



A Broad-Based Multiliteracies Theory and Praxis for a Diverse Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This article contends that the writing curriculum for “diverse classrooms” should be responsive to the resources students bring with them to the classroom and cultivate in them the multiple literacies needed to successfully navigate an increasingly global workplace and society. It also presents some findings from an experiment with and investigation into how diverse students in a college writing class responded to a curriculum and pedagogical approach framed around the idea of “a broad-based multiliteracies,” a curricular and pedagogical framework informed by recent developments in some aligned fields of rhetoric and composition—intercultural communication, literacy studies, media studies, and digital/new media studies.

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1. Introduction

This article discusses the outcomes of a teacher research, and argues for a broad-based multiliteracies framework for designing writing courses. The discussion primarily draws on an experiment with a writing course designed around such a framework in a diverse sophomore level classroom at a research university. The framework was built on the [New London Group's \(1996\)](#) theory of multiliteracies with integration of insights and ideas from some allied fields of composition studies, such as media and new media studies, intercultural communication, and literacy studies. These fields are not discrete, isolated knowledge domains, as they may appear to some on surface, but closely intersect, overlap, and directly speak to one another to the extent that we can pull ideas and insights from each one of them, combine, blend, synthesize or appropriate, and use them as resources for constructing a broader framework that enables us to teach multiple literacies, including intercultural and multimodal, to a writing classroom—both homogenous and/or the one characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. For instance, new media's core dimension—agency is what [Henry Jenkins \(2006\)](#) underscores in his discussion of convergence culture in media studies, and new media's another feature—divergence aligns so well with the idea of intercultural competence, where respecting and negotiating diversity and difference in communication behaviors is highly valued. No surprise, both agency and divergence are two of the most favored concepts in composition pedagogies.

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As such, this broader framework helps to expand the notion of writing as much as it helps us to teach such an expanded notion of writing to all students. To begin with, this framework responds to the fact that our students still compose, but compose with multiple media technologies, and this challenges the ways we teach our students to compose, as [Steven Fraiberg \(2010\)](#) notes: “composition for the twenty-first century requires a shift toward conceptualizing writers as ‘knotworkers’ negotiating complex arrays of languages, texts, tools, objects, symbols, and tropes” (p. 107). Such a stance of some, if not all, media and writing scholars about multisemiotic modes of composing paves the way for and demands for the implementation of what I call a broad-based multiliteracies framework in writing and literacy classes because the changed landscape of media, literacy and composition has implications to how we talk about and teach writing to our students. The major implication is that we need to teach our students an expanded notion of composition, the idea that composition these days is no more just alphabetic, but can be done with audio, video, graphics, still images, animations, 3D images and such, both in isolation and in combination. Taking up such a notion of composition in the writing classroom, however, involves different proactive approaches and strategies. It also requires a re-imagination and redesign of our pedagogical and curricular artifacts and policies. This essentially could mean formulation and implementation of a new writing pedagogy ([Hocks, 2003](#); [Yancey, 2004](#)). In this essay, I propose a broad-based multiliteracies framework that draws on and engages insights from allied fields of writing studies as one such potential writing pedagogy, as it effectively responds to the call of scholars such as [Michele Anstey and Geoff Bull \(2006\)](#), who maintain that today’s students need to be multiliterate in order to effectively respond to the composing and communication challenges of a highly mediated and globalized world.

2. Diverse classrooms and writing pedagogies

Statistics on student demographics at the national level attest to the fact that the U.S. college classrooms are increasingly diverse and globalized. About a million international students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities every year now, and the enrollment trend shows a steady growth of these students over the years ([Institute of International Education](#)). Even in the traditional sense, U.S. classrooms these days are remarkably diverse. The last three years of domestic student enrollment data shows that the number of minority students in U.S. colleges and universities has remained consistently diverse over the years (Current Population Survey, 2013, 2014, 2015, [U.S. Census Bureau](#)).

Mirroring the national trend of student population, my own writing class at the Northeast Research University (NRU—a fictitious name) for the Spring of 2012, which I studied for this article, featured the same sort of diversity. In total of twenty students, I had thirteen domestic American students while seven other students hailed from different parts of the world—one each from South Korea, Haiti, India, and two each from Mexico and Puerto Rico. There was diversity even among domestic American students in terms of race, class, and literacy traditions let alone among international students who were brought up in completely different cultural, linguistic and academic traditions. This sort of demographic diversity in our classrooms presents us with both opportunities and challenges. It affords us the opportunity to respond to and tap into the resources these students bring with them to the classroom, but scaffolding their natural meaning-making capacities and teaching them what they need and what they want is challenging. This study is an attempt to work with those opportunities and challenges present in a diverse writing classroom.

3. Definition of key terms and critical pedagogic imperatives

Demographic shift in student population in our classrooms calls for corresponding shifts in other components of school, such as pedagogies and curricula. Another, even more important, implication is that we should be teaching multiple literacies to those diverse students because “[W]ith increasing cultural and linguistic diversity becoming a global phenomenon, higher and wider levels of literacy are expected from all students” ([Tan & McWilliam, p. 214](#)). Reflecting on what diverse students need to succeed in the world today, many literacy scholars maintain that the changed working conditions demand flexible but multiple literacies in each one of our students as and when they join workforce. In 1996, a group of scholars popularly known as the New London Group (NLG) presented similar argument with their theory of multiliteracies. The NLG acknowledged that it was an opportune time for them to “extend the idea and the scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies, for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate” (p. 61). Critiquing “‘mere literacy’ . . . centered on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language” (p. 63) as severely limited, the Group advocated for the “pedagogy of multiliteracies” that “focuses on modes of representation much broader than

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