

Mapping meaning: profiling with integrity in a post-modern world

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Where we're at

The current insistence by governments that we interpret our students and classroom activities in terms of formal grids or frameworks raises fundamental issues. How should we educators respond? Should we resist this intrusion of formal classification into ALBE (Adult Literacy and Basic Education) and try to subvert it? Or should we formulate better focused and more useful frameworks – grids that we can use as tools for thinking about what is going on in our classrooms and for planning what comes next?

We believe that the best way to respond is to 'get our hands dirty' and try to negotiate a grid that is both governmentally and pedagogically responsible – a grid that supplies governments with the sort of information they need for their purposes, but which also gives us the sorts of information we need to assess where our students are at, to plan what to do next, and to position students in terms of pathways. What we need is a framework for reading students' texts and performances, not against a formalist linguistic grid, but as an expression of their meaning-making potential in a given context, with respect to their past sociocultural biography. We need a framework for reading students' texts as sites in which they can mobilise their sociocultural resources. And we need a grid which does not simply valorise a particular form of life (masculinist, Eurocentric, anglo etc.) as the temporal and developmental end point of historical and personal development. We also believe that it is important to hang on to notions of growth or development, as tools for framing curricula and evaluating students' progress.

In this paper, we outline a way of thinking about ALBE students and classrooms that can map student texts onto their meaning-making capacities and which views both of these in relation to larger social and historical patterns. In this way we can use the texts produced in our classrooms as locations for intervening and helping our students participate in the cultures of postmodernity.

Phases (our history of experience)

The first thing we'd like to outline is a map of change – a map of where our culture is coming from. We live in a post-modern world, which has evolved out of a modern world; and that modern world evolved in turn out of a pre-modern one (McCormack's 1992 *World of Work* is a good introduction to these epochal shifts¹). When we say that one world evolves out of another we mean that a culture reworks the things it did before in a way that has an impact on the way in which people live their lives. It's not just that a newer world replaces an older one, nor that a new world springs up alongside an older one; rather, what happens is that a new world emerges as a recontextualisation of an older one – our past stays with us, but we can't live it any longer in the ways we did before.

We'll refer to these recontextualising phases of life as realms. In general terms, we think we need to recognise at least three realms. We'll call the 'oldest' of these, which is still with us, the vernacular realm. This is the world of our various kith and kin – embracing the meaning resources, knowledge and skills developed through life among family and friends outside of formal institutions. We'll refer to the 'middle' of these realms, which is still with us and which has recontextualised the vernacular realm, as the institutional realm. This is the world of modernity – embracing science and technology, business and government, and the institutionalised learning we need to go through to function in public spheres. Finally, we'll refer to the most contemporary of these realms, which is currently recontextualising the institutional realm (and thus the vernacular realm), as the global realm. This is the world of post-modernity – embracing world-wide communication networks (the information super-highway), innovations in workplace management (the quality control team), multimedia texts, intertextual reading practises and so on. These three realms are outlined in Figure 1.

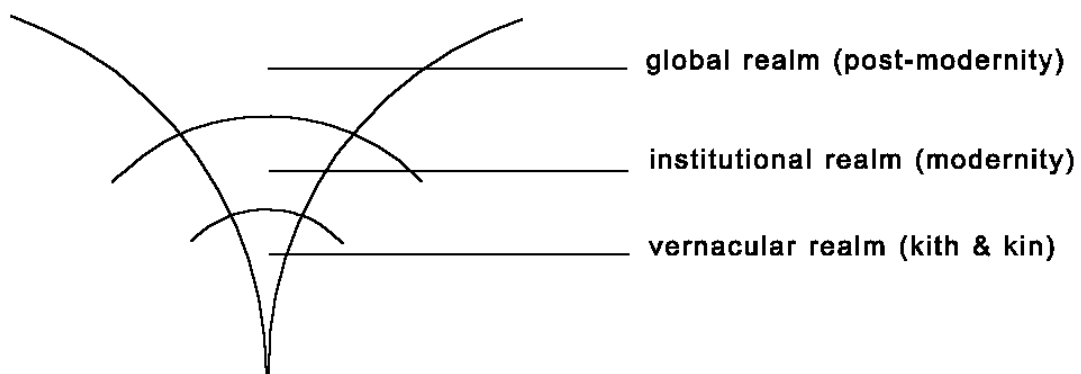


Figure 1. Phases – evolving realms of experience in a post-modern world.

We believe that what is so significant about these realms of experience is that each of us has to work through them in our own ways in our own lives if we are to function productively in a post-modern epoch. To get where we are today, each of us has grown up in a vernacular realm that gave us our start in life. Beyond this, those of us reading this article went through a school system

designed to apprentice us into the institutional realm – a realm into which we continue to grow as literate employees in workplaces of various kinds. And beyond this, most of us are adjusting in ongoing ways to the global realm which is currently redefining our working conditions, how we interact with our colleagues, which students we teach, what they want to learn, how we go about teaching them etc. In our society, individuals who don't go through these recontextualising processes are very much at risk.

And since individuals are at risk, so too their vernacular cultures (whether indigenous or migrant). We believe that unless non-mainstream vernacular cultures find ways of working through modernity, then they will have difficulty negotiating a place for themselves in a post-modern world. This doesn't mean that everyone has to become a mature, anglo, middle class male simply because our culture has made it easiest for this group to modernise (and so get more powerful), and then to postmodernise (as so get even more powerful). Change implies recontextualisation. So when we say that a vernacular culture needs to work through modernity we imply that it needs to remake modernity (and then post-modernity) in the process – just as a Yothu Yindi hit like 'Treaty' recontextualised modern popular music from an Aboriginal perspective, and a Yothu Yindi album recontextualises post-modern world music by including Aboriginal vernacular music and Aboriginalised pop music on the same tape or CD.

Domains (our experience of history)

The next thing we'd like to outline is a map of social practices – a map of the ways we go about living our lives. In general terms, we think we need to recognise three domains – a domain of knowledge, a domain of identity and a domain of regulation, as outlined in Figure 2 (McCormack's 1995 'Different angles: thinking through the four literacies' is a good introduction to these domains and to the literacy of public debate which we will take up under the heading of citizenship below²).

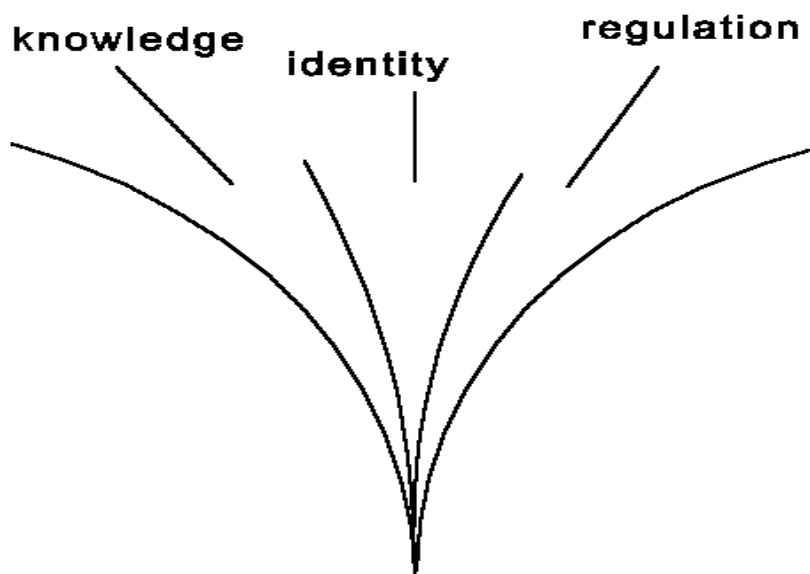


Figure 2. Domains – grouping social practices (ways of living).

The domain of knowledge covers the various ways in which we go about understanding our world – how we build up folk and more or less scientific theories of the world around us, including its physical, biological and social organisation. The domain of identity covers the various ways in which we go about understanding ourselves – how we appreciate and position ourselves as members of smaller and larger communities and talk with others about what who we are and what we do. The domain of regulation covers the various ways in which we go about controlling what we do – how we organise ourselves and others to get on with the lives we live together.

To add detail to this outline of change and social life, we need to intersect domains with phases, as in Figure 3 below. Within the vernacular realm, knowledge, identity and regulation are highly integrated – so much so that for some purposes we may not need to draw boundaries among domains. In this realm, knowledge is built up by naming the sense-able world and participating in physically involving activities with kin, friends and co-workers. Identity is constructed among these same participants, especially through the stories that express our attitudes to what has happened to us and others that we know. Regulation in this realm is closely tied up with participation; as we learn how things are done, we learn what we and others are supposed to do – the rules are simply what we do.

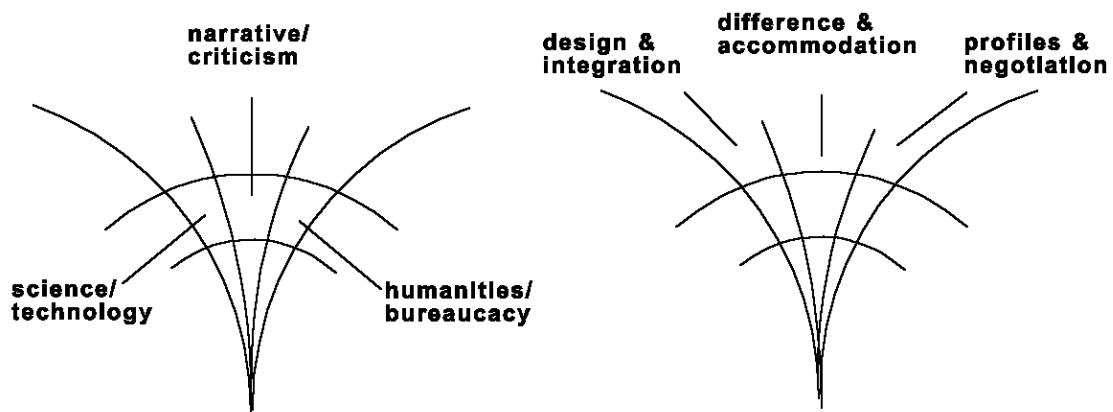


Figure 3. Mapping domains onto phases – a cultural cartography for contemporary life.

Within the institutional realm, on the other hand, the boundaries among knowledge, identity and regulation are strong. Knowledge of our physical and biological environment is built up through science, and used to construct technologies that work back on that environment in large-scale mechanical ways. Identity is similarly constructed on a larger scale, typically on our behalf, though public forms of narration (the novel, film or play with which we are expected to identify) and critique (the expert appraisal with which we are expected to affirm). And regulation manifests itself as administration, involving a hierarchy of governmental and bureaucratic enterprise that rules and conditions our public life (with the humanities responsible for developing the understandings used to manage large populations of citizens, employees, students and ‘confined’ subjects of various kinds). The key technology enabling institutions in all three realms is literacy – and literacy ‘across the curriculum’ is, in fact, the fundamental technology that our systems of publicly funded education have evolved to teach.

Within the global realm, the domains of knowledge, identity and regulation remain significant, but with some blurring of boundaries as domains comes to interrogate one another. Within the domain of knowledge, internal boundaries become blurred as science and technology struggle to design the ecological understandings we need simply to undo the ravages of modernist gutting and pollution of physical and biological resources, let alone provide integrated environmentally sensitive solutions for the future. Man is no longer in charge of nature; in a post-modern world he (sic) is simply another, probably endangered, part of life in our world. The precarious nature of our material resources resonates with a world in which our identity (our sense of ourselves) is very much at risk. It's no longer possible to look deep inside ourselves for the essence towards which others will eventually assimilate in turn. Rather, the global realm reworks western people as simply another, probably dated, voice among different accommodating concerns.

Similarly, the domain of regulation, finding itself caught up with environmental crises and competing voices it is struggling to control, has moved at all levels away from procedural specifications of how things are to be done towards profiled specifications of what needs to be achieved, leaving it up to teams of employees to negotiate ways of attaining quality outcomes.

In this kind of realm, the key technology would appear to be that of productive dialogue across difference – facilitated, as far as we can see, through multi-modal texts that enable participants to interact publicly in literate ways. At present, this is a technology that appears to be more self-taught than institutionalised in formal education (our way of naming an important new educational frontier).

For practical purposes, it might be useful to set aside the symbolism associated with evolution (i.e. change, recontextualisation and indefinite boundaries) and reconfigure the map in Figure 3 above as matrix (Table 1 below). This gives us a 9-celled grid which might be used to sort out the various social practices associated with each domain/phase.

Table 1. A grid for mapping social practices onto domains and phases.

| Domain//phase | vernacular | institutional | global |
|---------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| knowledge | social practices | social practices | social practices |
| identity | social practices | social practices | social practices |
| regulation | social practices | social practices | social practices |

Describing social practices (how we mean)

How do we specify what is going on in the 9-celled maps of meaning making practices in our culture we have outlined to this point (Figure 3 and Table 1 above)? How can we ground the theory we have developed? How can we get our hands on it, so that as educators, we can act upon it?

The key point here is that social practices are manifested as texts (also called processes, where we want to emphasise their dynamic processual nature) – conversations, letters to the editor, recipes, advertisements, paintings, video clips, songs etc. These text/processes manifest the various meaning making systems that underlie them – language, image, music, dance, architecture, film etc. For educators, the two most important of these are probably language and image, since the text/processes used to apprentice students into modern and post-modern realms draw so heavily on these systems.

In Australia, the most relevant descriptions of both language and image texts have been developed by systemic linguists³, many of them working in educational contexts. In general terms these descriptions involve work on expression (the phonology of speaking and the graphology of writing), content (the grammar and wording of clauses and the discourse semantics of texts) and context (the field, mode and tenor of a social practice and the way these register variables are combined and staged as genres). One such model is outlined in Figure 4, drawing once again on the metaphor of recontextualisation – with phonology/graphology recontextualised by grammar and lexis, grammar and lexis by discourse semantics, discourse semantics by field, mode and tenor, and field, mode and tenor by genre. Recent work on images has concentrated in particular on content (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1990, and O’Toole, 1994). For application in educational contexts work on registers and genres of images is urgently required.

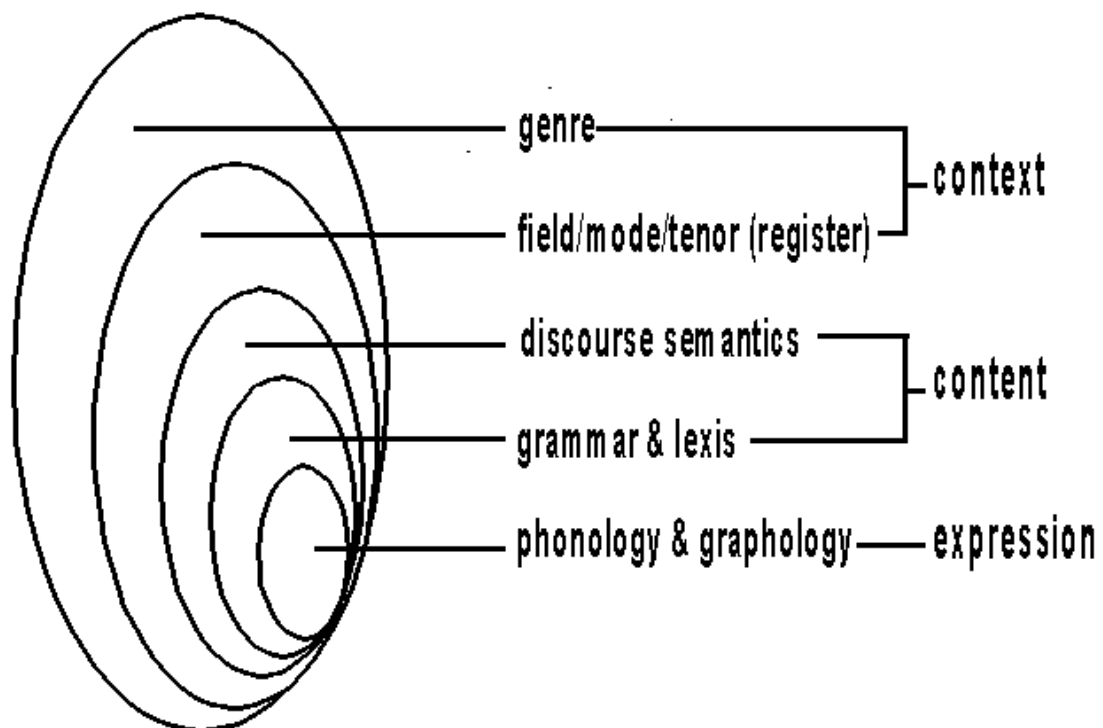


Figure 4. A framework for specifying linguistic resources for a particular domain/phase

A model of this kind can be used specify in some detail the linguistic nature of texts in any one of the domain/phases outlined above. One of the best known

set of texts is that associated with institutional knowledge (i.e. science; see Bazerman, 1988; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Lemke, 1990; Martin & Veel, 1998; Swales, 1990). Some of the key features associated with scientific language are outlined in Table 2 below, including passing reference to the images (tables and figures) which play such an important role.

Table 2. Foregrounded linguistic features in scientific texts (after Halliday & Martin, 1993).

| | |
|------------|---|
| | science (institutional knowledge) |
| graphology | alphabetic; numeric; specialised formatting... ; (verbiage/image text...) |
| grammar | relational clauses; complex classification; nominalisation... |
| Lexis | specialised and technical; abstract; impersonal... |
| discourse | generic reference; internal conjunction; taxonomic lexical relations... |
| Field | taxonomy; implication sequence... ; (projected tables, figures...) |
| Mode | waves of abstraction... |
| Tenor | impersonal; minimal appraisal... |
| genre | report; explanation; procedure; procedural recount ... |

How much detail of this kind do we need in order to work effectively with our students? There's no one answer to this – it depends. For some students, in some contexts, examples of the kind of text at stake may be enough. For other students, or the same students in other contexts, it may be important to name what is going on in order to come to grips with it. The critical thing is to ground the social practices we are mapping in texts and to show students what is going on in ways that allow them to get their hands on it (if that's what they decide they want).

Citizenship (dealing with difference)

But where, you might be asking, is critical literacy? You might also be thinking that, by framing literacy in terms of movement through sociocultural contexts, we are falling into a reproductive and uncritical notion of literacy. And if you are a postmodern theorist, you might also be objecting to our insistence on a modernist moment in coming to terms with the present: you might be thinking that marginal groupings within modernity can and should bypass modernity altogether and move straight into postmodernity.

So what is our attitude to critique and critical literacy? To answer this we need to look at the three phases we have identified and at how they deal with difference. For practical purposes, we can classify the three by saying that the vernacular realm frames difference in terms of insider and outsider, in terms of 'them' and 'us'; those who are different or other are projected outside the boundary defining 'us'. By contrast, the institutional realm is intent on bringing difference or otherness inside the boundary of its operation, either as enclaves of difference (asylums, prisons, reserves and so on) or by colonisation, migration and assimilation. It is fundamentally committed to bringing the whole population within the ambit of universal norms or truths – to treating everyone as deep down all the same, and thus refusing to acknowledge or foster cultural

difference. The global realm, on the other hand, places genuine value on difference or otherness, and is concerned with establishing sites and processes of negotiation that foreground complementarity over contradiction, negotiation over argument, reciprocity over domination – in short, modernity stripped of illusion. Attitudes to difference across the three realms are summed up in Figure 5.

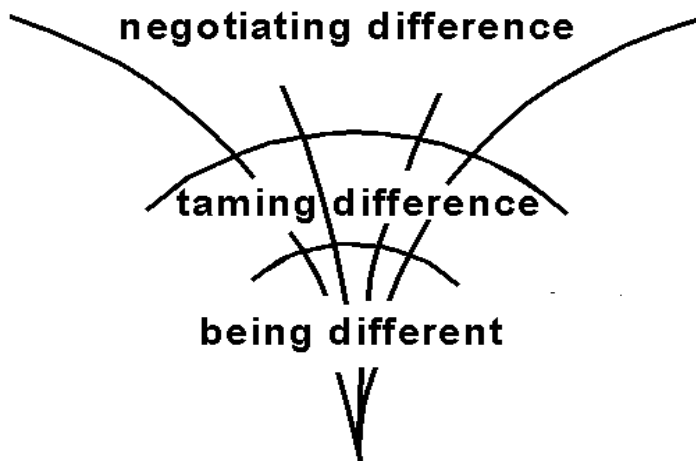


Figure 5. Attitudes to difference – across vernacular, institutional and global realms.

Let's now examine views of difference in the institutional and global realms in more detail. Modernity's attitude to the vernacular realm tends to be patronising. As science/technology, it is intent on replacing the 'old wives' tales' and 'home-spun remedies' of vernacular with rational forms of knowledge and technique based on evidence and fact. As narrative/critique, modernity attempts (especially through education) to shift the allegiance of those from vernacular realms so they embrace the more 'universal values' of modernity. And finally, as humanities/administration, modernity attempts to replace local custom with national law and family obligations with impersonal procedures of public certified officials.

In short, modernity attempted to tame the other. In the domain of knowledge, other views were framed as false or anachronistic. In the identity domain, other cultures were framed as primitive, exotic and doomed. In the domain of regulation, acting differently was framed as abnormality and in need of remediation. As far as literacy was concerned, modernity tended to picture its population as answerable to edifices of writing (legal, theoretical, bureaucratic, or artistic) that have been composed and worked over in successive revisions. Much of literary studies, particularly in the British Leavisite tradition, has been engaged in a project of construing the narrative of the vernacular into the modern in such a way that the vernacular is supposedly neither devalued or obliterated. This was often framed in terms of a rejection of modernity by identifying modernity with the other two domains: science/technology and humanities/bureaucracy. Thus, many secondary 'English' classes have poured over *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and their ilk – all framed in terms of an opposition between the authenticity of the private individual versus the alienated impersonality of the public institutional world. What this tradition

often forgot was that it too is part of modernity: the inner directed modern individual is not part of the vernacular world even though they may pine for the fluency and 'life' of the vernacular: their home territory tends to be the musty smell of books and the classroom.

Before moving onto post-modernity, we could sum up the relationship of the institutional realm to the vernacular by saying that modernity is critical of the vernacular: it finds it to be unreliable, inconstant, elusive, partial, irrational, and unable to explain itself – just as from the point of view of writing, speech seems erratic, inarticulate, meandering, self-centred, and illogical. Modernity as literacy is inherently critical of the speech of the vernacular – even when it valorises it. Literacy by definition problematises and distances us from the ways of speaking and meaning we are born into and so is inherently critical of the vernacular.

Alongside being inherently critical of the vernacular, modernism is inherently critical of itself in that its texts are based on reasoning and must be explicitly validated. And insofar as all modernist texts aspire to a transcendental horizon, they all fail. In this sense, modernist texts, their writing and their reading, are critical activities in which texts or drafts of texts are measured against a meta-horizon, not just a local 'she'll be right, mate' horizon.

And so we come to the global realm – post-modernity. Perhaps the key move in the shift to global realm is the shift to electronic systems of communication that are not just one-to-many (like mass media) but many-to-many (like telephones, postal services, and E-mail). Thus, the linguistic and sociocultural border that the modernist nation state tried to maintain at its territorial boundaries has become more permeable. The border is now crossed by manufactured goods, software, tourists, satellite transmissions, and most significantly information (the Internet).

So, whereas the institutional realm of modernity tried to understand both things and people as instances of an underlying essence, the global realm of post-modernity emphasises diversity and difference within the global village. It is no longer possible to assume that there is only one way of being or doing things: one way of being human, one way of being modern, one way of working, one way of making meaning. The notion of the one way, the true way, the universal way loses its innocence and obviousness. And as belief in the reality of one universally valid humanity recedes, two things happen. One, things done in the name of universality are exposed as in fact expressions of partiality and particularity; thus, modernity is increasingly perceived as Euro-centric, masculinist, bourgeois etc. And this relativisation of the West, opens up a cultural space for marginalised groups such as women, indigenous cultures, recent migrants and so on to engage in a politics of difference by reinvoking their vernacular realm.

Relativising modernity means more than just acknowledging uniqueness and specificity; it also opens up the reading of texts. So, whereas modernist literacy framed its texts as autonomous, self-contained, self-consistent, and achieving closure (in opposition to the 'slackness' of vernacular speech), post-modernity frames texts as inherently dialogic contributions to a heteroglossic social milieu made up of a cacophony of complementary voices and points of view. Whereas modernity thought this range of voices could be orchestrated and eventually distilled into a single voice, postmodernity acknowledges the impossibility of synthesis.

It is important to note that just as the institutional realm does not replace the vernacular but rather reinterprets it, so too the global realm does not simply replace modernity but reinterprets it. Some have interpreted the collapse of the transcendental values of modernity (e.g. social justice, equality, truth, authenticity and autonomy) as meaning that anything goes: 'if God is dead, we can do anything'. We doubt however that it is possible to glibly surpass the moral horizons of modernity. We would prefer to construe post-modernity as 'modernity without illusions' (Bauman, 1993). Recontextualising and relativising the aspirations of modernity does not necessarily mean abandoning them. But what post-modernity does mean is that life is reconfigured as a public space in which we are each infused with multiple stances and points of view.

A post-modern literacy of the global realm is a way of reading and writing that is dialogic and that acknowledges difference and paradox; a literacy that notes the variation and creativity brought to the reading and writing task by students; a literacy that is not ashamed of its vernacular origins. However, it is a literacy that also acknowledges modernity. Just as it must guard against sentimentalising the vernacular, so too it must guard against demonising modernity. Modernity is also a voice in the global dialogue. To maintain this balance, it is important that post-modernity not be collapsed into a romantic celebration and fictionalisation of the vernacular by the modernist domain of narrative/criticism.

For us, post-modernity means the recontextualisation of the realms of the vernacular and the institutional. It does not mean their abandonment or rejection: this would be a supremacist and modernist reading of the global domain as if it instituted a completely new epoch of history, an epoch that shared nothing with previous eras. Thus for us critical literacy cannot mean adopting some transcendental vantage point from which to critique other texts or processes. But nor can it mean simply asserting your own point of view. Rather critical literacy means being able to participate in unfolding conversations and voices engaged in assessing and assigning value to matters in the present.

Genesis (making change)

If we are right that our current world is made up of three coexisting realms of sociocultural meaning, and if it is correct that we are mentored into social life by those around us, then it is plausible to suggest that the pattern of emergence in the larger historical culture may be at play in the growth of the individual student. Also if the meaning potential of students derives from their apprenticeship into the sociocultural regions we have outlined, theoretically we should be able to formulate a point and angle of intervention that provides the leverage to effect significant learning in our students. If we can map where they are coming from – the many places, not the single place – then we should be able to formulate a curriculum that mobilises, resonates with, the harmonics and discords within their existing meaning potential in such a way as to provoke 'deeper' learning, learning that resonates through regions of student meaning potential, learning that can even shift the contours of their meaning potential as a whole.

Recently Halliday and Matthiessen (1999) have been developing a framework for thinking about semiotic change which we have found useful. In this model,

three types of semiotic change, or semogenesis are recognised: logogenesis, ontogenesis and phylogenesis (depending on the time span we are taking into account). Logogenesis refers to the unfolding of the text, ontogenesis to the development of the individual and phylogenesis to the genealogy of the culture. In their terms, phylogenesis provides the environment for ontogenesis, which in turn provides the environment for logogenesis; conversely, logogenesis (texts) provide the material for ontogenesis (learning), which in turn provides the material for phylogenesis (cultural change). A snapshot of their model is outlined in Figure 6.

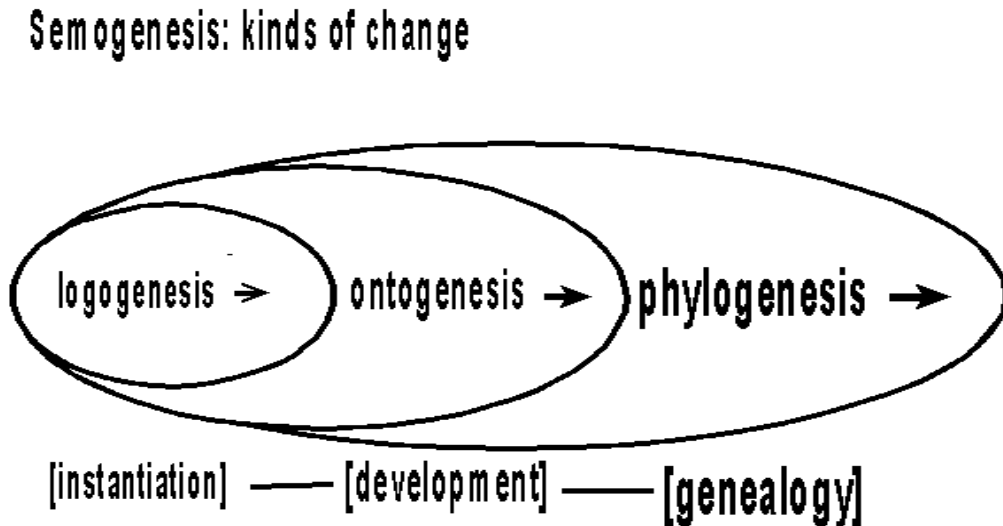


Figure 6. Halliday and Matthiessen's model of processes of semiotic change.

What makes the field of education such a sensitive site in our culture is the role it plays in influencing semiotic change. Its very *raison d'être* is to intervene in change – to affect the culture by affecting students and to affect students by affecting texts. Thus whenever educators plan curricula they have designs on the trajectory of culture as a whole; whenever they teach lessons, they guide the development of individuals; and whenever they evaluate texts, they govern the reading and writing practices by which that text unfolds. An outline of these interventions in relation to Halliday and Matthiessen's model of semogenesis is presented in Figure 7 below.

Significantly, then, it is in classroom texts that teachers work on instituting dialogue between the voices within students and the voices of the larger culture, and between the meaning potential already at the disposal of students and the dispersed meaning potential of the larger culture. Working with text implies recontextualising students, just as teaching students implies recontextualising culture.

Making change

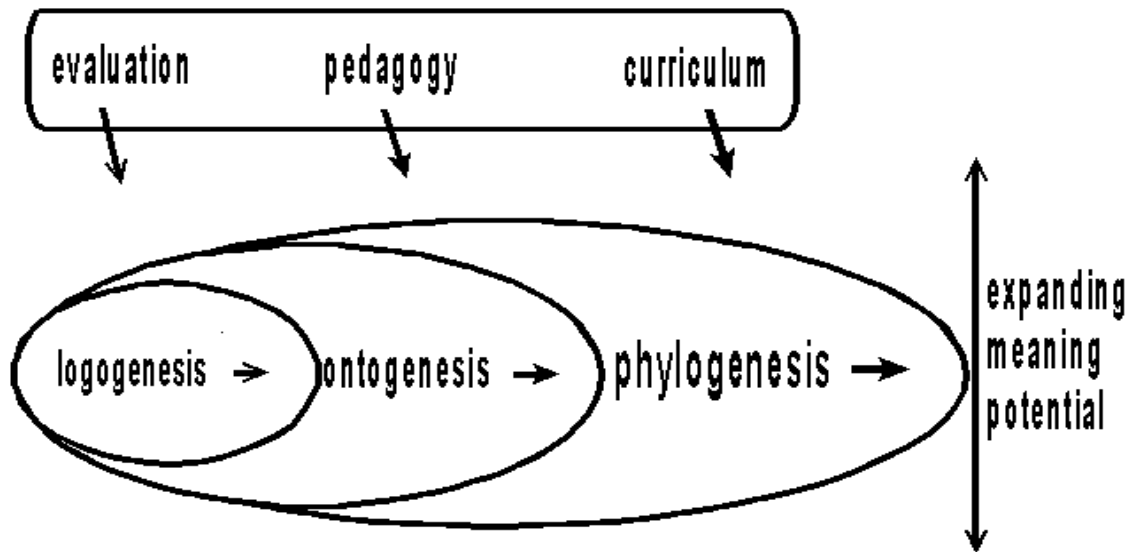


Figure 7. Teaching in relation to processes of semiotic change.

As teachers we interpret the meaning-making practices of students, the texts/processes they enact, as voicing the meanings they have accumulated in their life so far (often called 'their prior knowledge'). And by intervening in the texts/processes of our students (by talking with and at them, by setting reading and writing tasks, by providing models, by editing, by pointing to absences and so on) – by deploying all the discursive stratagems at the disposal of teachers, we try to assist students expand, elaborate, and enhance their meaning potential as well as take up new points of view, new angles of projection.

Envoi

If we can construct a framework that acknowledges both the complexity and the unique shape of student's prior engagement with the larger culture, as teachers we can begin to initiate curriculum texts/processes that work to assist students to recontextualise and rework their 'prior knowledge'. The shifting participation of a student in this unfolding curriculum text (usually consisting of a range of complementary texts/processes over a number of weeks) will profile the shifts in their meaning potential. In this way we can interpret student learning in terms of where they are coming from.

But by relating this student profile to the larger shape of the realms and domains of the present (viz. post-modernity plus modernity plus pre-modernity), we can frame ALBE students language and literacy competences both in terms of the demands of social world around them and in terms of their own histories. Thus participating in the larger social world on the one hand and speaking out of their own experience on the other, are not mutually exclusive options. Doing one is doing the other. Speaking to and for your own specific

meaning potential is speaking to and for the larger meaning potential of the sociocultural world.

Perhaps if we could put some flesh on this sketch over the next few years, we may be able to develop a pedagogy that is not just a vernacular ‘flying by the seat of your pants’, nor a lock-step universalist procedural pedagogy of modernity, nor simply a post-modern dialogic acknowledgment of multi-modal intertexts, but a principled weaving back and forth across these modes in ways that allow us to be more attuned to points of engagement with the specificities and histories of our students.

Profiling the world of our students and profiling world of the larger culture will be systematically related, but not because students simply reproduce the larger culture, nor because they have been trained into the larger culture, but because both share similar histories.

Endnotes

- 1 For a functional linguistic perspective see Halliday, 1993.
- 2 For a functional linguistic perspective see Martin, 1993.
- 3 For work on language, see Eggins, 1994; Halliday, 1994; for work on image, see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1995, and O’Toole, 1994.

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