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New Times, New Literacies

Why do we need to think about literacy in new ways?

The world continues to change

socially

- changing societal structures in a shrinking world
- increasing social and cultural diversity
- increased marketing of ideas and products through multimedia

technologically

- globalisation of economies, cultures and workplaces
- new information and communication technologies
- literacy is no longer print-based
- media influence reaching into homes, leisure sites and workplaces
- increasing use of still and moving images and other semiotic systems

economically

- multiple occupations throughout one's working life
- changing demands upon literacy skills and behaviours
- knowledge economy

There is a need to think about literacy for lifelong learners in new ways. We need to equip students with the ability to combine and recombine existing and new literacy skills in different ways, for new purposes and with new technologies. Critical literacy skills are also essential.

... being a child, being an adolescent and, indeed, becoming literate, have changed in some fundamental ways. The tool kit of basic skills that served many of us well in the 1950s is inadequate today.

—*Literate Futures: Report*, p. 7.

The literacy tool kit of the 1950s was concerned with the technologies of print on paper because literacy was defined as reading and writing alphabetic texts, some of which contained illustrations or photos. The focus of literacy teaching and learning was on interpreting the one meaning of the printed word. Reading visual images, and the influence of page layout on meaning, were seldom considered. This restricted literacy tool kit suited people in a world where jobs were secure and only basic literacy skills with the technologies of the day were required.

New communication technologies, globalised economies and world cultures are altering—and will continue to alter—the ways in which we live and work. A large percentage of Queenslanders of the future will be employed in service- and information-based sectors, using a variety of language and literacy skills to manage information, to communicate, and to construct and participate in a range of social relationships. They will almost certainly have more than one occupation in their lifetime, and the technologies of the literacies that they use will continue to change. They will interact routinely with different cultures and languages, and with different communities, states and countries.

Predictably, there will also be increasing social diversity in Queensland, not only in culture, ethnicity and language, but also in patterns of poverty and exclusion, whereby specific groups will be unable to access the new economies and technologies. A number of indicators suggest that up to 1 in 4 Queensland school children live in poverty. These children live in a range of locations from the inner city to remote Indigenous communities, and may include refugee students whose first language is not English; Indigenous children attending a community school and learning English as a second dialect; children with unemployed parents from professional backgrounds, and children in a rural town whose parents are, for example, itinerant fruit pickers. This spread of life and literacy experiences highlights the need to understand and address the differences between students' home-community backgrounds and school literacies through localised responses to the needs of these students.



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Change will continue to be significant in the lives of all Queenslanders. The question concerning educators is *What is the impact of such changes on literacy, reading, communication and social skills?* We may predict that some will benefit from the change but, unless literacy education itself changes, others will increasingly be excluded. Certainly the basic literacy tool kit of the 1950s is no longer adequate. Some aspects of change, and its effects on literacy, especially reading, are examined in the following sections.

Print is only one of many technologies available for communication, and as technologies continually change, so do printed texts. Many texts are constructed to work across **platforms**—consider, for example, the text of a TV program guide printed in a newspaper, displayed on a TV screen and viewed on a website. While these texts essentially look the same, they are produced to be used in different ways that call for different literate and social behaviours. The TV program guide printed in the newspaper is not **interactive** and has only program and time information, although there may be an adjacent feature article about a program or star. The TV program guide on the website is **nonlinear** and therefore has the capacity to be **interactive**, with links from the listed programs to homepages where links in turn offer the user access to further information. The texts on any of these websites may include still and moving images or music, as well as images of word-based print, and offer the user the opportunity to respond in writing, or to download and **construct** and **reconstruct** visual, musical or written texts for their own purposes. There may also be links to related shopping sites through which merchandise and magazines can be purchased.

Advances in communication technology and travel have created a ‘smaller’ world in which social and political upheavals can directly affect our working lives, domestic routines and leisure pursuits. Individuals may interact daily with different social, cultural, religious and ethnic groups. Such interactions may occur face to face, through print, through digital electronics such as email and the Internet, or other technologies such as film, that may now be an everyday part of most people’s workplace, domestic and leisure life. Changes in communication technology allow individuals to be involved at a distance in events in other locations—for example, through television, by mobile phone or email.

What is the impact of such changes on literacy, reading, communication and social skills? It is now necessary to master the increasing range of technologies available. This means understanding that information is delivered on a range of digital platforms such as computer, **DVD** and **Playstation 2**. Each platform has developers, users and an API (application programming interface); an API has the capacity to run applications such as word processors, databases and games. Therefore it is also necessary to learn the different codes and conventions associated with both the platform hardware and software.

Because individuals are interacting more often with different social and cultural groups, they need to know more about appropriate ways of communicating and behaving within and between these groups. Thus their social behaviours and literate behaviours become intertwined.

Pedagogical thought

Think about your students’ literacy practices and experiences. Are they using technologies and software at home that you have not used yourself? Are there technologies in your school curriculum that have been superseded? If so, think about why you might or might not use them as part of your literacy program.

Do the technologies used in your classroom engage your students in similar or different tasks and technologies to those prevalent in their community and home life?

What are the real-life purposes for using these technologies? What social and literate skills and knowledge do students need to have to be able to use these home and school technologies in real-life contexts?

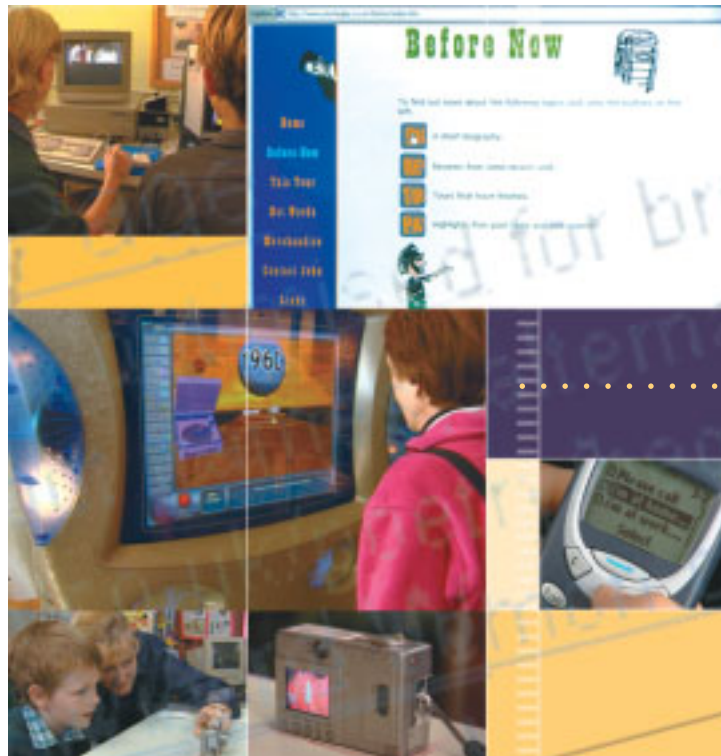
Social change

In periods of upheaval and change there are often calls for a return to times when (so the perception was) there was one set of largely-shared community values and conventions. The 1950s is often constructed as such a time. The dominant values of that period were often conveyed through television programs depicting 'well-balanced' families, through escapist movies with happy endings, and in popular magazines. Idealised and escapist television programs and movies are still produced, but many alternatives are also available.

Given the global social and political changes of the past twenty years, the growth in print media, and the technological changes that have made generally available media systems incorporating video, radio, television, pay TV, and the Internet, the belief that one, universally-held, overarching set of values and beliefs might exist is naïve.

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It is important to recognise that social and technological change is associated with more than the workplace and pop culture. It involves change across most social, cultural and age groups—for example, the biggest increase in Internet users is currently the over-60 age group. Many people's leisure time now involves multimedia: video, film, television, DVD, games and the Internet. As video camcorders, digital cameras and personal computers become more accessible to the domestic market, the consumer is now also the producer of media for both personal use and public consumption.

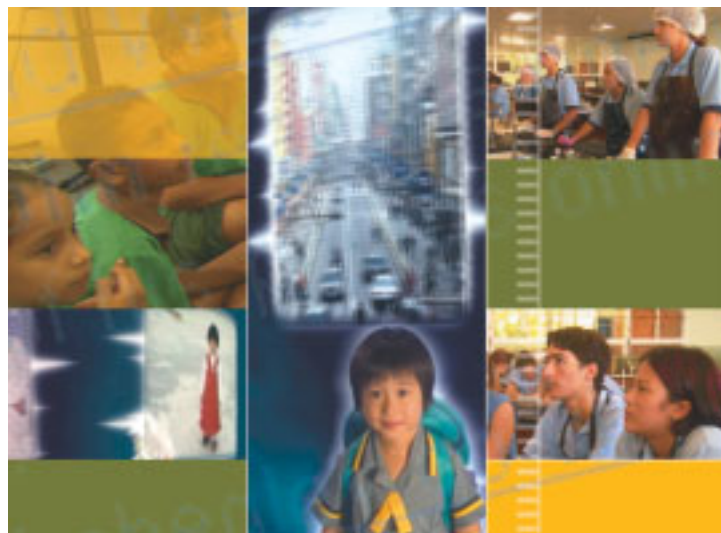


Identity is strongly influenced by mass media. How and who you imagine yourself to be are increasingly defined by what you consume. Niche marketing recognises this by specifically targeting subcultures and specialist groups. Certain subcultures and specialist groups also advertise their ideas and beliefs through mass media such as magazines and websites. Globally-integrated mass marketing targets larger groups that have characteristics in common, promoting commodities that move across a range of media. Children and parents are the most significant mass market for new technologies, particularly children as they are highly media-literate. For example, children across the world have been the target of the Pokémon and similar marketing campaigns that offer a complete suite of computer games, trading cards, TV programs, T-shirts and other accessories, such as caps and pencil cases.

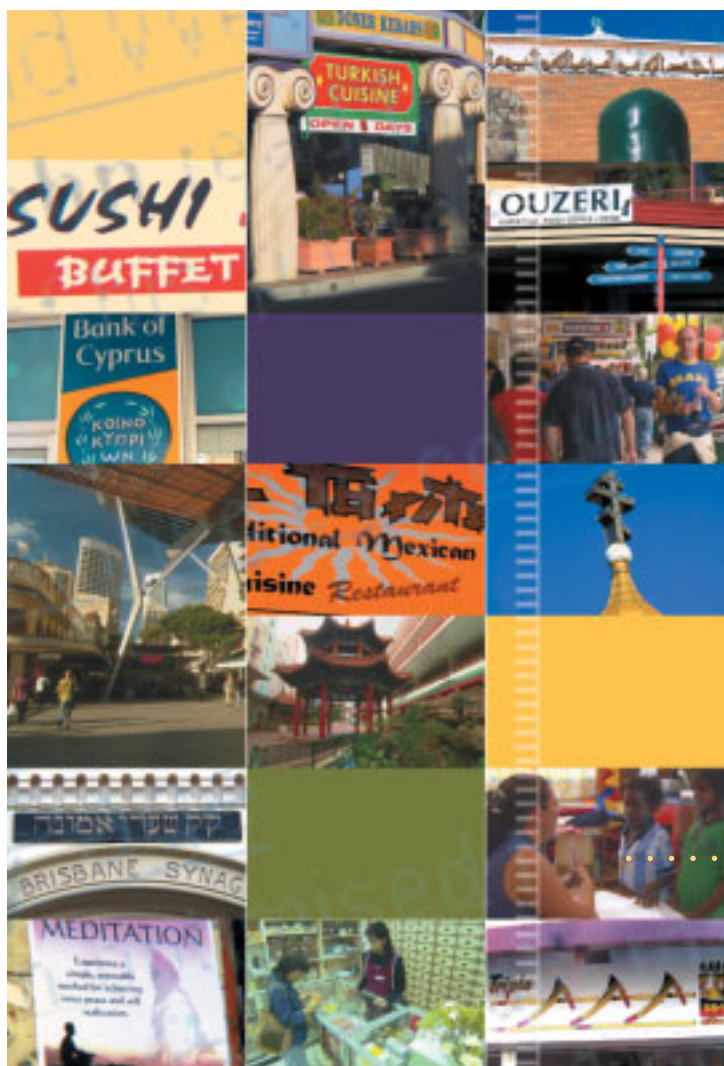


The literacy and social skills necessary to identify and understand niche and mass marketing techniques and influences today are more sophisticated than those previously required. All these products, including values and beliefs, can reach the individual, as consumer, in the home by means of letterbox drop promotional print (flyers or brochures), the home entertainment system and computer. Because of their ease of access and purchase, products and ideas can become commonplace, regarded as part of everyday life and therefore uncritically consumed. It is the responsibility of the individual as consumer to consider purchases of products and ideas carefully. It is important that individuals attempt to check the origin or source of the items and ideas, and their authority, and consider their worth and how the consumer or user might be shaped or changed by them. It is essential that individuals have the skills to engage in critical analysis in order to make informed decisions.

In Queensland, social change is also manifested in changing demographics and community profiles: community diversity is now the norm rather than the exception. There is an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor, significant intergenerational unemployment, increases in family transience, and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity. Diversity and at-riskness are now major factors that have to be considered in planning for the teaching and learning of reading. The need to cater for different learning needs was previously described in terms of only one characteristic—for example, gender, or low socioeconomic background, or non-English-speaking background. It is now apparent that it is the **intersection** of several of these characteristics that influences access to learning. While low socioeconomic background might be one factor, certain additional characteristics, for example, being a male who speaks English as a second language, indicate the need to consider how the intersection of these factors might influence students' access to learning.



The changing social diversity of Queensland means that, when developing literacy and reading programs that teach critical analysis of texts in different technologies, teachers must be aware of the diverse experiences of students, and how these will influence teaching and learning. As teachers, we need to take care to acknowledge not only the linguistic and language differences of our students, but also the literacies of the social, cultural and religious groups within our school communities. We need to recognise that students need to be literate in their community literacies as well as in the 'mainstream' literacies of school. For example, the literacies of dance, traditional art, dress and oral literacies particular to cultural traditions may be different from those of the school, but highly significant in the social and cultural lives of our students. Sometimes the literacies of culture and school may seem to work against one another—for example, the critical analysis of texts may be seen as inappropriate in some religious or cultural groups. We need to be sensitive to these issues and build strong community links in order to explore such issues productively. We also need to consider that students may need more scaffolding in order to learn literacies that are not part of their everyday social, cultural or religious literacies.



Reflection point

View a TV program you would normally reject. Think about why you normally reject it. Consider its target audience, and the values and attitudes presented both explicitly and implicitly.

How did you identify those attitudes and values? How were they conveyed (for example, through plot, characterisation, point of view, costume, lighting)? How was technology used to convey these meanings?

Consider where the TV program was made. In what ways do you think its origin influenced its messages and values?

Conduct similar activities with other media, for example, websites, magazines, discussion groups. What do you need to know and be able to do in order to critically analyse these texts?

Now do a similar analysis of a TV program that you watch regularly.

Pedagogical thought

Consider the typical comprehension tasks you set students in your classes.

How much critical analysis takes place and how might you change this if you feel it is insufficient?

What is the balance between traditional print texts and other texts in your classroom?

How do you acknowledge the diversity of students in your class in terms of selection of texts, modes and teaching strategies?

What literacy practices do your students engage in within their homes and communities?

Do you acknowledge, value and build upon the home and community literacies of your students?

Reflection Questions

What do you consider to be the key concepts and understandings for—

Why do we need to think about literacy in new ways?

What are the key concepts or issues here?

How do the ideas and concepts presented influence how I think about my school and community?

What is similar to or different from what I already knew or had learned before?

How do the ideas and concepts presented influence how I think about my classroom and the way in which I teach reading?

What did I have difficulty with?

What did I disagree with, and why?

How will this influence my approach to teaching literacy and reading?

Are there things I need to know more about?

