

Further Notes on the Four Resources Model

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In 1990 we developed the four resources model of reading ([Freebody, 1992](#); [Freebody & Luke, 1990](#)). The model posits four necessary but not sufficient "roles" for the reader in a postmodern, text-based culture:

- Code breaker (coding competence)
- Meaning maker (semantic competence)
- Text user (pragmatic competence)
- Text critic (critical competence)

As descriptions of the normative goals of classroom literacy programs, these four roles have been widely circulated and adapted for use by teachers and curriculum developers in Australia. Our purpose in this short paper is to review and reconsider the relevance and value of the model's categories.

An axiom of mid-century New Criticism holds that trying to recover authorial intent is a waste of time, so we will not discuss here what we "meant" or "intended" when we initially developed the model. Further, since 1990, we have ourselves individually and jointly applied, modified, and explicated it in different ways (see articles in [Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997](#)). These notes are not a naive attempt to assert some kind of discipline or remediation on the fields where the model is being used. After all, Foucault reminds us that texts and discourses have a way of taking on a life of their own, with local uptakes, interpretations, and convolutions made irrespective of their authors' intentions or the political contexts of their production. So it isn't surprising that the four categories have taken on such a life of their own through teachers', teacher educators', and researchers' work in Australia and elsewhere.

However, it is worth *commenting* on the intellectual, political, and professional contexts that pertained at the time of the model's initial production -- not as an act of nostalgia or discipline, but to begin querying the model's continued relevance to literacy education and to the new forms of work, social relations, and identity that shape the social construction of literacy. Because the model is a normative one we need continually to critique and reformulate it in light of new social and cultural conditions, demands, and possibilities for literate practice. Here we offer some comments and reflections that second-guess and recontextualize aspects of the model.

Drawing on History

From work on the history of literacy pedagogy, literacy curricula, and the manufacture of "literacy crises" by governments, we agreed that there was no single definitive, truthful, scientific, universally effective, or culturally appropriate way of teaching or even defining literacy. History taught us that literacy refers to a malleable set of cultural practices shaped and reshaped by different -- often competing and contending -- social institutions, social classes, and cultural interests. If the formation and distribution of literacy is indeed about the construction of social, cultural, and economic power, how it is constructed and who gets access to its practices and potentials is hardly a foregone conclusion of skill acquisition, behavioral patterns, or natural patterns of creativity and development.

This was the received wisdom about literacy we encountered in the 1980s, and to this day it guides the principal ways of defining, shaping, and conducting literacy instruction in many classrooms in Australia, the United States, and elsewhere. Literacy education is *not* about skill development, not about deep competence. It *is* about the institutional shaping of social practices and cultural resources, about inducting successive generations into particular cultural, normative ways of handling texts, and about access to technologies and artifacts (e.g., writing, the Internet) and to the social institutions where these tools and artifacts are used (e.g., workplaces, civic institutions).

Teaching and learning literacy, then, involves shaping and mastering the repertoire of capabilities called into play when managing texts in ways appropriate to various contexts. Another of our premises in developing the model was that these contexts, as institutional and community cultures, are not homogeneous, consensual sites where rules, rituals, and symbols are at work, as many mid-century cultural anthropologists believed. Instead, we have learned from work in critical sociology and postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies that cultures are heterogeneous and heteroglossic, written through and through with complexity and difference, with conflict over power.

This view emphasizes the variety of capabilities that literacy involves, the multiplicity of purposeful social activities in which these capabilities play an important part, and the variability of literacy activities from place to place and occasion to occasion. To say that literacy is a social practice is to say that it is subject to the play and power relations of local face-to-face contexts -- of classrooms, communities, workplaces, places of worship, homes, and so forth. Indeed, as all teachers who read this know, these contexts can be unpredictably idiosyncratic, shaped and reshaped as social fields by the deliberate choices [in [Bourdieu's \(1998\)](#) terms, the "position-taking" practices] of literate people. However, to say that literacy is a social practice is also to say that it is constrained, mediated, and shaped by relations of power --relations that may be asymmetrical, unequal, and ideological.

It was our position that determining how to teach literacy could not be simply "scientific," but rather had to involve a moral, political, and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices needed to enhance both peoples' agency over their life trajectories and communities' intellectual, cultural, and semiotic resources in multimediated economies. Literacy education, then, is ultimately about the kind of literate society and literate citizens or subjects that could and should be constructed. In this sense, it is difficult (and what's more, pointless) to proclaim that "phonics" advocates or "word recognition" advocates or "early intervention" advocates are somehow right or wrong in any absolute sense. The decision about how and what to teach is not a descriptive, scientific one but always involves normative activity and labor. As the research of the last decade shows us, what we would call "pedagogic work" -- the actual labor of social interaction and discourse exchange that occurs in classrooms -- constructs and shapes (and constrains and limits) literate knowledge, power, and discourse. Teaching and learning aren't just matters of skill acquisition or knowledge transmission.

When we refer to something as being "normative," this suggests that it involves a set of moral and political, cultural and social decisions about how things should be, rather than a simple description of what is. It puts us into the domain of what philosophers call "prescriptive" as

opposed to “descriptive” statements about preferable social forms of life and economic and social fields.

We also shared in 1990 a profound skepticism toward “single method” answers to “the literacy problem.” Again, the historical perspective showed us that how and when literacy became a problem had as much to do with economic, cultural, and social change as it did with anything that might go on in schools and classrooms. Given this, it should surprise nobody that illiteracy and literacy have been viewed as a continual problem -- an index of moral panic over the kinds of changes wrought by new technologies, fast capitalism, and globalization, promoted as a definitive “cause” or solution for any of these phenomena. We could devote a lot of time to critiquing phonics or progressivism or “open education,” or process writing or traditional grammar -- but none of these *causes* literacy problems as much as they differentially shape the social practices of reading and writing that children learn in institutions like schools.

Nonetheless, we found that there was a continued proliferation of magic bullets, of new approaches that promised to solve the literacy problem. Many of these -- like other 1980s curriculum reforms -- were expressed in evangelical terms and were based on the assumption that all that practitioners had done before was wrong, needed to be discarded or reversed before the “new” and “best” method could be put in place.

We wanted to develop a model that attempted to recognize and incorporate many of the current, well-developed techniques for training students in becoming literate. We wanted to shift the focus from trying to find the right method to determining whether the range of practices emphasized in a reading program was indeed covering and integrating the broad repertoire of textual practices required in today's economies and cultures. The model could be more a map of the normative terrain of possible practices -- the “selective tradition” -- in any classroom. It would be drawn from understanding of a group of students' existing repertoires of linguistic, cultural, and textual practices, and from a sense of the kind of life trajectories that might be possible and relevant for those students. Choices regarding instructional practice should be made by teachers, and we would argue that this kind of classroom decision making needs to be defended zealously as part of teachers' work, in opposition to the single-method mentality that, not coincidentally, aligns itself very well to centralized political surveillance and technocratic control in education -- hardly an abstraction in the current climate.

But the model wouldn't be an instructional panacea, it would not profess to have all the answers on the “right way.” Accordingly, we have attempted to avoid and resist the “commodification” of critical literacy as an educational and political solution for all that ails us. In our view, critical literacies -- in all their varied print and multimedia, practical and theoretical, cultural and political forms -- refer to openings in the curriculum that enable teachers, students, and communities to explore alternative ways of structuring practices around texts to address new cultural and economic contexts and new forms of practice and identity. So the term marks out a space for development and exploration of a new set of active, agent-oriented, denaturalizing, and counter-ideological textual practices. If psycholinguistics in the 1970s defined reading as a “psycholinguistic guessing game,” to speak of “critical literacies” is to open the possibility of defining reading as a mode of second-guessing texts, discourses, and social formations.

Changing the Terminology

So, because of our skepticism toward single-method models, we wanted with the four resources model to come up with a normative description that both validated literacy practices being undertaken by teachers in classrooms *and* provided opportunity and a vocabulary for productive development. Since 1990, we have debated the actual terminology used in the model. *Role* was the term we originally used, but its connotation in contemporary sociology suggests something that can be defined a priori for someone to “fit into.” It also tends to individualize the process, suggesting, for example, that the particular kinds of literate practice

involved in "coding" or "semantic" work are somehow the prepossession of an individual. Instead, we felt that each could be better defined as a *family of practices*. This approach draws our attention to the fact that, while literacy is an aspect of an individual's history, capability, and possibilities, it is also a feature of the collective or joint capabilities of a group, community, or society.

Consider for a moment the full idea of literacy as a family of practices. First, the notion of "practices" suggests that they are actually *done* -- performed, negotiated, and achieved in everyday classroom and community contexts, rather unlike psychological skills, schemata, competencies, and so forth. Second, the notion of "family" suggests that they are dynamic, being redeveloped, recombined, and articulated in relation to one another on an ongoing basis. So for us, the shift from roles to practices was an attempt to represent more clearly the shift from psychological, individual models of literacy to models that describe substantive and visible, dynamic and fluid practices undertaken by human agents in social contexts. This shift becomes more relevant each day, as we encounter unprecedented hybrid multimedia texts.

Stemming from these ideas, our third reason for the shift in terminology is to put in the foreground how literacy as a social practice is necessarily tied up with political, cultural, and social power and capital. "Cracking the code," "constructing meaning," "participating in literacy events" -- each involves the use of power and knowledge in social fields ([Luke, 1997](#)). These fields -- and their practices -- are local and dynamic, such that constructing meaning of a particular text might count for something in the classroom and for something far more or less in a given workplace or, for example, an aboriginal or migrant community.

We've seen many attempts to diagram the components of the model. These have included triangles, boxes, spirals and gyres, hierarchies, and so forth, all of which have different practical implications. Each is the artifact of a particular system or form of inscription (the effect of the emergence of clip art and PowerPoint on the categorization and structuring of knowledge shouldn't be underestimated). In any attempt, however, the key concept in the model must remain necessity, not sufficiency: each family of practices is necessary for literacy in new conditions, but none in and of itself is sufficient for literate citizens or subjects. It might be best to visualize the four families as inclusive, with each being necessary but not sufficient for the achievement of the others.

Mapping the Dimensions

Literacy capabilities can be seen as having three dimensions: the breadth of an individual's or community's repertoire of literate practices; the depth and degree of control exercised by an individual or community in any given literacy activity; and the extent of hybridity, novelty, and redesign at work. Thus, the questions we can ask about a person's capabilities in literacy are typically "What kinds? How much?" but also "With what transformative direction and power?" Since both the breadth and depth of literacy practices are developed through educational experiences and, at least in principle, can be reliably and validly assessed within such educational settings, these dimensions constitute a significant educational responsibility. Figuring out how to deal with issues of hybridity, transformation, and novelty without romanticizing practice or falling back into individuated models of creativity is a resilient and unresolved issue.

The matter of breadth of repertoire is usually regarded in terms of the range of social activities involving literacy that the curriculum systematically puts on offer. In some places these are referred to as "genres," though elsewhere they have been diluted -- with deep consequences -- to "text types." In the development of genre theory in the 1980s and 1990s, the purposeful social nature of the activity (beyond, around, as well as "in" the text) was placed in the foreground. In contrast, translating *genre* to *text type* has the effect of desocializing literacy learning, allowing curricula and classroom activities once again to become uncoupled from the

communal, diverse, and changing cultural practices toward which schooling ostensibly steers students ([Hasan & Williams, 1997](#); [Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997](#)).

In considering the depth of control or skill available to a student, the model examined existing and proposed literacy curricula and pedagogical strategies. Effective literacy draws on a repertoire of practices that allow learners, as they engage in reading and writing activities, to

- break the code of written texts by recognizing and using fundamental features and architecture, including alphabet, sounds in words, spelling, and structural conventions and patterns;
- participate in understanding and composing meaningful written, visual, and spoken texts, taking into account each text's interior meaning systems in relation to their available knowledge and their experiences of other cultural discourses, texts, and meaning systems;
- use texts functionally by traversing and negotiating the labor and social relations around them -- that is, by knowing about and acting on the different cultural and social functions that various texts perform inside and outside school, and understanding that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality, and their sequence of components;
- critically analyze and transform texts by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral -- that they represent particular points of views while silencing others and influence people's ideas -- and that their designs and discourses can be critiqued and redesigned in novel and hybrid ways.

The proposition here is that these repertoires of capability are variously mixed and variously orchestrated in proficient reading and writing in societies such as ours. As with other complex, culturally determined tasks, learners need distinct spaces for acquiring and practicing these domains, as well as ample room to practice their integration in meaningful events. Holding fast to this practical, outward-looking view of learning how to participate in literacy events also alerts students to the changing cultural expectations about literacy activities that operate out of school. The hope is that they will develop a flexibility of practice along the depth, breadth, and novelty axes that will enable them to respond directly to the expectations of the local community or work subculture.

It remains our position that literacy was never a matter of deficit but principally an issue of economic and social access to the cultural institutions charged with literacy education and practice. A number of studies conducted in various countries have explored the distribution and maintenance of literacy capabilities in society. One point that arises from these studies is that access to different kinds of educational experiences becomes both a symptom and a cause of literacy performance. In newly industrialized and rural-agricultural economies, the spread of literacy capabilities among social groups tends to develop its own momentum, increasing both the extent to which the capabilities are spread and the motivation to secure them. In such instances, literacy develops with an ideology of desire for modernity and cosmopolitanism.

But it is also clear that an equal spread of literacy capabilities across all sections of our community is not achieved within current schooling arrangements. Patterns of access to social and material resources in any given society are closely related to the kinds and levels of literacy capabilities of various groups within that society. Questions about breaking the cycle of poverty, inequality -- and, indeed, illiteracy -- are in fact sociological questions about how to generate counter-reproductive and transformative approaches to schooling and work. It is important to recognize that there is no evidence that literacy education -- in any of the most familiar forms -- could possibly end poverty or solve unemployment, despite the cyclical claims by politicians and others that lack of literacy is the cause of all that ails us and its widespread acquisition will be the solution. But there is evidence that literacy education can make a substantial contribution to transforming the social distribution of knowledge, discourse, and, with these, real economic and social capital among specific communities, groups, and individuals ([Carrington & Luke, 1997](#)).

Recently, many attempts have been made to draw together research that takes into account the kinds of students who participate in literacy programs, rather than simply looking at the approach to teaching. One critical point that has emerged is that, while students who have a high degree of congruence with the culture of the teachers perform well in various types of programs, students who lack such congruence perform particularly poorly in programs described as "meaning based." This research provides a direct link between curricular and pedagogical practice on the one hand and cultural and social class diversity and educational disadvantage on the other.

Yet the school-effectiveness and school-management fields continue the pursuit of what has become the holy grail of instructional psychologists: a single effective or "authentic" pedagogy. The four resources model suggests that varied combinations of pedagogies and curricula may have differential effects for different groups of students. Regardless of the intense debates about the relative efficacy of various teaching methods and in spite of the fact that effective teachers have been found to use materials with broadly comparable features, it remains our contention that, within a certain range of procedures, differing teaching approaches work differentially with different categories of students. Further, we contend that effective teachers know this and monitor the progress of their students in order to make appropriate adaptations. This reinforces our position that, rather than being unitary dimensions of human performance, both literacy and literacy education refer to repertoires of capability and to families of practices. As students vary in their needs for development in different aspects of that repertoire, so do teachers vary in the range of educative experiences they can offer and in their responsiveness to students' needs.

Our point here is that it is not that some literacy teaching methods work and others do not. They all work to shape and construct different literate repertoires in classrooms. They all have outcomes visible in practices and motivation. If we begin from this position, the four resources model continues to raise as many questions as it might answer: What do particular combinations and blends of families of practices work to produce? In which combinations and emphases do they work with specific communities of students? For what practices, places, times, and occasions do they prepare students? And for what political and ideological configurations?

What better way to assist teachers' work and pedagogy in these new times than with complex and critical questions rather than simple answers.

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