Supporting 21st Century Skills in Language and Literacy Classrooms with a Multiliteracies Approach

Russell Hazard, Aidi School Teaching, Learning, and Innovation Center, China

The European Conference on Language Learning 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Educational leaders, governments, and international organizations have responded to the combined forces of globalization and socio-technological transformation by formulating education initiatives that attempt to equip young people with an education relevant to the needs of the future. Some of these initiatives, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) program emphasize the healthy development of the individual within the context of sustainable community. Others, such as the 21st century skills movement focus more on individual competition with wellness and community being important but secondary motives. Many of the 21st century skill models that have been developed display progressive attributes. However, there is potential for criticism of them as well. For example, the basis of these reforms can be taken by some as stemming from neo-liberal trends that are commodifying education and people instead of supporting more cooperative mindsets such as those found in ESD. Another point for critique relates to how assessment washback from standardized testing could actually be diluting the time spent to train the most important components of 21st century skills in the classroom, and how incorporating more process-oriented assessment that takes multiliteracies into account could be helpful in this regard. Also, the prioritization of traditional text types and registers within the classroom may be ignoring the potential to help contribute to a more engaging and authentic 21st century education for many students by recognizing the diversity of modes of communication through a multiliteracies approach.

Keywords: Multiliteracies, Educational Assessment, Project Based Learning

Introduction

Educational leaders, governments, and major international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have responded to the combined forces of globalization and rapid social transformation by attempting to formulate new ways of conceptualizing education in order to equip young people for the needs of the future. Some of these, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2016) Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) initiative prioritize the healthy development of the individual within the context of sustainable community. Others, such as the 21st century skills movement, though having significant overlap with many ESD objectives, focus more on individual employability with wellness and community being important but secondary motives. The 21st century skills movement has sparked particularly widespread reform in literacy and numeracy efforts around the world as states seek to enhance their overall competitiveness by making their citizens more individually competitive (Babones, 2015).

Literacy studies have also transformed dramatically over the last century. Originally giving strong primacy to the written word (Goody & Watt, 1963), this area of research has progressed to examine multimodality and a variety of literacy skills from a socioculturally oriented, post-modern perspective (Kress, 1997). Importantly, this perspective now values many different forms of literacy, both digital and analogue, and situates meaning making within various cultural, spatial, and social contexts (Cope & Kalantziz, 2015). It also now considers the power structures that are deconstructed or reconstructed through education and the relevance of the entire educational experience to participants from a multiplicity of backgrounds (The New London Group, 1996). The multiliteracies movement developed in recognition of the impacts of immigration, globalization, multiculturalism, digitization, and multimedia on modern communication and therefore on the needs of students (Cope & Kalantziz, 2015). A multiliteracies approach can therefore help to provide a framework for overlap between traditional literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and critical literacy. Given this expanded view of literacy, it is relevant to debate how the prioritization of traditional text types and registers within the classroom may be ignoring the potential to help contribute to a more engaging, authentic, and equitable education for many students by recognizing the full diversity of useful modes of communication in our emerging digital society as well as how this multimodal literacy can be supported. If multimodal approaches are indeed more authentic, equitable, and engaging, they may also assist more young people in gaining successful employment than a rigid focus on traditional forms (The New London Group, 1996).

The goal of anticipating the needs of young people in a dynamic and challenging global environment is worthwhile, and the 21st century skill frameworks that have been developed display progressive attributes. However, there is potential for criticism of them as well. For example, the basis of these reforms can be taken by some as stemming from neo-liberal trends that are increasingly commodifying both education and people (Babones, 2015). The work of multiliteracy theorists is based in empowerment and power relations and may therefore be a useful perspective to counterbalance these concerns. Another point for consideration is the possibility that assessment washback from standardized testing could actually be diluting the time

spent to train the most important components of 21st century skills, and the potential that incorporating more process-oriented assessments such as rigorous project-based learning that takes multiliteracy research into account could be helpful in this regard. Given the tremendous sway of initiatives such as the 21st century skills movement over curricula, budgets, teachers, and students and the growing tendency for standardized tests such as PISA to shape national education policies (Breakspear, 2012), it is important to critically examine how educators and assessors can best support desired student outcomes. These considerations suggest that a more explicitly articulated reference to the pedagogies of multimodality within 21st century skill frameworks could be helpful as well as improving the links between the field of multiliteracies and that of Project Based Learning.

With these considerations in mind, this paper will briefly examine the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) framework through a post-structuralist lens. It will then consider multiliteracy research, and what if any guidance it can offer educators around the world who are being asked to implement 21st century-oriented programs. Finally, an attempt will be made to briefly relate the findings to the global education environment and provide emerging examples of alternative models of assessment that may be more relevant to the lives of students than standardized tests alone.

Discussion

Governments and non-governmental bodies have been working both within nations and across nations to create new educational frameworks in order to ensure that what is taught in schools adequately reflects the reality of what students will need to know in order to be competitive in the workforce, and well as to function socially and civically (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). One of the watershed moments for the globalization of education came out of the seminal 1983 report on American K-12 education entitled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Gardner et al., 1983). This report was commissioned by the Republican administration of the time and laid out a frightening vision of American schools that were failing to equip students adequately for the future. Specifically, it addressed the future in terms of eventual career readiness and discussed the disconnect between the teaching styles and content that were being used at the time and the rapidly changing global work environment. The tone of the report was critical, indicating that the education system was in shambles overall, that America was rapidly losing its competitive edge, and that without significant top-down reform the long-term results on the economy and geopolitical landscape could be catastrophic (Gardener et al., 1983).

Although the findings of this report continue to be controversial (Babones, 2015) it spurred several waves of initiatives aimed at improving competitiveness in education. This occurred first in America and then internationally as other nations with the same concerns aimed to increase their competitiveness as well. Gardner et al. (1983) suggested strengthening the depth and breadth requirements for core courses such as English, math, science, social studies, and computer science. They also called on the education system to improve standardized accountability measures and switch to data-based decision making and quality assurance programs. They recommended that a renewed focus on achieving benchmarks should be accomplished by increasing hours of instruction, supporting a diversity of teaching methods, and providing increased funding to school systems.

In the wake of these recommendations, successive groups were called upon to help further refine the vision of what a modern education should look like, and how it should be both administered and measured. One of the key groups behind the "solving the problem" of education in America was Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21). Their framework for 21st century learning is not the only one in use, but it is one of the most influential and now forms the backdrop for much of the current discourse for 21st century learning internationally (Dede, 2009). The P21 framework evolved through a number of iterations and now has many points of contact with other progressive education models such as the United Nations ESD initiative (UNESCO, 2016). The P21 framework contains both student objectives and the support systems that are thought to be needed to achieve them.

The heart of the student objective set of P21 is the so-called 3R's (reading, writing, and mathematics) set within authentic 21st century learning contexts. To this core is added world languages, arts, science, social science, and civics. Notably, it discusses the need for schools to include interdisciplinary learning into the core content programming. These interdisciplinary themes include global awareness; financial, economic, business, and entrepreneurial literacy; civic literacy; health literacy; and environmental literacy.

This content knowledge is then enriched with three other objective areas including information, media, and technology skills; learning and innovation skills; and life and career skills. The information, media and technology skills include the ability to access information; to adapt successfully to technological change; and to be effective at evaluating and creating media in a variety of forms. The learning and innovation skills area is populated with the "4 Cs". These include creativity/innovation training; critical thinking; communication, and collaboration. Finally, the life and career skills are described as social and emotionally-based, and include skills such as adaptability, self-direction, social skills, cross-cultural skills, accountability, and leadership.

When examining this framework in detail, it is clear that there are many elements of progressive, multiliteracy compatible education embedded in it. However, there are questions about how well these elements are being converted from the framework documentation to the classroom given the focus on competitiveness and the relative level of priority of easily testable core knowledge. Babones (2015) is highly critical of the *Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) report as a starting point for any educational reform. She states that the public education system in America has been under attack by the conservative business lobby since 1983. This has resulted in a much wider utilization of for-profit education and a prioritization of educational outcomes that amount to subsidized employment training. However, her most important concern is that this lobby has succeeded in pushing an agenda that over-utilizes standardized testing and thereby works against attainment of many of the 21st century skills that were identified as critical by the report and in subsequent work by groups like P21. Her argument is not only that that school administrators, teachers, and students have become ever more focused on high stakes testing, but also that the nature of this testing clouds the difference between excellence through critical, process-oriented education and a race to the bottom with test-oriented for-profit schools who undermine teachers and the public education system as a whole. This leads her to fear that the actual agenda behind these policies is the privatization of education in America rather than the welfare of students or even of their eventual economic output.

Within the field of language and literacy studies, examples of process-oriented projects such as those that turn students into project based "language researchers" can promote Critical Language Awareness (CLA) as well as potentially enhancing the ability to interpret, redefine, and guide one's own "linguistic landscape" (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). An in-depth understanding and ownership of the linguistic landscape can result in significant shifts of meaning for young people in lower income areas such as identifying underappreciated elements of a neighborhood as being valuable parts of the local social fabric rather than something to be replaced by redevelopment projects (Burwell & Lenters, 2015). These forms of learning and assessment are important, because they help young people to take ownership over where they live and, by extension, over part of their own identity development. Although arguably appropriate for all demographics, this can be particularly useful for lower performing youth in marginalized areas or groups. The kind of Project Based Learning described by Burwell and Lenters (2015) is just one example among a tremendous array of possible process-oriented projects that are suitable for developing 21st century skills but are not adequately captured by most current standardized assessments.

Cope and Kalantziz (2015) note that early pedagogical approaches to multiliteracy such as situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice have given way to the newer Learning by Design multiliteracy pedagogical project. However, the foundations of linking in-school learning to real world contexts, creating transfer between the familiar and unfamiliar, the development of explicit metaknowledge, critical analysis, and the application of learning back into the real world remain important (Cope & Kalantziz, 2015). Many of these approaches are also embedded in the P21 framework and examples of their use is well supported by multiliteracy researchers such as Burwell and Lenters (2015), who situate Project Based Learning within unique communities and utilize it as a means of local empowerment.

The importance of considering an evolving view of literacy is outlined by The New London Group (1996). They argue that the multiliteracies perspective is critical to understanding the full range of communication types that are occurring within current educational, work, civic, and private contexts. They also argue that because so many people are disenfranchised, it will be difficult to facilitate the majority of students toward being able to self-design their social futures and find successful employment without a multiliteracy based approach. The emphasis of The New London Group (1996) is more heavily oriented toward critical multiliteracy and the deconstruction of power structures than the more traditionally-oriented and seemingly pro-business P21 framework. However, there is still significant overlap in terms of expressing the need for students to be empowered, to take leadership roles, to critically think using 21st century contexts, and to create meaning. One significant difference is in the relative value placed on different kinds of literacy. The value that is placed on different expressions of literacy translates into how that value is assessed. The way we decide quantify the literacy skills of students is of critical importance and will be one of the main determinants of student futures, regardless of the reality of their capacity. This is because what we test, and how we test it, determines what is taught and valued in schools. The "disparities in life chances" (The New London Group, 1996, p.61) that arise from what kinds of literacy are valued are one of the key points of tension in education that these researchers highlight and argue for a better understanding of.

The New London Group (1997) discusses the variability in literary orientations for different cultures or subcultures who might favour the visual or symbolic over the written. Although these factors are certainly touched upon in the P21 framework it, there is a central place given to more traditional literary practices and academic forms in our systems. This raises a question for educators. Should the more traditional and formal literacy practices, such as formal essay and report writing, still be favoured over newer forms, which may be both more enjoyable and more relevant to the lives of large numbers of young people (Jewitt, 2005)? It is a difficult question as there seems little doubt that traditional academic practices are still valuable for many job positions (Lane & Conlon, 2016). However, it is equally true that many very creative and well paying positions can be had without writing traditional reports or reading long technical texts. Also, one of the primary goals of the 21st century skill movement is to foster an entrepreneurial mindset and motivation. Could it be that a process-oriented multiliteracies approach in which all students are no longer forced into high level academic writing, but instead allowed to pursue equally rigorous study using a variety of media and registers, could achieve this objective as well or better in a dynamic, technologically driven economy (Street & Leftstein, 2007)?

This, combined with the possibility that such an approach might better support social mobility and meritocracy for chronically marginalized groups, is a powerful point that is made eloquently by multiliteracy theorists. Although there has been some attempt made by groups such as P21 to raise the relevance of different cultural and literacy practices, the strong bias toward traditional skills that comes from the original panic of the Gardner et al. (1983) report is still echoing through American education. It is also increasingly becoming the foundation of international education and the assessment practices that drive it. Groups such as the OCED are aware of the potential to reinforce power differentials through PISA and other assessment measures and also of criticisms that its testing could contribute to problems of entrenched marginalization (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

The intersection of pedagogy and assessment is important as assessments are often used to determine both what is taught and how it should be delivered (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Indeed, researchers such as Berger, Rugen and Woodfin (2014) and Larmer, Mergendoller, and Boss (2015) argue that process-oriented, student-engaged assessment and Project Based Learning are key to shifting from an educational environment that prioritizes evaluation and ranking to one that motivates students from different backgrounds to excel in learning that matters to their future and that develops the 4 Cs. Modern Project Based Learning design also offers insight for those wishing to explore multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary studies that blur the lines between literacy, numeracy, citizenship, and other often discrete zones of learning (Larmer, Mergendoller, & Boss, 2015). Although demonstrating different emphases depending on the framework, there is recognition in the modern project based, student-engaged, multiliteracy oriented literature that better balance needs to be achieved between didactic, authentic, and critical pedagogies, which Cope & Kalantziz, (2015) describe as a reflexive pedagogical stance.

Conclusions

It is important to remember that much of the origins of the 21st century skills movement came from the *Nation at Risk* (Gardner et al., 1983) report. The language

in this report served to provide the impetus for a total re-evaluation of American education through the lens of employment preparation. However, as worthy as training youth for jobs is, such preparation has not historically been the sole reason for education (Babones, 2015). As 21st century skills have evolved, they have gradually come to resemble more cooperative and project-oriented frameworks such as ESD (UNESCO, 2016). Continued work needs to be done to emphasize the cooperative, social/environmental, creative, and critical aspects of this framework in the classroom and in policy.

For education to be truly meaningful at a local level as well as at the global level, the community should be involved. Like Livingstone and Sefton-Green (2016), Babones (2015) feels that schools should follow a community center model in which teachers are professionals who know and understand their students, the context of the lives that are being led locally, and the wider community conditions that students are still quite likely to work in after graduation. Process-oriented multidisciplinary project work that involves the community and builds understanding of the socio-cultural realities of education and employment are extremely important as we progress to even more technologically driven ways of interacting and creating both wealth and meaning (Dede, 2005). Such an orientation does not preclude work with global competencies and fits emerging frameworks for the delivery of ESD (UNESCO MGIEP, 2017). This point also relates well to the findings of Burwell and Lenters (2015). Schools are situated in a specific place, and the local is still at least as important in the day-to-day lives of students as the global. Engaging in authentic work that has authentic impact can be practiced at all levels ranging from the local to the global.

This acknowledgement of the nurturing element of education within a unique glocal context is important in North America, but perhaps even more so outside of it where many of the 21st century skills have been imported into cultural contexts where they are alien. Poorly conceived education can be harmful to any student. However, when dealing with the extremely vulnerable students in countries with a very low development index, it can deprive them of basic literacy (Djite, 2005) and the dignity of connection with their own community. The work done in the field of multiliteracy theory is helpful when considering these problems as it constantly reminds us that context is critical, as is the uniqueness of every student. Once we accept that identity, literacy, and education are socially constructed and that they both reflect and reproduce power, we can reorient education to empower first and provide employment second. The 21st century education movement is evolving from early life employment training to a more multifaceted view that is better linked to citizenship, the community, and the planet. As this evolution continues, we might wish to explore ways to better incorporate the full spectrum of multiliteracies as well as the more cooperative/activist agenda built into ESD. Projects such as the one detailed by Burwell and Lenters (2015) can help students to take what could be argued to be the most important step in multiliteracy work, which is to begin to self-define their identities and communities with an explicit understanding of the post-structuralist perspective on reality and power. The opportunities afforded by project based work are almost endless depending on the interests of the students and the unique characteristics of the community (Bell, 2010).

Garner et al.'s (1983) report has resulted in a vision of accountability that is standardized test heavy and data driven. Because objectives such as creativity,

collaboration, critical thinking, and communication in a variety of registers and media are not suitable for the standardized testing that is driving so much of global educational policy right now, they may not be manifesting in classrooms with the depth that groups such as P21 might wish (Dede, 2009). This is not meant to imply that standardized testing has no place. Tests such as PISA may improve some educational practices, particularly in areas where rote learning is still the norm (Breakspear, 2012). They may also provide useful data as long as that data is understood to be extremely narrow in scope and not a valid representation of achievement for all elements of the educational endeavor. If the objective is actually to develop authentic, cooperative, process-oriented skills that are applicable to a wide range of situations, then students will need to be assessed in a variety of ways or the inevitable test washback will push teachers and policy makers toward the most simply tested objectives. With this in mind, education policy makers and assessment designers need to be clear on what the 21st century objectives really are and how they can be assessed ways which are valid but still offer accountability. Dede (2009, p.3) points out that this must include efforts to educate policy makers, communities and teachers to "unlearn the beliefs, values, assumptions, and cultures underlying schools' industrial era operating practices".

Creating accountable but process-oriented 21st century multimodal learning is not impossible and may help to move those objectives from theory to the reality of classrooms. Common examples of promising steps in international education include the development of programming based in the Buck Institute for Education's Project Based Learning frameworks, College Board's Advanced Placement (AP) Capstone course, and the new Cambridge International Project Qualification course. As one example, AP is a well-respected system of courses that have relied entirely on standardized tests for the official grade. The strength of the new AP Capstone is that it is highly interdisciplinary, research oriented, and potentially multimodal. It can be utilized by a student for almost any research they wish. A student who is interested in design could research and design a solar pump for their community water supply, while another that is interested in Spanish language hip-hop could examine the impact of the genre on their peer group. Assessment is via a spectrum of written, visual, and oral components that utilize trained markers with rubrics that are designed for reliability and accountability. Programs like these can offer insight into ways we can begin to incorporate the diversity of interests and ideas that students have into their own education, as well as offering a means of assessment that can adequately tap the kinds of skills that are listed in the P21 framework so that our education policy is not guided solely by traditional test formats.

As The New London Group (1997, p.69) points out, without the ability to negotiate a wide variety of linguistic, cultural, and symbolic literacy types "averting the catastrophic conflicts about identities and spaces that now seem ever ready to flare up" is less likely. When looking at these conflicts in today's America it is clear that they are serious. When considering them internationally, they can make the difference between peaceful international development and great international suffering. Even as we attempt to build multiliteracies and ESD into classrooms along with 21st century skills, research needs to continue into how our assessments and educational paradigms are driving education. This research needs to happen alongside a frank discussion on what kind of global future we are trying to bring about. Williams and Cooke (2002) describe some of the decisions to be made regarding sustainable versus

neoliberal trajectories in development. These are not only considerations for so-called developing nations, but also for highly industrialized nations. The decision of whether to design education policy around cooperation, sustainability, and the fostering the ability of diverse groups to communicate can be informed by the work of many of the multiliteracy researchers who have been warning that how we construct identity and communication through meaning-making practices will have a direct impact on what kind of world we live in. Further discussions around sustainability, intercultural competence, cooperative problem solving, and multiliteracies are entwined with a need to support meritocracy, economic fairness, and an education system that serves all.

References

Ananiadou, K. & Claro, M. (2009). *21st century skills and competencies for new millennium learners in OECD countries.* OECD Working Papers, 41, OECD Publishing. doi: 10.1787/218525261154

Babones, S. (2015). *Sixteen for '16: A Progressive Agenda for a Better America.* University of Chicago Press. University of Chicago. Chicago.

Bell, S. (2010). Project-based learning for the 21st century: Skills for the future. *The Clearing House*, *83*(2), 39-43. doi: 10.1080/00098650903505415

Berger, R., Rugen, L., & Woodfin, L. (2014). *Leaders of their own learning: Transforming schools through student-engaged assessment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Breakspear, S. (2012). *The Policy Impact of PISA: An Exploration of the Normative Effects of International Benchmarking in School System Performance*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 71. OECD Publishing (NJ1). doi: 10.1787/5k9fdfqffr28-en

Burwell, C., & Lenters, K. (2015). Word on the street: Investigating linguistic landscapes with Canadian urban youth. *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, 10(3), 201-221. doi: 10.1080/1554480X.2015.1029481

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2015). The things you do to know: An introduction to the pedagogy of multiliteracies. In B. Cope & M. Kalantzis (Eds.), *A pedagogy of multiliteracies* (pp. 1-36). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dede, Chris. "Comparing frameworks for 21st century skills." *21st century skills: Rethinking how students learn* 20 (2010): 51-76.

Gardner, D., Larsen, Y., Baker, D., Campbell, A., Crosby, E., Francis, N., Foster, C., Giamatti, A., Gordon, S., Holton, G., Haderlein, H., Kirk, A., Marston, M., Quie, A., Sanchez, F., Seaborg, G., Sommer, J., & Wallace, R. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. United States Department of Education. Retrieved from: www.eric.ed.gov

Goody, J., & Watt, I. (1963). The consequences of literacy. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5(3), 304-345.

Jewitt, C. (2005). Multimodality, "reading", and "writing" for the 21st century. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 26(3), 315-331. doi: 10.1080/01596300500200011

Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: Rethinking the paths to literacy*. New York: Routledge.

Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic landscape and ethnolinguistic vitality an empirical study. *Journal of language and social psychology*, *16*(1), 23-49. doi: 10.1177/0261927X970161002

Lane, M. & Conlon, G. (2016). *The impact of literacy, numeracy and computer skills on earnings and employment outcomes*. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 129, OECD Publishing, Paris. doi: 10.1787/5jm2cv4t4gzs-en

Larmer, J., Mergendoller, J., & Boss, S. (2015). *Setting the standard for project based learning: A proven approach to rigorous classroom instruction*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Livingstone, S., & Sefton-Green, J. (2016). *The class: Living and learning in the digital age*. New York: New York University Press.

New London Group (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60-92. doi:10.17763/haer.66.1.17370n67v22j160u

Partnership for 21st Century Learning. (2016). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Retrieved from http://www.p21.org

UNESCO. (2016). *Education for Sustainable Development.* Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org

Wiggins, G., & McTighe. J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Williams, E. & Cooke, J. (2002). Pathways and labyrinths: Language and education in development. *TESOL Quarterly* 36, 297-322. Retrieved from: www.jstore.org