

Beyond Babel: Multiliteracies in Digital Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights the importance of the concepts of media literacy, and digital and informational literacy to understand the multimodal meaning of multiliteracies and their interfaces. An analogy with Babel is used to understand the different ways in which this concept articulates the linguistic, visual, audio, spatial, and gestural dimensions in digital culture. In this framework, the question of convergence is highlighted in learning experiences undertaken in formal and informal contexts. To qualify the meaning of this learning for the subject, the article mentions the concept of personal literacy to locate the importance of subjectivity in the interactions that the multiliteracies offer. Finally, in an exercise of representation of the components of the multiliteracies, the article presents a diagram that highlights the importance of mediation and the forms of appropriation that express concepts and experiences in search of a transformative pedagogical practice, as an opportunity to understand the multiliteracies as a condition of dialog, expression and participation in the culture.

Keywords: Convergence, Digital Culture, Learning, Media Education, Multiliteracies

INTRODUCTION

Upon discussing the concepts of media literacy, digital literacy and information literacy and their specificities in the fields of education and communication (Fantin, 2010), we see that if all media require literacy and if all language needs to be appropriated, we can think of a broad concept of literacy. This concept should be updated according to the demands of social practice and different socio-cultural contexts, and should dialectically consider the micro and macro dimensions of these processes in their specificities and generalities. This leads us to think at the frontiers of the concepts, practices and uses of the multiliteracies based on their

multiple faces – written, oral, visual, artistic, spatial, gestural and tactile modes of representation – which reveal their multimodal character and the interfaces articulated in various dimensions of languages.

Given the Babelic condition of human language and its potential for appropriation, this plural condition does not only signify the difference *between* languages, but a “multiplicity of languages *within* language, in any language, Therefore, any language is multiple, since *one* singular language is also an invention(...)” according to Larrosa (2004).

Without considering the merit of the discussion between tongue and language, this Babelized condition of language can also signify encounters, because beyond the confusion and catastrophe that the myth of Babel represents, the plurality of language, more than an excess,

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can imply different forms of dialog and mediation. Babel appears to run through any human phenomenon of communication and of construction of meanings and given the multiplicity of cultural practices, it is more than ever necessary to deal with its different forms of translation, interpretation and appropriation.

Babelized Languages and Learning

Different forms of written, audiovisual, digital language, and so forth, have their codes and specificities and the process for these learning styles is complex, involving basic dimensions and abilities that concern common issues. Based on the specificities of the languages and the media and of that which is common to the different learning processes, we can discuss how the concepts of literacy are intertwined in the multiliteracies.

If the concept of literacy is discussed today as multimedia literacy, as Buckingham says, digital literacy “can be seen as one of the multiple literacies that are required by the contemporary media” (Buckingham, 2005). Thus, instead of the simple inclusion of digital literacy in curriculums, Buckingham defends a broader reconceptualization of what is understood by literacy and by autoliteracy.

In this respect, Rivoltella (2008) also affirms that, more important than including media education in a new school discipline, a transversal approach and attention is needed in the curriculum, so that students can learn about digital culture in an environment in which teachers adopt media and communication as a teaching style. As a style of teaching, digital media involves convergences and this leads us to consider the perspective of multiliteracies.

For the New London Group the notion of multiliteracies:

is an attempt to comprehend and target the multiple text forms that have resulted from the new technologies and new media forms, through a pedagogy that allows students to comprehend

and deal with the ‘increasing complexity and interrelationship as different modes of meaning’ (Iyer & Luke, 2010)

For those who defend multiliteracies, the emphasis on the plurality of literacies does not refer only to the various media or modes of communication, but also to the social nature of literacy and its various forms of use in cultures and societies. It is by understanding reading and writing as social activities that some researchers prefer to refer to ‘literacy practices’ instead of simply literacy, according to Buckingham (2005).

In this conceptual expansion, Hobbs (2006) once again presents the idea of media literacy based on the concept of multimedia literacy and on the areas of the emerging syntheses. Situating the terms along with visual literacy, media literacy, critical literacy, informational literacy and technology literacy, the author expands the concept of literacy in its forms of expression and visual, electronic and digital communication, including the respective objects of study and analysis. Reviewing key disciplinary and conceptual traditions of some of the new literacies, the author examines the consensuses and disagreements so that:

A model that synthesizes this literature is created in order to support the work of scholars interested in investigating how teachers translate the “big ideas” of multiliteracies into classroom practice and to support the development of measures to assess students’ learning (Hobbs, 2006)

From this perspective, the author elaborates three key-ideas for multiliteracies that concern AA (authors and audiences), MM (messages and meanings) and RR (representations and reality), individualizing them in a framework that situates each literacy. This helps identify its applicability and offers a view of the different emphases and aspects of its similarities and differences.

In this reconceptualization and synthesis of the different perspectives:

All of the proponents reflect an appreciation that visual, electronic, and digital media are reshaping the knowledge, skills and competencies required for full participation in contemporary society, and all view these abilities as fundamentally tied to the intellectual and social practices known as literacy (New London Group, 1996; Hobbs, 2006).

This understanding of multiliteracies recognizes that “the acquisition and development of these competencies require changes in the learning environment” (Buckingham Hobbs, 2006) and this includes significant changes in teaching and the functioning of education: projects, experiences, access to tools and material resources, forms of mediation, classroom organization, and related issues.

More recently, educational work with ICT based on the concepts of digital literacy and information literacy allows making advances in the concepts of multimodal and multimedia literacy, as originally proposed by the New London Group in the sense of a critical pedagogy and critical and multiliteracies, and place at the center of the concept the “transformative pedagogy aimed at affective leanings across social and cultural differences, and across different learning styles” (Iyer & Luke, 2010). For these authors, multiliteracies and multimodal literacies understand that the integration of linguistic, social and cultural diversity promotes a project that results in student agency and transformative pedagogy.

Multiliteracies aim to target literacy practices currently favored in schools as well as literacy practices children acquire at home, and in other informal settings. In this sense, multiliteracy approaches are mindful and inclusive of the diverse and complex cultural perspectives of learners and their diverse learning styles (Iyer & Luke, 2010).

For this reason, it is essential to think of media literacy, digital literacy and information literacy as multiliteracies, or that is, as

a repertoire of related capacities, some more generic and others more specific, related to the medias, as Bazagette (2005) emphasizes. From this perspective, the teaching and learning of multiliteracies is associated to art, science, narrative and the ludic, as fundamental languages in which the subject expresses and communicates his or her feelings, ideas and experiences in the most varied forms: oral, written, artistic, corporal, electronic, digital.

This means that the teacher needs to learn to use various types of media and learn different forms of teaching. This demands teacher training that deals with expression and creation not only based on scientific knowledge but also as a possibility of belonging and digital inclusion.

From this perspective, multiliteracies can be understood as a condition for citizenship, because digital inclusion must include social, cultural, technological and intellectual dimensions in order to favor belonging and assure the effective participation of people in the culture, as Fantin and Girardello (2008) affirm. In school contexts, an articulation between different languages and contents involves a collaborative work of experimentation, creation, and discovery. It also involves dialog, negotiation, polyphony, openness, flexibility, criticism, and collaboration.

In this process, the languages of different fields of knowledge can be understood based on different perspectives: as a form of expression of the subject of the culture, as a means of communication, as a form of interaction and human development, and also as a social-cultural object of knowledge (Fantin & Girardello, 2008)

That is, to think of the concept of multiliteracies implies thinking not only of the theoretical bases that give foundation to and legitimate this concept but also of public policies and investments in teacher education to work with this new perspective. This is not reduced to specialized courses, because it involves thinking of the potential place for media-education in initial and continued teacher education within educational institutions at their various levels

of education. This teacher education should work with approximation to and distancing from the various literacies, not only to assure the movement between conceptual and institutional continuities and ruptures, but also to reconsider what is considered to be “new.” At a time in which large and rapid changes are occurring at stunning speed, the validity of classical and contemporary knowledge need to be considered in a new dimension. And although new media require new competencies, we cannot always remain at the mercy of the novelties, understood as something good or bad in and of themselves.

Equally important to the resignification and updating of certain practices is the search for concepts that can express this movement, and in this search we can find broader and hybrid terms that represent the complexity of these questions, which preserve and maintain important elements, while also transforming them. Thus, educational thinking and action, understood as cultural practices, can not only be in better harmony with the current challenges, but act in the construction of a route:

That recognizes and respects the new forms of culture and the new modes of acting which they generate, but which does not sacrifice, and does not change the compulsive and frenetic innovation, the incessant search for meaning and quality of life. It is the search for a space for a type of “third path” of a cultural nature that allows crossing horizons to a new intelligence of the world and of life, which is capable of intervening in the local, but with a global understanding and vision (Pinto, 2005).

In this search for paths and meanings, the author refers to an “ecology of communication” (idem), which understands communicative practices not only as information and transmission, but as relation, dialog and connection. This idea can be expanded to educational practices, relating them to a concept of multiliteracies that redimensions the role of the subject, and its ties and relations with the other, with the social surroundings and with the cultural scenario.

To help understand this plurality of relations of the subject and her subjectivity in the context of multiliteracies, we can aggregate the concept of personal literacy, understood as a “process of expressing desires and complex motive states in an articulate manner” (Fiunara, Cole, & Moyle, 2010). Considering that the educational context involves questions of power and that the use of social technologies requires increasingly cooperative practices, the analytical capacity, logic and critical evaluation demanded by the other literacies are necessary abilities but also involve other spaces, times and subjectivities.

In the context of an experience guided by the concept of multiliteracies, Cole and Moyle (2010) affirm that personal literacy refers to the work of each individual in a group, and her projects and the articulation between the personal and cultural identities in the activity that “involves activation of her modes of creativity including imagination, memory and synthetic thought about who they would like to become.”

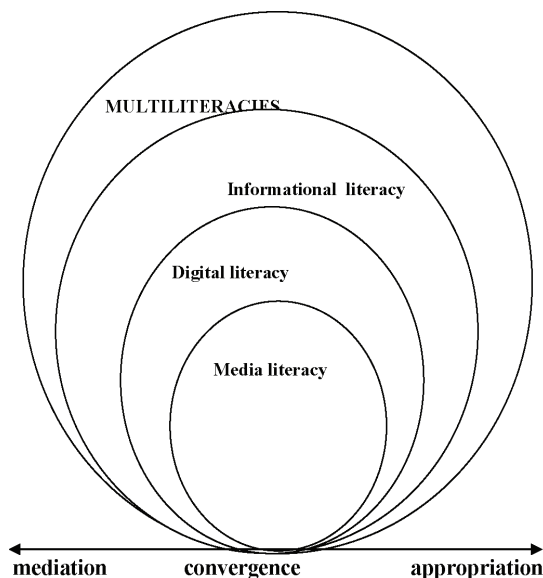
At this time, I mention personal literacy only to call attention to this important concept to be considered in the larger framework of the interfaces that compose multiliteracies. Alongside the linguistic, visual, audio, spatial gestural and digital dimensions, this idea can advance the understanding of the concept, qualifying the understanding of the integrated learning that occur in the social and cultural context of multiliteracies.

CONCLUSION

Considering the Babelic condition of multiliteracies, we see that their interfaces involve media literacy, digital literacy, information literacy as well as personal literacy, mediated by the idea of convergence. With this we seek to offer conceptual and cultural instruments to understand what multiliteracies and their concepts, practices and uses signify.

As a provisional synthesis to represent this complex process involving multiliteracies,

Figure 1. Components of the multiliteracies



instigated by Cartelli, I have made a diagram to represent the factors mentioned in the article and their possible articulations. In Figure 1, I also include other elements related to the condition of being fluent in multiliteracies, which concern different mediations and opportunities to appropriate this multimodal experience and the idea of convergence.

For each one of the components that represent the idea of multiliteracies, the realms of the different literacy are part of one another and dialog with each other. The lines, which sustain and form the design, can be understood as threads that cross the dimension and highlight the specificity of each frontier, woven by the idea of mediation, appropriation and convergence. We can also include indicators that qualify the texture of the mediation and its educational, technological and cultural emphases, as well as the possibilities for instrumental, critical, ethical-aesthetic, and creative and shared appropriation. This would allow recognition of different opportunities to achieve fluency in multiliteracies as well as recognition of the significance of learning as

a search for dialog, expression and participation in the culture.

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