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ABSTRACT

The current literacy crisis, which has spawned numerous studies and generated vigorous debate, is less about decreasing literacy and ability among the North American and worldwide population than it is about who controls literacy, how literacy is used, and who can use literacy. Most who claim there is a literacy crisis are reacting to the expansion of the "dominant discourse" and the broadening nature of literacy. They define literacy as something which reflects and supports a narrower definition of the dominant discourse which is largely western, white, and male dominated. This paper calls for a broadening of the definition of literacies, toward one that is more inclusive. Literacy, as defined in the paper, applies to more than just reading and writing--it encompasses any form of communication; literacies are multiple and are created and used through a "critical socio-psycho-semiotic process." And the understanding of discourses in the paper--the sayings, doings, thinkings, feelings, and valuings within a specific group--comes largely from the work of James Paul Gee (1990; 2000). The paper discusses why it is important to label literacies as critical; why semiotics is necessary in the definition of literacies; and literacies as social process. It relies on the socio-psycholinguistic reading model developed by Ken Goodman to understand how literacies work as a process. In Goodman's model, according to the paper, literacies use four cueing systems: semantic (meaning), syntactic (the grammar and rules of literacies), sensory (the medium through which the user interacts with literacies), and pragmatic (context). The paper examines each of these cueing systems in turn. (Contains 36 references.) (NKA)

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DEFINING LITERACIES

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RUNNING HEAD: Defining Literacies

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Defining Literacies

According to some in North America today we are in the throes of a Literacy crisis with "dangerously high levels of illiteracy"(Chamberlain, 1993), leading to unemployment, social welfare, and underemployment, leaving our nations unable to compete globally (Chamberlain, 1993; Rayner et al., 2002). This crisis has spawned numerous studies and generated vigorous debate amongst nations and legislative bodies throughout the world. Yet this literacy crisis is less about decreasing literacy levels and ability among the North American and worldwide populations (Hirsch, 1987; Rayner et al., 2002; Langenberg et al., 2000) than it is about who controls literacy, how literacy is used, and who can use literacy (Lankshear, 1997; Shannon, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Most who claim we are in a literacy crisis are, primarily, reacting to the expansion of the dominant Discourse and the broadening nature of literacy (e.g. in academia room is being made for the voices supporting civil rights, feminism, queer studies, etc.). They, typically, narrowly define literacy as something which reflects and supports a narrower definition of the dominant Discourse; for example, Hirsch (1987) suggests, in his Cultural Literacy, a return to a dominant Discourse which is largely western, white, and male dominated. This is not to say that Hirsch is doing so maliciously or in his own self-interest as a white male professor of western literature at an Ivy League university. This position calls for a narrowing of what it means to be literate. I personally prefer and lean toward a broadening of the definition of literacies, toward one that is more inclusive because I do not believe that our society should or can be monolithic. As such I am calling for a redefinition of what literacies are and what it means to be literate. We need to redefine literacies to reflect more recent research and theorizing.

Literacy, as I define it, applies to more than just reading and writing; it encompasses any form of communication. Literacies are multiple and are created and used through a *critical socio-psycho-semiotic process*. It is my intention to provide a broad and encompassing definition of

literacies, understanding that in the act of defining there are intentional (and unintentional) exclusions as well as inclusions. Any definition is extremely limited, but it is a necessary process to begin to understand what literacies are, how they may be learned, and how to teach them. I am going to define literacies for myself [as a teacher, father, researcher, literacies user, and learner] in a manner which is accessible to a larger audience. It is my hope that this definition, though apparently static, will act as a touchstone for discussion and debate and thus take on a dynamic and evolutionary nature.

Literacies are always a critical sociopsychosemiotic process. They are *critical* because the way they are used is as important as the literate act itself (Comber & Cormack, 1997; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997) and literacies are acting on the user (Simpson 1996) as much as, or more than, the literacies user is acting on literacies. Whether the literacies user is aware or not, every literate act is either reinforcing or dismantling the hegemony present within the society in which it is produced and interpreted (Cherryholmes, 1988; Gee, 1990); while at the same time literacies are positioning the user within society (Gee, 1990; Lankshear, 1997). Literacies are always a *social* act. Literacies are always used to communicate (Halliday, 1975) or understand meaning beyond oral language and between people, thus making them *social* constructions (Harste, 1999). A literate act, however, always originates in an individual, whether through reacting, creating, or interpreting [*psychological*] (Y. Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987; 1996). Thus literacies which are either being created or understood are done so through the filter of the individual user's immediate environment, his/her history, various experiences, and Discourses (Sumara, 1996). Literacies are *semiotic* in that they use signs to convey meaning or are symbolic in nature (Danesi, 1998). Literacies encompass not only reading and writing, but drama, art, dance, music, math, as well as any method used to convey meaning, for all forms of meaning making support one another (Berghoff et al., 2000). Finally, any literate act is a *process* whereby each of these systems acts in

concert to make meaning (Burke, 2000). It is impossible for meaning to be made independently of the critical socio- psycho- or semiotic process systems, the failure of one of these systems inhibits meaning making and the process breaks down.

Literacies as critical

It is important that we label literacies as critical because literacies are always negotiated in terms of their use, learning, teaching and they are always political acts (Muspratt et al., 1997; Freire, 1970/1995; Shannon, 1998). Anytime we engage with literacies they act on the user forcing the user to conform to Discourses embedded in the text. My aforementioned attempted definition of literacy is in itself a political act; it is an attempt to clarify and support some ideas, and discredit and draw into question other ideas related to literacies. Even my use of the word 'literacies' instead of 'literacy' is a political statement. Any literate act works either to support the dominant Discourse or acts to broaden, or undermine, that Discourse (Gee, 1990). Any literate act either works to reinforce or resist hegemonic structures present within the culture in which it is produced (Cherryholmes, 1988); this is the case for subjugated Discourses as well as dominant Discourses within a culture. I am not confusing culture and Discourse here, though the two words can be similar. I am using Discourse to mean the combination of "sayings-doings-thinkings-feelings-valuings" of a particular group (Gee, 1990) or as an identity kit (Gee, 2000), whereas I use culture to encompass not only these elements of Discourse but also the interplay between different Discourses, thus suggesting larger systems.

I think it is important to pause here briefly to explain what I mean by Discourses. My understanding of Discourses comes largely from the work of James Paul Gee (1990; 2000). Discourses, with a capital < D >, is the sayings, doings, thinkings, feelings, and valuings within a specific group. Discourses can almost be thought of as specific 'clubs', in which there are certain rules which govern all aspects of a person's identity while they are members of that club. There

are primary Discourses, the Discourses we learn through our family, and secondary Discourses, which we learn in order to interact with groups outside of our immediate community. Secondary Discourses are typically institutional Discourses, or ones that we learn at school and other institutions. There are also dominant Discourses and subjugated Discourses. Dominant Discourses are those that are used by the group which has access to power or what Gee terms 'social goods' (like status, worth and material goods). Subjugated Discourses are those which are othered by dominant Discourses. The dominant Discourse is the Discourse typically used and valued in and by schools and other institutions (i.e. government, business, industry, etc.).

The rules of any Discourse are constantly tested to decide who is an insider, who is an outsider, and who is colonized. A person who is colonized is a language user who has just enough access to a Discourse to signal that he/she is not a full member of the Discourse. As such, that person acts to reaffirm those in dominant Discourses, resulting in hegemony. Because language is multi-variant there are Discourses that are embedded within Discourses; within any Discourse there are multiple layers, and gaining access to one layer of a Discourse does not guarantee access to the other layers. This is further complicated by the multiple Discourses we all use as we move between different roles and group affiliations within our lives (Wenger, 1998). The way we use Discourses, and are required to use Discourses shifts and changes as we move between roles and groups. We use these Discourses to shape our identities both by signalling our group affiliation and also othering those who are not members of our specific Discourse(s).

When we think of literacies in terms of Discourses and move beyond literacies as only reading and writing, it becomes clear that the use, learning, and teaching of literacies are always political acts (Gee, 1990, p. 27). Literacies are not just a simple set of skills, or sub-skills, but Discourses which must be learned. Furthermore, it is which Discourse knowledge counts as literacies that has resulted in the "reading wars". We need to ask whose Discourse is dominant. As

the dominant Discourse has been expanded, selectively incorporating elements from many formerly subjugated Discourses, there have been voices which have called for the full participation of more Discourses as a part of the dominant Discourse (e.g. Edelsky, 1996; Freire, 1970/1995; Nieto, 1998; Shannon, 1998) [a position which I support]; while others lament the expansion of the dominant Discourse (e.g. Bennett, 1995; Hirsch, 1987) and have been fighting for a return to the "basics". This desire for a return to the way things were is often presented as needed because of a decline in literacy skills, which for many within the dominant Discourse it is. If anything, the literacies of the children in our schools are improving, not declining, the literacies required of them have expanded to include new literacies (e.g. computer literacy) and they must learn Discourses which are more dissimilar to their primary Discourses than students in the past had to learn. Frequently, this is not included in the derision of current literacy levels among youth, again emphasizing that how literacy is defined greatly influences how one sees literacies, for the theorist as well as for the literacy user. Regardless of how literacies are defined and viewed, they are an expression of meaning, the way in which we communicate with each other.

Semiotics and literacies

As an act of communication, or an instance of language (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984), literacies are inherently social; the user is always trying to interpret or express meaning. How does this process take place? How do people access meaning? The field of semiotics offers insights into these questions and is necessary in our definition of literacies, for a literate act is always a semiotic process.

Semiotics refers to all literacies (i.e. reading, writing, music, art, dance, math, movies, etc.) as sign systems, or ways of knowing (Berghoff et al., 2000; Danesi, 1999; Eco, 1976). Each sign system is a distinct way of knowing (Berghoff et al., 2000; Burke, 2000); if they were not, there would be no need to distinguish them from each other. Knowing something through music is

different than knowing through math or writing. Semiotics suggests that signs do not transmit meaning but prompt the construction of meaning (Danesi, 1999). Each sign system is a different way of knowing and creating (see figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE

Sign systems have three attributes: they are a defined system, are comprised of interrelated subsystems and they generate unique types of meaning [in relation to other sign systems] (Burke, 2000). Each system focuses on process rather than product (Danesi, 1999). Sign systems give access to meaning but not necessarily the meaning itself. They have interrelated subsystems, or cueing systems (K. Goodman, 1967), which are dependent upon each other for the creation of meaning. Each subsystem is dependent on the others for the production of meaning, and the system fails to function with the loss of any one of the subsystems. Finally, each sign system creates its own unique form of meaning; hence we have a distinction between writing, reading, drawing, spoken language, etc. Each of these sign systems is related and they in fact share attributes, yet each one has its own unique way of knowing. Semiotics goes beyond language: it operates at the symbolic level to allow us to construct meaning.

According to semiotic theory, we experience the world, or model what is around us, on three different levels (Danesi, 1998): a primary modeling system in which we use our bodies to learn and understand (Sumara, 1999); a secondary modeling system in which we use language, or our minds, to understand; and, a tertiary modeling system in which we use symbols to make meaning. We relate the tertiary level to reading and writing, sometimes forgetting that we also relate to the world through the first two levels. Through all three modeling systems, we make meaning and each sign system engages with these three modeling systems differently.

The focus of the semiotic process is on meaning; the construction of meaning and knowing, the creation of knowledge, and understanding as a process and not a product (Danesi, 1998). As

we use each sign system we create knowledge in a unique way; we are positioned differently in relation to our knowledge, allowing us to form new perspectives. It is through this process, called transmediation (Berghoff et al., 2000), that we make new connections and see our own positions differently. Literacies as a semiotic process moves the concept of literacies beyond reading and writing.

Literacies as social process

Literacies are always social. They are either the expression of meaning or the interpretation of meaning, engaging our ideas, emotions and experiences transmitting them beyond ourselves, and beyond the moment. Literacies would not, could not, have developed had there only been one human (Gee, 1990; K. Goodman, 1996). They are always used as an act of communication, either with others or with ourselves. The way in which meaning is constructed is not only defined by the medium (McLuhan, 1964/1994), but also by the groups with whom one affiliates.

It is impossible to define literacies without including the way literacies are used. Writing, for example, is a semiotic process whereby meaning is constructed through the transaction among author, audience, reader, and text (Rosenblatt, 1989). It is through this transaction that meaning, associated with Discourses (Gee, 1990), is constructed. Without some level of interpretation there can be no meaning. All meaning is socially constructed, whether it is created from the history a person brings with them when they use a particular literacy, or socially constructed through its use. To understand someone else, or to be understood, requires that meanings are, to some degree, agreed upon by the group with whom we are communicating. It is only the meanings which are agreed upon which are useful (Fleck, 1979). These meanings will shift and be different depending upon the community of practice in which they are used (Wenger, 1998).

The way in which literacies are used signifies the user as a member of a particular group (Gee, 1990). Which literacies are used, and how they are used, or not used, is often defined by

group affiliation. This goes beyond accent, gestures, language, and word usage, but extends to how meaning is constructed. Epistemology and etymology are not universal, but Discourses-dependant, and thus it is the community of practice which defines what meaning can be derived from a particular literate act. The term literacies is contested; I define literacies as including music, drama, dance, math, art, reading, writing, or anything used to convey meaning; other groups define literacies as reading and writing (perhaps art for young children), still others would reject the use of the word literacies instead of literacy. Literacies are social, and as such they are complex.

The literacies process

I rely heavily on the socio-psycholinguistic reading model (Y. Goodman, Watson. & Burke, 1987) first developed by Ken Goodman (1967) to understand how literacies work as a process. Literacies use four cueing systems: semantic (meaning), syntactic (the grammar and rules of a literacies), sensory (the medium through which the user interacts with literacies), and pragmatic (context). These work in concert so that the literacies user can make sense of the world. In this model of literacies I have replaced K. Goodman's graphophonic cueing system (1967; 1996) with a *sensory* cuing system. The literacies user utilizes diverse senses to interact differently with various literacies to make meaning. It is through the sensory cuing system that the literacies user accesses or engages with literacies. In reading and writing, this cueing system is graphophonics, the sounds and appearance associated with the written word; in music it would be the way the music sounds and the way the notes appear on the page; in dance it would be the choreographic notes and the physical mapping/movement of the dancers on stage. It seems clear to me that K. Goodman uses a graphophonic cueing system because his focus is on reading. Before K. Goodman, the majority of theories focused solely on the sensory cueing system and it is Goodman's work that allows us to see literacies as a process.

All the cueing systems work together for the literacies user to make meaning. It is the interplay of these four cueing systems, semantic, syntactic, sensory, and pragmatic, which allows us to get meaning from any literate act (see figure 3). The use of these cueing systems is not

INSERT FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE

always balanced. If I approach a genre of art with which I am not familiar, I will require over-use of the other cuing systems to compensate for my lack of pragmatic experience; when this happens the literacy process often breaks down and meaning is either lost or not accessible. This breakdown of the process can be made evident by looking at the introduction of new art forms: audiences are unable to access meaning from the art and reject the art until they are exposed to enough of the new style to construct meaning. Children must discover, or invent, how the cueing systems work together to make meaning as they become conventionally literate, and construct strategies for how to use these four cueing systems. Meaning is accessed through the interplay of these cuing systems.

Semantic cueing system.

Semantics is at the center of all the cueing systems, though all the cueing systems work together to make meaning from literacies. Generally defined, semantics is meaning. Whenever we engage in any literate act we are trying to make sense of it. Meaning is a semiotic process; the interpretation, or translation, of literacies into meaning is just as dependent on what a person brings to the construction of a literate act as the product itself. Meaning, then, is something that is mediated by each person and interpreted differently based on experience, Discourses, locations, in what Louise Rosenblatt termed transaction theory (1989). Hence, it is possible for someone to read a passage from a book and know all the words but not be able to access it. This would be the case if I tried to read a book on advanced physics; I would be able to read the words, but the meaning would be beyond my grasp. By the same notion two people can read the same thing and have it

mean very different things, as all of us who have participated in a book club discussion can attest to. The same can be said for dance, art, or any literacies. Recently while I was in New York I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and saw Monet's Water Lilies for the first time; later the same week I attended the ballet at home; I interpreted one of the scenes in the ballet as the Water Lilies. In dance or art the semantic cueing system is more fluid, but if one cannot make sense of a literate act meaning is lost and the literacies cease to be accessible. Meaning is inherently related to the lived experience of the literacies user (Sumara, 1999; 1996) or the context from which the literacy use is being conducted. As such, semantics and pragmatics are closely related, for both are dependent on what the literacies user brings to the literate act for it to be meaningful, or make sense.

Pragmatic cueing system.

The pragmatic cueing system largely refers to context, but, as implied by the discussion of semantics, context is a broadly defined term. In using context I am referring to the framework of the literate event [that which comes before and after a literacy instance within a literate act], how the literacies are being used, the literacies user's lived experience, the purpose for engaging in literacies, and the situation [environment, both physical and psychological] the literacies user is in. Implied in my definition is that pragmatics is always multiple, and when we read the aforementioned conditions, they all influence what, why, and how we engage in literacies. The most easily explained aspect of pragmatics, context, is the literate framework. In this sense of context I am referring to the immediate context of the literacies being experienced. That is, any literacy that is being understood or created is influenced by what has come before it, in any particular literacies act, and what is going to come immediately after [what is perceived as going to come immediately after]. As I read a book, for example, I come to know the characters; based on

this information I can anticipate or predict how a character will react to a particular setting. Pragmatics, then, has an impact on our immediate perceptions of literacies.

We don't approach literacies as *blank slates*; we bring experience to our understanding or creation of that literacy. This is another layer of pragmatics. Our previous experiences with literacies and our lived experiences [or the culmination of our daily interactions with the world], often define how we approach literacies and shape who we perceive ourselves to be as we engage with various literacies; thus, literacies can never be culturally neutral (Gee, 2000; Shannon, 1998). Different readers will comprehend the meaning of a text differently and will be more or less familiar with the content of what they are reading. The more familiar a reader is with the type of content and the genre of writing, the easier it will be for the reader to access. If a reader has had a bad experience reading a particular type of material, however, they may have difficulty reading that genre. In the same fashion, the first time I saw Waiting for Godot, a play by Samuel Becket, I failed to understand its meaning; I knew the words the actors were saying, I recognized the gestures and the characters, but I had no context from which to construct meaning and thus the play was meaningless (I have seen the play since and think it is brilliant). This then is complicated even further depending on the purpose with which we approach literacies.

The purpose we have when approaching literacies changes the way we engage in any literate act (Sumara, 1996). It is often easier to read a book we choose to read than it is to read a book which we're told we have to read; in fact there are often times when I dislike a book I choose to read so I abandon my reading of it [this is not a choice with assigned reading]. We also read differently when we are reading for enjoyment or if we are reading to get specific information. The purpose with which we approach a literate act affects the way in which we engage in that act.

Finally, the physical and psychological context in which a literate act takes place influences the literacies user and how the literate act is perceived (Sumara, 1996, 1999). If I am reading

something outside on a sunny day, I have to be riveted by what I am reading or I am inclined to distraction. Likewise, when I am reading something for someone else [e.g. an assigned reading or grading], and I have an extremely hectic schedule, it is difficult for me to think about what I am reading and not think about my schedule. When I am reading for pleasure in my favorite armchair, however, I become oblivious to the world around and concentrate solely on what I am reading. When my grandfather died I had a great deal of trouble writing, either for pleasure or work. Writing is the way I work through my thoughts, and I needed to first write about and to my grandfather before I could write for other purposes. All these different layers of context work together in comprising the pragmatic cueing system. Yet only one level of pragmatics actually deals with the literacy that is being used, furthering the argument that literacy is more than just the sum of its parts. It is a process that involves the literacies user and all his/her surrounding complexities.

Syntactic cueing system.

One of the effects of exposure to a particular literacy is that the literacies user gains an understanding of how the syntactic cuing system works for the specific literacy or genre within literacies. The syntactic cueing system refers to the rules, or order, however loosely or rigidly defined, that govern literacies, the set of constraints and patterns which we use in literacies to make sense of them. During the Renaissance, the rules, the syntax governing realism, lasted centuries; in fact, early attempts by painters to challenge those rules were met with confusion and were largely rejected by society. In a similar way, it is possible to 'read' the weather because of the order which governs it. However, the sometimes seeming inability of weather forecasters to accurately forecast the weather is largely because of the inconsistency of the 'rules' of weather, or because our understanding of those rules is incomplete. There is a predictable order to literacies that allows us to make sense of any literate act. Without syntax there is no access to meaning (K. Goodman,

1996; Y Goodman et al., 1996). Without considering the syntactic cueing system, 'boy bites dog' and 'dog bites boy' have exactly the same meaning (a meaning which is indeterminate).

Sensory cueing system.

The sensory cueing system is the physical system (hearing, touch, sight, smell, movement, taste, etc.) through which we experience literacies. If we couldn't physically interact with literacies they would not exist for us, as it would be impossible to experience a literacy. It is this cueing system that Ken Goodman named the graphophonic cueing system (1967). Using the example of reading, we use the sensory cueing system to experience reading through sight, sound and touch [e.g. Braille]; we are able to read by interpreting the symbols written on the page in combination with our understanding of the linguistic features of the language we are reading.

It is the sensory cueing system that often causes debate among researchers and practitioners. Because the sensory system is the cueing system with which we experience literacies, many researchers have confused the sensory cueing system with the literacy under investigation. Such confusion has caused some researchers in the field of reading research to suggest that we read, and must read, every phoneme in any text we are reading (Adams 1990; Rayner et al., 2002), a statement proven erroneous through various eye movement studies conducted since the mid-1950's (K. Goodman & Paulson, 1999; 2000). In the field of mathematics research some have argued that math is computation, number, and line. Such an error is understandable because, throughout history we have often confused the way we experience something with the object under study; in medicine we have repeatedly confused the symptoms of a disease with the disease itself (Fleck, 1979). It is difficult to look beyond the thing under study and see how it actually functions.

We experience all literacies differently, each through a different set of sensory combinations. Literacies can be combined to ease the access of meaning. Because literacies are a semiotic process, the more systems a signifier is conveyed through, the more chance there is that

the audience of the literacies will understand the author's intent. This is the power of television (McLuhan, 1964/1994) as it allows for, and uses, a complexity of rapidly changing and layered visual symbols and sound. When literacies are used in concert, the literacies user can scaffold the knowledge of one literacy on another, ensuring access to meaning through a patchwork of strategies, using the different cueing systems.

Literacies strategies.

We use a series of strategies derived from our tacit understanding of the cueing systems to construct meaning through literacies. This understanding of the cueing systems is transparent for the literacies user, for once a literacy is mastered its mechanisms and how it functions become unseen to the user (Gee, 1990). Recently, eye movement studies have shown that our eyes only see fifty percent to seventy-five percent of the text that we read and that the eye only focuses on 3-4 characters of those words we do read (K. Goodman, 1996; K. Goodman & Paulsen, 1999). This indicates we do not read individual sounds or words, but that meaning is being constructed by some other means. Y. Goodman, Watson, and Burke (1996) examined reading and found that we primarily use 5 strategies when reading: predicting, sampling, inferring, confirming, and integrating. Though this theory was designed to explain how a text is read, it also explains how the cueing systems are used to create meaning.

As suggested by eye movement studies, we never actually read the entirety of any text, we sample it. With all literacies we sample the literacy as we engage in a literate act. We focus on key points and 'fill-in' the rest. This is reflected in how our physiology works. Take the eye for example, we each have a blind spot on each eye, where the retina attaches to the optic nerve, yet we are unaware of the presence of this blind spot because our brains 'fill-in' what should be there in our vision.

Cueing systems are used in concert during a literate instance. We use syntax to predict a sentence; we use pragmatics to sample and apply our past experience to infer or predict; we use the sensory cueing system, to predict or infer; we use semantics to limit the response set, to infer or predict and to confirm the inference or prediction. Once the prediction/inference has been made, we integrate the feedback we received, with the cueing systems. If the prediction/inference was accurate, we may use the same type of prediction in the future; if it failed, we may not use it in the future. As we become more proficient with literacies we are able to, and do, predict and infer more frequently and accurately (K. Goodman, 2000). We compare our current literate engagement with past experiences, providing a context, and use the syntax of the literacy we are engaged in to accurately predict what is coming next.

If the literacies user had to engage with a literacy purely through the sensory cueing system, and not use any of the strategies mentioned, s/he would engage with literacies at a painfully slow rate, and meaning would be next to impossible to access. We rely so heavily on prediction, sampling, and confirming when we engage with literacies that we hardly realize that we are using them. We use these strategies in the same way a fish uses water to breathe, the fish is unaware of the water until it is taken away and then it is unable to breathe. They come so automatically that we are unaware of them until there is a breakdown in the cueing systems, and they no longer function.

Identity and literacy

The way in which literacy is used is socially defined, yet an individual, or a group of individuals working together, generates each literate act. Any literate act is affected by previous experiences with a specific literacy and by the purpose, audience, and group affiliation which we claim. Literacies are either generated or interpreted by the literacies user, even though the use is being mitigated socially and culturally. We bring experiences, biologies, and histories any time we

engage in a literate act (Sumara, 1996; 1999). For this reason, collaborative work enhances a literate product, because it has the benefit of multiple experiences, histories, and biologies. Each literacies user constructs the meaning of each literate act; not only defining the literate act, but also being defined by the literacy.

Conclusion

Literacies invoke the imagination and are critical in their potential ability to transform our society. We are shaped by literacies as much as we shape the literacies we use, and these literacies are fashioned and defined by the Discourses from within which we use them. As such, literacies are always social and political in nature and every literate act is working toward reproducing or resisting the hegemony within Discourses or culture. It is this resistance that has caused an ever-broadening definition of what it means to be a member of the dominant Discourse and to be literate. It causes members of the dominant Discourse to decry the current state of literacy and initiate the literacy crisis we are now in. This, then, is the issue: What is literacy?

Literacies are a *critical sociopsychosemiotic process*. They are complex, not reducible to subsets of skills. They must be considered as whole and multiple, applying to more than just reading and writing, encompassing any form of communication, or way of knowing. We access literacies through sampling, predicting, inferring, confirming, and integrating and we do this through the semantic, pragmatic, syntactic, and sensory cueing systems. Although this definition is limited, it is a necessary process to understand what literacies are, how they are learned and how to teach them.

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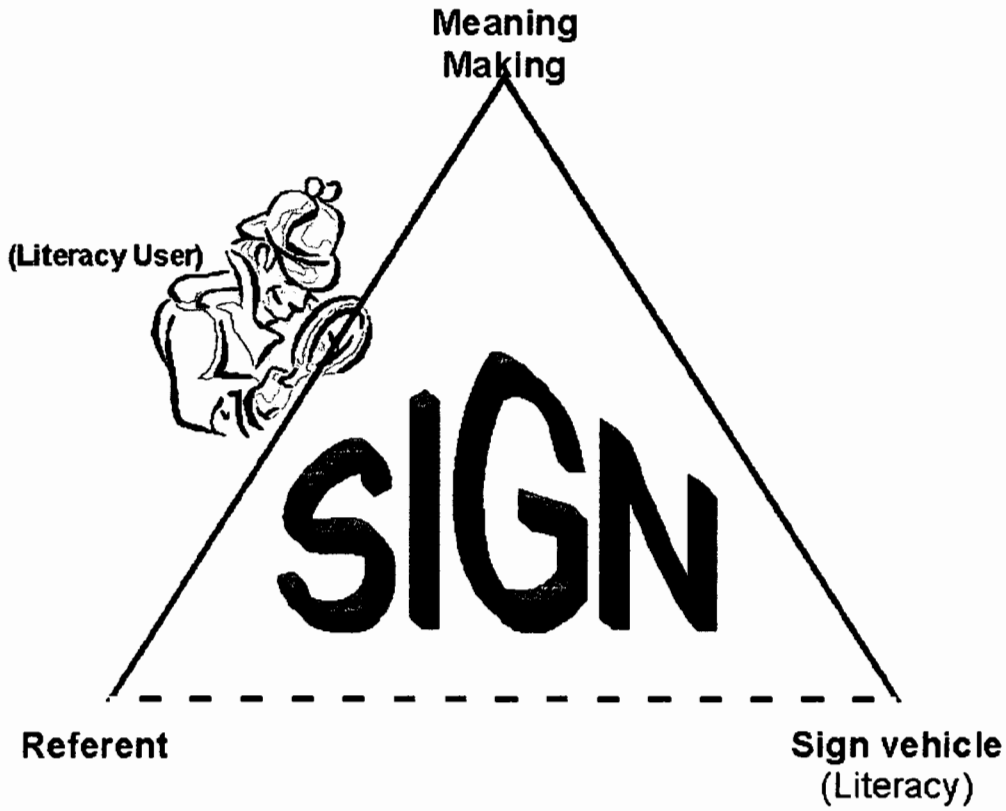
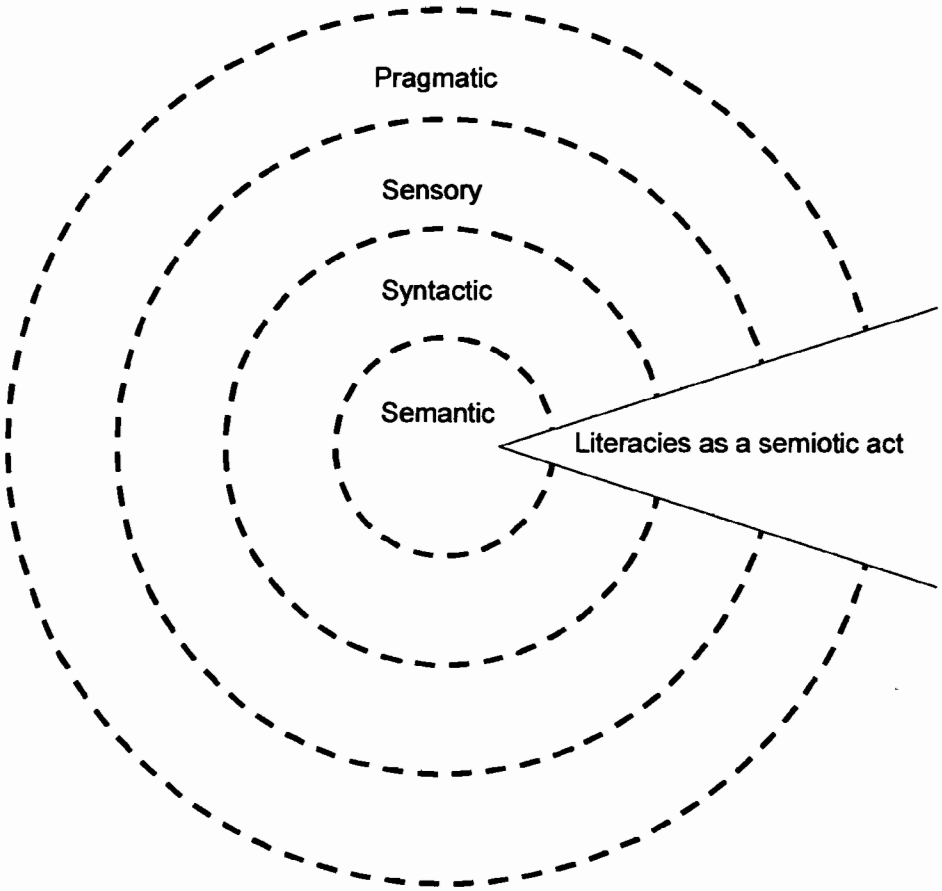
Figure 1.



Semiotic Model
Adapted from Pierce as referred to in Echo, 1976

Figure 2.



Literacies as a Critical Socio-Psycho-Semiotic Process
Based on Y. Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987 and Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984

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