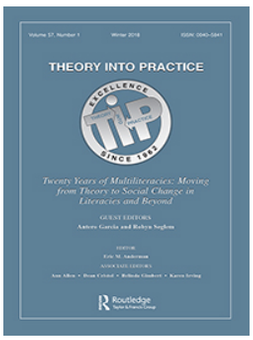

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Looking at the *Next* 20 Years of Multiliteracies: A Discussion with Allan Luke

In this discussion with literacies researcher Allan Luke, the New London Group Member reflects on the role of multiliteracies in shaping literacies research and the continuing changes to technology, capitalism, and learning. Focused on looking toward future advances in literacies research, Luke reflects on the role of multiliteracies in contemporary educational policy and how this work is shaping literacy scholarship and practice today. Luke looks pragmatically at the current political landscape and emphasizes how colonial practices of technology over the past twenty years bend literacies research away from the initial optimism expressed by the New London Group. At the same time, Luke grounds contemporary literacies interpretations of technology and learning in foundational critical theorist like Freire, Illich, and Dewey. By focusing on how technology has changed schooling, power, and literacies, Luke considers what challenges loom for the theory and practice of powerful, equitable literacies in the next two decades.

Allan Luke is an Emeritus Professor at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. With contributions to literacies scholarship spanning more than 3 decades, Luke's work intentionally connects theory, practice, and policy. As a member of the New London Group, Luke helped conceptualize a "Pedagogy of Multiliteracies" (1996). Across myriad other articles, chapters, and books, Luke's work has guided the field's understanding of how critical conceptions of literacies, sociocultural perspectives of learning, and contemporary shifts in society converge on schools and the lives of learners and educators alike. Guidance such as the "4 resource model of literacy" (developed alongside Peter Freebody) and work guiding and advising national curricular models in

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Australia, North America, and elsewhere have highlighted Luke's work pushing toward sustained, critical engagement with new understandings and *designs* of literacy instruction.

In this interview—conducted via e-mail in January, 2017—Luke considers the directions that schools and society are headed 2 decades since the New London Group's formative publication. Through his responses, Luke helps illuminate the broader concerns of how *social futures* within the multiliteracies pedagogical framework have shifted. Discussing the critical aspects of mulitiliteracies that are too often not addressed in practitioner spaces, Luke reflects on the formative work that he and his 9 colleagues engaged in. He wrote, "We began from discussion of the deskilling of labor, of the marginalization of women, of where minorities and the urban poor would be relegated in the 'Post-Fordist' economy." Though there are myriad pathways that multiliteracies research can take literacies educators and researchers in the next 2 decades, Luke's words that follow suggest a re-emphasis on scrutinizing structural power and its effects in classrooms today.

Garcia & Seglem: First, thank you for engaging in this conversation with us. Although much of our discussion will be about looking ahead, we wanted to start with one broad, reflective question. When you reflect on the impact that multiliteracies has had on the field of education, what do you feel has been most impactful (for better or worse)? Are there any areas that you feel have been overlooked or that you would have changed in the New London Group's original articulation?

Luke: Thank you for putting this important volume together. I think of New London as a deliberate political and intellectual action in an historical context. As such, there's not a lot one could or would change. It isn't a paradigm or method or theory. It was brought together by Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. We were then working together in an Australian regional teacher education program with a strong commitment to social justice and to Indigenous community. In terms of the geolocation of ideas, this was not a product of the cosmopolitan, urban or political center. It was a view from elsewhere—from a radically different media/tech environment and political economy.

The starting point was a shared focus on equity and social justice, and an aspiration that new media could alter the exclusion of working class, cultural minority and Indigenous communities from and by the institutions of print literacy. I think this (old) materialist and constructivist account of inequality holds today. Unfortunately, digital technology hasn't fundamentally altered the inequities of print-based, industrial-era schooling. For many communities, economic inequality, social injustice, and cultural marginalization have worsened.

The 1990s was an altogether different political economic context, a different civic and geo-political era: We were working right at the cusp of the Clinton/Blair optimism about progressive reform, coming out of the first Gulf War and its affiliated recession. With improving employment, international trade, inexpensive mortgages, a steady supply of fossil fuel, and the supplanting of traditional manufacturing by dot.com multinationals—this was, according to popular commentaries, the "end of history," "the end of ideology," "beyond left and right." It was a period of Western geopolitical and ideological triumphalism, and American technological/economic expansion.

By my recollection, we began from discussion of the deskilling of labor, of the marginalization of women, of where minorities and the urban poor would be relegated in the *Post-Fordist* economy. Remember, this was a time where the deindustrialization of America, the offshoring of polluting industry, the renewal of American companies and manufacturing by following principles of *Toyotism*, just-in-time transnational supply chains, learning communities, and new age managerialism were seen as the economic solution, not the problem. Digitalization—its global reorganization of space, time, labor, and identity—was seen as the driver of an expanding service and information based economy that would cross borders,

turning multiculturalism and multilingualism into productive assets, yielding smarter workforces, new markets, new clients, new consumers. And before the dot.com crash, speculative investment in digital technology and a deregulated banking sector were driving an economic boom.

So it's important to see New London itself in historical terms: as an educational response to a persistent unequal distribution of capital, wealth, and power; an emergent technological/scientific revolution; and changing relations between the state, capital, and corporation. Looking back, I think the focus on digital technology was subordinate, an educational means rather than ends. The 4 days of talk were fraught with dialectical tensions: between text and context; between the lexicogrammatical, visual, and generic features of texts and their social consequences; between direct access to elaborated codes of print and digital media and the critique of their ideological contents and practices; between progressivist integrated, project-based curriculum and direct instruction and access; between linguistics-based and cultural/media studies models of text; between a normative goal of equitable redistribution of educationally defined capital and the critique and reinvention of that capital.

What a difference 2 decades makes. Many of these educational tensions and debates persist—but the events of 2016 have changed everything: in technology, media and communications, politics and culture, geopolitical and civic order, and, for many communities, the sustainability and survivability of everyday life.

Any reconnoitering of multiliteracies has to begin from an educational engagement and critical analysis of these new economic and cultural, civic, and media conditions. For many students and communities have to contend not just with poverty, joblessness and inequality, but also the stark effects of autocracy and plutocracy, renewed racism and sexism, ideological distortion and untruth, unethical and unjust social relations and conditions, and fundamental issues around freedom, policing and public safety, control and surveillance. Now, more than ever, schooling, education, and literacies have to be about *reading and writing the world*—to paraphrase Freire. Lives and futures are on the line.

Garcia & Seglem: We wanted to unpack the subtitle of the original *Harvard Educational Review* manuscript, "Designing Social Futures" (New London Group, 1996). Either individually or collectively, do you have any thoughts about how the field of educational broadly (or literacies research specifically) has taken seriously the call for "designing" framed in multiliteracies? Likewise, are there ways you see social futures reshaping or realigning in the coming years?

Luke: New London was an attempt to change the subject from what were then current, but perennial, debates over the *right* approach to print literacy. Isn't it odd that the world and communities can be burning down around us, and educational debates seem to default to ideological red herrings of phonics and 'back to the basics'?

The field required new vocabulary; hence, the terms *multiliteracies* and *pedagogy*, the latter an archaic term, were part of this approach. The *design* metaphor was an attempt at an analytic unit for curriculum beyond the traditional categories of literary form or linguistic/rhetorical genre. In Queensland schools, we were moving from the traditional focus on behavioral skill to the study of *text as social practice*. We were seeing new kinds of textual work in classrooms, with students and teachers in classrooms working around concepts of text, discourse, genre, register in both print and visual media. But we also were seeking a different descriptive language that wasn't wholly tied to and defined by linguistics—to accommodate visual, audio, and kinesthetic media. Hence, *design*. The design metaphor is about creativity and agency—it works in technical, scientific fields and in the arts, in classical, modernist and postmodern art and literature, in architecture and

engineering, in print and new media, in the digital and the analogue.

Finally, the grammatical transitivity of the phrase "designing … social futures"—sets up the act of designing as an agentive bridge between convention and innovation, between the canonical and the new, between reproduction and creativity. It positioned students as engaged in cultural and civic action, and, indeed identity work, institutional critique and formation. The articles you've brought together here capture these possibilities, with an urgent focus on cultural, civic and community analysis and action.

Garcia & Seglem: Related to the previous question, we see the texture of education shaping—from a neoliberal stance—to respond to the increasingly globalized setting of how individuals interact. How will multiliteracies need to adapt to the span of literacies, distances, and identities found in classrooms and beyond? What challenges do you see educators facing?

Luke: All communications media reorganize and alter our senses of space and time. They enable and constrain epistemic and cultural stance, the building, conservation, critique, and transformation of cultural forms, meanings and identities. And digital media has expanded exchange between students, teachers, and citizens beyond the confines of embodied and geographic place. Successful work with young people shows how digital arts and culture can provide "tools for conviviality" (Illich, 1973): means for learning to live together within and across diversity and difference, space and time, in ways that don't destroy environments and communities—particularly in the face of those who would build walls and recreate borders.

At the same time, the passage of multiliteracies into the official curriculum has been ripe pickings for neoliberal educational policy. I think we've seen three forms of the colonization of multiliteracies: (a) Multiliteracies have been incorporated into the human capital rationale, the very heart of neoliberalism—redefined as requisite job skills or tools for the new economy. This strips it out of a broader critical education; it can silence classroom debate over the morality, ethics, and everyday social consequences of communications media, their ownership and control. (b) Multiliteracies have been redefined as a measureable domain of curriculum for standardized assessment: digital tasks will be included in the current PISA testing. This has the effect of normalizing, controlling what officially counts as digital creativity, critique, and innovation. (c) Multiliteracies have been the object of commodification, with curriculum packages, approaches, methods and materials offered by publishers, corporations and consultants. This has the effect of eliminating the local, idiosyncratic, cultural play and interaction with new media and supplanting it with formulae and scripts, inevitably aligned with (a) and (b). The cases you've gathered here are models of how multiliteracies are used as an open curriculum space for students and their teachers to explore, critique and construct texts, identities, forms of social and community actions. This is about as new as Dewey's (1902) discussion of the project or enterprise. In Australia, multiliteracies worked precisely because there wasn't an official curriculum definition, or even a formal academic/scholarly *doxa* around it. But over the last decade of Neoliberal governance, the move has been to put all curriculum and pedagogy in the box of standardization, assessment, accountability, control and surveillance—aided by government-initiated and corporate-sponsored work in the learning sciencesto measure and assess digital practices. This is an appropriation of multiliteracies into the same system of standardization and commodification that defined and delimited print literacy and traditional curriculum. And it returns us to the original institutional problems with print literacy that we targeted in New London: a closed curriculum that yields differentiated and stratified achievement.

Garcia & Seglem: One concern that we've felt is how the concept of multiliteracies has primarily been taken up in terms of the digital modalities it encompasses. Although research

on literacies often points to New London when discussing the latest digital tools, the cultural contexts and power implications around digital tools are integral and increasingly overlooked. In your 2016 Literacy Research Association presentation, you mentioned that digital is "recolonized" in the years following the New London Group's first publication. We are interested in your thoughts on the unintended consequences that may have happened with the field's emphasis on tools over the social futures and cultural contexts around these tools.

Luke: This is the effect of the *watering down* of multiliteracies under systems accountability and standardization. It risks turning multiliteracies into skills and competences: with a new formalism focusing on skills acquisition, the identification of textual features and affordances, production and reproduction of conventions and so on. Nonetheless, multiliteracies—like print literacies—are always about something, they are always about texts, representations, identities, and meanings in what remain real bio/eco/social environments of exchange, power, and relations. What's surprised me is the degree to which many versions of multiliteracies are taught as neutral tools, sans discussion of all of the key ethical and political issues of surveillance and control, truth and lies, bullying and exploitation, profit and ownership (Luke et al., 2018).

Garcia & Seglem: Given the role that pedagogy plays in the original multiliteracies framework, in what ways do you think teachers need to adapt or reshape their practice as we get nearer to the second decade of the 21st century? In the original essay, there are four pedagogical dimensions noted (situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice). Do these still feel like the right aspects of multiliteracies-informed pedagogy? Are there areas you would adjust?

Luke: I've always felt that the pedagogy was and is still the most valuable element of original work. This pursuit of *single method as correct method* is an absolute bane of classroom and literacy research, whether it's advocacy of phonics, whole language, critical pedagogy, constructivism, or whatever. The worlds of classrooms, teachers, and students tell us a different story altogether: powerful and effective teaching actually oscillates or weaves through different pedagogical modes, depending on what is being taught, the age/developmental capacities of the cohort, the cultural and linguistic resources of community and students. The *pedagogy of multiliteracies* was actually an attempt to reconcile those different tensions by making the case for immersion in practice, for explicit instruction, for critique and deconstruction, and for social, civic and semiotic action.

Garcia & Seglem: In your 2016 Literacy Research Association Distinguished Scholar Lifetime Achievement presentation (Luke, 2016), you said, "When practices are embodied by teachers, they don't go away." It was a powerful and necessary statement for the conference and we are wondering if there are specific embodied practices around multiliteracies you would want teachers to more actively take up.

Luke: I was referring to our experience with the rise of multiliteracies and *critical literacies* in Australian state curricula from the 1990s, which was officially squelched 2 decades later in the current Australian National curriculum following a concerted negative campaign by the neoconservative press and neoliberal politicians. The populist claim was that students were studying digital media, online sources of information, video ads, gaming, text messaging and social media, and so forth, rather than traditional literature and the basics. There was a concentrated attack on critical literacy as a new form of politically correct indoctrination. Over the long term, my sense is that critical approaches to curriculum are embodied in many teachers' dispositions—that is, once they and their students are engaged with critical, inquiry-based, dialogic, and constructivist work around the formation of knowledge and truth, text and

discourse, writing and image, field and discipline, there's no going back. Critical literacy is as much about acquiring a disposition toward texts, a learned and inquiring skepticism, as it is a formal element of curriculum. We were doing multiliteracies and critical literacies long before we invented them—and we'll be passing them on long after they've been supplanted as official curriculum categories.

Garcia & Seglem: Particularly considering the critical nature of the multiliteracies framework, we wonder if you might contextualize what multiliteracies mean and can do in this present, political moment. Here in the United States, for example, we write this in a time when classrooms are reeling in uncertainty and emotional pain. Globally, we see conflict, capitalism, and promises of a digitally-mediated future that will somehow fix all problems. Whether in the context of multiliteracies or beyond, what kinds of pragmatic actions do you suggest for teachers and teacher educators in engaged in the critical work of learning and teaching alongside youth today?

Luke: It's stark and simple, and probably can't be understated, so here goes. You've got an elected administration and political culture that is modeling and exploiting the unethical, immoral, and destructive use of digital media, and attacking the long-standing practices and criteria of print journalism, broadcast journalism, and peer-refereed science. You've got an online environment where new forms of exchange, creativity, and community sit alongside new forms of criminality and bullying, real and symbolic violence. You've got powerful corporations that are profiting from the reorganization of everyday life by social media and digital tools, making business deals with autocratic states to suppress, control and surveil citizens, engaging in dubious labor practices, are implicated in forms of production and manufacture that are environmentally unsustainable, and who bury profits to avoid taxation responsibilities that might fund improved education, health care, and communities. And there is a secret state/corporate nexus that monitors and surveils communications and exchange at all levels for their own commercial, geopolitical purposes. In the midst of this, many communities have to contend with everyday violence and warfare, the effects of environmental decay and climate change, public health crises and the unavailability of meaningful work.

Technology per se didn't cause these problems, nor does it in and of itself have the capacity to solve or fix them. The current situation requires a remaking of citizenship, ethics, and a renewed social contract. This will require an ongoing "problematicization," to use Freire's (1973, p. 174) term, of these conditions as focal in the curriculum, thematically crossing social studies, the arts and sciences. To return to New London, classroom multiliteracies can be a staging ground for that new civic space—where critique and technical mastery can lead to transformed (and, in instances, conserved) practices. This is about setting the grounds for rebuilding of community relations of work, exchange and trust.

Garcia & Seglem: For researchers, are there any cautions you would urge we heed as we dive into the beginning of a third decade of New London informing the field?

Luke: Unfortunately, we live in a kind of dystopian media spectacle—where traditional authoritative sources of knowledge and cultural standpoints of print journalism and broadcast media have been left grasping for air, where science, truth and experience are but more competing texts, where relationships between figure and ground, sign and signified, celebrity opinion and scientific truth, real event and its representation have become blurred. This is the implosion of meaning predicted 2 decades ago—but, like global warming and planetary desecration, it seems to have occurred faster and more totally than anyone predicted. Digital ethics, multiliteracies and citizenship should be at the core of the curriculum for all.

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Additional Resources

1. **Illich, I. (1971). Deschooling society. Richmond, UK: Calder & Boyars.**
   In this small treatise, Illich connects issues of structural power to the challenges of teaching and learning. At once accessible and brief, Illich's text can guide critical classroom and professional development discussions.
2. **Luke, A. (2018). Critical literacy, schooling, and social justice: The collected works of Allan Luke. New York, NY: Routledge.**
   This collection features many of the key intellectual contributions that Luke has developed across his career. Including key ideas referenced in this dialogue, Luke's work continues to push researchers and educators today.
   These curricular materials, which are aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards, include free instructional units designed to show middle school students that "engineering is everywhere." Through these units, students have opportunities to critique existing designs and create socially responsible and sustainable alternative designs.
3. **Luke, A. (2016). LRA 2016 distinguished scholar life-time achievement session. Literacy Research Association.**
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swWWWlZOqPg&
   In this recorded discussion at the 2016 Literacy Research Association, Allan Luke reflects on how educational research has shifted as well as reinforced issues of power. Emphasizing the needs of classroom teachers today, Luke's presentation is clear, concise, and offers clear practitioner takeaways