

## Essay Book Review

### **Multiliteracies in Motion: Current Theory and Practice.**

David R. Cole and Darren L. Pullen (Eds.). 2010. New York: Routledge.  
273 pages. Hardcover ISBN 0-415-80156-7. Softcover ISBN 0-415-80157-5.  
E-Book ISBN 0-203-86403-4.

### **Language and Power: A Resource Book for Students.**

Paul Simpson and Andrea Mayr. 2010. London: Routledge.  
256 pages. Hardcover ISBN 0-415-46899-X. Softcover ISBN 0-415-46900-7.  
E-Book ISBN 0-203-86770-X.

## Practice Makes Perfect Despite Imperfect Theory

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The books **Multiliteracies in Motion** and **Language and Power** highlight the difficulties theory encounters when practice progresses at a rapid pace. The effect of technology on everyday classroom teaching has been dramatic and unstoppable; theory vainly tries to make sense of that effect. While the books ably document the changes in pedagogy, they do not take the logic of these changes to its conclusion. As a result, the books are a rich source of data but not of theoretical insights.

In many if not all fields of learning, theory desperately tries to catch up with practice.

Simple illustrations come from literary theory. Sophocles wrote *Oedipus Rex* before Aristotle tried to explain, in his *Poetics*, why the play works. T.S. Eliot wrote *The Wasteland* before the American New Critics figured out that why it was good to write poems of that sort. Even the postmodern critics in the latter part of the last century had to admit that James Joyce, writing *Ulysses* in 1922, had anticipated their insights by more than 50 years.

Theory also always comes after practice in science. In the field of physics, light had been around millennia before Einstein realized that it was traveling at constant speed. In the field of medicine, cancer, AIDS, and SARS existed long before doctors named them. In the field of technology, which is the context of this review, children have been doing non-linear thinking long before the term "Web 2.0" was first uttered.

The real problem with the two books under review is not that they contradict

each other, but that they contradict themselves. The theoretical underpinnings of both books have not caught up with the practice that they document.

Let us take first the one with a modest goal—*Language and Power*.

The book is part of the series Routledge English Language Introductions, which includes such books as *Introducing English Language*, *Researching English Language*, *Language and Media*, *History of English*, *Grammar and Vocabulary*, *Psycholinguistics*, *Stylistics*, *Child Language*, and *Language in Theory*. Its being part of such a series is both good and bad.

It is good for the book because it is forced to share the same level of pedagogy of the other titles in the series, constituting a kind of peer review among books. For example, like the other books in the series, it is marketed as a book “that develop[s] self-study skills and promote[s] independent learning”, designed in such a way that it assumes “no prior knowledge of the subject area”.

The book is touted, in the words of its publisher, to “provide an accessible overview of the key topics, [have been] designed for flexible use, draw on a wide range of authentic texts to bring study to life, and include guidance for further reading, glossary and index”. That does not sound modest, but it is, since most textbooks offer such benefits to teachers and students. What the publisher most likely considers the contribution of *Language and Power* (and perhaps of the whole series) is the idea of “flexible use”, by which is meant that the teacher and the student can read the book in either of two ways, “vertically straight through from beginning to end” or “horizontally across the numbered units”, as the section “How To Use This Book” puts it.

On the other hand, being in a series is bad for the book, because it automatically and understandably limits its range and focus to the specific issue indicated in its title. Any non-holistic view of language is bound to fail, even *a priori*, because language is a human phenomenon that encompasses everything (if we were to believe philosophers of language, particularly poststructuralists), and unlike everything else resists any kind of analysis or breaking down into components. Nevertheless, given the realities of the publishing world, where a publisher will not make much money if it publishes only one book rather than a series, this limitation might be forgivable.

There are, however, many things that are not forgivable.

First, the book is supposed to be used in conjunction with a website, but the website does not interact with the book. Instead, it offers only additional materials that need not be on a website but could be included in a CD. The book does not take full advantage of the resources of the Web, particularly interactivity. In effect, the website is a sequel to the book, providing materials for more advanced students.

Second, the book claims to follow this pedagogy: the student is introduced to key concepts, then given a detailed grasp of the field, then allowed to explore on his or her own, then asked to read the experts. While apparently allowing for a less transmissive mode of delivery, the student is forced at the end to listen to the experts anyway, clearly a disincentive to think on one’s own. The traditional and still valid reason for doing higher education is “to challenge received wisdom”. Such a challenge should decentre the experts, who represent received wisdom.

To ask students at the end to listen to these experts, who are claimed by the book as providing “guidance and questions for further thought”, is to dampen the student’s enthusiasm for breaking new ground.

This issue of authority versus exploration, or age versus youth, is, needless to say, the stumbling block to any pedagogy that claims to be transformative rather than transmissive. We do not need Marx or Foucault to tell us that it is human nature for the powerful to hold on to their power. The powerful in any university are the teachers, and they are not about to give up that power to the youth that, in the view of most of them, are under their care like children, they being in *locus parentis*. Ironically, the book is about language and power, and language—as any literary critic will tell us—is power. To limit the student’s thinking about language and power is an exercise of the power of the teacher. But then, no pedagogy has been devised that will allow the student to be free yet ensure that the student does not reinvent intellectual wheels.

Let us now take the second book, a much more ambitious, even vainglorious book—*Multiliteracies in Motion*.

The book is roughly divided into two unequal parts, a long practical part and a short theoretical part.

The practical part, consisting of articles documenting real-life experiences in using multiliteracies mostly in Australia, China, UK, and USA, generally lives up to its billing. This part, as the book proclaims, does show for the most part that multiliteracy works with today’s digital natives. The theoretical part sadly pales in comparison with the practical part.

First, the practical part.

I fancy myself as a true digital bilingual. Marc Prensky’s now canonical 2001 essay distinguishing those to the computer born and those (like my generation and even the generation immediately after mine) that have to think before touching a keyboard did not take into account people like me, a 66-year-old 42-year veteran of teaching in real classrooms with flesh-and-blood students in various countries, who is so fascinated and so adept at technology that I rarely use my cellular phone to do phone calls (I do email or Facebook instead), my laptop to do word processing (I play games instead), and my car to go places (fortunately gifted with a chauffeur, I sit at the backseat and watch movies on a portable DVD player or a tablet instead). I spend all my honestly-earned money on gadgets (I have a ridiculous number of outdated cellular phones and laptops). If I had dishonestly-made money, I would still spend it on gadgets, on the most powerful desktops or television sets with the largest screens that I currently cannot afford. I would, like the other digital bilinguals I know, spend the money going to all the computer fairs in the world.

I can understand the frustration of the students discussed in essays such as “Disrupting Traditions: Teachers Negotiating Multiliteracies and Digital Technologies” by Elizabeth Petroelje Stolle and Gustavo E. Fischman. The teachers studied by the authors have tried their best to appear young, by using the multiliteracy tools that students use every day, but habit is thicker than intention. At the end of the day, the teachers find ways to ensure that they are the teachers and the students remain students. Student-centred learning is a nice phrase to

use, but the teachers in the study (and perhaps all the teachers anywhere else in the world today) will never give up their position of authority. If nothing else, they will decide whether the students pass or fail the course; that is the bottom line.

Unfortunately, Web 2.0 cannot be assessed. Let me take an example from literature, which is my field. If we take a simple text such as a hyperpoem (for digital immigrants or digital aliens, this is a poem where words are linked to other webpages), the reader (if we can use a traditional term) clicks on a word, is taken to another webpage, enjoys reading that page, may come back to the original poem, clicks on another word, goes to another webpage, stays on that webpage if interesting enough, clicks on something in that webpage, which then leads to another webpage, and so on. Eventually, the reader does not return to the original poem at all. This is the point of Web 2.0. The author no longer has authority. The text no longer has preeminence. There is no canon. There is no Literature (with the capital L) or even literature (with a small letter l). There is, in fact, no text, because every reader will click on a different word, go to a different webpage, click on a different link in that other webpage, and so on. The permutations may not be infinite, but they are too large to be able to predict any kind of regularity of reader response.

When a student enters a classroom, whether real or virtual, that really takes multiliteracy seriously, s/he may or may not listen to the teacher at all. Listening is only one type of literacy, and it is not necessarily the most important. (Governments around the world are usually efficient, but very few of them listen.) Jumping from topic to topic or not taking any particular topic seriously is very much like surfing the Web. When we talk of non-linear thinking, we are actually using two-valued logic (the old linear or non-linear paradigm, otherwise known as *p* or *not-p*). Prensky was only half-right: he divided computer users into digital natives and digital immigrants, but he did not recognize digital aliens and digital bilinguals. As Aristotle said so many centuries ago, there are never only two ways of looking at anything; there are always all sorts of ways scattered between two extremes (of course, he focused only on the middle way).

Passing or failing a student not only should not be the prerogative of the teacher; it may not even be necessary or important in a multiliteracy environment. There is no authority in a postmodern, multiliterate, Web-based world. This is what Deleuze and Guattari, idolized by David R. Cole in his essay "Multiliteracies and the Politics of Desire", wanted to say but never did get to say. Once we allow the human body (the topic of Cole's theoretical essay) or more precisely, the desire that is in the libido of a teacher, to intervene in the classroom, we allow everything. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky should have put it but did not in *The Brothers Karamazov*, if there is no God (read, teacher as the god in the classroom), everything is permitted.

The theoretical part, in other words, fails to take one step beyond the practical part. Since I am professionally a literary theorist, I take deconstruction quite seriously. I deconstruct deconstruction. Just like Marxists who think that everything is conditioned by history except Marxism itself, multiliteracy theorists continue to hold on to the center. Although they pay lip service to the idea that

language may not be the center of the universe, they still hold on to verbal literacy as the foundation or the key or the ultimate goal of learning.

We can take simple examples, some of which are mentioned in the two books. There is nothing in PowerPoint (or any comparable software) that has gone beyond the blackboard, except that you can make things move and you do not have to erase the board before writing something else. The teacher is still a lecturer, imparting knowledge to poor, benighted students in the time-honoured despite being much-maligned banking tradition of teaching. There is nothing in emailing that has gone beyond the student consultation in an office, except that you are not in an office and do not have to find a way to ask the student to leave. There is nothing in a cellular phone that has gone beyond talking face-to-face with a student, except that you do not have recourse to body language and you know that you can always mute your or your student's curses. There is nothing in chatting that has gone beyond a group discussion in a classroom, except that you could come in late and even join in after the live session. There is nothing in an online course that has gone beyond the teacher preparing a syllabus, giving some readings, and doing an examination at the end, except that you do not have an attendance check and plagiarism or asking someone else to do the work is implicitly allowed.

There is nothing in the new gadgets that the old ways could not do, unless you take the gadgets and use them in ways that could not be done in the past.

For example, you could, as a teacher, prepare a PowerPoint presentation, but allow your students to use your laptop and change the slides any which way they like. If you had, say, twenty slides, you may never get to show Slide Number 10, if the students insert their own slides or delete your slides or do all kinds of other things you do not approve of to your slides. The PowerPoint presentation then becomes a communal presentation. If we want to extend the use of multiliteracies, we could get the students to sing, dance, or whatever in front of the screen, perhaps even doing a shadow play against the backdrop of the slides. From your point of view as The Teacher, it would be utter chaos. But then, you are probably a digital immigrant pretending to be a digital native.

Or you could excuse your students from coming to the campus completely. This will not make your course an online course if you do not follow the campus paradigm at all. Let them do whatever they want. At the end of the term, let them upload whatever they have come up with. (In real life, this was done by Randy Pausch, the famous Carnegie Mellon professor who gave "The Last Lecture.") Then let the students themselves decide if they should pass or fail the course. You could do it by voting (through SMS, as they do in television series like *American Idol*) or you could just simply ask the student what grade s/he wants for the course.

I taught an undergraduate course a few years ago on Science Fiction. On the first day, I asked the students what novels they wanted to discuss in the course. They came up with a list of novels they had read or wanted to read. We scheduled a novel a week for discussion. All the students had to read all the novels. So did I. As I feared, I had not read half of the novels they liked. I spent the term catching up with my students. Since I had nothing to say that they did not already know, I made them do all the talking in class. In effect, they taught themselves and I got very well paid for it!

The problem with the two books, then, is quite simple: they do not go far enough. They do not take themselves seriously enough. They are still, after all, books. Older literary critics used to talk about enactment, but which they meant that form mirrors content. If a novel wants to talk about itself, it should look like it is talking about itself; Miguel de Cervantes achieved this in *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha*, popularly known in English as *Don Quixote*. If a novel wants to say that novels should retard the narrative (as the Russian Formalists used to preach), then the novel should indeed retard the narrative (influenced by Cervantes, Laurence Sterne did this in his *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, and closer to my home, so did Penguin-published Jose Rizal in his *Noli Me Tangere*). If a poem wanted to say that poetry itself is problematic, then the poem should not look like a poem; the only other Penguin-published Filipino writer, Jose Garcia Villa, did this in "The Emperor's New Sonnet," which has only a title but no other words.

The two books under review should not have been published as books, but as webpages, and not as websites but as Facebook pages, and not just ordinary eBooks but enhanced eBooks, with links and videos showing the very interesting and informative situations described in several of the articles. If we take multiliteracy theory seriously, we should be multiliterate ourselves and not depend so much on the written word.

This review, of course, is made up of words and is published in a printed journal. But as Nobel laureate Samuel Beckett said, "Words are all we have", or as the great twentieth-century literary critic Jacques Derrida put it, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (best known in the wrong translation as "There is nothing outside the text").

If I were true to what I have been saying, I should put this on a Facebook page, but then, you would have to be my virtual friend in order for me to reach you, and that, because Facebook has already disallowed me from extending my 5,000-friend limit, is among the very few things left in this world that are impossible.

## THE REVIEWER

**Isagani R. Cruz** is professor emeritus and university fellow of De La Salle University, where he currently serves as the executive publisher of the Academic Publications Office. He received the Hall of Fame of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards in Literature and served as Senior Bibliographer of the Modern Language Association of America. He helped set up the Philippine Association of Scholarly and Academic Publishers, the Philippine Journals Online project of the Oxford-based International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), and the Philippine E-Journals project. Among his numerous books is *The Other Other* (2010).

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