

Foreword

Youth Literacies in New Times: Everywhere Everyday is a much-welcomed collection of essays. In this brave and courageous work, the scholars assembled here challenge the conventions about literacy education. They provide a great sense of new possibilities amid a sense of educational crisis. To gain a sense of what is fresh about this approach, one need go no farther than the reference to *youth literacies* in the title of this book. The book begins with the assumption that youth are already literate, and literate in multiple ways, with many rich instances of these literacies presented in the pages that follow.

Each chapter offers another aspect and setting for these literacies, drawn from the work of these authors with the young. Together, author and the young have explored ways to build on these literacies. In the process, the authors set out the extent of, as well as the current limits to, the decoding and encoding that comes of logging on and tuning into global systems of image and text. They make clear how such literacies make up the lives of the young, outside and inside of schools. They help us to face the challenge of keeping these literacies moving forward in the hands of the young, adding not just to their educational value, but to the part that such literacies can play in making a better world. And as much as it is the young who are immediately present here, on so many pages, they are placed in conversation with, in more than one place, the likes of Judith Butler, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, as a way of extending how we think about these literacies as expressions of identity, social structures, and language, more broadly.

The book is certainly a credit, in the first instance, to its editors, Kathy Sanford, Theresa Rogers, and Maureen Kendrick, who first brought together these education researchers at the University of British Columbia in June 2010. For this initial discussion of the issues and studies, I had the pleasure of joining my once and lasting UBC colleagues, as well as the other invited scholars who had travelled to the campus. The editors have now assembled this group again, within these pages. Here, they make present, through their work, this sense of literacies everywhere.

This sense of *everywhere* is another of the radical starting points for their collective work. The universal presence of these literacies offers a second radical starting point for this collection. For too long, education scholars have regarded literacy far too provincially, as if we are employed in nothing larger than advancing the

nation-state. Literacy has, of course, always been everywhere a global cultural phenomenon, even if the schools have tended to restrict that concept to the inclusion of, in Canadian readers, an exotic folktale from Malaysia or Kenya in the school reader.

The literacies of the young, on the other hand, are now increasingly plugged into global networks through shared platforms and applications. The young are already everywhere, with it left wide open what that larger presence can mean for learning about the world, and for contributing to the meaning of the world, in these oh-so-new times. This online connectedness is not everyone's experience, but it is for an increasingly large proportion of the young, otherwise known as the net generation. In the United States, where I work, some fifteen percent of the population continues, distressingly, to live below the poverty line in this land of abundance, and yet it appears that 93 % of all teenagers had a computer in their home and went online in 2012, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (even as fifteen percent have been the target of "online meanness" through social media sites). In Africa, where the internet may still only reach sixteen percent of the population, the Internet World Stats website reports that, in 2012, there were still 51 million Facebook users.

This collection reflects this global, mobile aspect in so many ways. It is to be found in the Ugandan solar-powered access to the networked world of information; among homeless Canadian youth going public with their street literacies; with a journalism club in Kenya linked to students in Canada; it infuses the American students doing Bitstrip cartoon responses to a novel online; it can be heard in the talk about PlayStation in a South African township or creating captioned images on HIV/AIDS in KwaZulu-Natal; it is there among the young Canadian Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer or Allied filmmakers saying no to hate; it shows up in proposals, in the UK, for teaching primary students to tweet; and it appears in learning the laws of the world, if only in the World of Warcraft.

Across these locations, the book makes clear how common themes and machines are subject to local cultural adaptations, much as the VJ in a Uganda Shack Video Hall, as described in this book, does a voice-over interpretation of the Hollywood movie everyone is watching. The authors bring to the fore the global scale of the divisions and inequities, poverty and illness, boundaries and prejudices that it falls to education to address, both in teaching about the world, and in thinking about how to act on the world. For me, what marks the new times here is how effectively the authors manage to shift the education researchers' perspective away from the traditional literacy concerns over improving test-scores, rather than the technologies of communication, after all, been with us for some. The students may well have an expertise with these new systems that elude many of us. But what is new about the times may well be a recognition that this expertise among literacies is where we start to work with the young.

To that end, this collection allows us to hear the voices of the young, in their aspirations and ambitions, as they live out the bounds and boundaries of their lives. They are not speaking here from the far more typical starting point for work on literacy, often described as the deficit model. The young are not suffering here from a want of literacy—which we try to address through various formulaic teaching

strategies, from SQR3 to high-interest/low-vocabulary novels—but instead reflect a capacity to speak out and take on, to decode and encode, things that matter. In this, they call into question high school test-results that reflect, according to the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress dating back to 1971, a stalling of the gains made in earlier grades (and a decline in literacy among seventeen-year-olds in the twelfth grade). We have here a starting point for rethinking what we make of the world in the name of fostering new literacies. We can see here that what needs remediating is the decoding and encoding of norms that are seen as something other than given and fixed.

Yet this book is not about the progress of nations. It demonstrates forms of research aimed at contributing to the lives of the participants rather than extracting data from them. The significance at issue is in research designs that make a difference in the lives of those poorly served by educational systems that continue to falter in the face of poverty, racism, homophobia, and sexism. The chapters that follow reveal research and participant helping each other to stand up and speak out about education, through various media, including, given what you have in hand, an old-school book for new times. Together, those represented here make something of literacies' performance, finding the queer possibilities of these literacies to work against norms that judge some marginal rather than, as they are here, at the center of text and meaning.

Yet the contributors to this collection are also refreshingly candid about shortcomings in what the young make of their literacies. They are not here simply to celebrate the literacies of the young, for they recognize the dangers, excesses, and thoughtlessness to which such technologies lend themselves. As researchers and educator, the authors are prepared to challenge the young, and themselves, in thinking about how to work toward a more critical take on the world.

Teaching with the new literacies involves, to take but one example from the book, the literacies of civic engagement and ethical strategizing in organizing people to some end, beginning with videogames but with an eye to how this approach moves out into the real world. Encouraging reflection on, and an understanding of, such principled engagement among students allows teachers to contribute to what is *new* about the times, while keeping present literacy's traditional value as an instrument of democracy. This collection demonstrates as much by showing how the young, with the help of those whose work is represented here, find ways of directing their literacies against the wrongs and injustices within their lives, through forms of public engagement and pedagogy.

To catch sight of the advances made by this collection, one need only look back to earlier work on the new literacies, say, a book I worked on thirty years ago, with a *new literacy* title and theme. I, too, wanted to draw attention to those who were in their classrooms were changing the conventions of literacy instruction. This was when literacy was thought of as singular and what was *new* involved nothing more new than having primary-grade students write their way into literacy. Ruth Fletcher, the teacher I was teaching with (and I was studying, as a new Ph.D. returning to teach the fifth grade), used to step into the supply room each morning, where the rest of us were lined up to copy worksheets for our classes' lessons, and simply pick

up a stack of blank paper to take to her grade-two classroom. Her students made books of their picture-and-word stories; they went on, with our help, to stage movies of those stories. And if their stories railed against any domesticating or grading of their literacy, they did not fail to reproduce gender stereotypes, which gave us pause.

So while some similarities persist, the *Youth Literacies* collection goes much farther afield. It asks larger, more critical questions around a broader range of students, settings, and issues. What is striking about it is how much care is given to how to both empower the young, in the making of media statements, and how to be thoughtful and critical of that making. In this, the contributors are admirably facing the educational challenge of these new times. They are there, with the young, working on an appreciation of what these literacies entail and afford, and they are asking, in chapter after chapter, that we see these literacies as having a greater purpose, and able to serve greater ends, than we have in the past. That purpose and end have everything to do with, it seems to me, adding to what matters in the meaning of the world and acting on it, much as happens in what follows here.

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