Multiliteracies Pedagogy:
An Interdisciplinary Endeavor

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By addressing the topic of multiliteracies, several integrated facts concerning literacy practices come to fore: the changing nature of the semiotic landscape in relation to other changes in social, cultural, economic, and technological domains; the multiplicity and multimodality of texts (any object that conveys meaning) ever more integrating written language, visual, audio, spatial, behavioral...; the multiplicity of channels of communication or technological modes of exchange of texts and knowledge; the multiplicity (and complexity) of linguistic and cultural contexts where people live and work, which generate new demands upon a person’s capacity to interpret the world and to use the new modes of representation; the multiple discourses with their specific social languages and cultural ways of having things done in the world; the diversity of knowledge as well the diversity of the capabilities that must be involved in its production, consumption, and transformation.

These and many more facts authorize a definition of multiliteracies that recognizes the existence of multiple semiotic systems with their own conventions that produce multiple dimensions of meaning, linguistic patterns being only one among others. Indeed, together with the linguistic mode, meanings are also conveyed by sound, sight, gestures. Above all, this multiplicity does not come from the sum of all those facts but, rather, their integration.

All of this has important repercussions in teaching and learning. On one hand, in this context of global diversity and increasing change, the multiplicity must repercut in the assumptions about what means to be a literate person now and tomorrow together with what the social...
outcomes of learning should be. These considerations also crucial for rethinking pedagogical practices at all levels, both in formal and informal contexts.

In this respect, it also seems important to have in mind several other facts concerning the multiplicity of literacies: their more or less formality that also contributes to the diversity among them. School subjects, with their own languages, modes of representation, conventions and patterns for meaning and meaning-making, configure different formal literacies than the informal multimodal practices that intertwine in everyday life and that people control for achieving their own purposes.

This difference may be an important aspect to take into consideration when thinking about learning and pedagogy in general. First of all, it is necessary to understand school multiliteracies – what are their privileged modes and materialities, conventions and pattern – in order to allow students a full control of them; second, the informal literacies practices in which students engage in their everyday life – and where they are insiders – are many times forms of knowledge learning and of knowledge transformation and production and, therefore, are crucial resources for enhancing learning outcomes across the full range of the curriculum and in the course of life.

Being so, it is also crucial to devise the interfaces between the informal literacies that students may call upon in order to support learning of school multiple literacies. This can be achieved by knowing what literacies dimensions students control, which of those dimensions are similar to the school ones and which literacies they engage and do not engage in their formal learning.

The focus here is of course upon capabilities in using dimensions and features of literacies that are generic to the demands of the school discourses (the “ways of combining and coordinating words, deeds, thoughts, values, bodies, objects, tools, and technologies” [Gee, 2001]) in order to fulfill the most important goal of education and schools: to create conditions for knowledge and competencies that, ultimately, pay off outside school; also as a means to avoid anachronism. And this is understanding and having control over all the forms of representation and meaning-making, by means of the multiple channels and material resources available.

The program with Portuguese adolescents that aims at developing those interfaces in order to, in a first basis, prevent school abandon,
draws upon the previous framework and has two interconnected strands: intervention and research.

As far as intervention is concerned, the program has the following objectives: to engage adolescents in the diverse multiple literacy modes of producing meaning that are socially representative; to promote control—at the operational, cultural, and critical levels—over the multiple features that specialize those practices; to create conditions for socialization in the multiplicity of discourses, this is in the multiple configurations of knowledge.

The interconnected research design aims at knowing the following: the meanings that adolescents attribute to knowledge; why, how, and under which circumstances they produce, reproduce, and transform knowledge; the features of their practices in producing knowledge; which forms of representation to produce and to acquire knowledge they privilege; the functions of the grammar of the semiotic systems they use.

To achieve these aims, besides what we may call situated practices, particular emphasis is given within the program to the use of multimodal texts and new technologies (ICT) in such a way that knowledge production and consumption are always intertwined without clear frontiers between them. This means that in order to produce, for instance, a travel guide—paper or web-based—of their county, the adolescent students must research and interpret other multimodal texts. This intertwining of knowledge production and consumption as occurs the reverse order as well: for example, during the straightforward reading of a science magazine, they may start transforming and producing new knowledge. The same production of knowledge happens when they are producing blogs on social network groups.

Thus, these activities involve multiple literacies in the sense that talking, reading, writing, photographing, making videos, dramatizing, and advertising are in continuous interaction integrating the various modes of expression and reception of meaning: verbal, visual, audio, spatial, gestural. The overall picture is, then, about constant individual or group interactions with texts, about texts, and through texts.

In the program, all of these processes are transformed in spoken reflections by the student and guided by the tutors about what is in hands and what is being or is intended to be achieved. The group also considers the nature and type of the text, the configuration of knowledge it represents, the modes and material resources involved in its
production, and the relations between the modes and technologies and the intended communicative goals, social uses, and roles. Group discussion of these topics gives form, among others things, to analytical and classifying thinking.

Some of these discussions among the tutors and the adolescents, or just among the adolescents, recorded to aid further work – the intention is to make conscious the understanding of the texts and processes involved in the production and recontextualization of understandings. The two phases of discussion about the textual objects and textual processes give form to explicit knowledge through which everything is explicated – texts, processes, strategies, material and social conventions, as well as quality criteria that are taken into consideration when assessing the adequacy of a given production.

Similarly, the students develop and share the specific languages and grammar of the semiotic systems involved (after will be registered in clusters concerning the specific semiotic system) so that they will be more conscious of the role of the linguistic, visual, or audio elements of any given text and how these elements interact to increase the meanings that the text conveys.

The nature of all this work – doing it, talking about it, reflecting on it – is intended to give form (and words) to the different modes for meaning in their several aspects. Moreover, by creating conditions to understand that “meanings come to us together: gesture with sight, with language, in audio form, in space” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 211), the program enables the participants to act accordingly.

The program entails a deeply interdisciplinary process where the written word mingles with other semiotic systems, through which meaning is appropriated, transformed, and new knowledge is produced.

To achieve the aims of this multiliteracies pedagogy it is fundamental, therefore, to be aware of the multiple facets of the semiotic productions that go from the representational, to the social, the organizational, the contextual, as well as the ideological – as they are defined by the authors quoted above.

The adoption of a such framework, which makes visible the vernacular literacies of the adolescents and identifies the gaps and bridges between formal and informal literacies – which is needed to accomplish learning in educational formal settings specifically and in life generally – presupposes particular emphasis among other aspects in the nature, roles, and functions of each one of the elements of the
linguistic, visual, spatial, gestural . . . modes of meaning that are in the scene.

This leads to the identification of key-elements where particular attention is given to participants (people and things involved and represented); roles, commitment, interaction, relations in the communication; forms used to make sense at micro and macro textual level; conventions; relevance and relations between form and medium; contextual features; intertextuality and cross-reference; authorship and readership; horizons of expectations concerning meanings and the degree of authorized participation in the construction of the meanings (i.e. open narratives, visual frames, etc.).

When blogging, producing travel guides, making flyers about environmental matters, students enroll in multiple literacies that are meaningful to them, that give them a notion of agency while at the same time developing the kind of knowledge that empowers people. And this occurs because they also become aware that when they make a choice, or someone else chooses a certain configuration for conveying meaning there are other options that stay silent, perhaps intentionally.

In this way, the program is trying to turn these adolescents from poor environments into cosmopolitan individuals by helping them understand their engagement with the multiple types of (literate) practices and the related tools and technologies involved in them, where knowledge “subjects” hang together, consequently opening multiple horizons beyond the limits of their landscapes.
References
