Paying Attention to Texts:
Literacy, Culture and Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

In his paper in **English in Australia** in 2002, Bill Green called for a literacy project of our own, and for the need to think again, and think newly about the place of literary literacy within contemporary curriculum. But what does literary literacy mean in curriculum that recognises a wide diversity of texts and literacies? If literature and close attention to the aesthetic and imaginative dimensions remain important, what kinds of texts should we value, and how should we attend to them? This article considers how such matters might be taken up with multimodal texts of different kinds.

Over recent years we have become familiar with the ways in which literacy and literacy education have become a prominent feature of public debate about education, political agendas, and the subject of media panics of various kinds. More recently, however, this has been paralleled by similar attention to the place and nature of literary texts and the ways they are studied in English curriculum. In this paper, I focus on literary texts particularly, and on some central questions facing us about literature, the aesthetic, and the place of new texts and literacies, as we move into increasingly multimodal and culturally diverse times.

In one of these curious parallels that sometimes characterise historical moments such as these – when curriculum and national identity are at the forefront of public debate – (parallels that turn out not to be so arbitrarily synchronicitous when you look closely), I found myself reading two lists, two manifestos effectively, two 'statements of belief', within a couple of days of each other recently. The manifestos, of course, were the AATE's six statements of belief published in a recent issue of *English in Australia* – vol. 42, no. 2, (an overnight phenomenon seven years in the making) and a media 'communiqué' from the Australia Council from their Australian Literature in Education Round Table. What was curious and striking about this juxtaposition was their close similarity in asserting the value of Australian texts, and of literary and classic texts, and their place in the curriculum.

The AATE *Statements of Belief*, particularly the first three, foreground the centrality of Australian texts, cultural heritage and the literary to ongoing formations of English in Australia over time:

We respect the enduring values and traditions of Australia's cultural heritage.

We believe students come to understand themselves and their world through engagement with a range of cultures and the ways these cultures represent human experience.

We value the power of the imagination and literary expression to provide pleasure and enrich life.

We are committed to developing powerfully literate citizens who are able to effectively participate and realise their goals and aspirations in the twenty first century.

We use research and evidence to inform practice and improve the learning of students.

We are committed to ongoing professional learning especially through active participation in a range of professional communities. (*English in Australia*, 2007, p.15–16).

The *communiqué* from the Australia Council Round Table presented fourteen points arguing the importance and relevance of literature and Australian literature in the curriculum, as well as a number of recommendations supporting the teaching of Australian Literature in schools. For example, they argued:

> Classic works, both from Australia's literary past and from English and world literature, should form a prominent part of English in school and university curricula;
>
> Literature presents many perspectives on life, powerfully imagined and memorably expressed, and that exposure to this variety of ways of thinking about the world is one of the main benefits of literary study, particularly in a multicultural and diverse society such as ours
>
> A principal aim of curricula should be to encourage in students a love of literature and reading;
>
> Teachers have a critical role to play and need the opportunity to explore literature through dialogue with their students as a way of fostering a love of reading.
>
> (Australia Council for the Arts 2007)

Leaving aside the fact that Australian Literature and authors are already well established and highly visible in schools (Howie, 2007), there appears to be a high degree of consistency and commonality between the AATE statements and those the Literature Round Table advanced. At first blush, it's hard to see where there's a point of difference, and yet, of course, these are both intensely political documents, both reflective of the ways in which English curriculum, texts, and individual, national and cultural identity are intimately intertwined. Both make claims about the centrality of (literary) texts to the curriculum, both are jousting to position themselves as central in the current round of debates about national curriculum, and about who determines what goes into the curriculum and how.

This is not a new move, nor was it particularly surprising at this time. Writers like Goodson argue that studying school subjects 'provides us with a window on the wider educational and political culture of a country' (Goodson, 1988, p. 25). Contestation over curriculum is part of the broader process by which discourses within the field of education, as elsewhere, represent a range of institutional positions and political stances, and are in constant struggle to reassert and prioritise their own interests over others. Struggles over curriculum involve conflicts over definition, ownership and purpose, fought out in the context of institutional agendas, resources and priorities.

Historical perspectives show that from the earliest times English, like other subjects, has been deeply enmeshed with social and political agendas, with institutional struggles over meaning and resources (Goodson, 1988) differentially framing the shape the subject takes and the way it is taught. In particular, the pivotal role Literature and literary texts have been seen to play in defining and maintaining national and cultural identity, together with societal expectations about literacy and perennial crises about 'standards', structure the external interferences and pressures that English inherits, and contribute to the form the subject takes in specific times and in individual schools.

The politics of the national curriculum debate intimately tie together subject ownership, content and assessment. This makes for some curious implications and positioning. As David Homer, points out in his paper on the first of the AATE statements 'The kinds of study that constitute English have always been, inescapably about culture, and thus "cultural heritage", since the term, and the evolution of its practices have evolved side by side.' (Homer, 2007, p. 17) He was, he politely notes, somewhat 'surprised' to see that first statement 'we respect the enduring values and traditions of Australia's cultural heritage' – it struck him as 'odd', and he rightly identifies the very existence of the statement as a response to media representations of English as somehow lacking these things. Despite the centrality of cultural concerns to the subject since its outset, he notes 'cultural concern, when applied to English in 2007, is now no longer assumed, as it has been for many years. Rather, it is something that has to be firmly asserted'.

So, here we are yet again being confronted with two old and familiar sets of questions: who owns the curriculum? and which texts? with what attention? The second set of these, as Bill Green put it in his keynote

address for the 2003 conference for the International Federation for the Teaching of English, have long been 'very fundamental questions of curriculum and pedagogy':

> We ask ourselves and each other: *what shall we teach*? *And how?*
> This is of course a transformation of another well-known question in the curriculum field at large, 'What should the schools teach?' behind which is another: 'What knowledge is of most worth?' – the title of a famous 1859 essay by Herbert Spencer (Franklin, 1999: 459). At the more specific level of classrooms and programming, all this is captured for me in those two key questions: What to teach and how to teach? – or rather, *What to teach in English?* and *How best to teach English?* Indeed, such questions reverberate all throughout a field at all levels, which is why English teachers and curriculum scholars need to be talking and working with each other more than they seem to do. We need to be as knowledgeable about curriculum inquiry as we seek to be about English teaching itself. (Green, 2004, p. 298)

While political imperatives may incline us to do otherwise, I don't think much good is served by putting the profession at odds with the Australia Council, particularly as English as a subject in Australia does indeed promote Australian literature, and literary literature, and has done so proactively for some time. A more strategic set of moves might be to identify and assert the kinds of texts and literacies we should be working on with our students in school, and the kinds of attention we might pay to them. In particular, I want to focus on literary and imaginative texts, in print and multimodal form, bearing in mind Green's injunction that English (needs to have) 'a literacy project of [its] own' (Green, 2002), and Kress's formulation of English as about ethics, aesthetics and texts, and as a subject with 'deep purpose' that earns its place in a curriculum for a world characterised by instability and change. It does this, Kress argues, through being 'the subject that provides means for understanding the relation of an inner world of imagination and desire with an outer world of culture and of social demands' (Kress, 2002 p. 17).

This notion of deep purposes, and of curriculum in the twenty-first century signals the need for curriculum to 'look both ways'. This means we need to acknowledge where we have been, and the ways in which curriculum – and texts and engagement in particular – help shape individual and cultural identity, and at the same time to reflect on and prepare students for the contemporary world. The expansion of the English curriculum to include a much broader range of texts and forms does not, and ought not, imply the abandonment of literary texts, classic and canonical texts among them, both from the Western tradition and from the greater diversity of cultures in our schools. It's not just the iconic status of many of these texts as 'cultural heritage' (something I do think needs to be taken seriously), but also the kinds of engagement they invite, and worlds they open, that mean texts such as these must remain an important part of English in the curriculum. This entails a different, and significantly broader view of literature, text and engagement than unproblematic notions of exposure to canonical texts and the cultivation of literacy and taste of previous times.

It seems then that we are faced with significant challenges for 'literary' English in contemporary times. Some of the most interesting and important work that has been undertaken recently about literary/ imaginative/creative texts concern:

- Re-theorising the aesthetic: The place of literary (creative, imaginative) texts within a critical literacy curriculum – how imaginative, inner and creative forms of engagement may also be critical and social (Misson and Morgan 2006)
- The place of canonical texts in the digital age
- Questions around 'cultural salience' (Kress 2002) and diversity: the recognition, inclusion and representation of culturally diverse texts
- Multimodal texts and the aesthetic – their qualities and affordances; what to attend to and how
- How we might respond to students' experiences of text in their out of school worlds – digital culture, multiliteracies and design
- Multimodal texts, senior curriculum and assessment. The challenges and consequences of including multimodal texts alongside written ones within centrally prescribed curriculum and assessment
- What it means for students to be able to be makers and designers, as well as consumers of multimodal texts of imaginative/creative/aesthetic kinds
- The implications more broadly of a shift from word to image, as the dominant communication mode – and what happens to engagement and imagination in these changing forms.

These eight challenges provide an agenda for thinking our way forward in working with literary and aesthetic texts in contemporary times.

I want to turn now to a number of practical examples where questions such as these are being addressed

in interesting ways, and the issues they raise may be explored.

Classic texts:
canonical texts in contemporary times

Questions around the place of literary texts in contemporary curriculum are at their most intense in relation to classic texts; whether they should be there, how we approach them, how students might engage with them and which texts they should be. Classic texts have a particular status within English that stands as a sort of shorthand, alongside literacy, for a whole set of public debates about the nature of the subject and its role in the production or maintenance of particular kinds of values, citizens and society. The term 'literature', as Wendy Morgan notes in her essay on the AATE statements, carries baggage – to use her terms, 'the promise of a known and stable body of canonical works in print, of solid and enduring value (and values)' (Morgan, 2007, p. 35). Such a formulation, while comforting in its familiarity, is also problematic. How does it provide space for the inclusion of literary texts outside the Anglo-Celtic trajectory? How does it allow for this kind of attention to be paid to 'literary' texts of less traditional forms and kinds? How does it account for the diversity of ways in which different readers construct the same text? How does it make room for recognition of readers' positioning and perspectives in the meanings that are made? How does it recognise questions of ideology and representation? How does it allow for critical engagement with questions like these? Yet literary texts – classic texts – remain important, and we need to find ways to think about them, and work with them, in ways that allow for close attention and careful reflection as well as openness to their conceptual, imaginative and aesthetic dimensions. Morgan and Misson (2006) argue that we need a different term, a different way of thinking about literary texts to avoid some of this 'baggage', and argue for the use of the term 'aesthetic'.

One of the more interesting places in Australia where classic texts and their place in contemporary curriculum are being actively explored is through the Bell Shakespeare Company. The education arm of Bell Shakespeare is engaged with some of the most problematic and pressing of these questions, in practical and diverse ways. Their productions explicitly set out to make Shakespeare relevant and contemporary, with inventive and dynamic staging, and sometimes risky casting and interpretation. Within their education program, projects like 'Actors at Work' and the online 'Design a Scene' competition for students, together with professional development programs like the Regional Teachers Scholarship Scheme for teachers in remote and rural areas with less than five years teaching experience, buy into the challenges and difficulties of working with tough texts like these. Such projects work towards re-theorising the plays' relevance and build new connections and reference in contemporary Australia, and strive for connectedness with students and schools, ranging from those who are traditionally more comfortable with classic texts, and those who are not. Their emphasis on texts as performance presents a richer and more accessible representation of Shakespearean drama than most of the classroom measures more generally available. The use of website and digital resources to support research, online discussion, the design of scenes and so on provides a mechanism for linking print, performance and digital affordances, and addressing some of the issues raised by distance and cultural diversity.

Multimodal literacies and visual texts: Australianscreen.

Shakespearean plays are already multimodal performance texts, and recognition of this fact is the key to successful engagement. I want to turn now to visual texts, and the Australianscreen website and project. Earlier this year student teachers at Deakin University had the chance to work with the Australianscreen in its pilot form. Australianscreen is one of a number of film archives currently going online. The website offers a real vision of the ways in which we might seamlessly integrate multimodal texts alongside other areas of study, and present our students with richer and more complex versions of Australia and Australian cultural heritage than the monocultural perspective that characterises so much rhetoric in this area. The site provided the opportunity to look in detail at how visual/multimodal texts sat within the text categories around which English curriculum in Australia is organised, both in relation to the types of clips students used and what they did with them. The national Statements for Learning for English describe these categories as:

> Three broad categories of text are used within the Statements of Learning for English. These are imaginative texts, information texts, and argument texts … All categories include texts that are print and electronic and they may be found, for example, in books, films, television programs, CD-ROMs and websites.

Imaginative texts: texts that involve the use of language to represent, recreate, shape and explore human experience in real and imagined worlds …
Information texts: texts that involve the use of language to represent ideas and information related to people, places, events, things, concepts and issues …
Argument texts: texts that systematically present a point of view or seek to persuade an audience.
(MCEETYA 2005 p. 3)

The mini units developed by the student teachers explored the incorporation of multiliteracies, and multimodal texts in attentive ways. They were asked to plan three lessons making use of the Australianscreen website, together with theoretical justification and references to key readings. Lessons could focus centrally on film clips from the website, or use the website in support of other areas. They could make use of film clips in one, two or three lessons, and other resources, depending on their focus. The range of lessons developed, and the topics and ideas chosen, included work around issues and themes, documentary and news footage, representation and point of view, argument and persuasive language in written and visual forms, literary texts, novels and film, poetry, humour, film as text, writing and drama. Approaches to using the website in the classroom included the clips being specified by teachers or chosen by the students, the use of data projectors to show clips, student access to site on individual computers via laptops or in a computer lab, the incorporation of clips into classes as one resource amongst others, or the use of clips as the sole texts studied, and the integration of clips into a mix of classroom activities including reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, making and role play.

Digital texts, Digital literacies

In thinking about curriculum and texts, and the kinds of attention we might pay to them, resources like these coupled with the *Statements of Learnings for English* and their state iterations, take us a long way in working with multimodal texts and literacies, particularly with respect to drama and performance, and screen-based texts like film. But what about the world of literacies online – digital culture and out of school literacies?

There are many challenges and issues here. We know that in their out-of-school worlds, most young people are immersed in deeply engaging and often highly social textual worlds through their engagement with the internet and various forms of mobile technology, ranging from mobile phones to ipods to psps (play

station portables). How we respond to this is an area of considerable interest and research. Whether we look at bringing such texts into the English classroom for formal study, or rather whether we learn from these out-of-school texts and literacies to inform in-school teaching of print and multimodal texts, it's an area we cannot afford to ignore. Building connections between students' out-of-school worlds and the curriculum, and recognising and building on the knowledge students bring to school, have been central platforms for English teaching for many years. Forms of text and literacy are evolving rapidly, and while frameworks for analysing visual texts such as film have taken us a long way, more is needed to understand and use the affordances of interactive texts, such as websites and computer games.

As Eve Bearne notes, the existence of digital culture and digital technologies opens up the range of texts and literacies with which English might engage:

Digital technology presents opportunities and challenges in terms of the greater number, frequency and formats of texts now made possible. The wider range of media for communication further extends the scope of future English studies and increases substantially the likely repertoire of any citizen by 2015 (Bearne, n.d., p. 1)

Tim Rylands' work using the computer game *Myst Exile* in a traditional classroom to teach the use of poetic language is a provocative example of the ways in which texts like this might be used to support traditional print literacies. The youtube clip shows Tim sitting with his upper primary school class watching *Myst Exile* projected up on screen. 'Like ink dropped into water' we hear Tim say as the clip starts. 'Could we say something like that? Look at the way that water's moving. Can anybody give me some similes or metaphors for the colour of that rock?'

'Like a white heart' says one student.
'Streaked with scars like a gaping wound' says another.
'Streaked with scars like a gaping wound', Tim repeats thoughtfully.

Myst Exile itself is a highly literary text, and Tim draws on both its stunning visual imagery and the ways the game presents written text – as a handwritten manuscript using evocative poetic forms. Students read both visual and written text within the context of the game, and more than this, participate with each other, and Tim, in savouring moments from the game. Tim asks for 'metaphors and similes', notes the 'lovely use of

that comma' as he reads aloud from the narrator's journal, and asks students to have a go at writing their own running commentary in the same vein. At the heart of the lesson's success is not just a powerful and engaging text (*Myst Exile)* but also Tim's respect for his students and rapport with them, as theirs with him, his love of 'literary' language together with an approach to the text that comes across as knowledgeable and genuine. Digital culture and school knowledge, multimodal and traditional print literacy forms, are integrated side by side.

Comments posted on the youtube site suggest this is not an unwelcome importation of out-of-school culture into school from students' point of view:

> teenr0cker (1 month ago)
> Man, that rocks
> **
> flamethrower1411 (1 month ago)
> awesome teacher man wish i had that!!!
> **
> shmeexkenny (2 months ago)
> i wish my shool'd take poetry and writing this far. that'd make it so much more ... tolerable. I love this game to death, and I think the fact kids are exposed to it is great!
> **
> uberlutra (2 months ago)
> 'That's a really great use of a comma there' Twenty years on J'nanin made Saavedro really good with commas XD
> heck, even kids love the end of Amateria. Well, who doesn't ... hahaha that is just too awesome.
> **
> (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5xFMmK5Ujs)
> 13 August 2007

In this instance, digital texts are being used to support traditional literacy, where the game is being used as a springboard or medium for the development of particular types of literary writing and language use. But as Bearne suggests, digital texts also have a place in the classroom alongside other texts as objects for study in their own right. Kerin and Nixon's account of what critical literacy might mean when applied to the study of interactive and shifting texts like websites focuses questions around this issue:

> The integration of ICTs and critical literacy are no longer academic or innovative pursuits but are now framed as the responsibilities of all educators within curriculum frameworks and syllabuses from the early years through to post-compulsory education across Australia…
> • How are digital texts both like and unlike other texts to be 'read' and 'written' in subject English?
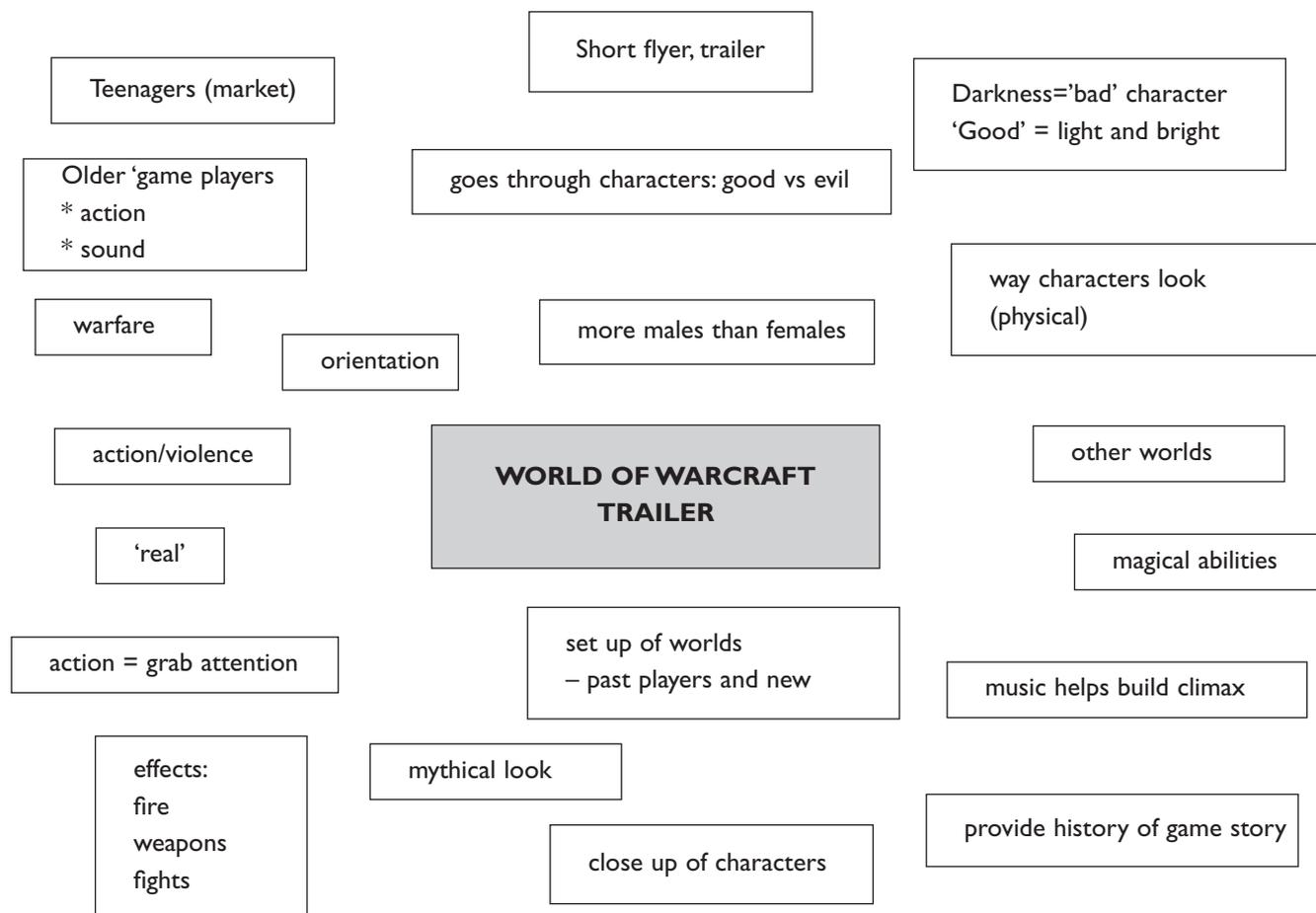
> • How might teachers use digital texts as texts for close and critical reading?
> • What does it mean to 'author' a digital text?
> • What might 'critical' approaches to the study and production of digital texts look like in the middle years English/literacy classroom?
> (Kerin and Nixon (2005: 20)

When we talk about digital texts and out-of-school textual worlds, what kinds of text and aesthetic are we dealing with here and how do they intersect with existing approaches, pedagogies and technologies? How do we navigate these territories? Introducing computer games into the classroom foregrounds questions about what these new forms of text and literacy mean for English, and where the challenges and boundaries lie. As part of a study exploring critical literacy, advertising and convergence in computer games (Beavis, in press), Year 8 students in a Melbourne school were shown a trailer for the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game, *World of Warcraft: The Burning Crusade.*

Prior to beginning the computer games unit, students had done extensive work on narrative, film and advertising. The trailer presents the backstory, characters, landscapes and scenarios of the game, together with a hint of weapons, music, dominant moods and themes. After screening the trailer, the teacher, Rob, conducted a whole-class discussion exploring aspects of its appeal. The students' observations, mapped on the board, tracked the ways in which the trailer worked as both narrative and advertisement to attract players to buy the game. It showed the students drawing on film and print-based analytic frameworks to actively comment on what they knew to be an interactive form, even though the advertisement proceeded within the genre of the film-like animations introducing different stages of game play, rather than replicating the look of the game itself as it would be played. That is, their analysis drew on both what they saw – in many ways a conventional animated film trailer – and what they knew of the genre of massively multiplayer and role-play games. As they viewed the trailer and talked about its audience and appeal, they imported additional expectations and knowledge of these genres to fill in what the print and film-based frameworks failed to provide. Their comments include attention to a range of dimensions including sound, light and symbolism, and the ways in which the trailer was both introductory and intertextual, explicitly located in relation to earlier iterations of the game.

Work of this kind – exploring intersections between

Teenagers (market)

Short flyer, trailer

Darkness='bad' character
'Good' = light and bright

Older 'game players
* action
* sound

goes through characters: good vs evil

warfare

more males than females

way characters look
(physical)

orientation

action/violence

**WORLD OF WARCRAFT
TRAILER**

other worlds

'real'

magical abilities

action = grab attention

set up of worlds
– past players and new

music helps build climax

effects:
fire
weapons
fights

mythical look

close up of characters

provide history of game story

more familiar genres and frameworks for understanding them, and newer, digital forms of texts and literacy – presents tensions of many kinds. Old and new modalities do not necessarily sit comfortably together. Tensions and constraints entailed in bringing together old and new modalities of print and digital texts and literacies include questions about the kinds of elements and analytic frameworks that should be valued, the need for new perspectives to accommodate or more accurately reflect digital and interactive affordances, questions about what should 'count' as reading and analysis, and in what forms that might be presented, and more general questions about how interactive multimodal texts might be incorporated into English curriculum. What happens to reading, what happens to writing, and what happens to 'text' in English if we take seriously the 'new communicational landscape' (Kress, 2000) and the requirement that we do address critical literacy and ICT?

We need to know more about the ways in which texts and literacies are constituted in this new landscape, in the digital world of the twenty-first century.

Guy Merchant proposes an interesting list of some of these features, drawn from his study of textual innovation and' digital writing' based on specific instances of screen-based communication (email, chat rooms, SMS, discussion boards and weblogs) (Merchant 2006). Merchant suggests that texts are changing in a number of ways, and that trends include:

- A move from the fixed to the fluid: the text is no longer contained between the covers or by the limits of a page
- Texts are revised, updated, added to and appended (and often archived)
- Genres borrow freely, hybridise and mutate
- Texts become collaborative and multivocal, with replies, links, posted comments and borrowings
- Reading and writing paths are non-linear and epistemology is rhyzomic
- Multimedia allows for a rich interplay of modes as texts become multimodal (Merchant, 2006 p.102).

Linked to this, as both cause and result are new relationships between readers and writers, reflected in:

- A move from the control of the author to the control of the reader
- Textual interaction and collaboration which results in shared authors
- The emergence of multiple and diverse affinity groups
- The new reading paths and writing processes associated with screen-based texts
- Identity is contingent: anonymity and role experimentation (or deception) are always possible (Merchant, 2006 p.102).

And changing contexts, where:

- A sense of space is shared as the local becomes global
- The time is now as we inhabit a world of co-presence and synchronicity
- Boundaries between work and leisure begin to blur
- Distinctions between public and private are less clear
- The serious and the frivolous intermingle (Merchant 2006 p.102)

Is it the case that these new forms of text and literacy, and the forms of attention we pay to them, alter the nature of our engagement and what it is that is done in the English and literacy curriculum? Kress (2003) argues that the shift from page to screen, from word to image as the dominant communicative mode, has profound implications not just for the ways in which we understand literacy, but also for the kinds of relationships we have had with texts, and for imagination and design. These challenges bring us back to those core questions: What to teach in English and how best to teach in English? Paramount is the need to stay open to the diversity of communicative forms, of texts and literacies, including classic, literary, everyday and digital; the need to keep incorporating the close study of text and language in multiple forms, and the need to find ways to address both critical literacy and the aesthetic in a renewed conception of the subject as one with 'deep purposes' for 'uncertain times'.

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