"I'm Not a Pencil Man": How One Student Challenges Our Notions of Literacy 'Failure' in School (2001)

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Biography of the Text

This paper was originally published in the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* (volume 44, issue 5). It grew directly out of my doctoral research work, which comprised a case study of four very different young people in Grade 7 in Brisbane, Australia. My doctoral thesis itself was located within the context of a new state syllabus, which was grounded in systemic functional linguistic and genre theory conceptions of language use. The syllabus made significant claims about how powerful uses of language could be taught explicitly in school; that is, by teaching particular text genres and their accompanying linguistic features, students could become socially powerful users of language. My research findings stood as a critique of such claims, showing that the Discourses in which my four very different research participants engaged outside school were far more influential in their ability to use language and texts effectively than what they were learning about language and texts in school (see Knobel, 1999). "I'm not a pencil man" takes the case of Jacques—a Grade 7 student with a history of failing literacy at school, but who is doing just fine outside school—and reframes my analysis of his case within the larger trend towards content-focused curricula, student-learning performance standards and standardized testing. The principal argument remains the same, however, that many young people's out-of-school proficiencies with language, texts and ways of being in the world are not leveraged to their benefit in schools.

Introduction

Many researchers agree that we are currently living in New Times (Castells, 1996; Hall, 1991; Lankshear, 1997). These New Times are characterized by the rise of multinational companies that increasingly seem to wrest control of nations away from governments. At the same time, economic production in the developed world is shifting from high-volume to high-value outputs and workers are expected to be multiskilled and trainable (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998). Moreover, much of this high-value production is done in countries where labor is cheap, by people who have little hope of purchasing or enjoying the kinds of goods they produce.

Schools have a significant role to play in embracing and critiquing New Times, rather than trying to domesticate them or keep them at bay (de Alba, González, Lankshear, and Peters, 2000; Lankshear and Knobel, 1998). By coming to understand New Times, students will be better prepared to combat or resist alienation, cultural loss, identity dispersion, family fragmentation, and dependence on nonlocal corporations for livelihood rather than self-sufficiency, some of the social costs of New Times. In terms of addressing these social costs and in developing tactics for negotiating New Times, what students now need to learn is—and should be—vastly different to what was required in the not-so-distant past to maximize people's quality of life chances (cf. de Certeau, 1984; Lankshear and Knobel, 2000; Luke and Elkins, 2000).

However, many government responses to New Times around the world have focused on constraining what students learn by means of national curricula, increased national and state testing accountability checks for teachers, and mandated standardized tests. Without a doubt, literacy seems to have become a hot topic for governments everywhere—with many of them insisting that literacy is mostly to do with learning to read, write, and spell (Department for Education and Employment, 1996; Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1998; Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1998; Secretária de Educación Pública, 1999; United States Department of Education, 1997). For example, in Australia at present the government has implemented a set of reading, writing, and spelling tests in Grades 3, 5, and 7. Test outcomes are indexed to a set of benchmarks that indicate whether a student performs at a standard, proficient, or excellent level (or doesn't meet the benchmark at all, which means the student needs remedial reading, writing, or spelling lessons). These benchmarks are in keeping with the latest national literacy goal for Australian education—that "every child leaving primary school should be numerate, and able to read, write and spell at an appropriate level" (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1997: 1). The move to benchmarks and national testing in Australia is indicative of similar moves in other countries (e.g.,

Clinton, 1997; Department for Education and Employment, 1996; Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 1998; Secretária de Educación Pública, 1999).

The conception of literacy developed by means of national curricula, benchmarks, and standards is *school literacy*. This encompasses those literacy skills that most often lead to success in school (e.g., correct spelling, being able to write and speak abstract texts, being able to write five-part essays, being able to read and write for no obviously meaningful social purpose). Interestingly, however, a great deal of research shows that school literacy on its own—and as currently configured in most schools around the world—does not necessarily guarantee success in literacy practices for out-of-school contexts (Gee, Hull, and Lankshear, 1996: Lankshear, 1997; Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel, 2000; Luke, 1993; Mahiri, 1997; Prakash and Esteva, 1998; Prinsloo and Breier, 1996).

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Setting standards and benchmarks always brings into question what it is that students should know, to what ends, and how what they know is most effectively measured (Shepard and Bliem, 1995). As critical literacy approaches to education have long shown us, "the selection and organization of school knowledge contains dispositions and values that handicap certain groups while they benefit others" (Popkewitz, 1991: 151; see also Edelsky, 1990: Gee, 1996; Lankshear and McLaren, 1993; Macedo, 1994: New London Group, 1996).

Standard-setting and benchmarks only seem to make it easier for students to "fail" because "literacy"—or more accurately in such contexts, reading, writing, and spelling—is constrained to *school* literacy. However, focusing solely on school literacies at the expense of literacies that students practice out of school is for many students a grave injustice because it invalidates those literacies in which they are fluent and effective out of school. This flash point brings into play analyses of relationships between school and everyday-life experiences in any consideration of what counts as an effective language and literacy education for young people. Such analysis becomes troublesome when we focus on benchmarks and standards in relation to students who have a history of literacy "failure" at school yet engage successfully in a rich range of literacy practices outside school settings. The case of the 13–year-old discussed in this article is a telling example. It calls for educators to think carefully about what they assess as "literacy" in school and to reflect on how they respond to literacy "failure." My aim here is to analyze aspects of the relationship between school learning and one student's everyday life. I also consider the implications this might have for how educators think about teaching literacy in the face of increasing governmental assessment and analysis of literacy learning outcomes.

Meeting Jacques

Jacques (all names are pseudonyms) is stocky with a beaming smile and an infectious laugh. He has short, light brown hair and clear blue eyes. He likes to dress

comfortably out of school and mostly wears T-shirts and shorts at home. Jacques wears a uniform to the large Australian public school he attends, but always manages to look somewhat disheveled in it. His talk is laced with hilarious witticisms and parodies of people, situations, and remembered conversations. Jacques appears to be well-liked, and everyone—including his teacher—calls him by his nickname, J.P.

Jacques' school literacy practices

In class Jacques sits at a group of desks close to the chalkboard at the front of the room. He either moves restlessly in his chair or sits motionless staring at the busy road that lies beyond the large bank of windows lining one wall of his classroom. By his own admission, he is easily distracted and often loses track of what is happening in class: "I get distracted a lot. by other things y'know, if they're doing something better, I'd rather- my attention's on them instead of on my work." His teacher rates him as "having great difficulty" with literacy. Jacques repeated Grade 1 and appears to have a history of school failure.

It was apparent right from the beginning of the two weeks I spent closely observing Jacques in this classroom that he was not enamored of school. He seemed to be patiently enduring school until the time came for him to be allowed legally to leave in Grade 10. Jacques claimed he has no intention of continuing his formal education into senior secondary levels, and he openly declared: "I don't like school very much." When I asked about his reading and writing practices Jacques closed down the conversation by declaring, "I'm like my dad. I'm not a pencil man."

The "snapshot" in Figure 1 is a typical example of Jacques' "participation" in a lesson. The lesson makes use of a proforma—in this case an "open compare and contrast" photocopied worksheet with a paragraph at the top describing a range of Balinese customs and two columns of lines for writing on beneath it. One column is headed "similarities" and the other "differences." This lesson is also typical of the lessons conducted by his teacher, Ms. Bryant. The indented paragraphs in Figure 1 indicate what Jacques and his classmate Sean were doing as part of the "underlife" of the lesson (cf. Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson, 1995).

Jacques rarely contributes to lessons voluntarily and is called upon by his teacher infrequently to furnish answers or information for the class. Even when working in groups, he usually waits for others to make suggestions, asks them for the answers, or simply copies what they have written. Much of his work remains incomplete, or mysteriously becomes "lost." Indeed, Jacques does very little schoolwork unless constantly supervised and has developed a range of elaborate avoidance strategies. These include spending time looking for items he seems to have misplaced, delegating tasks to others (especially to his best friend, Sean),

(Monday 14 November 1994: Day 7 of observations)

Event: Language lesson

Sub-event 1: Reading information sheet (pair work)

(9:40 a.m.) Ms. Bryant tells students to take out their language books and explains that today they'll be working in pairs. She hands out a photocopied information sheet on Balinese customs to the students, along with an "Open Compare and Contrast" proforma. Ms. Bryant tells students to take turns reading.

Sean starts reading, and Jacques mutters to me, "I hate reading. It's boring." Sean keeps reading, and Jacques comments "Boring, hey." "You're not wrong," replies Sean. "C'mon. Keep going," counters Jacques and then pretends to fall into a deep sleep. They discuss Sean's recent trip to the beach, and Jacques talks about accidentally knocking over a girl while roller skating at a local rink.

Sub-event 2: Learning task (whole class)

(9:50 a.m.) Jacques and Sean have read only three of eight paragraphs when Ms. Bryant brings the class together again. She explains again that she wants them to compare and contrast Balinese and Australian customs.

Jacques pretends to give Sean electric shocks and is reprimanded by Ms. Bryant.

Ms. Bryant asks various children to read aloud consecutive paragraphs. She identifies things in common to both cultures and points out some of their differences.

Jacques and Sean share a running metatextual commentary on proceedings. Ms. Bryant talks about baptism and Jacques declares softly, "Yeah. and Sean was dropped."

Ms. Bryant directs the class to complete the compare-and-contrast proforma, using information from the sheet and what they know about Australia.

Sub-event 3: Work task (pair work)

A student asks Ms. Bryant what they're supposed to write, and she tells him with a sigh that she has already told the class twice.

Jacques turns to Sean and asks with a wide yawn, "What have we gotta write? She didn't even say." Sean doesn't seem to know, and they ask Nikki, who tells them to write something about baptism. Jacques asks Ms. Bryant to clarify the task, claiming he couldn't hear what she was saying.

(10:15 a.m.) Ms. Bryant explains again. Sean works on the proforma while Jacques sits, yawns, looks around, or fiddles with a pencil.

Figure 1: Snapshot: Compare and contrast

"helping" others instead of working (e.g., filling glue pots), claiming he hasn't heard Ms. Bryant's instructions, and spending large blocks of time "planning" what to do during student writing sessions. Frequently, these avoidance strategies seem to lampoon the school work he is set to do by his teacher (see Figure 2).

(Wednesday 16 November 1994, 3:00 p.m. Day 9 of observations)

Event: Teacher interview 2 (utterance 047)

Sub-event: Talking about Jacques assembling miniature books in which he writes 10-word stories about himself.

Ms. Bryant: I had a corner set up of ways to publish stories, and he would take- I used to fight with him, because he'd take *2 days* to get the paper cut out and stapled. He was wasting time because he didn't want to write. Yet, he got a 1ot of approval from the rest of the class for those books. I can remember him reading them out, and they'd be laughing . . . so he continued writing them . . .. He doesn't like to write—it's difficult because his spelling is poor. And for that reason he avoids writing; I find that he tries not to take it seriously. He tries to make a joke of his writing in all his stories. In first term all the children did general process writing, and he made these little books called "J.P.'s Stories." He made about six of them, and the kids thought they were hilarious. But there was nothing in them. Like, they might have had 10 words at most in them. They were very, very childish.

Figure 2 Avoidance strategies

Of course, given Jacques' comments about schooling, his subversion of Ms. Bryant's writing activities can also be interpreted as a refusal to engage in tasks that have little real-world meaning for him rather than simply as his having a problem with writing.
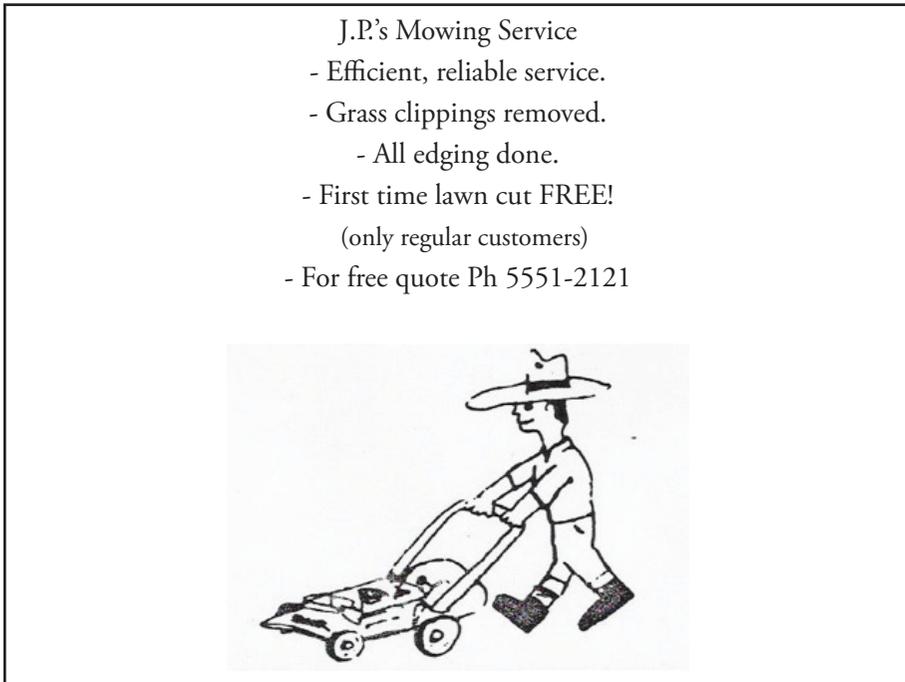
Jacques' Everyday Literacy Practices Out of School

Jacques' life outside school contrasts dramatically with his life in school. As practicing Jehovah's Witnesses, Jacques and his family are closely involved with church outreach work in local communities. Jacques' father owns a successful earth-moving business and is an elder in the church. Jacques' mother runs their home and is heavily involved in volunteer church work and other activities each day. Jacques and his family attend Theocratic School every Thursday night. Theocratic School has a dual purpose; it provides ministry training and acts as a forum for

knowledge sharing (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1971). In Jacques' case specifically, every so often he has to write an introduction and conclusion to a Bible reading, which he then presents to the congregation (often up to 100 people). The introduction and conclusion usually tie the reading to current issues or to personal experiences in ways that help explain the meaning of the Bible text for everyday life. This reading, speaking, and exegesis is publicly evaluated by members of the Theocratic School who use checklists and criteria from the School literature to assess his performance,

Indeed, Jacques' church commitments are very much part of an adult world, and Saturdays see him dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase as he, his family, and others, in his group go "witnessing" in their allotted "circuit." This work requires Jacques to be familiar with the literature they show to people and involves his discussing sophisticated concepts and understandings about personal values, religious beliefs, and contemporary social issues with a range of people.

Being a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses involves Jacques in a wide range of reading, writing, speaking, and listening practices. Although Jacques sometimes engages in these practices reluctantly, the amount of public and private reading, public speaking, and discussion he does in connection with his church far outstrips his application to literacy activities at school. Continual self-development is a recurrent but loving theme in Jacques' parents' talk and is not necessarily tied to academic success. In Jacques' case, for example, they actively encourage his interest in his father's earth-moving business, and he is free to stay home from school camps and the like in order to accompany his father to work.

Jacques' world of work is very much an adult world, where he is expected to assume adult responsibility. His conversations at home and elsewhere are interwoven with references to "work" and "being a worker." Thus, when talk at school turns to hit songs and trendy clothes or about being a surfer or a homeboy, Jacques either does not join the conversation or contributes comments that usually bring the discussion to an abrupt halt (e.g., "I'm nothing. I'm just a workin' man"). He definitely was a worker. He had learned to drive work vehicles at 7 years of age and operated them under supervision regularly during school breaks. Jacques understood and valued learning in relation to being able to perform well as a worker. "If you want to put gravel on a road you have to be able to work out how many meters you need." Jacques also puts his knowledge of the business world and his skills as a worker to his own personal use. For example, with the help of his mother and brother, Jacques used his father's computer to compose a flier advertising "JP's Mowing Service" (see Figure 3).

J.P.'s Mowing Service
- Efficient, reliable service.
- Grass clippings removed.
- All edging done.
- First time lawn cut FREE!
(only regular customers)
- For free quote Ph 5551-2121

Figure 3 Jacques' promotional flier

He had posted this flier in local letterboxes and had quickly established a profitable weekend and summer-holiday business. When asked about the language used in the flier, Jacques explained he had included '"First time lawn cut FREE!" in order to entice customers; or in his words, "So they all go, 'Oh yeah, this is great' [mimes a double take] 'Whhhhaaattttt!' [grabs the flier] 'What's that number again?' [mimes dialing frantically]. Capital letters for *free* plus the repetition of "free" in relation to a "quote" are all strategies used by business people to attract customers. The smaller font for "only regular customers" also complies with the genre of business fliers and emphasizes Jacques' sophisticated understanding of the way things are done in the business world.

Jacques' life out of school appears to have much more meaning and purpose for him than life in school. For example, as a "worker," Jacques engages in real-world tasks that are purposeful and meaningful for him. He is expected to conduct himself as an adult and is involved in various kinds of autonomous and team work. He has access to guided participation, opportunities to do things himself, and some understanding of the links between work and livelihood (Rogoff, 1995). Such opportunities and knowledge are obtained from observing and working with his father, watching him ordering machine parts and other materials during the day, and seeing him balance accounts at night. Likewise, Jacques is a

fluent and mature speaker beyond his years and he participates in witnessing and in Theocratic School. Unfortunately for Jacques, the expertise he has acquired is not valued academically within his classroom, Even when opportunities arise for Jacques to demonstrate his mastery of business discourse such as his thriving car sales business established during *Earn and Learn* sessions (in a role-play simulation of a community [Vingerhoets, 1993], Jacques was a millionaire, while many other students were bankrupt)—this simulation is seen by his classmates and teachers as only a game they play on Friday afternoons, rather than as an opportunity to be successful students.

Interestingly, many current economic and social theorists agree that the nature of work and the roles of workers are changing as modes of production and consumption change in New Times (Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Castells, 1996; Gee, Hull. and Lankshear, 1996; Howe and Strauss, 1993; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998; Reich, 1992). Economic success in the future, according to these writers, will depend at the very least on the ability to identify problems and to predict future life chance by analyzing the past, present, and future. In their terms, expert performance in this kind of analytic work requires metalevel understanding of consumer and business practices. Thus, Jacques' increasing metalevel understanding of business enterprise and his ability to put these understandings to work in practical ways (such as in his lawn mowing business) will stand him in good stead with regard to economic prospects in the not-too-distant future. Indeed. despite technically failing primary school, Jacques seems confident—as do his parents—that he will be successful out of school.

Jacques' Case Is Not Atypical

It seems that current language lessons in his classroom have no bearing on the real world for Jacques. In terms of reading and writing standards and benchmarks, Jacques would most certainly be shunted into intensive remedial programs that would be likely to alienate him even further from school forms of literacy (cf. Moje, Young, Readence, and Moore, 2000). The 2 weeks spent observing Jacques for this study confirm a rupture between what Jacques is doing in school and the sets of adult practices in which he is fluent out of school.

Although Jacques' experiences with literacy in school and his literacy practices out of school cannot be generalized to all students everywhere, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that his case is not atypical (see, e.g., "Deena" in Cazden, 1988, and Gee, 1996; "Lem" in Heath, 1983; "Vinnie" in McLaren, 1994: "Murph" in Walker, 1988). These kinds of cases of young people "failing" to achieve literacy in school, but not failing in their lives outside school, have enormous implications for the role and outcomes of national testing, benchmarks, and

across-the-board standards. Indeed, these cases call for educators to problematize nationally mandated testing as a measure of "literacy learning" and to ask what counts as literacy learning and failure according to these tests and standards (cf. Alloway and Gilbert, 1998; Kincheloe, Steinberg, and Gresson, 1996). Educators need to reflect critically on what learning and expertise is overlooked when pencil-and-paper tests are used to assess a student's learning, in order to be sure that they are not playing into the hands of injustice.

In addition, because of the impoverished conceptions of literacy in national curricula and benchmarks, it is important for teachers to guard against letting the tests and standards—rather than sound literacy and learning theories—direct their teaching. Indeed, time constraints and pressures on primary school teachers to produce students who are able to write, read, and spell at an "appropriate level" by the time they reach secondary school encourage transmission or banking models of teaching that focus on content alone or that promote "quick fix" approaches to learning (cf. Freire, 1972; Knobel, 1999; Lankshear and Knobel, 1998). Transmission approaches to teaching are abstracted from meaningful contexts and real world practices, so that students are often left wondering *why* they are doing a task, memorizing these words and not others, or completing work sheets and text proformas. The content of transmission approaches to teaching is usually static, grounded in the experiences and knowledges of the dominant—and often minority—group in a society, and often out of date (cf. Freire, 1972; Heath, 1983; Lankshear, Peters, and Knobel, in press; Macedo, 1994; Prakash and Esteva, 1998). None of this promotes *real*, useful learning (Heath and McLaughlin, 1991; Knobel and Lankshear, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995).

Despite education standards in most countries being linked explicitly to the health of the national economy, most standards packages don't take into account the myriad forecasts for the kinds of workers needed or even what it will mean to be a citizen in 10 years' time. Reich's (1992) predictions concerning the role of symbolic analysts in workplaces in the next millennium suggested that current students need to be taught much more than merely school-selected content and how to write or construct arguments by simply "filling in the blanks" (see also Aronowitz and DiFazio, 1994; Castells, 1996; Howe and Strauss, 1993; Lankshear, 1997, 1999). His predictions re-emphasized the problems inherent in reducing language and literacy to a list of demonstrable skills and insulating classroom language and literacy learning from "real world" practices. This situation is only underscored by the case of students like Jacques.

So What's a Teacher to Do?

The suggestion in this article is not that teachers should ignore testing schedules, benchmark evaluations, and the like; many teachers have tried to rebel but have

usually found themselves marginalized or out of a job (cf. Searle, 1998). Rather, it is important to emphasize that standards tests and benchmarks should only ever be the *baseline* for a teacher. That is, effective teachers will always go beyond the standards and benchmarks to enact meaningful and richly conceived literacies in their classrooms.

There are a number of conceptions of literacy that have grown out of socio-cultural theory that can serve as useful guides to planning for literacy teaching in classrooms in ways that take students beyond the skills level of standards testing and benchmarks. These include, among others, Freebody and Luke's four reading practices and Lankshear and his colleagues' three-dimensional model of literacy. I will discuss these conceptions in further detail.

Luke and Freebody (1997, 1999; also Freebody, 1992; Freebody and Luke, 1990) outlined a conception of reading that encourages a multipronged approach to classroom language and literacy planning and teaching. Although Luke and Freebody focused primarily on reading, their insights apply equally to all other forms of text processing and practice. They emphasized how in current times "the means and practices of reading had changed significantly in important ways in relation to cultural, economic, and social developments" (1997: 191). In other words, their four reader resources are grounded firmly in a sociocultural theory of literacy (i.e., collectively, they take the social and cultural dimensions of "being human" into account). Accordingly, their set of practices and resources embodies historical and relatively new perspectives on reading pedagogy and includes coding practices, text-retelling practices, pragmatic practices. and critical practices. These reader "resources" are used as elements of "successful reading" (Freebody, 1992: 49) and embody in classrooms "a richer understanding of literacy that recognizes and builds on students' prior cultural resources, experiences, and knowledges in all instruction and programs" (Luke and Freebody, 1991: 221).

In brief, Luke and Freebody's (1997) "coding practices" describe processes whereby decoding skills and habits are used to "unlock" alphabetic codes or scripts (the kinds of literacy practices most often measured by standards and benchmarking processes). Text-meaning practices inscribe the reader as a participant; someone who is able to make meaning from a text by bringing to it additional cultural and social knowledge about texts, the subject matter, and statements and discourses in the text. Pragmatic resources are brought into play in text-mediated social activities or events. That is, readers engage in using texts effectively by being able to match texts and contexts and tailor their reading accordingly. Freebody (1992: 53) warned, however, that these pragmatic resources for reading are "transmitted and developed in our society largely in instructional contexts, some of which may bear comparatively little relevance to the ways in which texts need to he used in out-of-school contexts."

Finally, critical reading practices engage the reader in analyzing probable world views and assumptions constituting a text. The reader as text analyst and critic is acutely aware that texts are also idea and value systems, and that readers often comply unquestioningly with the positions offered within these systems. Critical practices in reading require the reader to have metalevel understanding of how, why, and in whose interests texts work and be able to employ complex sociocognitive processes in interrogating representations of "how things are" in texts and how this compares with how things are in the real world (Luke and Freebody, 1997; see also Kress, 1985; Wallace, 1990).

These practices are not meant to describe neat categories of activity, rather they are one way of trying to make explicit the complexities invoked in teaching students to be effectively (or "properly") literate. They also offer insights into how we might go about teaching students like Jacques. Despite his difficulties with coding, participating in, and using aspects of literacy lessons in school, Jacques is highly literate in the codes, meaning-making, uses, and practices of the business "discourse." One way of drawing on Jacques' expertise could be to take his status as a millionaire in the role-playing game *Earn and Learn* and have him construct a guidebook based on his experiences and practices in the simulation and his expert knowledge of business discourse. Such a text would require him (a) to read or view other texts, or to draw on his knowledge of other texts; (b) draw on his participation in the world of work, as both a worker and business owner (his mowing business in the real world and his car sales business in the simulation): and (c) to draw on his use and analysis of the business discourse in terms of constructing his mowing business flier and preparing catalogues of cars he was selling in the role play. Of course, Jacques' out-of-school reluctance to write (he claimed to be no great fan of computers, either) might mean that the handbook has to be audiotaped or videotaped.

In terms of developing Jacques' (and other students') critical reading practices, the teacher could consider generating a unit of work for the class that focuses on the effects of changes in work machines on actual work and livelihood. The unit might, for example, take in texts about the Industrial Revolution in England and the Luddites' attempts to save jobs being lost to steam-powered weaving looms and lace spinners. It could embrace analyses and critiques of texts that portray men and woman at work and that discuss wage inequities, child labor, and high-cost, high-status apparel made in labor-cheap countries.

Another way of approaching how to teach students like Jacques is to use the three dimensions of literacy first sketched by Green (1988) and further developed in the national *Digital Rhetorics* project report (Lankshear et al., 1997). The three dimensions of literacy have also emerged from a sociocultural theory of literacy. In comparison with the four reading practices discussed earlier, the cultural aspect of the three dimensions of literacy encourages teachers to think more explicitly in

terms of social and cultural practice, rather than focusing on the effects of texts. For example, emphasizing sociocultural practices enables us to understand how something could be simultaneously a religious artifact or ritual in one cultural context, a work of art in another, and propaganda in a third. Engaging with the sociocultural practices of literacy is crucial if we are to develop strong arguments for, and practices in, going beyond the "basic skills" of standardized tests and national curricula.

As with Luke and Freebody's four reading practices, the three dimensions of literacy proposed by Green, Lankshear, and others are interrelated and inseparable dimensions—operational, cultural, and critical—that span and integrate context, language and meaning. These dimensions are not restricted to written texts either, but include the full range of literacy practices in which people engage. The operational dimension of literacy emphasizes the language system itself and how it is used by people in "order to operate effectively in specific contexts" (Green, 1988: 160). In other word, this dimension names what people do when they are able to read, write, speak. and view effectively in terms of the socially recognized purposes of texts (e.g., to entertain, to instruct, to inform).

The cultural dimension, as we have already touched on it, focuses on the meaning in texts made by contexts and sociocultural literacy practices into which we are socialized. That is, "[t]he cultural dimension [of literacy] involves understanding texts and information in relation to contexts—real-life practices—in which they are produced, received and used" (Lankshear and O'Connor, 1999: 33). This dimension of literacy enables people to understand what makes "particular ways of reading and writing [and speaking, viewing, listening] appropriate or inappropriate, adequate or inadequate in a given situation or setting" (ibid.: 35). For example, Jacques' flier was not simply a completed cloze exercise that was to be pasted into a book and then thrown out at the end of the school year. Instead, the wording was aimed directly at people who needed their lawn mowed. It was carefully designed to alert them to Jacques' mowing business and to entice them to employ him ("first time lawn cut FREE!") on a regular basis (for "only regular customers"). The wording itself is appropriate to the task—the business-like words in an advertising context clearly convey Jacques' message.

The critical dimension of literacy "has to do with the socially constructed nature of all human practices and meaning systems" (Lankshear, 1998: 46). It is concerned with identifying and critiquing the sectional and selective meaning systems in which a text has arisen and thus, access to the principles of selection and interpretation that take them beyond being merely "socialized into the meaning system and unable to take an active part in its transformation" (Green, 1988: 162). Certainly, for proponents of the three-dimensional model of literacy, positive *transformation* for as many people as possible is a key goal.

At a practical level, and again taking Jacques as our example, the operational dimension of literacy was well and truly covered in his classroom (e.g., the compare-and-contrast proforma). In terms of the cultural dimension of literacy, his teacher did make efforts towards developing this dimension by means of a Writers' Center and its grounding in the Process Writing movement, which tried to bring professional writers' writing practices into the classroom. However, students were not apprenticed into a writing culture per se (where their writing was for a real audience or for a meaningful social purpose), nor was a wide range of genres encouraged in and by the Writers' Center—indeed, the teacher expected students to use the center only in writing narratives—which effectively excluded Jacques (and possibly other students in the class) from participating due to his lack of interest in producing this genre.

However, imagine Ms. Bryant embracing the three-dimensional model of literacy. We then see that in her classroom the Writers' Center is gone and in its place is a large pinboard full of notices from the community. These ask for help with producing animal lost-and-found notices, formatting curriculum vitae and form letters, and with compiling and publishing newsletters and advertisements for a range of organizations and services (from washing and ironing to computer tutoring and programming). In one corner a group of students is meeting with the president of a mothers' group who is proofreading a flier the students produced for the group's next summer fundraiser—an excursion to a distant rainforest. In another corner, students are putting the finishing touches on a beach scene (complete with tissue paper palm trees) for a digital photograph they're taking for a poster on discount eco-tourism holidays commissioned by a local travel agent.

A group in the middle of the room is brainstorming possible interview questions to ask the Minister for Tourism via e-mail. The students decided they wanted to interview him about the tourism policies set in place for the Sydney Olympics in order to evaluate how ecologically sound the policies were in terms of predicted numbers, destinations promoted, and guidelines to be given to the visitors. Still another group is putting the finishing touches on a booklet they have written based on interviews with 10 travel agents about the moral issues associated with trying to run a business in the tourism industry. The teacher is currently working with the final group on a song that explores the environmental and employment issues surrounding the controversial filming of *The Beach* (2000, Danny Boyle, Director) on Phi Island, off the south Thailand coast. In all of this, the teacher stresses the need for accurate spelling, grammar, and syntax on commissioned work and work destined for public consumption.

This kind of scenario is not so far-fetched. Teachers and other cultural workers are already teaching the three dimensions of literacy in effective and interesting

ways (see accounts in Heath, 1983; hooks, 1998; Knobel, 1999; Mahiri, 1998; Wallace, 1999).

Going Beyond the Benchmarks

Now, six years after the case study of Jacques, I find that he did indeed leave school as soon as he was legally able, is working full time with his father, and enjoys nothing more than tinkering and fine-tuning the old car he bought with his own money before he left school. On all fronts he can be considered a successful young man—which is hardly what one would have predicted for him without knowledge of his social practices outside school contexts.

The main aim of this article was to examine national benchmarks, testing and standards in the light of one case in Australia in order to discuss the pitfalls associated with judging students on the basis of school literacy practices only. An important goal was to appeal for going beyond the literacy benchmarks to teach literacy in ways that make it culturally and sociocritically meaningful to students by embracing models of literacy teaching that are not limited to code breaking or operational literacy practices. The main argument in support of this goal is the claim that when teachers focus intentionally or unintentionally on *school* purposes and practices in language lessons, and other language-related experiences (e.g., using proformas to compare and contrast customs in different countries without discussing the social purposes for such comparisons), they may ultimately put students at a disadvantage in terms of success in school—Jacques is a case in point.

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