

Designing a Curriculum for the Advanced Stream of a Foundational Literacies Course

James Emmet Owens

Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

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Abstract

Originally, members of the Basic Skills project at Kanda University of International Studies were given the task of developing a new curriculum for the Basic Reading course. Recent developments, however, have complicated this task. The new course being designed has been renamed 'Foundational Literacies' to better reflect the move away from traditional thinking about teaching literacy and cognitive skills, and instead focus on what is called a 'Multiliteracies' pedagogical approach.

A Multiliteracies pedagogy suggests a new way of looking at the idea of 'literacies' that is more compatible with the modern world, a move away from the traditional one-dimensional view of literacy. It means providing access to what learners really need in order for them both to empower themselves and to become functional, effective and successful members of what is now often labelled a 'post-Fordist' world of 'fast capitalism'. In such a society, a much larger range of skills and the capacity to interact in many different ways with many different people are essential. Older, simpler models of teaching literacy are no longer relevant.

The paper will describe the process we have used so far to begin designing a completely new course, intended for an advanced stream of learners, and a justification for some of the decisions we have made in this process. The project is as yet unfinished, and is undergoing constant re-evaluation, but reading about our process and decision-making may prove useful for other teachers and course designers who currently find themselves in similar situations, or for those who are curious about what a Multiliteracies-focused curriculum may look like.

1. Introduction

Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), based near Tokyo in Japan, is an institution where learners focus on the study of foreign languages and intercultural communication. The university philosophy has always emphasised the role that individuals play in managing their own learning, recognizing individual differences in learning styles and preferences. An individualized approach emphasizing choice and variety are therefore essential components of the KUIS curriculum.

Freshman students, in addition to other communicative classes, have until now had to take Basic Reading and Basic Writing classes. Whilst these courses had some benefits, they also had many shortcomings, which are explained in more detail in a previous paper (Owens, 2012). Therefore, for a variety of reasons, in 2011-2012 the Basic Skills committee, of which the author was a member, initiated the process of designing a new curriculum for the Basic Reading course, using the Nation and Macalister (2010) model of language curriculum design as a guide. The iterative and collaborative process, including a needs analysis and environment analysis, is described in the aforementioned paper (Owens, 2012).

However, a year into this redesigning process, additional factors created new challenges in the formation of the new curriculum. A program-wide curriculum review, in response to dissatisfaction from multiple stakeholders, including the administration and higher-level students, suggested that the English Department ought to change academic direction. This change was also partly in response to shifting trends in the applied linguistics literature, and in particular the 2006 MLA Journal monograph that called for widespread reform of foreign language education. Kramersch (2006) has suggested moving away from the hitherto focus on communicative proficiency, as a set of discreet and teachable cognitive skills, towards what she has termed symbolic competence. In keeping with this, all of the various course curricula within the English Language Institute (ELI) were to be newly inspired by the 'Multiliteracies approach', a term first coined and advocated by the New London Group (Cazden et al., 1996).

2. Multiliteracies

A Multiliteracies pedagogy suggests a new way of looking at the idea of literacy that is more compatible with the modern world, taking "...a much broader view of literacy than that portrayed by traditional language-based approaches" that takes into account the "...multiplicity of communications channels and increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today " (Cazden et al., 1996:60). It means providing access to what learners really need in order for them both to empower themselves ("students need to develop the capacity to speak up... negotiate, and to be able to engage critically with the conditions of their working lives" (p67)) and to become functional, effective and successful members of what is now often labelled a 'post-Fordist' world of 'fast capitalism'. In such a society, a much larger range of skills and the capacity to interact in many different ways with many different people are essential. Older, simpler models of teaching literacy that focus on the ability to read and write traditional text formats are no longer relevant.

Within this context, The New London Group describe there as being "...twin goals for literacy learning", one of which is to create "...access to the evolving language of work, power and community"; the other goal is "...fostering the critical engagement necessary for them [students] to design their social futures and achieve success" (Cazden et al., 1996:60) where success can be defined in a variety of different ways (career, knowledge, empowerment...etc.).

The use of the word 'multi' in this pedagogical approach is deliberately ambiguous. It refers in one instance to "*social diversity*", and suggests that ideas of there being only "the rules of a single, standard form of the national language" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012:1) are outdated and no longer useful. However, 'multi' also refers to "*multimodality*" (p.2). We no longer operate in a world of simple text and print: "...the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioural, and so on" (Cazden et al., 1996:64). The new course would have to take both these factors into consideration.

3. Satisfying a Range of Aims

Another complication affecting our curriculum design process relates to the recent decision made by the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) to award generous grants to institutions that are able to send their students away on scholarships to foreign universities in English-speaking countries. In order to satisfy entrance requirements, students need to achieve high scores in certain English-speaking proficiency tests. The most widely accepted, and therefore most useful, of such tests would seem to be the TOEFL test. Students at Kanda University are therefore encouraged to take the traditional paper form of this test as many times throughout the year as they wish, and are obliged to take it in January.

Shortly after Kanda University announced its change of direction to adhere to a Multiliteracies pedagogy, the Basic Skills committee was reformed into a Foundational Literacies committee. The new committee was to design a whole new course, an integrated course replacing both the Basic Reading and the Basic Writing courses. This paper does not have sufficient space to engage in such a debate, but there is general consensus in the world of academic research that integrated courses function much more effectively than separate skills courses: "One of the most consistent implications of two decades of reading and writing relations is that they should be taught together and that the combination of both literacy skills enhances learning in all areas" (Grabe, 2001: 25).

As part of the conditions for the awarding of the MEXT grant, the university administration created smaller, more efficient classes (of roughly twenty students per class where in the past there had been between twenty-five and thirty) and to create a separate advanced stream of six classes (out of a total of roughly eighteen) with a different curriculum to that of the 'mainstream' classes. The students in this top stream would be the intended and most likely beneficiaries of the study abroad programme, though students from all tiers are fully eligible to apply for the programme.

The challenge for this newly created Foundational Literacies Advanced Stream Research Committee was to create a course that could satisfy at least four main aims:

1. To replace an outdated, unpopular Basic Skills course;
2. To make the new integrated course compatible with the aims of a Multiliteracies pedagogical approach to learning (including greater use of both analogue and digital internet-mediated text genres);
3. To ensure the course improves learners' TOEFL scores, without reducing the classes to a 'teaching the test' formula;
4. To make the content more relevant to learners' actual lives and needs both in a Japanese context and also for study abroad.

The next stage in the design process was negotiating and drafting a curriculum plan combining all the target competencies. Therefore all the relevant TOEFL and Multiliteracies competencies, together with those suggested in the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) were listed and codified. The resulting basic plan for a two-semester curriculum can be seen in Appendices A-D.

4. Genre

From these tables, it can also be seen that the next decision made in the curriculum design process was to make the course genre-based in terms of organisation. This is a popular approach, especially amongst advocates of the Multiliteracies approach to learning, and in this regard the committee was inspired by the curriculum development work taking place at Georgetown University, as described in Byrnes et al. (2006). Again, this paper has insufficient space to list in detail the advantages and disadvantages of such a course, but using genre as an organising principle has many supporters in the recent world of research. For example, Hyland (2007) writes:

Instead of focusing on the process of composition, the content of texts, or the abstract prescriptions of disembodied grammars, genre pedagogies enable teachers to ground their courses in the texts that students will have to write in their target contexts, thereby supporting learners to participate effectively in the world outside the ESL classroom. (p. 48)

Put more simply, and in direct relation to the Multiliteracies theme of learner empowerment, genre-based approaches are useful because genre directly relates “the social purpose of a text to language structure” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2012:126). Therefore, enabling learners to achieve ‘genre consciousness’ allows them to acquire “...the power of choice and the linguistic potential to join new realms of social activity and social power.” (p. 129)

With regard to the use of the term ‘genre consciousness’ above, different academics have opted for different terms in defining what it is they hope students to achieve in studying on such a course. For example, Hyland (2007:154) talks of "genre knowledge", whereas Johns (2008:238) contrasts mere "genre acquisition" with, in her view, the more useful goal of "genre awareness". To avoid getting too involved in the

complexities of this issue, we have for the time being settled on the use of the more neutral term ‘genre consciousness’.

It is our hope, then, in creating this course that learners become familiar with a variety of different genres and the uses of language located in a social context. As part of this, learners should be able to critically analyse texts. This presents quite a challenge in Japan, where critical thinking is generally not taught or celebrated as an educational skill. However, it is an essential skill. In fact ‘critical framing’ is one of the “four curricular components” (Allen & Paesani, 2010: 123) of Multiliteracies pedagogy, the others being ‘situated practice’, ‘overt instruction’ and ‘transformed practice’.

5. The New Curriculum

There are two semesters per year, each of fifteen weeks, in a Japanese university. The Foundational Literacies course consists of two lessons a week, with each lesson ninety minutes long. It runs alongside a ‘Freshman English’ course that will focus on more communicative skills and vocabulary, and students also have access to TOEFL-test-taking classes and workshops/counselling that help prepare them for life abroad in a foreign university. Thus, the Foundational Literacies course has the fortune to focus more specifically, though not exclusively, on reading and writing competencies.

The first week focuses on an Introduction to the course, including the use of a standard exercise to be used as a weekly homework activity. This exercise will form the topic of a future paper, as an explanation of the thinking behind it would take considerable time and space. However, it can be said to be relevant to a Multiliteracies course as it is designed to encourage students to reflect critically on a text, and allow them to respond in a multimodal format (such as the use of digital concept maps) rather than simply writing answers in the traditional manner.

Following the Introduction, the next unit focuses on the genre of Email, chosen as it is the genre students should most be familiar with, given their age and the frequent use of smart phones and digital devices among young people in Japan. This unit runs for 3-4 weeks, followed by a Narrative unit (which is described below in greater detail in order to demonstrate more clearly how we are trying to adapt our curriculum to a Multiliteracies approach) for 5-6 weeks. The first semester finishes with an Essay unit for the final 5 weeks.

This first semester curriculum intentionally moves from more familiar genre types to more literary and then more academic materials, covering what Byrnes et al. (2006) refer to as primary, blurred and secondary discourses. This has the added benefit of gradually familiarising learners with the kind of difficult or unfamiliar texts they are likely to encounter in the TOEFL test.

The second semester’s contents have not yet been fully planned, but, as can be seen in Appendices A-D, the provisional draft involved a first unit that would focus on the genre of Product Review, followed by the genre of News Report, and finishing with a second unit on the genre of Essay.

However, there have very recently been some alterations to this original draft. The institution decided students would take the traditional paper form of the TOEFL test, for financial reasons, while this original draft was created assuming they would be taking the iBT version. Therefore, it was decided that students needed more practice with the type of reading comprehension skills considered useful for the paper-based TOEFL test. Thus, an Information Report unit incorporating such practice was created to replace the News Report. In addition, it was decided that the second Essay unit would be discarded in favour of a Media/Social Media unit. This would allow us to focus on greater use of multimodality and also introduce some critical analysis skills. Additionally, given the popularity and usefulness of media in general, in the worlds of business, socialising, and information sharing, if we really wish to empower students and prepare them for success in the world, the inclusion of such a genre is essential. Some might argue that essay writing is so important as to warrant a greater focus. However, the general aim of our course is to focus on textuality itself, rather than mastery over any one text type. 'Essay' as a unit gets greater focus in the second year curriculum. In the freshman year the course is designed to introduce some foundational principles of text organization, style, and rhetoric as related to different rhetorical situations and contexts. We do not believe that "essay" necessarily has a certain unquestionable value. This is still an issue under discussion, however. As this is the first year to implement the new curriculum, there will be a significant amount of changes, trial-and-error, continuous evaluation and redesign.

A decision was reached to make the whole course digital-based. To standardise the course, all students in the advanced stream are required to purchase iPads, and all the material for the course is available online or in the form of iBooks. Some screenshots from the webpages can be seen in the Appendices.

6. Example Unit: Narratives

In order to demonstrate more clearly the contents of our course and how they hopefully conform to our aims and make use of the "four curricular components" mentioned above, this paper will explain in more detail one of the sample units from the first semester: the Narrative unit.

Aside from an assignment and vocabulary test, there are ten lessons that make up the Narrative unit (numbered in Chinese characters in Appendix E). Alongside these lessons, students can make use of the forums (as seen in the appendix) to discuss the work and help one another outside of the classroom.

The first lesson (Making a Narrative) introduces the genre of Narrative, and familiarises learners with the standard five-part model that many narratives follow: introduction, scene setting, complicating action, further action(s) and a resolution with a reflection (or ending and evaluation). Students see this simple model in action and are invited in groups to make their own simple narratives that conform to the model (situated practice). Language work is also essential, so in the next lesson, students work on compound sentences and the use of transitions, while also being introduced

to more narratives in the form of travel blogs, and in the third lesson they look at natural-sounding patterns of writing given and new information.

The fourth lesson reviews the five-part model of narratives, and asks groups to look at different fairy tales and folk stories from various different cultures around the world and apply the model (see Appendix F), before forming new groups and comparing their narratives (overt instruction). The fifth lesson then looks at a Japanese folk story as learners attempt to apply the model again. The intention is that students will notice by comparison that Japanese fairy tales do not necessarily include a clear reflection/evaluation, and learners are encouraged to discuss why this might be. What does it suggest about, or how does this relate to, Japanese culture? (critical framing).

In the next lesson, learners look at a news narrative, and again apply the five-part model, while also noticing any differences/similarities between news narratives and other types of narrative we have encountered so far. In each of the lessons, students are asked to reflect on the type of vocabulary used in each genre (for example the old-fashioned 'literature' words that are used in fairy tales, and the intentional combination of both formal and informal vocabulary in news stories) and asked why these 'choices' are made by the author. Learners are constantly required to analyse language choice and think critically and independently.

The seventh lesson makes use of the transformed practice component. Students have two options: they can either, in groups, rewrite one of the fairy tales as a news narrative, or perform the opposite task, changing the news story into a fairy tale. This is an effective way of allowing learners to show how they have achieved 'genre consciousness' whilst allowing them to be creative. They are also asked to then reflect on their own vocabulary use, on their language choices as writers, just as they did when reading the other narratives. In the next lesson, they present their finished work to each other in groups, followed by some more language work (use of connectives and writing longer sentences).

The ninth lesson looks at a personal narrative. Again, learners apply the five-part model, then reflect on both the abstract and descriptive vocabulary used in the narrative, once again in the context of author choice. They are then set the task of writing a personal narrative with a similar theme (a life-changing moment). This leads into the final lesson, where critical analysis is the focus as they look at constructed narratives. Learners again read, in different groups, various supposed 'personal narratives' from people claiming to have experienced life-changing moments. After they have applied the five-part model and discussed their narratives in different groups, reflecting on field, tenor and mode, and authorial intention, they are made aware that all the narratives come from the same website, promoting the sale of a product that promises to change people's lives. Then they discuss the same questions in the context of this additional information (Appendix G).

7. Conclusion

The above description of one sample unit hopefully gives some indication as to how we have attempted to follow the Multiliteracies pedagogical approach to create a course that sufficiently challenges and empowers our learners, in response to recent ideas in the field of applied linguistics research. This is an exciting period of change at Kanda University, as we go about changing and updating all our ELI curricula. There will no doubt be problems and changes, as we constantly re-evaluate and redesign our course, but we hope that it will meet with success. There are many institutions currently updating their courses to better reflect newer attitudes in the world of language teaching. As such, our attempts are one such example, and this paper will hopefully help any teachers or course designers who are attempting similar processes.

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Appendix A – Draft Plan for Writing, Semester 1 - By completion of Writing Semester 1: Students can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within a field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.

CEFR: B1	TOEFL skills	Multiliteracies	Unit	Course Assessment
Can write email/formal letters conveying degrees of emotion and highlighting the personal significance of events and experiences and commenting on the correspondent's news and views.	Main points, supporting details	Can communicate in ways which conform to conventions or textual genres (<i>of: Email, narrative, short essay</i>). Understand authorial purpose in a text. Awareness of rhetorical moves. Politeness in text.	Email/Formal Letter	Email
Can write straightforward, detailed descriptions on a range of familiar subjects within his/her field of interest. Can write accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions in simple connected text. Can write a description of an event, a recent trip – real or imagined. Can narrate a story.	Compound and Complex sentences. Subordinating clauses. Transitions.	Can use multiple modes to create meaning in a narrative. Can rewrite a story to fit another genre/rhetorical situation.	Narrative	Narrative of Experience
Can write short, simple essays on topics of interest. Can summarize, report and give opinion about accumulated factual information on familiar routine and non-routine matters within their field of interest.	Create an argument, Topic sentence, Main Idea, Support, Conclusion. Cohesion. Noun clauses for summary	Understands relationship between purpose, context and form	Short Essay	Short Essay: Summary

Appendix B - Draft Plan for Writing, Semester 2 - By completion of Writing Semester 2: *Students can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest, synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.*

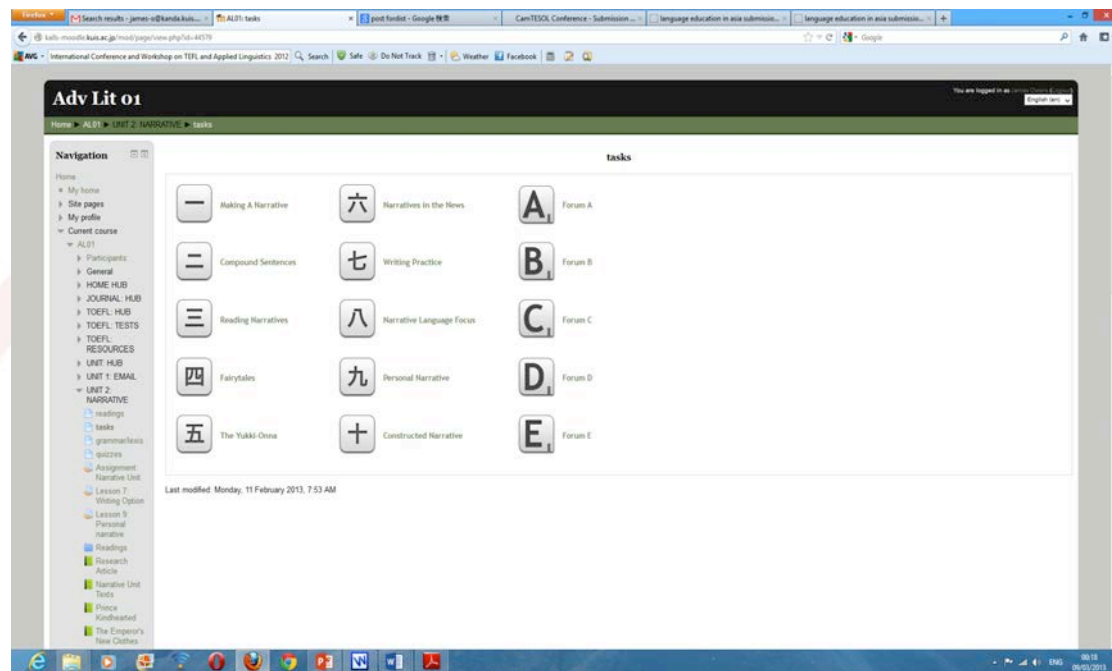
CEFR: B2	TOEFL skills	Multiliteracies	Unit	Course Assessment
Can write clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest. Can write a review of a film, book or play.	Adjectival phrases State an opinion and support a position.	Identity and voice in writing. Is able to create persona for giving a credible review.	Product Review	Review
Can write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences, marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected text, and following established conventions of the genre concerned.	Academic vs. phrasal verbs. Main ideas and support.	Understands and demonstrates constraints of media on text design.	News report	News report
Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options. Can synthesize information and arguments from a number of sources.	Create an argument, support a position. Cohesion: reference, ellipsis, pronouns. Transitions, conjunctions. Nominalization.	Academic vs. informal register.	Short Essay: Point of view	Short Essay: Point of view

Appendix C - Draft Plan for Reading, Semester 1 - By completion of Reading Semester 1: Students can read straightforward factual texts on subjects related to his/her field and interest with a satisfactory level of comprehension.

CEFR: B1	TOEFL skills	Multiliteracies	Unit	Course Assessment
Can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters/email well enough to correspond regularly with a pen friend. Can find and understand relevant information in everyday material, such as letters, brochures and short official documents.	Reading for main idea, authorial purpose. Identifying main ideas.	Rhetorical moves and document design.	Email/ formal letter	Mid-term quiz
Can scan longer texts in order to locate desired information, and gather information from different parts of a text, or from different texts in order to fulfill a specific task. Can recognize significant points in straightforward newspaper articles on familiar subjects.	Skimming and Scanning for main idea. Understanding inference.	Understanding different narrative structures. Grammar of storytelling.	Narrative	
Can identify the main conclusions in clearly signaled argumentative texts. Can recognize the line of argument in the treatment of the issue presented, though not necessarily in detail.	Logical argument and point of view.	Voice and point of view. Rhetoric of persuasion.	Short Essay: Summary.	Final Quiz

<p>Appendix D - Draft Plan for Reading, Semester 2 - By completion of Reading Semester 2: <i>Students can read with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively. Has a broad active readin</i> Can scan quickly through long and complex texts, locating relevant details. Can quickly identify the content and relevance of news items, articles and reports on a wide range of professional topics, deciding whether closer study is worthwhile.</p>	<p>Understanding vocabulary in context.</p>	<p>Understanding social nature of text types. Understanding visual aspects of texts.</p>	<p>News report</p>	
<p>Can understand articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular stances or viewpoints. Can understand lengthy, complex instructions in his field, including details on conditions and warnings, provided he/she can reread difficult sections.</p>	<p>Finding factual information. Determining purpose. Understanding negative facts. Following logical argument. Inferences.</p>	<p>Recognizing and noticing formal aspects of academic register.</p>	<p>Short Essay: point of view.</p>	<p>Final Quiz</p>

Appendix E – Narrative Tasks/Lessons Page



Appendix F – Applying the 5-Part Model to a Narrative

Exercise 1:

Can you identify the 5 parts to this story (main idea, scene setting, complicating action, further action, result and evaluation)? Use the questions below to help you:

Analysis of the Narrative

1 What is the main theme of this narrative?

2 Scene-setting

Who are the main [characters](#)?

Description of main [characters](#):

Where is the story set? How do you know?

When is the story set? How do you know?

3 What is the complication in the story?

4 Main events (further actions):

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

f)

5 Resolution: How does the story end?

Reflection:

Discuss with your group your opinion of the subtext. (It is fine for you and your classmates to have different interpretations of this).

1. What is the deeper meaning of the story?
2. Does it make you think?
3. Is there a 'moral' message for the reader?

Conclusion:

1. Did you and your group members disagree about the reflection/evaluation?
2. What different or similar ideas did you have about the deeper meaning of the [fairy tale](#) narrative that you read?

Appendix G – Final Task for the Constructed Narrative Lesson

Part 6: The Secret

Read the following then look at the task below it.

The Secret

‘The Secret’ is a controversial film and book, both created by Rhonda Byrne. The book has sold about 20 million copies worldwide, and has been translated into 46 different languages. It has been followed up with other similar books such as ‘The Power’ and ‘The Magic’.

All the books and films centre around a belief system created by Byrne and her colleagues, an odd mixture of modern popular psychology ‘self-help’ guides, and superstition and religion (some would call it a cult rather than a religion or philosophy). Its followers believe that if you force yourself to think positively and write down and visualise your thoughts, some spiritual power in the Universe will give you what you wish.

It has attracted a lot of controversy and criticism. Some people note that it has made Ms. Byrne and her company a very rich lady, and that the only people it has really made happy are her and her rich colleagues. It also seems to target very vulnerable people, people who need real counselling and real material help, and fool them into thinking their own misery is their own fault, and into buying books and movies from the website.

On the website, there appear hundreds of ‘stories’ and personal narratives from people who claim The Secret has changed their lives forever. Many suspect these ‘stories’ are not real stories at all, but created artificially in order to encourage people to buy their products, or that the writers have been brainwashed and tricked into thinking ‘The Secret’ has changed their lives when it hasn’t. Byrne and her company reject these accusations.

Discuss:

Now you have read some information about *The Secret*, get back into your original groups and discuss the questions below again (from Part 4: Discuss) regarding the narrative you read. Have you changed your mind about any of the answers? Make sure to take notes on answers that your group formulates.

1. Who do you think is writing this? Why do you think so?
2. Why is the author writing this?
3. Where might you see this type of narrative?
4. What [audience](#) is he/she writing for?
5. The author has written in a style that is deliberately 'familiar'. Why has the author written in this way?
6. How is this similar or different to the personal narrative we read last lesson (*A Time for Change*)?

