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**NEW MEDIA**  
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Rethinking Primary Literacy

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# 1

## THE CHALLENGE OF 21ST CENTURY LITERACIES

This chapter will:

- provide an introduction to the book
- introduce ideas about how literacy is changing
- introduce the *Charter for 21st Century Literacies* and the nine principles that it is based upon.

At six you are already part of the world, skilfully working with the tools at hand, interacting with your environment and communicating with those who are closest to you. Your digital history trails behind you, to a time before your birth, held in pre-natal scans, health records and all the rest. As a new-born, still and moving images of you found their way onto *Instagram* and *Facebook*. Your first toys are now forgotten though once they sprang to life with flashing lights and tinny rhymes, welcoming you to the gadget world ...

New media technologies play an important role in the lives of children and young people. They are an integral part of everyday life in many parts of the world, and have been rapidly taken up in commerce, entertainment and daily communication. In education, their adoption has been rather uneven, varying between countries, regions and institutions. Although much has been written about how technology *might* or *should* change schooling, there is little principled and practical guidance for teachers – particularly for those working with children in the earlier stages of schooling. There is, however, a growing literature on how children’s lives and literacy practices are influenced, inflected or transformed by digital media, and it is this body of work that we draw on in this book. Our aim in writing it is to provoke a

debate about approaches to incorporating new media in schooling, to provide a catalyst for change based upon what is realistic and achievable, and to argue for classroom work that reflects the changing communicative practices in society at large.

Reviewing developments in policy and practice for an earlier edited volume, we concluded that there was no shortage of aspirational statements about how digital and online practices *might* radically change classrooms, but there was a distinct gap between these and the more conservative approaches in evidence in many curriculum documents and assessment practices around the world (Burnett, Davies, Merchant & Rowsell, 2014). Nonetheless we explored many examples of innovative teaching and learning in which teachers, sometimes working alongside researchers, were harnessing the potential of new technologies to engage children in activity that reflected the new literacies of everyday life in an authentic way. In that work we identified nine principles or orientations that underpin what, in this book, we ambitiously call a Charter for 21st Century Literacies. Using these principles, we argue, might enable colleagues to develop literacy practices in school – literacy provision that would be empowering to children and help them to have a creative and critical engagement with a range of digital media. This book explores these principles in depth and is to a large extent driven by our own experience of working collaboratively with groups of primary school teachers on aspects of the Charter.

The main focus of this practical work is on situated activity – classroom activity that relates to the particular needs, interests and experiences of children in their immediate context. In this work there is often a sense of spontaneity and unpredictability, as classroom events unfold and children take the lead. Children are encouraged to be creative, improvising and collaborating in an experimental or playful manner which draws freely on their communicative resources and the materials they have access to. They work across these resources to create new meanings. This approach helps to broaden their communication repertoire and develops a creative and critical sensibility which is in step with everyday practices.

Throughout this book we adopt an expanded view of literacies which simultaneously acknowledges the centrality of lettered representation and the importance of other semiotic systems in meaning making. Engagement with new media is seen here as part of a more widespread and proliferating set of communicative practices which are increasingly important to full participation in social life. This set of practices is what we mean by the *communication repertoire*. We suggest that many everyday practices involve creative, collaborative and experimental meaning making that draws on different elements of one's communication repertoire.



## The Charter for 21st Century Literacies

In some respects, the principles that inform the Charter for 21st Century Literacies restate the commitments of earlier literacy scholars, and in the chapters that follow we have tried to acknowledge and reference these when appropriate. We have argued that these commitments need to be restated because of the persistence of ‘old’ models of literacy education (Burnett & Merchant, 2015). However, we go further than this by building on recent research in literacy, research that has drawn attention to the generative and emergent quality of the kinds of meaning making associated with digital technologies. Planning for 21st century literacies is not simply a case of substituting one set of learning goals for another. It rests on an acknowledgement that resources for communication are now richer, more diverse and more flexible than ever before. New practices, new conventions and new habits of mind are beginning to develop. We explore and exemplify this claim throughout the book.

To begin with we offer a brief summary of the nine principles of the Charter for 21st Century Literacies in order to orientate readers to our key ideas.

- **Acknowledge the changing nature of meaning making.** If we are to address the divergence between literacies in everyday life and literacy in school, we need to continually revisit our definition of the scope and range of literacy at school to reflect its changing nature.
- **Recognise and build on children’s linguistic, social and cultural repertoires.** In everyday practice many children move fluidly between devices, using different modes and media, seamlessly combining both digital and non-digital interaction. This fluidity reflects their linguistic, social and cultural repertoire. For some this may involve using two or more languages, as well as the registers associated with different kinds of interaction. Recognising this repertoire and the choices it generates has implications for how we might think of an empowering literacy education. For example, it would not simply involve an incremental expansion of the kinds of texts children produce, but would also involve providing contexts in which learners could draw in open-ended ways *across* this developing repertoire: to combine and remix varied textual and linguistic practices in contexts that matter to them.
- **Acknowledge diverse modes and media.** Literacies have always been multimodal, but an explicit recognition of multiple modes can enable children to explore, develop and convey meanings in ways that might otherwise be overlooked. Opportunities to create using multiple modes help learners to explore ideas and possibilities in more nuanced ways, and digital media certainly make this easier. A specific knowledge of alphabetic representation and visual design are an integral part of this.

However, these are not separate skills but develop in tandem, and alongside other modes of communication.

- **Recognise the affective, embodied and material dimensions of meaning making.** The meanings we make are inflected by what we feel, what has just happened and who we are with, as well as how we are positioned by the people and things around us. The immediate environment, resources, personal and shared histories therefore all play a part in what children do with digital media. Literacy provision therefore needs to take account of affective, embodied and material dimensions of communicative practice.
- **Encourage improvisation and experimentation.** Although intentional design and production are important aspects of multimodal work, creative engagement is often unplanned and emergent in nature. Facilitating this sort of experimentation is based on an understanding of how meaning is made in the moment which may, or may not, result in a finished product.
- **Use playful pedagogies.** Schools have a role to play in providing risk-free environments in which children may follow passions, experiment, explore, gain feedback and consider alternatives. For teachers, this means adopting playful pedagogies and allowing work to take new or unexpected directions.
- **Create opportunities to work with the provisionality of digital media.** Although the school curriculum privileges the individual creation of fixed or final products, digital texts are often provisional, allowing them to be easily added to, reworked and remixed. Such practices have the potential to generate rich opportunities for children to reach new audiences, to give and receive feedback and to remix what others have done in ways that are both critical and creative.
- **Provide contexts that facilitate criticality.** Advocates of critical literacies argue that literacy education must address the power relationships perpetuated through and around texts through critical engagement. Calls for greater criticality have intensified in recent years and are linked to fears about internet safety, commercialism, the stereotypical depictions associated with games and virtual worlds, and the need for discerning use of online resources. Demonising the texts young people use in everyday life is likely to achieve little. Providing contexts in which young people may critically consider the practices in which they engage and how they position themselves and are positioned by others, with opportunities to rework texts to reflect alternative experiences, is important.
- **Promote collaboration around and through texts in negotiating meaning.** Learning about new media is not just about doing things with technology, it's also about doing things with others. Recent studies provide rich insights into the ways in which children and young people

collaborate and interact on and around screens. While encouraging such collaborations, we need to be alert to the complex ways in which such interactions are managed and support children to take up such opportunities with confidence.

We believe that these principles can be used to inform classroom practice and to provide children and young people with experiences of literacy that are in step with the world that surrounds them. They also have the potential to support them in being confident and discerning users of new media. In asserting this we are not, however, claiming to have the definitive answer and will regularly refer readers to influential work that is based upon similar principles such as that of the New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) and Jenkins et al. (2006).

## A charter for a changing world?

Tsering Dolma is not at home. The house and its outbuildings are abandoned, provisions stored away for the coming winter. Although the place has an atmosphere of abandonment, there is no mystery – just a temporary absence. Water comes from a six-inch pipe running all the way up to a cistern fed by a mountain stream below Shadé, but the pipe has long since fractured. There is no water. Tsering Dolma's possessions remain, despite the locked doors. At first they're hard to make out among the red dust and mud bricks, but slowly they reveal themselves. This home is well stocked. In fact it's bristling with technology: farming implements fashioned from wands of willow, a rake, a hoe, a basket-weave cradle for flattening the earth after ploughing – all carefully stowed in the roof space or jutting out from holes in the brick work. This is the technology of subsistence farming, of a low impact bonding with the land. The only absence is Tsering Dolma herself, but she is held in a network of relationships – with locals, the monks from Phuktar, her yaks, the sheep, these basic tools and the land she scrapes her living from. What I call technology, my phone, my camera and my tablet, would be of little use to her. They would play no part. And besides, there is no electricity, no signal, no internet. And if I thought about what might improve her quality of life it would be none of this. It would be more likely to be a pair of thick woollen socks for the winter. That and someone to fix several miles of six-inch pipe. But with no utilities, public or private, that would require an attentive and caring authority – or very generous neighbours with nothing else to attend to. So perhaps now, having more or less abandoned the modernist notion of human progress, of cultural development, of economic growth and the relentless march forwards, our place in the world in all its diversity needs

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

to be rethought. Tsering Dolma has a different relationship with the world. Better? Worse? These evaluations hardly seem appropriate. Zanskar is a very different world and one that is separated from mine by a wide margin, and this gap throws ideas of wealth, of relationship and of technology into confusion. Care has been taken in amassing a good collection of juniper, piled on a makeshift table in a small room near Tsering Dolma's house – a different sort of plenty.

Put in straightforward terms, the idea that our communication repertoire is changing seems incontestable. But this statement comes with some caveats. First of all, it must be acknowledged that this change, although wide-reaching, is by no means universal, as the vignette above vividly illustrates. Sometimes we talk rather glibly about the global reach of technology. In fact, from a global perspective there is enormous variation in the pattern of everyday communication, as well as in access to devices, services and connectivity. Nationally, and even locally within the UK, there is considerable variation too. Apart from location, age, employment, wealth and lifestyle are among the key influences on our communication repertoire. To a greater or lesser extent, we exercise a degree of choice, but paradoxically, in many walks of life, digital communication is now essential. We know from personal experience that in a university setting it is not exactly compulsory, but it might as well be. Daily transactions between colleagues, students and support services would grind to a halt without it. In these and similar contexts, digital communication has become normalised, mobile devices commonplace – everyone has at least one – and conventions surrounding their use are gradually emerging. For instance, in some formal and informal settings there are agreements about the use of mobile devices – if someone's mobile rings in a public lecture or presentation it is usually frowned upon, yet, on the other hand, tweeting at such events has become more socially acceptable and is sometimes actively encouraged. These are issues of custom and practice, and as new communicative avenues open up, new social practices and social etiquettes are sure to follow.

The extent to which children are drawn into this changing communication environment is likely to reflect the social and material conditions of their parents or caregivers and the choices they make or the choices they are able to make. Although national surveys chart year-on-year increases in access to new media technology (see Ofcom, 2017; Pew Internet Studies, 2017) there are disparities. As an indicator of this, digital inclusion (and exclusion) has become an important area of concern (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). But apart from this, some parents and caregivers are concerned about the possible negative effects of digital technologies and choose

to regulate children's screen time. There is a literature that refers to the 'toxic' influence of new technologies on childhood (e.g. Palmer, 2006), reports on the rise of a pathological condition referred to as 'internet addiction' (Chou, Condrón & Belland, 2005), some speculation on the long-term impact on eyesight and the brain (see Swain, 2011) and various commentaries on new forms of economic and cultural inequality (for example, Keen, 2015). At this point in time, however, there is little hard evidence about these negative effects. A more persuasive critique has been levelled at the domination of large global corporations, the consumerism underpinning the spread of new technologies, and the environmental degradation involved in the production and disposal of hardware (see Burnett & Merchant, 2017).

None of these critiques deny that changes are taking place, but they constitute part of an important ongoing debate about the desirability of our increased dependence on digital technology. Here, though, we are not overly concerned about whether or not this is 'a good thing'; rather we take the changes in communication repertoire as a starting point, and based upon that try to address the question of how educational provision – and particularly that aimed at the under-elevens – might adapt. It could and indeed has been argued that schools are places for face-to-face interaction, sanctuaries from a complex world and places in which the pervasive forces of new media should not be allowed to enter. We do not subscribe to this view for a number of reasons. Firstly, new media technologies are already part of children's experience: using them in schools builds on their skills and understandings of their use thereby providing important continuity with their out-of-school lives. Secondly, we believe that children should be creative and discerning users of *all* communication media and that can be best achieved by working with them in school. Thirdly, there are particular advantages, such as the ability to connect with those not present in the classroom, to share resources and to gain a direct understanding of the lives of others that is hard to achieve by other means. Using the new tools of communication enables greater participation in the social world of which they are part. Finally, new technologies already play a role in the life of the school, in their formal and informal use by teachers and school administrators and in the lives of an increasing number of children. Rather than deny this, it might be better to acknowledge it.

### **The question of terminology**

As with any development there are challenges in finding an appropriate language to talk about the new communication practices we are concerned with in this book. So far we have used '21st century literacies', 'new media technologies', 'digital and online practices' and 'new literacies' almost

interchangeably and we continue to do so throughout this book. However, there are some difficulties in this that we should not ignore. For example, we tend to think of rather different things when we think of media and literacy, but yet they are related in interesting ways (see Chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion). It is certainly the case that attempts to reflect on emerging patterns of communication have challenged what we think literacy *is*, a debate that is explored more fully in Chapter 2. Similarly, digital is not necessarily the same thing as online, and even to describe something as on-screen is ambiguous – we have only to think of the difference between touchscreens on mobiles, TV screens and ATMs to get a sense of this. Throughout the chapters in this book we attempt to navigate some of the ambiguities raised in the terms used to describe digital media, providing definitions when and where these are appropriate.

Our main emphasis is on changes to literacy provision – changes that we suggest are necessary if teaching and learning is to align with contemporary communication practices. The idea of a communication *practice* is important to us because it emphasises something that we *do* in our everyday life, whether that practice is relatively passive (as when we watch a *YouTube* clip) or more active (as in an exchange on *WhatsApp*), whether we are just looking at a *Twitter* stream or contributing by liking, tweeting or retweeting. Related to this concept of practice as action or activity, we refer throughout the book to the notion of *repertoire* which stands for all the different communication media with which we engage. Thinking about repertoire allows us to consider the differences and similarities in children's experience across different channels of communication, how they might make choices or move seamlessly between them. In this respect, we find the following definition of repertoire useful – repertoire refers to the 'conventionalized constellations of semiotic resources for taking action – that are shaped by the particular practices in which individuals engage' (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010: 248). In other words, repertoire is firmly grounded in the individual use and practice of socially recognised communicative acts.

### Locating the Charter in literacy research

This book is informed by research and scholarship in literacy studies – sometimes referred to as New Literacy Studies (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000) – which is concerned with how meaning is negotiated between people in everyday settings rather than the cognitive skills of communication and information processing in individuals. The Charter's principles reflect three interrelated themes emerging from this field.

First, research in literacy studies sees literacy as a *social practice* (Street, 1984). It explores how literacy is used by specific groups of people in specific contexts – their interactions, the modes of communication they use and the



texts they produce. We take our inspiration from work which has explored the many ways in which literacies are used for social purposes to connect people with one another. This is important because literacies allow meanings to cross spaces even when individuals do not have the power or resources to achieve this (Kell & Patrick, 2015). Research exploring children's diverse communicative practices has been particularly influential. Our first three principles therefore reflect the situatedness and diversity of literacies:

- Acknowledge the changing nature of meaning making
- Recognise and build on children's linguistic, social and cultural repertoires
- Acknowledge diverse modes and media.

Second, we are cognisant of the ways in which things such as apps, screens, devices, connectivity, arrangements of furniture and other resources play a part in how literacies get done and the kinds of meanings that get made. This *sociomaterial* perspective is helpful in articulating the complex nature of communication practices involving digital media, and this in turn has implications for how we integrate digital media in classrooms. Sociomaterialism is an umbrella term used to refer to a range of theoretical perspectives that acknowledge the web of human and non-human relations that produces the social world (Fox & Aldred, 2017). These relations affect and are affected by each other, assembling in different ways at different times. Literacy researchers have looked to sociomaterialism to describe how the social, material and semiotic combine and recombine in the moment, as meaning flows across on- and offline spaces. Our own research develops this theme. We are interested, for example, in what happens as children's screen-based activity (whether searching the internet or playing in a virtual world) intersects with what happens off-screen (e.g. spoken interactions, physical movement, proximity to other children, size and orientation of device and so on), and in how on/offscreen activity is inflected by personal histories, circumstances, moods and desires (Burnett, 2015a; Burnett & Merchant, 2016a). Our second three principles therefore acknowledge these sociomaterial relationships and the emergent nature of meaning-making:

- Recognise the affective, embodied and material dimensions of meaning making
- Encourage improvisation and experimentation
- Use playful pedagogies.

Third, a focus on *new literacies* has provided rich insights into evolving practices using digital media. Research has explored the diverse ways in

which people use new media to connect with others for social, civic or political reasons, for example sharing passions, interests and concerns (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Studies of new media practices have highlighted the possibilities generated for activism, collaboration and creativity, but also raised concerns relating to personal vulnerability, commercial interests, discrimination and inequality. Our final three principles therefore build on particular opportunities and challenges generated through working with new media:

- Create opportunities to work with the provisionality of digital media
- Provide contexts that facilitate criticality
- Promote collaboration around and through texts in negotiating meaning.

### **Digital media and the primary curriculum**

We hope that the discussion above has provided a convincing rationale for an increased focus on digital media in primary schools. It is important to state, however, that a focus on digital media may sit uneasily with current policy or curriculum frameworks in some locations. In England, where we are based, revisions to the national curriculum have emphasised computational thinking and computer science rather than ICT, and the curriculum for English as a subject makes no mention of digital media (DfE, 2013). Teachers' attempts to integrate digital media must jostle with pressures linked to statutory assessments for grammar, punctuation and spelling on the one hand and use of technologies for programming on the other. While an emphasis on the communicative dimensions of digital media is certainly not incompatible with these curriculum frameworks, neither is it explicitly encouraged. In other places, such as Australia, Quebec and Ontario, curriculum documentation is far more embracing of digital media (ACARA, 2013; CCEA, 2016; Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2017). Even so, pressures to address other areas of the curriculum still mean that digital media receive little attention in some classrooms. This is problematic if it means that the social, critical, creative and collaborative aspects of digital media use so central to everyday life are sidelined.

### **Reading this book**

In the chapters that follow we take each of the nine principles in turn, using examples from everyday life and from classroom practice to develop them more fully, to expand on why they are relevant and to illustrate how they may be applied. As will already be apparent from the brief summary of the Charter at the beginning of this chapter, the nine principles are interrelated. The criticality explored in Chapter 9, for example, may well arise from the



playful approaches to meaning making considered in Chapter 6. And the collaborative production of texts discussed in Chapter 10 will likely involve the review and response outlined in Chapter 8. While recognising that the nine principles interweave in practice, we present them in separate chapters as each offers a different emphasis.

The examples we use are ones we find intriguing or inspiring. Some are drawn from our own experiences while others represent the work of teachers and researchers we have worked with or whose work we have followed. Many of our examples are from schools where teachers have limited or inadequate resources and must integrate digital media alongside multiple, and often competing, expectations and demands. Most examples are from England, but we also draw from other countries to show how digital technologies have been taken up by teachers and children in different locations, and to emphasise how digital technologies are never neutral but are always placed resources (Prinsloo, 2005).

We focus on the kinds of practices that enhance opportunities for children to draw on and expand their communication repertoires in ways that are collaborative, creative and critical.

In doing so, we recognise that there are many other topics that will be relevant to teachers who are reviewing their use of digital media in classrooms. Research exploring e-books and story apps, for example, is refining our understanding of the features that are most supportive to young readers (Takacs, Swart & Bus, 2015; Rvachew, 2017), and work is being done to identify the skills and strategies associated with reading online (Leu et al., 2015). Our emphasis in this book, however, is on developing classroom media practices that usefully emulate the complex practices we see in everyday life.

As technologies inevitably evolve, new practices will continue to emerge in everyday life and we hope in schools. At the time of writing, for example, some teachers are exploring ways of using augmented and virtual reality as part of their provision, and specialist social media apps are being trialled as a way of improving home-school communication – we might well consider how such opportunities enhance or inflect children's communicative repertoires. The Charter, we suggest, has sufficient flexibility to support the development of communication repertoires drawing on a range of devices, modes and media, both those with which we are currently familiar and those yet to come.

## Summary

In this chapter we have explored how literacy is changing and made the case for a focus on critical, creative and collaborative digital media practices within literacy provision. We have argued that we gain valuable insights to

inform classroom provision by examining digital media practices in everyday life and have briefly outlined the Charter for 21st Century Literacies which forms the framework for the nine chapters which follow.

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### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How might you begin to describe your own communication repertoire, and the role that new technology plays in this? This might include thinking about social networking sites, your use of web-based information and entertainment, and the ways in which you communicate with friends and family members.
  2. How might you begin to build up a picture of the communication repertoire of children you know in a professional and domestic context? This could take the form of an informal conversation, or you might involve children in developing a list or graphic representation.
  3. Reflect on a recent day spent in a primary school. How and when did you as an adult (or teacher) draw on digital technologies as part of your own communication repertoire? How and when did children have access to digital technology for the purposes of communication?
- .....