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**Abstract**
This chapter reports on a project in which university researchers' expertise in architecture, literacy and communications enabled two teachers in one school to expand the forms of literacy that primary school children engaged in. Starting from the school community's concerns about an urban renewal project in their neighbourhood, participants collaborated to develop a curriculum of spatial literacies with real-world goals and outcomes. We describe how the creative re-design of curriculum and pedagogy by classroom teachers, in collaboration with university academics and students, allowed students aged 8 to 12 years to appropriate semiotic resources from their local neighbourhood, home communities, and popular culture to make a difference to their material surrounds. We argue that there are productive possibilities for educators who integrate critical and place-based approaches to the design and teaching of the literacy curriculum with work in other learning areas such as society and environment, technology and design and the arts. The student production of expansive and socially significant texts enabled by such approaches may be especially necessary in contemporary neoconservative policy contexts that tend to limit and constrain what is possible in schools.

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## Introduction

The New London Group's conceptual blueprint for a pedagogy of multiliteracies has highlighted the importance of incorporating design and multiple modes of meaning-making and representation into contemporary understandings of literacy, and has emphasised the increasing importance of screen-based and digital practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996). Yet other literacy researchers have noticed the increasing differences between in and out-of-school literacies (e.g. Hull & Schultz, 2001; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and have argued that students' investments in new and popular literacies highlights the lack of relevance of what is typically on offer at school. Nevertheless, we believe that it is possible for literacy educators to work towards building curriculum that is engaging for students and authorises their perspectives on the world around them (cf. Cook-Sather, 2002). Such curriculum might very well grow out of the arts or technology and design, with their emphases on visual and spatial modes of representation. But equally such curriculum might incorporate critical approaches to the study of space and place. In this chapter we describe the possibilities afforded by collaborative cross-curriculum planning, in conjunction with place-based pedagogy, for the student production of imaginative, expansive and socially significant texts.

With respect to critical pedagogy, place-based educators (Gruenewald, 2003) and environmental educators (Martusewicz & Edmundson, 2005) have argued that it has often ignored the *spatial* dimensions of social practice. Yet there are potential synergies between the work of place-based educators and those concerned with critical pedagogy (Gruenewald, 2003), and also between the work of spatial theorists and those of us concerned specifically with critical literacy. Focussing on the spatial and the socially produced nature of space (and place) is very much in alignment with critical literacy's insistence on the constructedness of texts. Indeed recognition of the politics of space—how space is constitutive—is akin to the discursive construction of subjectivity. Clearly, in pedagogical terms, focussing on space allows for analysis of the constructedness of the way things are and the possibility that things might be otherwise (Freire, 1985; Greene, 1988, 1995).

A key move for us has been to work with young people and their teachers to develop place-based pedagogies where the teaching and learning are designed to explore the affordances of particular places and spaces (Comber, Nixon & Reid, 2007; Comber, Nixon, Ashmore, Loo & Cook, 2006). A related move is working to 'open up' what constitutes literacy at a time when increasingly governments attempt to contain and limit it. This has meant searching for ways of thinking about students' and teachers' work that allow for *creativity* and *imagination* as part of a critical literacy project (Comber & Nixon, 2005; Janks, 2006). Critical literacy needs to be as much about positive representations of identity and knowledge through textual production as it is about deconstruction (Comber, 2001; Janks & Comber, 2006; Nixon & Comber, 2005). In this regard we believe Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) application of 'design' to curriculum holds much promise.

> Teachers, for instance, may either design their own lessons or merely 'execute' a detailed syllabus designed by expert educators. …when design and production separate, design becomes a means for controlling the actions of others, the potential for a unity between discourse, design and production diminishes, and

> there is no longer room for the 'producers' to make the design 'their own', to add their own accent. (p. 7)

Janks (2000, 2006) has explored how 'design'—a 'catch-all word for imagining and producing texts' (2006, p.3)—is crucial in the theory and practice of critical literacy because it has the potential to move people 'beyond critique to action' (p. 4). Janks demonstrates how young South Africans have worked with different media, modes and languages to collaboratively design texts that represent themselves and their worlds for young people in other places. Similarly, as we will show, in our study a critical multi-literacies approach positioned young people as agents using various existing semiotic resources for the re-design of material spaces that mattered to them.

In neo-conservative times where literacy curriculum has in many places been colonised by clocks and blocks, working in other curriculum areas such as society and environment or the arts may hold out more promise for critical educators. In addition, as Apple (2005) has recently argued, much counter-hegemonic educational work is accomplished 'locally and regionally' and it may be that projects which attempt to make an immediate material and visible difference in their places are most appealing to today's young people.

### ***Urban renewal from the inside out*: Repositioning teachers and young people as designers**

In a project entitled *Urban renewal from the inside out*,[1] two teachers, university researchers and students from the fields of architecture, communications and literacy studies worked with elementary school students to negotiate the design and re-making of a desolate space in the school yard located between a preschool and elementary school. The school used the name *Grove Gardens* as a shorthand way of describing the project and talking about it with children. In addition to the goal of making a material improvement to the school environment, an important aim of the project was to equip student participants with repertoires of powerful social practices such as negotiation, design and consultation.

Teacher Marg Wells had for some time been working on local and neighbourhood literacies around issues of 'place' (Comber & Thomson with Wells, 2001) in the context of the very large and extended program or urban renewal which was being undertaken in the western region, involving the demolition of most of the cheap public housing erected post world war two. At the time of the project there was little that students could do about what was happening to houses and the built environment in their area. However, they were in a position to improve aspects of their school playground and how it looked to them, and was experienced by them, in relation to the changing local streetscapes. An earlier survey conducted by Wells had indicated that students wanted to improve an ugly and unsafe space between the school and the pre-school which consisted of a car park and narrow asphalted path through a flat grassed area. Funding for the project provided an opportunity to document the work of Wells (Grade Three/Four) and her colleague Ruth Trimboli (Grade Five/Six) as they involved children in achieving this goal[2].

### Research design

The research design was contingent upon the negotiation of the re-development of the garden and the associated curriculum. Using ethnographic methods we sought to document key pedagogical events and practices, to collect the literacy assignments and artefacts, and to record teachers' accounts of children's engagement in the evolving project. Hence the research necessarily followed the garden project. Our aim was to document the change as it unfolded and people's various imaginings and investments in that change. The teachers aimed to use the project to develop children's spatial literacies and the skills and dispositions to act in and for the community.

While the project was focussed squarely on students' participation in the development of a material space within the school grounds, as literacy researchers we were particularly interested in what happened to children's repertoires of literacy practices when teachers added space as a focus for learning in their already rich critical literacy curriculum. Our questions included: What did teachers and children do with architects' vocabularies, concepts and drawing and modelling techniques? What did children imagine and envisage for this space? To what extent were they able to use various linguistic and multi-modal resources to argue for their imaginings? This is where we anticipated that critical and spatial literacies may be brought together as children learnt not only to represent, but also to advocate for, particular designs.

### Data corpus

The entire data corpus included artefacts produced by approximately 140 children and their teachers, and architecture, education and communication university students and academics, over an 18-month period. The children's artefacts bear traces of various teaching and learning activities and conversations about space and place that happened over time. They are also texts brought into existence by the nature of the project—authentic participation in the re-design and rebuilding of a material space—and therefore do not easily fit into existing school literacy genres. Texts, which were individually and collectively produced, include verbal descriptions, poems, reflections, notes, mind maps, reports and stories; visual and hybrid visual-verbal texts such as pencil drawings and plans of bedrooms, homes, the classroom, the school and the site for re-development; artistic works such as paintings, collages, and 3D models of ideas, imaginings and actual spaces made out of paper, card and other materials (see Figure 1); computer-generated 2D and 3D representations of children's designs for the site; and collective texts such as class books.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

Figure 1: Imagined garden spaces made of card and paper laid out to scale

## Inventing spatial pedagogies and texts for consultation

The collaborative development of the design of *Grove Gardens* required all concerned to open our minds to the pedagogical potential of the project. To some extent pedagogical approaches needed to be invented and adapted. There were no predetermined ways to move forward. The pedagogies were developed collaboratively through discussion and debriefing between the teachers and the university team. The question was how to move from our vision and intentions to a realisable yet evolving curriculum. What might transfer from a university architecture or communication workshop to a primary school classroom was not self-evident. And how our critical

literacy framing for the project might guide everyday classroom practice was also a matter for investigation. We cannot address all of these questions here; however, we hope to illustrate how the emergent spatial pedagogies offered particular opportunities for young people to represent their imaginings and their desires for changed spaces.

Initially architect Stephen Loo used workshop methods to introduce children to key concepts and terms related to social space, design elements and built environments. An important objective was to assist students to imagine new social spaces and built environments, and to 'translate' their imaginings and ideas into a range of media, and into forms that could be communicated to others using the children's vernacular, the language of school-curriculum learning areas (e.g. art, literacy, technology and design), and the language of architecture and design. Here we do not describe the full range of work that was undertaken (see Comber et al., 2006). Rather, we focus on texts produced by Grade Three/Four students during the 'consultation' phase of the project because they represented the culmination of many iterations of curriculum work and exemplify the emergent pedagogical approach adopted by one teacher as she grappled with how to bring together critical approaches to literacy education and a focus on the spatial dimensions of meaning-making.

During this phase pairs of children were responsible for producing two texts which were later made into pages in what we called 'consultation books'. The books were a purpose-made genre that fulfilled at least two purposes. Firstly, they allowed children to represent on paper their preferred ideas about the garden by drawing from a range of possibilities that had been developed over time, and as a result of working with various vocabularies, concepts and media. Secondly, they constituted artefacts that documented the children's ideas in a form that could easily be shared with and commented on by others. The first text produced was a written text that addressed questions about what students would like to see in the redesigned area and what it would look like. The second text was a visual text produced using their choice of medium, and representing their favoured plan for the design. Each visual text was produced on tabloid size paper using a choice of paint, black ink pens, coloured markers, collage, and so on. When assembling the books some blank space was left to allow children, teachers and parents to provide feedback.

In Wells' classroom, students' collective representational resources were pooled and meaning-making was a collaborative and collective enterprise, with interested audiences in sight and their comments invited. Tasks were structured and clearly framed. The children had already built up considerable knowledge of the field (garden design); and had rehearsed their preferences and arguments in numerous forums. Pedagogically then, Wells guaranteed that student-produced texts would be expansive (through the peer collaborations) as well as socially significant (through their collective input and audience and connection to real outcomes).

We turn now to examine Grade Three/Four consultation books in which the impact of spatial thinking in children's developing literacy repertoires is made visible. We suggest that the project generated new relationships between the spatial, imaginary and material worlds children envisaged and represented.

**Re-imagining space: Playworlds and lifeworlds**
In this section we first consider in some detail two texts collectively produced by two boys for the consultation books and then consider what was accomplished in relation to spatial literacies in the complete corpus of book pages.

Firstly, here is the written text produced for their first page produced by Adrian and Tan, aged 8-9 years:

> **What would I like to see in the area?**
> A big maze with some switches
> **Why?**
> So kids who are waiting can play in it while they are waiting for their mum and dad to pick them up and kids can get tricked because they won't know which is the beginning and which is the end.
> **What would it look like? Describe.**
> The walls around the maze are made of cement and are painted in gold. It will be 10 metres high and it will have traps inside it. You have to find a key to get out and you have to take a friend with you.

The boys summarise what they would like to see in the area using only six words: 'a big maze with some switches'. Here they imagine the desolate school yard space transformed into a material representation of something that they are fascinated by in the world of electronic gaming – 'a maze of switches'. Explaining *why* they would like to see the space designed like this, they write:

> So kids who are waiting can play in it while they are waiting for their mum and dad to pick them up and kids can get tricked because they won't know which is the beginning and which is the end.

The therefore imagine the re-designed material space performing a dual social function: providing both a designated place for children to wait to be collected by their parents, and a place for pleasurable play that involves the complex and hidden spaces of a maze as well as other tricks and puzzles. When they describe how they would like the maze to *look*, we can see how they draw on their developing architectural design vocabulary and spatial literacies as they note specific details about the *height* of the walls (10 metres), the *material* used to make them (cement), and how they would be *decorated* (painted in gold). Two particular features they would like to see in the maze are that 'it will have traps inside it' and 'you have to find a key to get out.' They also stipulate that children would not enter the maze alone, but rather, 'you have to take a friend with you.'

The boys' written text therefore combines an awareness of the *social function* that the space will fulfil in the redesigned area (kids can play in it while they wait for their parents, friends will enter the maze together), with aspects of their own specific and gendered interests in mazes and other games that include puzzles and quests ('you have to find a key to get out'). In other words, their writing moves between what Lefebvre (1991) conceptualises as *perceived space*—an acknowledgment of what the space is *actually* used for (waiting for parents, playing with friends)—and *lived* space; space that is lived or experienced but which the *imagination* also seeks to change. The boys' writing shows that they are able to imagine how this newly designed space in

the school yard could become a 'space of belonging' for members of the school community by improving the ways in which social relations are conducted within it. At the same time, they are beginning to imagine how, in design terms, the re-designed space could also replicate some of the features of popular culture games that they enjoy: entering a maze; confronting switches, tricks and other obstacles; and searching for ways to successfully end adventures and quests. The fact that the boys want the high cement walls of the maze to be 'painted in gold' suggests that they are well aware that their design that is intended to change the material and 'real' lifeworld that they inhabit is, in fact, being overlaid in their plan with elements of *imagination and desire* associated with fantasy fiction and electronic game-playing. This is a mix of serious and playful writing and imagining.
*Insert Figure 2 abut here*
Figure 2: Adrian and Tan's visual text in the consultation book

As in their written text, the boys' *visual* representation (see Figure 2) of what they would like to see in the area also combines elements of realism (grass, pathway, toilet blocks) and elements of fantasy (winged dragon, two kinds of maze). In relation to their developing spatial literacies, we can see that aspects of the image resemble an architect's plan with its aerial view, a sense of scale, lines that depict a pathway linking one side of the area to the other, written labels indicating whether a structure is a toilet block or gate, and icons that represent design elements such as seating structures and shelters. Architectural vocabularies, as well as design and drawing conventions, have entered their semiotic repertoires. But, as in the writing, there are also other kinds of visual elements foregrounded in this image, elements not so obviously connected with the spatial. Most noticeably different from an architect's plan is the vibrant red dragon with yellow wings that seems to be devouring one end of the pathway that links the school and pre-school. As in many fantasy genres, the dragon is comparatively over-sized in terms of scale, and its presence is further highlighted by that fact that, unlike other objects, it is depicted not from an aerial view but from a lateral view. Thus texts suggest the boys' desire for their playground space to be re-designed as a *social* place for play and adventure, but also as a space that specifically includes elements of popular culture with which they are familiar in their lifeworlds. This desire to include in the playground aspects of play that are promoted by the leisure industries was common among the Australian students and consistent with findings of the UK project *The school that I'd like* (Burke & Grosvenor, 2003).

The pages produced by the boys illustrate what was made possible by Wells' emergent pedagogical approach which brought together a focus on developing in children the capacity to take action about things that mattered to them with a focus on spatial literacies. Of particular interest is how this pedagogy allowed diverse children to draw on the range of cultural resources they had at their disposal, and to use these resources in order to connect not only with new concepts of spatial literacy, but also with more traditional school curriculum requirements.

This creative curriculum and pedagogy also allowed Adrian and Tan to do significant identity work around masculinity, and being a pre-teen boy with an interest in computer game culture. For example, the image of the red dragon has its origins in Yugioh cards and associated online games, and it recurs throughout Tan's work produced over a long period. In several of his texts the red dragon is depicted in conjunction with other images and motifs familiar from quest adventure games:

mazes, mediaeval weapons and keys. For example, in earlier work focussed on the architectural concept ‘spaces of belonging’, Wells had invited students to draw, talk and write about spaces and places in their lives in which they felt that they belonged. In response, students often created drawings of bedrooms or houses. However, an early illustration by Tan of his poem ‘In my belonging space’ depicted a bedroom-living room which contained not only the items that one might expect to find in such a space (bed, armchair, table), but also sculptures of dragons hanging from the ceiling by chains as in a dungeon (top left Figure 3). Other sections of the room contained a table dedicated to weapons used in quest adventures (mediaeval weapons, shield, large dungeon key), and a large media centre containing several games consoles (labelled Gameboy, Playstation and Playstation 2) accurately drawn with details of accessories, wire connections and electricity plugs (top right Figure 3).

*Insert figure 3 about here*
Figure 3: Tan’s illustration of his ‘belonging space’

In our view this text illustrates the productive potential—for this child at least—of a pedagogical approach that encourages children to produce visual texts alongside verbal texts and allows them to draw on their popular cultural resources. When this approach was combined with a focus on developing understandings of space, children were able to work with and develop a range of spatial literacy concepts. These included abstract understandings about design and social space such as ‘spaces of belonging’, and more technical skills such as how to represent ratio and scale, and how to represent the relationships between objects in space.

These achievements were not confined to one or two children in the class. On the contrary, evidence from the data corpus indicates that many children had developed significant capacities for spatial literacies (see Table 1). Their texts suggest that these accomplishments drew on both the resources introduced by the architects, and the complementary affordances of visual and verbal modes of meaning-making.

Table I: Children’s accomplishments in visual and verbal modes illustrated in consultation books

| Spatial literacies in verbal mode | Spatial literacies in visual mode |
|---|---|
| Make a comprehensive case about the design | Provide an overview of the space using aerial and other perspectives (e.g. elevations) |
| Make a persuasive rationale for the use of the space | Make an architectural plan; indicate emergent understanding of scale and ratio |
| Incorporate architectural vocabulary including design elements (e.g. platform, wall, pathway) | Use solid lines to demarcate edges of spaces and division of objects in space |
| Include significant detail and specificity (shape, size, colour, material) | Show the relationships of places and objects within a space; convey functions and relative size and shape of objects in space |
| Draw on appropriate discourses (e.g. aesthetic, health and safety, promotional) | Communicate the social nature of space; indicate awareness of the aesthetic dimensions of design |

| Transfer conceptual and representational resources (e.g. from game-playing) | Transfer conceptual and representational resources (e.g. from game-playing) |
|---|---|

**The politics of imagination: Pedagogical productions of spatial and social worlds**
Exploring the spatial dimensions of lived experience can provide important inroads for young people into critical literacies that are material, imaginative and creative. Working with the discourses and practices of architecture to redesign part of the school grounds opened up opportunities children and teachers alike to think in new ways. In the process children and teachers expanded their semiotic repertoires as children engaged in imagining, negotiating and representing themselves in the spatialised world of the school and beyond.

Using space as a focus for learning and frame for curriculum design is both generative and productive; it allows all children to contribute what they know about perceived and lived space. Further, it allows them to imagine how different people might populate different spaces, and how spaces might be re-configured and why. In their artefacts we can see traces of their classroom pedagogical history: an architect's presentation about buildings and the stories that might surround them; neighbourhood walks; discussions about local housing development issues; visits to newly developed local parks; and to an architecture studio.

The project illustrated very clearly Nespor's (1997, p. 12) argument that pedagogy is 'an ongoing collective accomplishment'; it involves 'real practices slowly accomplished over time and space, continuously modified to deal with change and contingency' (cited in McGregor, 2004, p. 366). Teachers involved in the project have been willing to expand the boundaries of what sometimes seems a shrinking normative space for literacy work and at other times an overloaded curriculum. The layered nature of the curriculum and pedagogical work they carried out with the children, and the ways that it drew on multiple traditions, allowed for and encouraged a simultaneous consideration of the aesthetic, the literary and studies of society, as well as the productive effects of working across multiple media of representation and communication. Their classes were sites of a rich and recursive pedagogy that was accomplished collectively over time and space.

One of the joys of this project was the opportunity to work with teachers who were themselves creative and open to expanding repertoires of pedagogical and literacy practices. Both teachers took hold of the project with great enthusiasm and proceeded to invent possibilities for tasks, activities and genres that were responsive to what their students could already do, what they needed to work on further, and the open-ended possibilities generated by the project itself. This is not always the case in schools. Even when new initiatives and innovations claim to be new or promise opportunities for change, schools by their very nature sometimes limit what is possible, stripping the practices to simulations and reducing meaningful tasks to skeletal approximations of what they might have been. The force of school time and space, as business-as-usual, can make routine and constrain even the potentially exciting. However, in this case, the opposite occurred. The *Grove Gardens* project appeared to release the energies and imaginations of the teachers along with their students.

Maxine Greene has long written about how and why the imagination is politically significant. She has argued that 'human freedom' involves 'the capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise' (Greene, 1988, p. 3). Being able to imagine alternatives and to imagine a better state of things is crucial. She emphasises the importance of 'the ability to make present what is absent, to summon up a condition that is not yet' (p. 16). From our perspective the project allowed this kind of imagining. We see this creative design work and the associated visible material action over time as crucial to sustaining critical multi-literacies in schools.

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[1] The project *Urban renewal from the inside out: Students and community involvement in re-designing and re-constructing school spaces in a poor neighbourhood* was conducted in 2004-5 by Barbara Comber, Helen Nixon and Louise Ashmore from the School of Education, Stephen Loo, Louis Laybourne School of Architecture and Design, and Jackie Cook, School of Information, Communication and New Media, University of South Australia with teachers, Marg Wells and Ruth Trimboli and students from Ridley Grove Primary School, Woodville Gardens, South Australia. The project was funded by the Myer Foundation.

[2] See the Myer Foundation web-site at http://www.myerfoundation.org.au/main.asp. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Myer Foundation.