

# On paper, in person, and online: A multi-literacies framework for university teaching

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Given the complexities and multimodalities of contemporary universities, students need access to an ever-increasing range of literacies to succeed and flourish. They need the academic acumen to read, view, compose, and perform a range of literacies in a range of contexts for a range of audiences and purposes (e.g. on paper, in person, and online). To do this students need to be conversant and confident in a range of literacies applicable to universities and applicable to broader social, cultural, and vocational contexts *outside* university. Our ‘multi-literacies’ framework identifies six literacy domains necessary for successful transition and success in the university context. These include: (1) *institutional literacies*; (2) *digital literacies*; (3) *social and cultural literacies*; (4) *critical literacies*; (5) *language literacies*; and (6) *academic literacies*. In our experience, students new to university are often ill-equipped to fully engage with the university system. In response, the framework endeavours to make explicit many of the literacy requirements that have been assumed, implied, or invisible altogether. Ultimately, this is about giving students access to the cultural capital and practical knowhow needed to succeed in a ‘widening-participation’ era. Such an approach should increase retention and completion rates and give ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ student cohorts a more empowering education experience. So far, despite widespread support for our framework, implementation has proved difficult. Moving beyond a skills-and-drills model of literacy to a critically engaged *multi-literacies* approach will require all stakeholders to genuinely reform teaching theories and practices for meaningful change to occur.

**Key Words:** multiliteracies, academic literacies, university literacy.

## 1. Introduction

A pedagogy of multiliteracies ... focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone. ... Multiliteracies also creates a different kind of pedagogy, one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representational resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural purposes.

(New London Group, 1996, p. 64)

Since 2012, we have been developing a literacy framework for first-year students entering university (Miller & Schulz, 2013; Miller & Schulz, in press). In 2013, at RMIT in Melbourne, we presented a preliminary version of our framework to much encouragement at the *11th Biennial Conference of the Association for Academic Language and Learning: New Students, New Learning: New Challenges?* It is our hope that this expanded framework will help academic language and learning teachers (and others) further equip students with the cultural capital, institutional knowhow, and literacy repertoires necessary to excel at university. The assumption, as

we know, that students arrive at university with all the requisite literacies that universities demand (fairly or not) cannot be sustained (Australian Government: TEQSA, 2013; Lawrence, 2000; Lillis, 2003). Similarly, we cannot know in advance which literacies students will bring to university and from which literacy traditions they have emerged (Lillis, 2003; Street, 2011). In a ‘widening-participation’ era we must expand—and *deepen*—our literacy offerings to help students maximise their university experiences (Miller & Schulz, in press; Miller, 2013; Putnam & Gill, 2011; Thies, 2012). The increasing digitisation of university processes and the migration of teaching and learning activities to online platforms and interactive forums makes such learning paramount (Bezemer & Kress, 2008, p. 166; Goodfellow, 2011; Lea, 2004).

We believe literacy and *literacies* remain the keys to access and inclusion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century university context (Lea & Street, 2006; Unsworth, 2001). The explicit teaching of literacy is therefore as essential today as ever (Cumming-Potvin, 2009; Thies, 2012). In the spirit of widening participation we present this multiliteracies framework in order to help students transition to university, acclimatise to university discourses and practices, and then excel once engaged in university study. Such an approach should increase retention and completion rates and give ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ student cohorts a more empowering education experience (Expert Group, 2012). It will also help students from diverse backgrounds—with diverse literacy repertoires—make the transition to tertiary study (e.g. school leavers, mature age, international, LSES, rural and remote, Indigenous, NESB, non-traditional, first-in-family, etc.).

## 2. Background

In 2012, Flinders University established a First Year Literacy Expert Group (‘Expert Group’) made up of representatives from the faculties and student support services to examine ways of expanding university literacy to help students make the most of their university experiences in a widening-participation era. After an extensive review, the Expert Group made two important recommendations: (1) that a whole-of-university rather than piecemeal approach be taken to tertiary literacy teaching, and (2) that a partnership be established between the University’s academic language and learning support unit, the Student Learning Centre (SLC), and the English Department to develop a new 4.5 unit ‘literacy and communication’ topic<sup>1</sup> to help students make the transition to tertiary study (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). The idea was to combine the expertise of both teams to build a topic to deal with wide-spread perceptions in the University that many students were lacking the ‘literacies’ required to fully engage with tertiary study (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2011; TEQSA, 2013). The English Department already ran a semester-long for-credit topic concentrating on English proficiency and basic academic literacies. The new topic would go further, and incorporate many of the ‘literacies’ previously delivered by the SLC through not-for-credit academic orientation sessions (e.g. digital, critical, institutional, and academic literacies). The new topic would integrate aspects of both programs to build a university-wide semester-long credit-bearing topic suitable for first-year students entering university and studying generalist degrees (Miller & Schulz, in press; Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). The first step, however, would be to develop a *literacy framework* to underpin the topic. This is the focus of this paper.

The Expert Group (EG) provided the Vice-Chancellor’s Committee (VCC) with several recommendations about how it viewed ‘academic literacy’ in the widening participation era. According to the EG’s report, academic literacy is far more than reading and writing effectively in the university context (Expert Group, 2012). The EG uses the University of Western Australia’s definition of academic literacy as: “*The capacity to undertake study and research, and to communicate findings and knowledge, in a manner appropriate to the particular disciplinary conventions and scholarly standards expected at university level*” [emphasis in original] (p. 5). To deliver this, the EG tells us, students need expertise in three types of literacy: (1) general literacy (i.e. proficiency); (2) academic literacy (i.e. university-specific literacies); and (3) professional literacy (i.e. discipline-specific literacies) (p. 4). The EG goes on to suggest that within

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<sup>1</sup> At Flinders University, the term ‘topic’ is used to describe a subject that forms part of a degree.

these three literacies there are a range of other practices and discourses necessary for university study. These include:

- “1. Understanding the rules of researching, reading and writing in an academic context ...
2. Developing the ability to deconstruct and hence understand the kinds of questions likely to be posed in typical student assignments.
3. Ordering materials and planning outcomes.
4. Knowing which tools to use, where and when: grammar, syntax, punctuation.
5. Knowing the conventions of different kinds and modes of academic communication: essay; tutorial paper; review; annotated bibliography; case study; lab report; exam; etc.
6. Producing the right outcome in the appropriate context: connecting process and objectives with discipline/faculty requirements.” (p. 4)

From this report we deduced four distinct literacy themes: (1) language usage and proficiency; (2) university acclimatisation and induction; (3) academic discourses and conventions; and (4) subject-specific and/or professional knowledge (which would remain the responsibility of each discipline). Within these themes, we noted, were other assumed or implied literacies, such as institutional, social, cultural, digital, visual, and critical literacies. It was on the basis of this realisation, coupled with internal discussions and further research into literacy developments across the sector, that we turned to a *multi-literacies* approach to first-year literacy teaching and practice (New London Group, 1996; Street, 2013). We could have turned to other approaches, like the ‘four resources model’ proposed by Luke and Freebody (1999; Freebody & Luke, 2003), but realised we were working in a university system that still viewed literacy as predominantly about reading, writing, and language proficiency (Lea & Street, 1998). Academic literacies were seen as something to be laid down over the top of traditional literacy *skills*.

Our conversations with staff in the English Department over a twelve-month period revealed that any understanding of literacy that became too ‘abstract’ or didn’t speak to a deep-seated skills-based literacy preconception would fall on deaf-ears. To sell the idea that literacy involves complex social and cultural discourses and practices rather than simply a set of cognitive or behavioural skills and capacities (Gee, 2009; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2013) would involve producing a framework that was, first and foremost, accessible to staff; second, useable in the classroom context (online and in person); and, third, relevant to students. Given staff from the English Department had designed the existing ‘skills-based’ literacy topic and used it for many years, we needed to convince them of the need to expand the curriculum (and supporting framework) to take in other literacy domains, as suggested by the VCC and Expert Group (and later by the Centre for University Teaching). When we spoke to English Department staff in terms of discrete literacy domains that could be overlapped to build a literacy map applicable to the demands of the university system, we found a workable (if temporary) solution. Staff could understand a multiliteracies approach so long as it still spoke to the importance of traditional language proficiencies, and then branched out to include more complex understandings of literacy involving social practices, discourses, dispositions, values, modes, media, and social justice. And so, after much debate and thought, the multiliteracies framework was born. Discussions about *implementing* the framework would come later.

### 3. A multiliteracies framework

Given the complexities and multimodalities of contemporary universities, students need access to an ever-increasing range of literacies to succeed and flourish. They need the academic acumen to read, view, interpret, enact, compose, and perform a range of literacies in a range of contexts for a range of audiences and for a range of purposes (e.g. on paper, in person, and online). To do this students need to be conversant and confident in a range of literacies applicable to universities and applicable to broader social, cultural, and vocational contexts *outside* university (Gee, 2009). This is in keeping with the multiliteracies approach advocated by the New London Group in 1996, and New Literacy Studies more broadly (Lea, 2004).

We have identified six literacy domains necessary for successful transition and success in the university context. These include: (1) *institutional literacies*; (2) *digital literacies*; (3) *social and cultural literacies*; (4) *critical literacies*; (5) *language literacies*; and (6) *academic literacies*. In our experience, a student ‘ill-prepared’ across any one of these literacies would be ill-equipped to fully engage with the university system. Given this, our framework endeavours to make apparent and explicit many of the literacy requirements that were previously assumed, implied, or invisible altogether. Ultimately, this is about giving *all* students access to the cultural capital and practical knowhow needed to succeed at university (Miller & Schulz, in press; Thies, 2012).

Many of the literacy practices we place in each domain could easily be placed in adjacent domains, but for the sake of clarity and explication we have identified and differentiated each type of literacy when, in practice, most literacies work together or in combinations depending on context, purpose, and audience. As such, we view each domain as part of a comprehensive suite of integrated and overlapping literacy practices necessary for full university participation. This is not, however, a skills-and-drills model. We are not simply up-skilling students in readiness for university study or post-university employment. Rather, our framework follows the advice of Lea and Street (1998, 2006) and others (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; New London Group, 1996; Serafini, 2012) by adopting a critically engaged, dialogical, reflexive, and multimodal approach to academic literacies. Here, the constructed and contested nature of literacy is examined alongside the enactment and refinement of literacy practices (Lea, 2004, p. 742). The six literacy domains will now be outlined in turn.

### **3.1. Institutional literacies: Reading and navigating the university system**

In order to ‘play the game’ and know how to think, act, and communicate in university settings, students need a range of literacies to unlock the system (Miller & Schulz, in press). We coined the phrase ‘institutional literacies’ to describe these often unmentioned and overlooked discourses and practices. Institutional literacies help students *transition* to university from a range of backgrounds by giving them ‘insider knowledge’ on how to enter and engage the system.

Institutional literacies include: (1) ‘reading’ and navigating the institution (i.e. understanding layouts, structures, hierarchies, policies, etc.); (2) knowing the spoken and unspoken rules of participation (e.g. protocols, etiquette, etc.); (3) locating and accessing institutional facilities and personnel (e.g. admissions, enrolments, health, libraries, unions, child care, transport, accommodation, employment, clubs, etc.); (4) accessing academic and professional staff (e.g. departments, administrators, deans, coordinators, lecturers, tutors, librarians, mentors, etc.); (5) understanding the role and function of lectures, tutorials, workshops, seminars, practicals, and examinations (e.g. expectations, processes, protocols, etc.); (6) making and following timetables (e.g. enrolment deadlines, semester dates, class registrations, timetables, etc.); (7) balancing commitments between family, work, leisure, and study (i.e. using diaries and/or electronic organisers); and (8) accessing and engaging assessment processes (e.g. policies, procedures, due dates, extensions, exemptions, resubmissions, etc.).

Without the cultural capital necessary to ‘read’ and ‘navigate’ the system, students cannot be expected to participate fully. Furthermore, students need these knowledges and literacies (and the confidence and agency they give) to engage with course content and classroom activities. As passports to participation, institutional literacies act as ‘keys’ enabling students to unlock the university system and, once inside, open doors to possible futures. In this sense, institutional literacies become a form of currency and exchange (Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007, p. 264). As such, institutional literacies do not just let students into university—they give students access to people, careers, knowledge, power, and social and political participation more generally.

### **3.2. Digital literacies: Understanding and using multimedia technologies**

The ongoing digitisation of university processes and products means students need extensive digital literacies to participate (Goodfellow, 2011; Lea, 2004). Most universities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will require students to use computers, tablets, smart phones, iPods, the internet, webpages, blogs, social networks, and databases to access and provide information. Students will be expected to design and produce a range of written, spoken, visual, and multimodal texts for a

range of contexts and media (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Gee, 2009). They will need the capacity to ‘read’ and ‘decode’ multimodal graphics such as sound, colour, image, movement, voice, and layout (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2012). Students will also need to be proficient in a range of software programs, tool bars, menus, and apps (e.g. Word, Excel, PowerPoint, SPSS, Skype, Endnote, etc.). This assumes, too, that students are sufficiently adroit in using and manipulating keypads, keyboards, cursors, and other navigational tools. Students also need to navigate library catalogues, academic databases, search engines, and tricky ‘Boolean’ search terms (activities even seasoned scholars can find bewildering). Beyond this, students need to learn and engage with the university’s online platforms and student hubs (which themselves can be idiosyncratic). They will then need the technical nous to upload and share documents, give and receive feedback and data, and store their contributions in different locations and file formats (e.g. .docx, .html, .pdf, .jpg, .mp3, etc.). Increasingly, too, topic coordinators require students to use referencing programs like Endnote, or text-matching software like Turnitin, before submitting assignments. The digital landscape of a university can be every bit as complex as its physical structures and layouts.

Given this, digital literacies need to be as openly taught in our universities as course content and academic conventions (Gee, 2012). We know from experience that the technological and digital requirements of contemporary universities can be barriers to participation.

### **3.3. Social and cultural literacies: Reading and relating to people and cultures**

Students need to learn the social and cultural dimensions of university life—everything from online enrolment procedures to engaging audiences when delivering seminar presentations. Social and cultural literacies involve understanding social practices and cultural differences and actively engaging in multiple contexts. The social and cultural literacies needed might include: (1) thinking, acting, and communicating in different physical and virtual settings according to different codes and conventions; (2) engaging in considered and sensitive debate without offending individuals or groups in social contexts and assignments; (3) respecting and accepting social and cultural differences and alternative perspectives in texts and social contexts; (4) using gender neutral and non-discriminatory discourses and practices in university settings and topic assignments; and (5) enacting ‘literacy’ as social agents in a range of social and cultural contexts using a range of verbal, gestural, postural, aural, and multimodal components.

For some students (and staff), learning gender inclusive language or overcoming prejudicial perspectives and behaviours can themselves be challenging learning processes, and not something necessarily overcome by simply reading university policy documents or mimicking others. Considered discussion and role-modelled discourses and practices are essential learnings. Social and cultural literacies need to be examined, discussed, and enacted to show how nuanced, sensitive, and potentially powerful these ways of being, acting, thinking, and communicating can be.

### **3.4. Critical literacies: Decoding and manipulating texts, discourses, genres, and practices**

Critical literacies occupy a privileged place in our framework. Without the critical capacities necessary to engage with the literacy domains outlined in this framework, or having the critical insight to question the purpose of different literacy practices in different contexts, students would be little more than highly skilled literacy *practitioners*. We want students to be critically engaged and astute literacy *agents* capable of questioning different literacy demands and changing their literacy repertoires accordingly (Lea & Street, 1998; Miller, 2013).

In the university context, students need the critical capacities necessary to engage with sophisticated topic content and complex social and cultural practices (Miller & Schulz, in press). This means reading assessment tasks, topic readings, research data, and lecture materials with a critical eye; it also means reading people and social contexts with a critical eye. The capacity to read and unpack texts to discover their many and varied meanings and strategies is called ‘critical literacy’. Critical literacies go beyond literary criticism and critical comprehension to questions about how texts defend and/or disguise positions of power, prejudice, exclusion, and vested interest (Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007, p. 266).

According to the Tasmanian Department of Education (2013), “Critical literacy involves the analysis and critique of the relationships among texts, language, power, social groups and social practices. It shows us ways of looking at written, visual, spoken, multimedia and performance texts to question and challenge the attitudes, values and beliefs that lie beneath the surface.” That is, critical literacy is more than just reading texts closely; it has a socially critical edge and involves complex interactions and social practices. It is about reading *all* texts—whether written, spoken, performed, designed, photographed, filmed, etc.—to discover the complex ways different codes and activities have been manipulated to serve particular agendas and social groups (Misson & Morgan, 2006). We are also expanding our understanding of ‘text’ to include the *un*-spoken, *un*-written, and *in*-visible forms of communication circulating at different levels (Miller & Schulz, in press).

This is why Aubrey Feeney (2013) suggests:

Critical literacy is the ‘deepest level of literacy’ there is ... Critical literacy is the act of thinking, reflecting and disputing the information one is receiving. Knowledge gained from texts can be enlightening and valuable, but it can also be misleading, unreliable and sometimes destructive especially to someone who is a passive reader ...

To not teach critical literacy would therefore seem irresponsible and short-sighted, particularly if the goal of education—and literacy itself—is to give students the tools and capacities necessary to express real agency in the world around them. And given this world is becoming more ‘textualised’ and multimodal by the moment, so too does the need for critical intervention grow more urgent (New London Group, 1996). According to the Tasmanian Department of Education (TDE, 2013):

Our lifestyles are changing rapidly in a hi-tech, globalised world. ... Information is reaching us in ways that hadn’t been invented fifteen years ago. We are swamped by masses of information. ... We need to be able to make meaning from the array of multimedia, complex visual imagery, music and sound, even virtual worlds that confront us each day in addition to written and spoken words.

Professor Allan Luke, one of Australia’s most celebrated literacy experts, suggests: “Literacy ... is as much about ideologies, identities and values as it is about codes and skills” (as cited in TDE, 2013). This is why students should engage in *meta*-level conversations about the very literacies and values we teach, thereby contributing to the narratives and debates circulating about literacy today. Rather than receive these literacies as innocent and institutionally-accredited *skills*, students should engage them as contested and ideological *constructions* open to personal and social manipulation and use, and instrumental in delivering and/or denying access to power, privilege, and disadvantage in society (Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2011). This takes literacy away from the functional and instrumental to the polemical and political (van Haren, 2013). In short: “Critical literacy provides us with ways of thinking that uncover social inequalities and injustices. It enables us to address disadvantage and to become agents of social change” (TDE, 2013). Clearly, then, critical literacy is not just about ‘reading’ and ‘comprehending’ texts; it is about *acting* on that reading in socially responsible ways (van Haren, 2013).

### **3.5. Language literacies: Understanding the mechanics of reading, writing, listening, and speaking**

Students also need to employ ‘language literacies’ when reading, viewing, composing, or responding to face-to-face, digital, and paper-based texts. This means writing assignments and presenting material using grammatically correct expression and following the accepted conventions of a given language or literacy practice. In our model, the capacity to read and write fluently and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in multiple contexts is called ‘language literacies’. Language literacies involve understanding the ‘mechanics’ of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and includes grammar, punctuation, spelling, syntax, diction, and other language features.

Obviously, the capacities to speak fluently, listen attentively, write clearly, and read accurately are still essential literacies for anyone wishing to participate in the contemporary world and university system (Miller & Schulz, in press). In particular, listening and speaking literacies need as much attention as reading and writing (i.e. listening in lectures, speaking in seminars, etc.). In all, language literacies underpin the other literacies and should not be overlooked or underestimated, even in the digital age.

### **3.6. Academic literacies: Producing academic texts and adhering to academic conventions**

Finally, students need the academic acumen to plan, research, and present written, spoken, visual, and multimodal texts for a range of tertiary and vocational contexts. This means presenting work and engaging in learning activities (e.g. tutorials, workshops, lectures, etc.) according to academic conventions, vocational standards, and discipline-specific guidelines. The capacity to use accepted academic conventions to produce a range of academic texts for a range of contexts and purposes is called ‘academic literacies’ (Miller & Schulz, in press).

Academic literacies include: unpacking and understanding assessment tasks; planning and producing academic texts; researching and locating academic resources and data; reading, writing, and speaking academic prose (or equations and numerals); understanding academic discourses and genres; understanding referencing, plagiarism, and academic integrity; editing and proof-reading academic texts; and following formats and guidelines when presenting academic texts (etc.).

Not surprisingly, academic literacies are the most visible of all the literacies in the university context because of the marks and prestige associated with them. In this sense, academic literacies are the culmination of all the other literacies in-so-far as the other literacies support or underpin the end products—the assessment texts—which showcase the student’s academic literacies and put them up for assessment. It is on the basis of the success or failure of these final assessment texts, which exhibit high class scholarship and adherence to academic conventions—*or not*, that marks are assigned and final topic grades are awarded. It is in the accumulation of these marks and grades that degrees and credentials are earned, and opportunities for careers, further scholarship, and social engagement are enabled. Academic literacies need to be made accessible to *all* students *equally* if universities mean to live up to their promise of equity and inclusivity.

## **4. The ‘Academic Literacies’ model: Meta-charging literacy**

In 2006, Mary Lea and Brian Street published a paper titled ‘The “Academic Literacies” Model: Theory and Applications.’ In this paper, Lea and Street analyse three literacy models used in academic contexts: (1) the *study skills* model, (2) the *academic socialisation* model, and (3) the *academic literacies* model (pp. 368-369) (see also Lea & Street, 1998). Each of these models reflect different ideological approaches to tertiary literacy teaching. According to Lea and Street (2006), the *study skills* model “... sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. This approach focuses on the surface features of language form and presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another” (pp. 368-369). This model concentrates on the mechanics of language (e.g. grammar and punctuation) and links back to behaviourist psychology and transmission models of teaching.

In turn, the *academic socialisation* model

... is concerned with students’ acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The academic socialization model presumes that the disciplinary discourses and genres are relatively stable and, once students have learned and understood the ground rules of a particular academic discourse, they are able to reproduce it unproblematically (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369).

This model concentrates on the construction of knowledge through discourses and dialogue and links to constructivist models of situated learning.

The *academic literacies* model goes much further.

[It] is concerned with meaning making, identity, power, and authority, and foregrounds the institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context. It is similar in many ways to the academic socialization model, except that it views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes, including power relations among people, institutions, and social identities (Lea & Street, 2006, p. 369).

To date, they suggest, the first two models have been the typical approaches taken by schools and universities when addressing academic literacy and student writing. It is the third approach that Lea and Street (1998, 2006) advocate, even if used in collaboration with the other two for the sake of implementation and institutional acceptance.

As many staff in our institution are predisposed to the first two models, we have strategically advocated the integration of all three models as a means of introducing staff to the critical elements advanced in the latter. We have endeavoured to build ‘skill acquisition’ and ‘academic socialisation’ into a far more nuanced and critical view of academic literacies (hence the privileging of *critical literacies* in our framework). We want students and teachers—as co-learners and co-creators—to learn a range of literacies while also debating the concepts and practices of literacy itself, thereby recognising that the practices and discourses they are learning and refining are themselves complicit in shaping social hierarchies and who and what has access to power, privilege, and influence in society (Lea, 2004; Street, 2011). Here, literacy is seen in its ‘full light’ as a socio-cultural and historical phenomenon battled over and deployed for different purposes and different masters. Literacy is not an innocent, a-historical, autonomous, or innocuous idea (Street, 2011, 2013; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). It too belongs to a discursive field open to modification, reinterpretation, and conflict. Our students are custodians and stakeholders of this loaded and contested concept and activity and should have an active say in what it means and does. As Garth Boomer (1988) and Paul Gee (as cited in St. Clair & Phipps, 2008) would advocate, we have built *meta*-analysis into our framework as a means of engaging all participants in rich and provocative literacy debates.

In a similar effort to widen participation, Lea and Street (2006, p. 370) took their ‘academic literacies’ model and ran an Academic Literacy Development Programme at King’s College London for pre-university students still in the process of learning English as an additional language. They hoped to enhance students’ A level performance and their chances of entering higher education. They found that classroom processes and learning outcomes improved when using a critically engaged ‘academic literacies’ model. This led them to conclude:

“Treating ... students as collaborators in the development of the academic literacies necessary for engagement with Higher Education in the United Kingdom can perhaps offer a different and more supportive route to ‘Widening Participation’ than the more traditional focus on either study skills or academic socialization” (Street & Scalone, as cited in Lea & Street, 2006, p. 373).

## 5. Why a multiliteracies approach?

Literacy, as we have suggested, is a contested and contentious concept (Freebody, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998; Luke & Freebody, 1999; Street, 2011, 2013; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008). People, including university lecturers and prime ministers (e.g. John Howard), have battled over its use and meaning for decades. Different positions on literacy reflect different ideological understandings of what literacy is and who should have access to it (Ludwig, 2003; Street, 2011). In Australia, the literacy wars have been described as the ‘reading wars’ or part of the ‘culture wars’ and have revolved around two basic positions (Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007). ‘Con-

servatives' have tended to favour phonics and skills-and-drills approaches to literacy; that is, literacy revolves around skill acquisition and functionality (i.e. literacy-as-tool or literacy-as-economic-imperative) (Street, 2013; Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007). Here, literacy is typically book-based (or paper-based) and cognitive in nature. 'Progressives', alternatively, have tended to favour whole-language and language-in-context approaches to literacy; that is, literacy revolves around personal emancipation and social participation (i.e. literacy-as-social-engagement or literacy-as-democratic-agent) (Street, 2013; Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007). Here, literacy goes beyond books and alphabets and brain activity to social and cultural practices and media (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Gee, 2009; New London Group, 1996; Street, 2013). Most progressive educators would argue that 'whole-language' approaches which immerse students in language-rich environments produce multi-literate learners capable of adapting to different literacy demands and contexts, thereby giving them greater social and political agency in the world 'out there.'

In short, there is no 'neutral' approach to literacy. All definitions of literacy—and all pedagogical approaches to the teaching of literacy—are socially positioned and ideological in nature (Luke, 2004; Street, 2011, 2013; Whitehead & Wilkinson, 2008), including the multiliteracies framework outlined here and including the 'back to basics' rhetoric promoted in the press. This is why, for us, students should be encouraged to 'read' the curriculum (and the values and ideologies that underpin it) as critically as they read books and blogs, and why, in turn, they should have an active say in what literacy means and does and who and what it defines and negates (as Lea and Street would advocate).

## 6. Difficulties of implementation

Currently, our framework is a *proposal*. It responds to the VCC's decision to revamp and modernise an existing literacy topic to suit the contemporary university context. The existing topic relies on what Lea and Street (2006) describe as a 'skills model', with aspects of 'academic socialisation' attached. It is not an 'embedded' literacy topic in the sense that Thies (2012), Webb (2012), and others have advocated; rather, it relies on students taking *skills* from one context and applying them to others. It overlooks many literacies (e.g. social, cultural, digital, institutional, etc.) in order to focus on language features and academic writing (i.e. grammar, punctuation, and argument).

The new topic will address these shortcomings by bringing all requisite literacies into one curriculum. To ensure access, the "VCC endorsed the proposal that a University-endorsed generalist credit-bearing literacy topic should be introduced ... as a compulsory topic in all non-professionally accredited undergraduate courses with an ATAR cut-off score of below 70" (2012). In turn, the topic will be designed and implemented using a university-wide collaborative approach to ensure depth and breadth (as advocated by Thies (2012) and Webb (2012)). However, it will also be a *generic* topic.<sup>2</sup> This means our framework needs to be broad enough to meet the needs of different cohorts and specific enough to be applicable to individual contexts.

Given this need, we recognise our framework is conceptually and logistically ambitious. Firstly, it attempts to cover six literacy domains in one semester. There are not enough weeks in a semester to cover the necessary literacy practices and meta-level debates completely. We are *in-*

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<sup>2</sup> The Expert Group has identified that the development of literacy skills and capacities "within specific courses should be achieved *either* through the explicit integration of course-specific literacy content within the course curriculum *or* via making provision within course rules for students to undertake a generalist, University-endorsed, credit-bearing literacy topic. The Expert Group's view is that this former (course-specific, integration) option is best suited to professionally-oriented courses. ... The Expert Group's view is that the option of a generalist, University-endorsed, credit-bearing literacy topic is the appropriate mode for broader and more generalist courses. ... If each of these courses ... were to develop their own generalist literacy topics, the likely result would be highly variable in content and quality, [and] subject individual students to multiple efforts aimed at essentially the same problem ..." (p. 3).

*roducing* students to the various domains and debates rather than completing the task. The need for ongoing multi-literacy support is therefore essential. Secondly, the framework challenges many of the existing approaches to literacy that our tutors and teachers are familiar with (Lea, 2004). Teachers will need to wrestle with and reflect upon these new theories and practices as wholeheartedly as students—and/or undertake professional development (Thies, 2012)—thus ensuring a dynamic, collaborative, reflexive, and dialogical learning environment. Thirdly, the University has inadvertently set up a deficit model. The nature of our task suggests that students are ‘lacking’ something we must provide (i.e. literacies valued by the University). The framework therefore adopts an ‘abundance’ approach to acknowledge that students arrive at university with a range of literacies we need to link back to the university context (not the other way around). We do not view students as illiterate or deficient. By viewing students and teachers as ‘co-creators’ and ‘co-intentional re-creators’ (Freire, 1996), and by opening up the learning space to ‘negotiation’ (Boomer, 1988) and ‘dialogue’ (Lillis, 2003), we are attempting to change the processes and products of the learning environment (Miller, 2013). We are not striving for consensus, but plurality (Lillis, 2003). This is an active rather than passive pedagogy.

As Garth Boomer (1988) notes, “*Making out* is a forerunner to *making changes*” (p. 69). If this framework only starts the process of *imagining change* and/or *generating debate* then it will have served a valuable purpose. After all, our students deserve the very best approaches to literacy given the social and cultural capitals associated with diverse literacy repertoires (Thies, 2012). Since the University expects students to have these literacies, we must provide access to them. Otherwise, university-specific literacies remain the privileged capital of the few rather than the many, precisely at a time when the tertiary sector is trying to widen participation. Literacies critical to success should not remain secret or arcane.

Sadly, despite lengthy discussions between academic staff from the Student Learning Centre and the English Department over a twelve month period, the changes proposed by the SLC to the existing literacy topic were rejected by English Department colleagues just prior to implementation (Pourshafie & Brady, 2013). Despite assurances along the way, our proposed changes proved too great: conceptually, technologically, pedagogically, epistemologically, and logistically. The English Department decided to stick with what they already knew. The ‘old’ topic would now become the ‘new’ topic. The University’s concerted efforts at literacy renewal were effectively thwarted at the coalface, at the point of delivery, by a few individuals. Clearly, university-wide reforms require all stakeholders to be genuinely committed in both word and deed for meaningful change to occur. As others have noted, implementing a ‘critically engaged’ academic literacies approach—let alone *multi-literacies* approach—can be difficult (Lea, 2004; Lillis, 2003). We plan to try again later. For now, we present our framework as a possibility for others to develop—or discard—in the ongoing struggle that *is* literacy.

## 6. Conclusion

We recognise that our framework—indeed, *any* framework—enters this contested space. That said, our multiliteracies framework is not a panacea for literacy education in the tertiary sector. It is a beginning point—an ambition—a template. It too will evolve and change depending on context, purpose, and audience. Each discipline, each society, each era, each language, and each literacy model defines and shapes literacy differently. As a concept and practice, literacy is a horizon rather than a destination. We are never literate enough. There are always new social practices, semiotic codes, discourses, genres, dispositions, values, technologies, and registers to learn, adapt, contextualise, and deploy. But we need to start somewhere, and our multi-literacy framework is but one attempt to further improve the literacy education of first-year students transitioning to university from a range of backgrounds and literacy traditions. As such, we believe we have developed a framework that meets the requirements of the Vice-Chancellor’s Committee and Expert Group, and suits the contemporary university context. We have named and categorised the different literacies as a means of understanding rather than fracturing literacy, when in fact most literacies work in contextual relationships. We live in multimodal times where texts and textualities dominate our life-worlds and shape the forms and modes of communication, interaction, and mobility on offer. We need to keep our literacy options open rather

than delimit the possibilities for future literacy developments. As Luke and Freebody (1999) note:

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).

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