

CHAPTER EIGHT

LITERACY AND *LEARNING INITIATIVES*: POST-LITERACY AND JOINT PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN A SCHOOL AND A UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The central argument of this chapter is that the world has changed. The ways in which we have traditionally established our understandings of the world have proven to be inadequate for contemporary education systems in the context of a postmodern world where there is a saturation of media and visual images.

Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra, hyperreality and implosion, and seduction are used to construct a post-Literacy framework that is linked to a reconceptualising of generation, culture, knowledge and power within formal educational contexts. The major finding of this paper leads to a more complex understanding of literacies within and outside formal educational contexts.

The paper also explores one attempt at beginning to address the changing nature of education by outlining a research project that was centred around research partnerships between schooling and university communities in order to broaden the participants' conceptions of how children engage with media in a futures oriented world. The research also explored how Learning Initiatives (a concept developed by a regional Queensland State School – Waraburra State School) could provide a framework for integrating the curriculum, pedagogy, policy and practice of e-learning, media studies and futures driven discourses between the school, the university and the wider community.

INTRODUCTION

I use this chapter as a vehicle for developing an understanding of the complexities of the visual world that we live in, and the way this world demands a new definition of visual literacy. I argue that a re-conceptualisation of visual literacy is becoming necessary as a result of

changing and increasing technologies, particularly in the Western world, and the need for more diverse readings of the visual world. I argue that existing visual literacy frameworks are inadequate for this challenge.

I will begin to take up the challenge of defining a more complex visual literacy by using the French theorist Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra, hyperreality and television as implosive^{xii} and neutralising, and seduction as my themes of analysis to develop what I refer to as post-Literacy^{xiii} understandings of the visual world.

This chapter uses Baudrillard to describe challenges facing literacy educators, and university educators and to talk about the ways in which partnerships across these sectors can facilitate the development of what will be referred to as post-Literacy. This chapter also extends on a series of papers I have been writing recently that explores this research partnership, multiliteracies and purposes of partnerships in schooling contexts (See Fleming & Walker-Gibbs, 2004; Walker-Gibbs, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

POSTMODERNISM AND POST-LITERACY

The framing of this chapter within a postmodern context has arisen from my research into the gaps of how visual literacy has been traditionally defined and extending this to a more complex definition that I term post-Literacy (Walker-Gibbs, 2001, 2003). I argue that there is a need to move towards post-Literate understandings of literacy that are informed by a recognition of the make-up of contemporary visual culture.

Post-Literacy is intimately linked with postmodern ideologies that move away from a notion of providing signifiers and that lead to a complete definition of complex terms (Blake, 1996). The concept of postmodernism is linked to this decentring of self and problematising of notions of reality (Lyotard, 1989), which raise key questions concerning the multiple ways in which we as a society construct understandings of media in an attempt to become literate in a visual sense. This point was made by Lovejoy (1990), who stated that "postmodernism represents a global 'shift' toward a more pluralistic way of seeing with a broader perspective on political and cultural possibilities" (p. 262). What we are left with is uncertainty, diversity and freely flowing, almost ephemeral understandings of our worlds (Burbules, 1995). Or as Hinkson (1991) stated:

This [postmodernism] is the idea that we now inhabit a space which has, as one of its qualities, an ability to support unprecedented cultural diversity It is an idea which captures the diminished significance of history in postmodernity, for this space has no 'period' of its own: it holds together all the forms of previous periods. It is given another expression in the media where the flow of images takes on its own (diverse) reality

within what for the moment we can refer to as an information space. (p. 7)

What this argument acknowledges is that 'we' are unable and also unwilling to capture a sense of truth or reality. The world and all its signifiers are freely flowing, changing and fleeting. The world has changed and these changes raise challenges for educators in all fields. One particular dimension of this changes and associated challenges relates to the increasingly spatial nature of imagery.

Even though the dominant forms of visual literacy traditionally have been important in understanding the symbols, syntax and semiotics of the visual image, I argue that in postmodern contexts these established categories are not enough in and of themselves (For a more detailed outline of established understandings of visual literacy see Walker-Gibbs, 2003). There needs to be a more diverse understanding of how the visual image is representative of, and represented in, society. The problematisation of the various literacies, enables me to examine the conception of a visual literacy that incorporates notions of popular culture and formal and informal educational experiences. These issues will be discussed in the next section of the paper.

BAUDRILLARDIAN AND POSTMODERN CHALLENGES

This chapter uses Baudrillard to map out the 'nature' of contemporary times with the specific purpose of setting up an agenda that visual literacy is challenged to respond to. Having set up this agenda I will look at one example of a 'new' teaching/learning initiative and discuss the extent to which a school and a university working in partnership have been able to 'meet' Baudrillard's criteria as outlined by some of his key concepts. These concepts, simulacra; hyperreality and implosion; and seduction have been grouped into what I term themes of analysis.

Baudrillard helps me to engage with the freely floating nature of the postmodern world in ways that are relevant to my engagement with the construction of post-Literacy understandings of the world that are based on the breaking down of overarching frameworks by which to study the visual world. I turn firstly to the concept of simulacra and establish this concept's relevance to this chapter in terms of delineating the world in which we as viewers currently operate.

SIMULACRA

The consequences of entering into an age of simulation suggests that we cannot search for or uncover a truth or reality and that we need to disrupt the essentialist notion of referent points. In a postmodern world we can no longer determine 'reality', because there are no binaries or signifiers and/or signified (Usher and Edwards, 1994), we are facing a potential unhinging of what it means to be visually literate. Baudrillard

(1983) put this de-differentiation down to the concepts of simulation and simulacra when he argued further that:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal [T]he age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself. (pp. 2-4)

I would argue that any attempt at interpretation in the traditional or modern sense is problematic when one embraces the concept of simulacra. If we cannot 'understand' an image as such, we need to change how we can confront the 'strangeness' of these images and encounter a new visual literacy that attempts to rise to the challenge presented to us by notions of hyperreality and simulacra and how challenging this is for us as educators. As Baudrillard (1983) stated: "... this was precisely the greatest game – knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them" (p. 9). If there is nothing behind the visual image but more simulations, an interpretation and/or complete understanding become a facade of representation.

What I am saying is that this constant seeking of truth or reality in the image distracts us from the notion that there is no reality or static truth to be uncovered, and that the image is as real or as 'un'real as the supposed message in the image. To seek reality is to ignore the fact that it is all simulation and therefore seeking meaning as advocated in the established categories of visual literacy may be considered to be a futile exercise. A major influencing factor that contributes to the concept of simulacra is the increasing saturation of the viewer in the visual world. It is this saturation of imagery that brings me to the next theme of analysis: hyperreality and implosion.

HYPERREALITY AND IMPLOSION

The second theme of analysis, hyperreality and implosion, is based on Baudrillard's use of this terminology in his writings. This theme has arisen out of the advent of television and cinema with the increase of ephemeral, evolving, visual images. Price (1997) defined hyperreality as:

... a state of existence which typifies advanced societies, in which reproduction and *simulacra* seem more real than genuine objects. The sign refers, not directly to reality, but to other signs, so that human knowledge is no longer of the real, but of signs and their 'excessive' and overwhelming presence. (p. 107; emphasis in original)

What Price (1997) is arguing here is that the “excessive and overwhelming presence” (p. 107) of visual signs has made simulation seem more real and makes the concept of the ‘actual’ object irrelevant. These notions of visual images being ephemeral and ever evolving, as well as the notion that we are overwhelmed by the presence of so many visual images, are further problematised when we also consider the concept of implosion. According to Baudrillard (1987): “TV is ... a nuclear, chain-reactive process, but implosive; it cools and neutralises the meaning and energy of events” (p. 19). Not only are we saturated in this visual imagery to the point that the discerning of reality is problematic but also with the concept of implosion we see the meaning of this reality disappear.

For the beginnings of a definition of hyperreality I turn to Kellner (n.d.), who stated:

The hyperreal for Baudrillard is a condition whereby models replace “the real” exemplified in such phenomena as the ideal home in women’s or life-style magazines, ideal sex as portrayed in sex manuals or “relationship” books (or porno movies), ideal fashion as exemplified in ads or fashion shows, ideal computer skills as set forth in computer manuals, and so on. In these cases, the model or hyperreal becomes an ideal and a determinant of “the real” and the boundary between hyperreality and everyday life is erased. (p. 5)

If we consider Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality in the context of this chapter, we need to discuss how the idea that ‘reality’ is no more will impact on how we view visual imagery. What becomes interesting for interpreting images is that we no longer have a single destination or way of determining what is represented, as Baudrillard (1987) stated:

The image is interesting not only in its role as reflection, mirror, representation of or counterpart to the real, but also when it begins to contaminate reality the better to distort it, or better still: when it appropriates reality for its own ends, when it anticipates it to the point that the real no longer has time to be produced as such. (p. 16)

As the image is continually changing in television broadcasts there is more scope for multiple meanings to be formed by the viewer. The focus then shifts away from the identification of signifying units to the saturation of the viewers in these signifiers. In order to interpret and understand this, one needs to focus on the viewer’s experiences rather than the images viewed (Baudrillard, 1987; Morgan, 1995; Usher & Edwards, 1994).

The concept of implosion is linked to Baudrillard's assertion that it is difficult to construct the meaning of an image, as all images are about the disappearance/denigration of meaning rather than the construction of meaning. Meaning in this sense is linked to "events, history, memory etc" (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 23). Rather than using various visual literacy approaches as a means of analysing images in order to uncover meaning, implosion sees this knowledge folding in on itself as opposed to distributing (however spectacularly) this knowledge in an external manner to the viewer of the image in terms of a fixed understanding.

Visual literacy theorists tend to focus on helping teachers to help students 'understand' the image, or as Baudrillard (1987) suggested: "we always look for a good usage of the image, that is to say a moral, meaningful, pedagogic or informational usage" (p. 23). The concept of implosion challenges the very notion of what it means to educate a student, in that the notions of meaning and understanding are fundamentally challenged; or as Baudrillard (1994b) has suggested: "It looks as if we are in the midst of an immense feeling of guilt, shared by intellectuals and politicians alike, and which is linked to the end of history and the downfall of values" (p. 2). Within the context of implosion and hyperreality, an historical understanding of meaning becomes problematic.

As mentioned earlier, one of the key assumptions within established categories of visual literacy is that we can somehow stand back from the object and analyse it in retrospect or in an almost detached or semi-detached manner. What becomes increasingly apparent when engaging with concepts such as postmodernism, simulacra, hyperreality and implosion is that this is impossible. We are completely immersed in visual images and are unable to deny our knowledge and experiences. Constructing, understanding and analysing this knowledge is problematised further by Baudrillard's (1994a) conception that this is all an illusion anyway.

SEDUCTION

The final theme of analysis that I will explore in this chapter is the concept of seduction. Seduction is closely tied to the previous themes in that it is linked to the notion of the simulated world that exists as part of hyperreality, implosion and simulacra. A consequence of Baudrillard's arguments surrounding the idea of simulation of the real is that we are seduced by these simulations as much as we are immersed in them.

Seduction reinforces further Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreality where these 'established' assumptions are no longer valid in a postmodern world. We are not only subsumed by this proliferation of images but also seduced by the saturation of signs that constitute television and other media.

Seduction tricks us; the truth and meaning of an image are unable to be realised as seduction controls both “the symbolic universe” and “the real universe”. When relating the concept of seduction to children and visual literacy, what I contend Baudrillard is arguing here is that seduction has been seen as part of the artifice and trickery connected to the so-called “symbolic universe”, whereas “the real universe” is where ‘true’ and ‘valuable’ knowledge actually lies (Baudrillard, 1990). An example of this would be that when we watch a television commercial we can be seduced by the symbolics and signs of the commercial but the ‘true’ power lies in the ‘real’ world where we actually buy the product that is being sold. The point at which we buy the product is the point at which the producers would know we have been seduced.

As an educator the focus traditionally would be on helping children understand how they are being seduced in order to help them gain power over the ‘real’ world and become informed consumers. Although I would agree that this is an important aspect of visual literacy, what I am exploring here is how the concept of seduction provides a challenge to some of these assumptions. What Baudrillard (1990) illustrates for us here is that “we are living in a supple, curved universe, that no longer has any vanishing points” (p. 157). If there are no vanishing points there can be no distinction between the “real” and “symbolic” worlds. What Baudrillard (1990) focused on then is that what becomes important is not the uncovering of the meaning behind the seduction but rather celebrating or focussing on the seduction itself, as can be seen when Baudrillard (1990) stated: “... seduction ... does not mask the “autonomy” of desire, pleasure or the body ... nor does it lay claim to some truth of its own. It seduces” (p. 7).

It is the experiencing of pleasure that becomes the focus. In terms of visual literacy what this means is that the viewer is seduced by the pleasure of the visual that can at times be linked to the saturation of the viewer in the signs. Usher and Edwards (1994) are arguing that, by pandering to, or participating in, those pleasurable experiences, traditional ways of viewing must change. We are not seeking to ‘understand’ the seduction; rather we are focussing on experiencing the seductive nature of the visual world.

The outlining of Baudrillard’s concepts of simulacra, hyperreality and implosion, and seduction has been undertaken in this chapter for three main reasons. These are: to help problematise the established categories of visual literacy and to begin to construct a framework for conceptualising a post-Literacy framework for ‘understanding’ the visual world. In the following section I will outline how these concepts link to a post-Literacy framework in more detail.

POST-LITERACY AND SIMULACRA

Baudrillard's conceptualisation of simulacra signals for me the move to a post-Literacy analysis that helps me to identify its impact on becoming literate in multimedia. The challenge for the shift to post-Literacy is to recognise and understand the complexities that arise when looking for a system by which to study the visual that includes the notion of simulacra. According to Baudrillard (1983): "... the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum – not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (pp. 10-11).

The concepts of 'reality' and 'representation' have been rendered forever problematic when embracing the concept of simulacra. A post-Literacy framework that acknowledges simulacra celebrates this and argues for a visual literacy approach that shifts away from an analysis of what an image represents and enters into a discourse with the fleeting, ever evolving conceptions for the experiences of the spatial. The next section these fleeting 'understandings' of the visual world in terms of hyperreality and implosion with the fleeting, ever evolving conception of the experiences of the spatial are discussed.

POST-LITERACY AND HYPERREALITY AND IMPLOSION

Hyperreality and implosion enable us to focus (however fleetingly) on this sense of excessive and overwhelming saturation of media. The difficulty for visual literacy now lies in identifying these experiences and from this constructing a way of understanding how to become 'literate' in these ways of knowing. When we look at the image with a post-Literacy lens, we are looking for the spaces created by the viewing, not what the image represents (Baudrillard, 1988. p. 27)

POST-LITERACY AND SEDUCTION

The main tenet of seduction and post-Literacy is that the power lies with the consumer rather than the producer, as Usher and Edwards (1994) argued:

It is the consumer (the learner) rather than the producer (the educator) who is articulated as having most power in this situation and given greater importance. Rather than being seen as a problem or a source of error and confusion, the fluidity of the world and its constantly changing images are identified as pleasurable, as something to be enjoyed. The cultivation of desire and informality is the aim, an aim to be pursued without a sense of guilt. (p. 199)

What we would be looking for is a post-Literacy framework that focuses on the idea of seduction, attraction and/or pleasure that can occur as a result of consuming media. This represents a shift away from the automatic assumption that the consumer is powerless to the post-Literacy lens that suggests that the consumer does in fact have power in this process.

IMPLICATIONS OF BAUDRILLARD FOR SCHOOLING

What the three themes of analysis have allowed me to do is to demonstrate how, by using Baudrillard's concepts, the significance of a postmodern world for understanding visual literacy becomes more apparent. An argument that helps to justify post-Literacy is that there is so much diversity and there are so many perspectives that we are unable to understand visual media in terms of what is advocated by established categories of visual literacy.

As discussed in a previous section of this chapter, the means by which we understand media are largely ineffectual when faced with the complexities underlying the three themes of analysis. When we link this notion of diversity with the three themes and with the experience we have of television and multimedia throughout the generations, we 'see' at a closer range the diversity of audience and imagery by which we are surrounded. Baudrillard offers a useful resource for two reasons. First he helps to pinpoint some of the key cultural/social changes that necessitate new forms of education. Secondly, he gives us a language for talking about 'literacy' in these 'new' times.

What I am arguing, therefore, is that we need an approach to the whole concept of visual literacy that is consistent with the postmodern contexts described by Baudrillard and others. This means, among other things, a need for an understanding of literacies that is able to:

- respond to the loss of single meaning by recognising multiple meanings;
- celebrate multiple exit points from various 'quests for knowledge' such as those associated with schooling systems;
- makes problematic notions of understanding, truth and reality;
- Makes problematic the analysis of visual images;
- Acknowledges the power of the consumer rather than the producer of visual images;
- Focuses on the seduction and/or attraction of the media.

As post-Literacy is attached to postmodern theory, there is the notion that it moves beyond the referents and signifiers and so could descend into

chaos and the more nihilistic versions of postmodernism. However I recognise that, if it is to be used or embraced in a formal school setting, then post-Literacy will need to be strategic in how it attaches itself to the more established notions of visual literacy. In following section I will discuss a partnership across university and school sectors that helps to facilitate the notion of a changing world and to investigate how formal educational systems are beginning to address some of these challenges posed by postmodern ideologies.

LEARNING INITIATIVES, THE PROBLEM WITH REALITY AND FUTURES DIRECTIONS

Waraburra State School has developed a concept called *Learning Initiatives* that provides a means of integrating curriculum pedagogy and assessment by enabling students to work in teams to solve 'real' world problems, and create products of performances and develop projects with community. School students become knowledge creators and producers by investigating and solving important local community issues and needs. In the first instance students utilise expert knowledge available in the community to enable their own learning and achieve the goals of the initiative. In this mode students have connections to experts who for the most part are consultants, to enable them to complete the *Learning Initiative* before them. (For a more detailed outline of this project see Cooling, Graham, Moore, & Walker-Gibbs, 2003). What this does in terms of Baudrillard and post-Literacy is begin to help children explore the visual world beyond the traditional 'four wall' of schooling. Most of the learning in *Learning Initiatives* happens outside of the classroom context. It is not unusual for students to work in the community, access community resources and broaden their experiences in a variety of contexts. They are saturated in media and are seduced by the initiatives but at the same time frame their experiences and define and re-assess the boundaries they work with/in.

A constant challenge for the research partnership outlined in this chapter has been trying to work through the complexities and challenges posed by a postmodern world whilst attempting to provide flexible frameworks for teachers that allow them to engage with post-Literate constructions of visual literacy. By embracing a postmodern theoretical framework, I hope to underline the importance of taking risks and learning to analyse/understand and negotiate the challenging context that is contemporary life. As Rowan (2001) stated:

It is ... vital that educators are provided with the kind of support necessary to prepare them for their role in helping individuals to respond to diversity in positive and inclusive ways As educators, it is not our role to ensure that we reproduce society as it is. Rather, one of our key responsibilities is to work consciously and creatively to

provide spaces for individuals to embrace principles of justice, tolerance and inclusion. (pp. 10-11)

I argue that these discourses need to be addressed in order to try to identify the implications of shifts in understanding and pedagogical knowledge with regard to visual literacy. As Hagood, Stevens and Reinking (2002) stated: "Thinking of contemporary literacies in a post-literate culture, we can perhaps address the disjunction formed between not what literacies mean to users of a particular generation, but what literacies and literacy practices do when conceptualised across generations" (p. 80). Ultimately what a quotation like this allows me to do is confront and challenge potential meta-narratives of the research whilst also paying attention to what Rushkoff (1994) stated: "[l]ike it or not, we have become an information-based society ... [and] we live in an age when the value of data, images, and ideologies has surpassed that of material acquisitions and physical territory" (p. 3).

Although the focus of the research partnership was on generational theory and ICT implementation in schools (Lankshear, Snyder and Green, 2000; Bruce, 2002; Kellner, 2002; Lankshear and Knobel, 2002; 2003; Luke, 2002; Duncum, 2004), what it has also highlighted are the distinctions between how we have traditionally perceived the visual world and how new generations of learners also may view the world from a postmodern perspective. Although *Learning Initiatives* do provide some interesting opportunities, further investigation into the impact of postmodern realities in formal education has become more imperative. The direction of this future study will be based on an exploration of the blurring of boundaries between formal educational institutions and communities and of inter-generational understandings of constructions of realities. For example, students having ownership of a project that is not assessed in traditional ways but rather according to student directed and constructed criteria.

What this highlights in terms of *Learning Initiatives* is that it helps teachers to recognise that there are multiple entry and exit points to knowledge that challenges the school as holder of all knowledge. *Learning Initiatives* moves towards acknowledging that the world is different and that there needs to be an engagement with this difference in order to establish multiple meanings and contexts for children to learn. Students are both consumers and producers of media.

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that Baudrillard's concepts help to challenge formal educational structures by embracing simulacra, hyperreality and implosion in terms of how in today's world the viewer is saturated in visual media. It has also been argued that the viewer/consumer is seduced by this media and therefore established ways of understanding the visual world specifically and

education more generally no longer provide educators with adequate lenses through which to view the world.

The chapter has provided a case study of a particular school that is attempting to engage in innovative practices and challenge more established ways of implementing visual literacy in the classroom. It is from this case study that we can continue to construct and re-construct *Learning Initiatives* to incorporate post-Literacy in an information rich society.

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^{xlixii} These two concepts are considered to be part of the same theme of analysis and will be referred to as hyperreality and implosion from now on.

^{xlixiii} The 'small p' designates postmodern theories that help me to move beyond, challenge and present alternatives to the established categories of literacy that are represented by the 'big L'. In other words I am looking at postmodern theories in order to challenge the meta-narrative of Literacy. By linking the two, I acknowledge that there will be connections as well as points of departure.