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This article is a response to Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy (Czubek, 2006). The author presents his views on the concepts of literacy and the new and multiple literacies. In addition, the merits of print literacy and other types of literacies are discussed. Although the author agrees that there is an American Sign Language (ASL) literacy, he maintains that there should be a distinction between conversational “literacy” forms (speech and sign) and secondary literacy forms (reading and writing). It might be that cognitive skills associated with print literacy and, possibly, other captured literacy forms, are necessary for a technological, science-driven society such as that which exists in the United States.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a proliferation of “meta” words in the traditional field of reading as in metacomprehension, metacognition, metamemory, and, even, my favorite word—metatheory. My wife claimed that, sometimes, during the night, I would utter a new meta word in my sleep. She should be happy that I was not tuned in to the New or Multiple Literacies terms that emerged during the middle-to-late 1990s. It might have disrupted our nighttime habits with my rendition of “unlimited literacies” words.

I am definitely tuned in now, considering that I have completed a book review on this topic for JDSDE, Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education (Paul, 2005), a few related publications (Paul, 1998a, 1998b, 2001; Paul & Wang, in press), and am currently serving as a coeditor (with David Bloome) on a special issue on Multiple Literacies (in progress). Besides, Harvey Graff is now a faculty member at the Ohio State University, and Brian Street has been a guest lecturer in our College of Education (see Czubek, 2006). So I suspect that a few of you are wagering that I am going to support the fact that there is such a thing as ASL literacy—one of the main arguments of Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy. That is an easy bet. The harder one is whether these new directions in literacy or literacies will really prepare our deaf students for the future or, to put it another way, assist in developing critical “readers/thinkers/writers,” especially with the use of English (the majority language in our society). That depends on several factors, which will be revealed throughout this article.

In responding to Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy (Czubek, 2006), I intend to present my views on the concept of literacy, the development of new or multiple literacies, and to argue the merits and implications of print literacy as well as the new directions in literacy. Not only will I address the issue of whether there is an ASL literacy but also I will comment on whether there should be a distinction between conversational “literacy” forms (speech and sign) and secondary literacy forms (reading and writing). Finally, I proffer suggestions for future research endeavors.

The Concept of Literacy

For those of us grounded in traditional notions of literacy—that is, print literacy—the proliferation of
phrases that contain the word literacy or literacies can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Tyner (1998) categorized the various forms of literacies into tool literacies and literacies of representation. Tool literacies refer to the general proliferation of new technological tools in society, including “computer literacy,” “network literacy,” and “technology literacy.” Literacies of representation address the need to analyze information and to understand how meaning is created and includes entities such as “information literacy,” “visual literacy,” and “media literacy.” Concepts such as oral literacy, sign literacy (e.g., ASL literacy), print literacy (traditional literacy), mathematical literacy, and so on are examples of literacies of representations.

To add to this confusion, I have proposed (Paul, 1998b, 2001; Paul & Wang, in press) that literacy be reconceptualized as a form of “captured” verbal information. This would yield categories with respect to the mode of the captured information as in “script literacy,” “performance literacy,” or “caption literacy.” (Braille literacy and communication boards will not be discussed here.) Script (or print) literacy refers to the capture of verbal language or information through print or written symbols, that is, via written language. Performance literacy refers to the capture of spoken or signed information only through the use of audio books or video books (in one sense, this is similar to ASL literacy—i.e., on videos). Caption literacy is the combination of script and performance literacy with a video background. Within Tyner’s (1998) framework, script literacy, performance literacy, and caption literacy refer to different literacies of representation.

In my view, the notion of captured information needs to be considered in the debates on the new literacies and multiple literacies, especially with respect to instructional, curricular, and assessment issues. Captured verbal language or information is critical because this permits individuals to engage in a deeper, more rational and critical reflection on the organization of information in a single text or even in multiple texts (in print, audio, or video). Traditionally, it has been argued that “thought” in print cultures is characterized by highly abstract, logical, complex theories and models, which maybe quite different from those of current cultures that do not possess written literatures or the printed word and also different from those of preliterate cultures which depended on orality or oral discourses (Denny, 1991; Feldman, 1991; Olson, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1994).

In defense of ASL literacy and other nonprint literacies (in captured form), this type of thought might not necessarily be unique to the mode of print (or to cultures without written literacy). It might also be evident with any mode of captured verbal language or information, which is obviously possible in this technological age. In any case, for success in school and beyond, individuals need to be able to have the ability not only to access the captured forms of information but also to interpret or use the information—in other words, to construct meaning or to use critical thinking skills. Whether thought reaches a certain level via the use of print only is debatable and is in need of further research efforts.

On the basis of the information above, one can infer that there is an ASL literacy. If we are referring to the use of ASL in a live face-to-face mode, this is roughly similar to the traditional concept of oral literacy or orality. If we capture ASL via technology, then this is roughly similar to my concept of performance literacy.

Agreeing that there is such an entity as ASL literacy is easy. Of course, I do not deny that there are political and power issues as well, which seems to stem from the parochialism of print literacy. Interestingly, if there is an ASL literacy, then there must be a Spanish literacy, German literacy, and even dialects of literacy (if we focus on the “oral” or “face-to-face” conversational form only). In fact, anything (language, pictures, graphs, symbols, etc.) that entails the delivery of information or knowledge can be a form of literacy. It should not matter whether we are referring to face-to-face live interactions or captured renditions, which are removed from context (i.e., print, audio text, video text, etc.).

Nevertheless, we should ask the $64,000 question—are all “literacies” equal (i.e., should be equally promoted and valued) with respect to the demands of society, particularly a market-driven, technological one such as that which exists in the United States? Contrary to the views of the author of Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy (Czubek, 2006) and possibly others (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear...
Knobel, 2003; Street, 1995), a different set of cognitive skills are needed for captured information, especially print, than for face-to-face information. I am not fully convinced that this “separation” (conversational literacies vs. print or captured literacies) is purely parochial, political, or power driven as social theorists claim.

Multiple Literacies

There is no doubt that the term, multiple literacies, can cause the die-hard traditionalist to shudder—almost uncontrollably. With the advent and continuing development of predominant social models of literacy, there is the emerging view that literacy is multiple and is an integral part of the sociocultural lives of individuals and communities. The notion of multiple literacies represents a paradigm shift from the notion of traditional literacy. Not only are there numerous literacy genres (e.g., fiction, nonfiction) but also there are a variety of literacy situations (e.g., literacy at home vs. in school) and a broad range of literacy practices (e.g., using and assessing multiple sources of information—i.e., “intertextuality”). In short, there are multiple worlds and multiple ways of knowing (epistemologies) or habits of minds. Furthermore, information can be presented in multimodal formats with the use of technology (e.g., sound plus print, sign language plus print, graphics plus sound plus print, etc.).

Multiple literacies refer to diverse sets of practices and semiotic systems to construct, acquire, communicate, and question knowledge as well as to create, analyze, and transform relationships among people and between people and institutions. There are concerns with issues of power, oppression, and social justice that are motivated by a predominant, indiscriminate use or promotion of print literacy or practices based on print literacy.

Multiple literacies’ proponents argue that schools use a narrow conception of literacy—print literacy—often limited to a single text (e.g., see discussions in Paris & Stahl, 2005). One outcome is that students who prefer other ways of using written language and who access and communicate knowledge and insight in modes other than script or print are labeled failures and as illiterate. A second outcome is the use of a narrow curriculum that does not promote broad habits of mind associated with “multiple perspectives.” Finally, and most important, this reliance on narrow practices, especially the use of single texts, does not prepare students for a diverse, changing world where they are expected to work collaboratively and become critical thinkers of information from a variety of sources.

It might be difficult to find “traditional proponents of print literacy” who do not also want to promote collaboration, the development of critical thinking skills across a variety of information sources, or even an appreciation of multiple perspectives (well, maybe we can find a few who do not care or agree). Perhaps, the major issue is that there needs to be an improvement in school literacy practices, especially in the areas of instruction, curriculum, and assessment. I would bet that traditionalists (and others) agree that the use of multiple texts (i.e., printed texts) is extremely important and should be a part of the new directions currently discussed, for example, for “reading comprehension” (e.g., see Paris & Stahl, 2005). That is, it is necessary to provide opportunities for students to answer questions that involve the access and interpretation of multiple texts—not just a single passage in a single text. Of course, this noble idea is not without its problems with respect to developing adequate comprehension assessments, especially standardized assessments.

The major knee-jerk reaction and strongest disagreement comes from perspectives on the first outcome—the label of failures and illiterates. These labels are the result of the indiscriminate application of mainstream literacy practices, which favor print literacy only. Deaf Studies’ scholars argue about the dominant, hearing-world, hegemonic literacy associated with written language (Brueggemann, 2004; Paul, 2005). And, then there is the issue of multiple social worlds, multiple perspectives, and multiple epistemologies that seems to be ignored by traditional print literacy.

On the other hand, traditional print literacy proponents argue that accessing and interpreting print information is the hallmark of success in school and society (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Pearson & Stephens, 1994; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Some might remark that print literacy is critical
for the development of the “type” of thought (i.e., theorizing, modeling, and problem solving) that is necessary for participating and collaborating in a technological, scientific dependent society. Of course, facility in print literacy is also related to the need to learn to “read and write” in the dominant or majority language of society—that is, English (in the North American context addressed by Czubek). Most important, the use of print seems to be extremely important for developing higher level comprehension skills (e.g., making generalizations, inferences, etc.) that are often associated with “traditional” reading lessons. Are the traditionalists completely right? Partially right? Dead wrong? For a perspective on these questions, it is important to discuss further the “merits” of print literacy or captured information.

**Merits of Script Literacy or Captured Information**

Given the extensive history, prestige, evolution, and “convenience” associated with script (print) literacy, it is difficult to argue for the use of alternative modes of delivering “comparable” information. Proponents of the merits of script literacy argue that facility with print is associated with the advancement of culture and science and even of social progress (Olson, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1994; Ong, 1982). In other words, it is assumed that print literacy (especially writing) is predominantly responsible for the development of modes of thoughts associated with science, philosophy, and mathematics. Even progress in technology seems to occur in societies with high rates of print literacy, although there are other influential factors (e.g., availability of resources, value systems).

Facility with print literacy is also considered to be a major instrument of cognitive development. Individuals, who are able to access printed materials, particularly learned information from school and books, are in a position to become literate thinkers. The ability to read and write permits a person to reach a level of complexity or abstraction. In fact, in some scholars’ eyes, the development of complex models, theories, and other modes of thought was not possible without literacy—that is, without the recording of information in printed form (Ong, 1982).

I am in agreement with the author of *Blue Listerine, Parochialism, and ASL Literacy* (Czubek, 2006) that the above reasoning is flawed—but, in my view, not completely wrong. Consider the following passage from Olson (1994):

> It is simply a mistake to identify the means of communication with the knowledge that is communicated. Knowledge can be communicated in a number of ways—by speech, writing, graphs, diagrams, audiotapes, video. (p. 12)

I would go one step further. If the knowledge that is communicated is captured or preserved, then this enables individuals to rely less on memory and more on the use of higher level thinking skills to compose models of thoughts that are roughly similar to those that exist in print literacy societies. It is the interactions between the individuals and the captured modes of information (whether in print, audio, or video) that can influence pervasively the structure of thought.

Thus, it can be argued that one way to capture information is to put it down in writing. The case can be made that captured information, in the form of written language, has provided the foundation for the argument that Western thought is characterized by highly abstract, logical, complex theories and models. The process of writing does not lead to a specific development of consciousness but to the realization that a person can recognize his or her interpretations as interpretations (Denny, 1991; Feldman, 1991). Of course, writing and reading can be used as tools for developing further one’s abstract, complex thinking skills; however, they are not the only tools for these purposes.

In essence, any form of captured information can serve as a tool. So, does this mean that all forms of captured information are equal and applicable for our society (similar to the “are all literacies equal” question raised previously)? At present, the answer is still in the negative because we do not have sufficient empirical data to argue that all forms of captured information or even oral literacy, sign literacy, and so on, are comparable to print literacy for a technologically-driven, scientific society. But, the future is always full of surprises.
The Future of Literacy Practices

We need more research on the differences between print literacy and all other forms of literacies, especially the captured forms. I have attempted to argue that the cognitive demands associated with print literacy may be highly different from those of other forms of literacy. Consider the following, but not exhaustive, issues that suggest such differences: (a) the complex structure of the language/information of print (syntax, density of ideas, etc.) versus the language used in face-to-face conversations, (b) the influence of the reader or “interpreter” on “comprehension” for audio books and video books, (c) the ability of individuals to access and interpret print information, which has been converted into audio or video texts, and (d) the ease of look-back techniques for print versus those that might be needed (e.g., listen-back or watch-back) for video or audio texts. Finally, consider the perceptual field of print, which is broader than that associated with the presentations of verbal information in video and audio texts. Will these factors make a critical difference in the interpretation of information, including literary works such as Moby Dick, passages in school texts, and even technical pieces as in academic journals?

Then, there is the argument that one can use the various types of literacy (performance, ASL, etc.) to learn to read and write English (which I assume is still important). Unfortunately, an adequate discussion of this issue requires more space than I have here, and there is clearly not sufficient evidence as yet to support this assertion. There are a number of publications on this “problem” related to learning English as a first or second language (e.g., see Musselman, 2000; Paul, 2003; Perfetti & Sandak, 2000). Suffice it to say that the case has not yet been made convincingly.

Conclusion

One of the major advantages of the new or multiple literacies, at least for those of us in special education, is the provision of additional tools to assist students in accessing the general education curriculum. If one goal is to represent (and capture) the complex learned topics of classroom discourses and information in printed texts, then nonprint literacy practices can be used to perform the same or similar functions as traditional literacy practices and materials. Individuals should be able to use nonprint literacy materials for review and study and to become engaged in meaningful discussions in the classrooms and other locations. Many of our current instructional activities for traditional print literacy can be used or adapted—specifically, prior knowledge and metacognitive activities, vocabulary activities, and assessment activities.

Individuals still need to share and talk about the information; learn the vocabulary, idioms, and metaphors of specific disciplines (i.e., the metalanguage); and shape the knowledge and discourses necessary to participate in as inquirers and thinkers. In short, after exposure to captured information, there is a need for individuals to be exposed to multiple perspectives, clarifications, and so on, to assist them with their meaning-making or interpretation processes. This is essentially what occurs (or should occur) with traditional literacy practices (Paul, 1998b; Pearson & Stephens, 1994; Snow et al., 1998).

Nevertheless, whether this will ensure success in society is still an open question. Admittedly, I am a strong cognitively oriented scholar; however, I have several concerns with the new or multiple literacies. With respect to literacy and at-risk learners, children with language and reading disabilities, and children in special education programs, who do not read or write well, the cognitive tasks of accessing and understanding the contents of the various multiple literacies remain a challenge for these children and adolescents (e.g., Butler & Silliman, 2002; Snow et al., 1998).

Regardless of the description of the new or multiple literacies, an ongoing issue for students with traditional reading difficulties is to ensure that these individuals develop adequate access and interpretation skills. This is necessary for students to understand and use information from either a single text or source or from multiple sources or texts. In addition, there has been little research or instructional focus on alternative means for assisting students to access information and to develop high-level cognitive skills similar to those that exist for print.

I agree with the social theorists that the goal is to become literate, not simply to possess the ability to access print. I am even intrigued by the notion of
a Deaf Epistemology (related to multiple epistemologies of the new literacies). Considering the social worlds of individuals and multiple perspectives are notable goals for literacy practices. According to my dentist, Listerine in any color is completely worthless for killing germs or performing all the functions that are advertised. Will the same be true for the new directions in literacies?

References


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