education. We hope that all the papers in this special theme issue will generate interest, new thinking and discussions in the minds of readers.

References

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