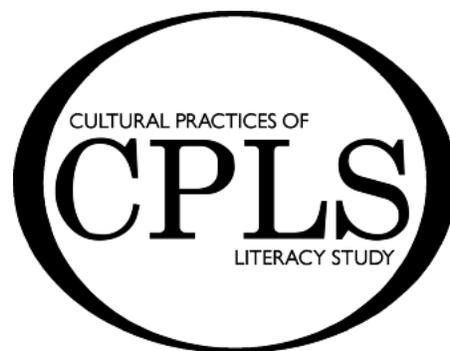


**Breadth and Depth, Imports and Exports: Transactions between the
In- and Out-of-School Literacy Practices of an “At Risk” Youth**

Stephanie Collins

Michigan State University



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Literacy Practices of an “At Risk” Youth

Penny,¹ her mouth full of purple taffy, squinted at the printed plastic which had a moment before housed her sugary treat. “Steph, can I read ya a joke?” she asked me, fully aware that I would say yes but not yet so aware of why I would say it. Penny expected the “of course” with which I replied because she has long known that I appreciate her humor—original or aided by “Laffy Taffy.” Penny at this point did not, however, know that I additionally appreciate her everyday literacy practices, that in this instance I happily observed her use of wrapper as text and text as vehicle for social interaction. Now Penny understands this in large part. Eleven years old, she has served as an informant to this piece of the Cultural Practices of Literacy Study (CPLS).

The Cultural Practices of Literacy Study

Ideologically situated alongside the New Literacy Studies, the CPLS employs case study to explore questions dually oriented toward literacy theory and practice; Allan Luke posed a series of such questions in *Reading Research Quarterly* in the winter of 2003:

Which linguistic competencies, discourses and textual resources, and multiliteracies are accessible? How, in what blended and separate domains and to what ends, are different languages used? How do people use languages, texts, discourses, and literacies as convertible and transformative resources in homes, communities, and schools? . . . How are these resources taken into communities and recombined with other kinds of social, economic, and ecological capital in consequential ways in which social fields and linguistic markets? Which children’s and adolescents’ pathways through and across social fields will be affected? (Luke, 2003, pp. 139-140).

Queries of this sort do not arise out of thin air; their appearance in rhetoric follows their neglect in educational policy—policy such as the Reading First component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation within the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Marketed as a large-scale effort to rehabilitate underachieving public schools, NCLB directly affects the school literacy experiences of students often labeled “at risk.” A highly politicized (and perhaps dangerously determinist and essentializing) phrase, “at risk” seems to subsume many of the possible combinations and confluences of marginalized identity in the US. Whether called “at risk,” “disadvantaged,” “underprivileged,” or by her name, Penny, an African-American girl of low socioeconomic status, acutely lives out current policy decisions and will acutely live out upcoming decisions. In working with Penny to create a portrait of her in- and out-of school literacy practices and the transactions between these literacy spaces—a portrait of the “blended and separate domains” in which she practices literacies and the ends to which she does so—I hope to help equip future policy-makers with some of the information necessary to meet Luke’s call:

the redefined function of governments...is to provide access to combinatory forms of enabling capital that enhance students’ possibilities of putting the kinds of practices, texts, and discourses acquired in schools to work in consequential ways that enable active position taking in social fields. These ways should enable some control on the part of these people over the shapes of their life pathways and, ultimately, over the shapes and rules of exchange of the places where they will put their cultural capital to work (Luke, 2003, p. 139).

Profiling Penny

Currently, Penny's living situation requires her to put her own "cultural capital to work" in various spaces within a declining industrial city in the Midwest. The youngest of nine children, Penny resides in a government-subsidized townhouse along with her mother and three of her brothers, ages 13 to 16. Train tracks running behind it, abandoned warehouses to the south, convenience shopping to the north, the cosmopolitan part of town a hair to the east, this townhouse sits among its architectural clones in a low-income public housing neighborhood known as "The Court." On days when the howling of cold wind drowns out most sound and the screeching of a passing train drowns out all the rest, The Court can exude a sort of drear—this visitor, perhaps projecting, has read gloom on the faces of residents. On other days, more gentle days, when children swarm The Court's playground, teenagers gather by its blacktop basketball hoop, adults congregate on its porches, and small groups of people make their way across the busy street fronting it for trips to nearby stores, The Court can emit excitement.

On the latter sort of days, Penny, her brothers, and their friends, many of whom also live in The Court, have pre-/early teen adventures in the neighborhood—they scheme about each other and about members of the opposite sex while crossing back and forth over front yards, ride bikes, practice cheers and dance routines on the pavement, and make grand expeditions to Shop n Save. On the former sort of days, Penny and friends sit inside each others' houses, chatting and watching television, doing "nothin" as Penny would say.

Penny believes she understands why her friends spend such time with her, believes she understands her appeal to them. Penny does not locate this appeal in her academic self; in fact, she often dismisses other people's characterizations—her teacher's, her tutor's, sometimes her mother's characterizations—of her as smart. In her view, intelligence functions as the currency of school, and school, as an institution-seeming entity, has labeled her and her brothers bankrupt.

Penny, now a fifth-grader at an intermediate (5th - 8th grade) public school, repeated the fourth grade last year; her three brothers who live at home attend varying levels of special education programming within their schools. Unsure of her intellect, insecure in the “in-school skin” that she associates with it, Penny shows greater confidence in her sense of humor and her appearance, spirited in her “social skin.” As evidenced above, Penny feels comfortable telling jokes and relating funny anecdotes. Additionally, she frequently plays at actor: in good fun, she deftly imitates children and adults around her, and, in trying to get her way, she puts on a remarkably believable (and knowingly cute) pouting face.

Penny does not solely pride herself on her skill in generating fun; she holds to certain values, loyalty the most apparent. Time and time again, Penny has stepped forward to defend certain capabilities (particularly relevant herein) of her brothers, doing so diplomatically before adults—“they *can* read”, and hotly before peers—“SHUT UP! He can read!”—and to stick up for her tutor when adults playfully joke about her or other children disobey her—“Don’t you be messin with Steph;” “I’m tellin your mama you’re not listening to Steph!”

Research and Relationship: Locating Myself

I, Steph, cannot help but feel sentimental at such moments—the relationship Penny and I share, represented in a timeline below, has grown from peripheral to personal since we met nearly three years ago when I became her literacy tutor through a Housing Authority/University partnership.

- Spring and fall academic semesters of 2001: Penny and I collaborated as a tutee/tutor pair through this program.
- Spring semester of 2002: Penny worked with several other undergraduates while I studied abroad.

- Fall semester of 2002: Penny, sometimes her friends and/or siblings, and I met outside of the program on a weekly basis for silent reading and social activities as I worked as an administrator for the program and Penny did not participate in it.
- Spring semester of 2003: I maintained my position as an administrator, Penny rejoined the program and worked with a different tutor, our outside-the-program reading continued, and our social outings grew to regularly include Penny's siblings and friends and my own good friend, who now acts as Penny's unofficial tutor.
- Summer of 2003: Penny and I saw each other an average of a couple times a week for reading, and Penny, her brothers, friends, and my friend joined together at least once a week for eating, swimming, shopping, or going to the movies.

Through these experiences and over time, I have come to know, to some extent, important people in Penny's life other than her brothers and friends: Penny's new tutor and I recently began friendly face-to-face and phone communication with Penny's teacher, and I have, for some while, made a point of chatting with Penny's mother and neighbors when I pick her up from home for outings. Sometimes Penny's mother reacts to me as "one of the family," as she once called me; other times she seems more restrained and preoccupied (and I feel certain I seem the same way to her).

Now that I have completed my undergraduate education and attend graduate school at a university two and a half hours (by car) from Penny's home, I have chances to interact with Penny's mother, neighbors, brothers, friends, and Penny herself about twice a month. When Penny and I get together, we socialize and work on the CPLS. Certainly, I cannot claim the role of a "fly on the wall" researcher (not that anyone truly can); rather, following some initial ethical pondering, I have come to embrace my overt embeddedness within the CPLS. In working with

Penny to document her literacy practices, I enjoy more opportunities to see her than I would otherwise and also strive to maximize this research experience as more than simply “neutral” for Penny. By interviewing Penny regarding her literacy practices, I not only recognize, and thus validate, all of her literacy practices—non-dominant literacy practices² especially—but also invite her to assume the researcher role herself. Penny does not just answer questions; she asks them of me, of her family, friends, and neighbors, and of herself. This research dynamic implies “with” over “upon.” I hope that acting as a researcher of her own “cultural creation” will empower Penny via investigation, celebration, critique, and the mainstream and non-mainstream competencies³ such ways of doing and seeing engender—the (multi)cultural capital they produce. Ultimately, or, perhaps, until my next episode of ethical and ethnographic questioning, I have reconciled research and relationship.

Breadth: Penny’s Text Use

This research with Penny to date reveals that the literacy practices enacted within her social world(s)—enacted by Penny, her family, friends/peers, and neighbors—span many domains that themselves overlap and intersect, span many of these space/action/purpose/role combinations that help to define an individual’s various selves. The domains encapsulating the literacy practices of Penny and those around her include: bureaucracy, clubs/organizations, community organization, entertainment, fashion, finances, interpersonal communication, personal care/daily routines, personal writing, public display, school, shopping, social cohesion, and work. Below, I delineate these domains mainly in terms of the texts and purposes involved therein—only a couple facets of literacy practice; later, I expound upon the larger relationship between domain and literacy practice in Penny’s life. While I suspend this full analysis until the section entitled “Making Sense of Literacy: Penny’s Literacy Practices,” I urge the reader at this

point to contrast the volume of the listing that follows with the potency, the concentration, of its contents.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy as a domain contains literacy practices used for official and/or enforced purposes—literacy practices such as Penny’s mother’s navigation of the paperwork of private aid agencies offering bill payment assistance.

Clubs/Organizations

Literacy practices that occur in and around organized non-school and non-religious activities fall within the domain of clubs/organizations. Penny’s text use/exposure within this domain includes: her mandatory and frequently dodged reading and/or writing (often centered around story and chapter books) during the “reading hour” of the mentoring program through which I met her, as well as her mother’s skimming and signing of permission slips and consent forms for her children’s participation in this program and its related activities.

Community Organization

The creation (and general distribution) of birthday-party announcing fliers by teenagers in Penny’s neighborhood and the reading of these fliers by recipients falls into the domain of community organization, which describes reading and writing done concurrent with efforts to bring community members together in various ways and to varying degrees.

Daily Routines/Personal Care

Reading the signs on restroom doors for direction into the women’s room, the numbers on digital clocks when she wants to know the time, and the text near the heating/cooling knobs in my car when she wants to adjust the temperature, Penny frequently (and quickly) accesses basic

information from text for simple self-maintenance. Embedded in routinized personal care, these literacy practices fit within the daily routines/personal care domain.

Entertainment/Pleasure

The domain of entertainment/pleasure refers to reading done for relaxation or “for fun,” as Penny would say. Penny’s reading and writing within the domain of entertainment/pleasure includes: reading a few select chapter books and poetry books through her past involvement in the mentoring program or with me independent of the program (initially self-reporting on such books without the assistance of my memory, Penny referenced only *The Twits*, which she encountered two years ago); reading a joke book bought at a school book fair and (as mentioned earlier) reading a joke from a “Laffy Taffy” candy wrapper; exchanging cards and/or letters with me and her current tutor (my friend) on infrequently interspersed occasions; writing labels, every once in a while, on pictures she has drawn; and searching the Internet (at the public library) for hip hop lyrics, and printing and reading those lyrics.

Fashion

The at-a-glance reading of brand-name labels on clothing (bought and owned clothing, desired clothing, and other people’s clothing) that Penny and her sixteen-year-old brother do fits within (though not exclusively within) the domain of fashion, which applies to reading and writing done with the *style* of attire in mind.

Finances

While reading clothing labels for brand-names belongs to the domain of fashion, reading clothing tags for prices belongs to the domain of finances. Penny and some of her family members engage in this text use and others that similarly deal with money: Penny and her mother read prices when purchasing food; Penny’s mother reads checks and bills.

Interpersonal Communication

Text use facilitating communication with family members and friends—text use within the domain of interpersonal communication—appears in Penny’s life in her seasonal selection and signing of birthday and holiday cards for family members and in her exchange of letters with her mother’s boyfriend (recently away) once and with tutors a couple times. While I studied abroad, Penny, assisted by a program administrator, emailed me such a letter, the text of which I have copied below:

dear steph, i miss you. hope to see you soon. i hop england is fun. you are very fun and i read with sharon but i like you more. bye bye.

love penny

Personal Writing

Around the same time she wrote this letter, Penny wrote a couple entries in a diary I gave to her as a gift, and these entries *seem* situated within the domain of personal writing—writing not intended for an audience—and here *seem* proves key, for I must admit that Penny has shared these entries with me!

Public Writing

Penny’s reading and writing within the domain of public writing—the converse of the domain of personal writing—includes (or may, in fact, consist entirely of) the time she designed posters hung as party decorations.

School

Identifying the literacies that occur in or around schooling and receive institutional sanction, the domain of school proves broad. Penny’s mother’s cursory reading and filling out of permission slips for her children’s participation in school events falls within this domain as does

her writing of letters to her children's schools to explain their absences. Up to this point in the study, Penny has compartmentalized her own text use within the school domain into sub-domains. The following sub-domains and the example text uses therein correspond, in many (but not all) cases, with academic subjects: reading musical notes and the letters designating them within *band* class; acknowledging the denomination of play currency circulated via a *classroom management* reward system; reading, writing, and correcting Daily Oral Language sentences as dictated by *classroom routine*; reading and writing numbers and words on *math* worksheets; reading short stories from a basal *reading* series and, on one occasion, reading a basal-topic-related article from a local newspaper; loosely "following along" as other students read passages aloud from a social studies textbook; writing, correcting, and rewriting *spelling* words. While in school, Penny does not always stick to such sanctioned literacy practices. Quickly and covertly exchanging notes with friends right under her teacher's nose, Penny "border-crosses" (and thus blurs) the domain of school and the before-mentioned domain of interpersonal communication.

Shopping

The domain of shopping encompasses literacies directly—not simply coincidentally—connected to the act of shopping. The casual perusal of store fliers (for sales and product—candy—selection), food packaging (for prices and favored ingredients), and clothing tags and labels (for sizes, prices, and brand-names) and the rare reading/writing of shopping lists done by Penny and her mother fit into several domains, one among them shopping.

Social Cohesion

For literacy researchers who adopt a socio-cultural perspective, most all text use functions within the domain of social cohesion as this domain highlights literacies that promote social interaction or testify to social solidarity. Overlap between domains admitted, text use by

Penny and her sixteen-year-old brother within this domain includes their reading of hip hop lyrics and brand name labels on clothing—both forms of cultural capital among their peers, both vehicles for signifying communally—in terms of peer group and imagined community—appreciated style.

Work

Literacies that comprise the work domain aid paid employment. As Penny lives in an impoverished neighborhood within a city with few job opportunities, it comes as little surprise that she cites the reading of labels on car-detailing cleaning agents by her mother's boyfriend (who does car detailing informally but for pay) as the one and only instance of work domain text use she can concretely recall among her family members, friends, and neighbors.

Depth: Mainstream In-School Text Use and Literacy Practices

True to its name, the central question of the Cultural *Practices* of Literacy Study focuses on the dynamics between in- and out-of school literacy *practices*; above I have outlined Penny's text use and its purposes within certain domains but have not explicated the literacy practices at play. Barton and Hamilton (1998) define literacy practices:

Literacy practices are the general cultural ways of utilising written language people draw upon in their lives. In the simplest sense literacy practices are what people do with literacy. However practices are not observable units of behaviors since they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships.... This includes people's awareness of literacy, constructions of literacy and discourses of literacy, how people talk about and make sense of literacy (p. 6).

While emphasizing the plurality of literacy practices present in mainstream schools, Gee (1996) gives particular attention to school-endorsed essayist literacy practice and creative

writing/literature literacy practice. Gee characterizes the former literacy as linearly structured, reportive, assumptive of the existence of objective facts and

founded on the idea—often associated with ‘modernism’ as opposed to ‘postmodernism’ ...of people transcending their social and cultural differences to communicate ‘logically’, ‘rationally’, and ‘dispassionately’ to each other as ‘strangers’ (the basic assumption behind the essay) in a thoroughly explicit and decontextualized way (pp. 156-157).

He positions the latter within a “print-based ‘high culture’ literary tradition, a tradition that...has origins in oral-culture practices (think of the line running from Homer to Hesiod to Chaucer to Shakespeare, and beyond)” (Gee, 1996, pp. 160-161). Valuing these literacies, Penny’s school asks her to *practice* them—to do them and to accept their premises—at a novice level but a nonetheless *engaged, involved* level: “Daily Oral Language” exercises (categorized within the school sub-domain of class routine/management) teach their conventions; silent reading and teacher “read-alouds” (of both biography and humorous fiction, for example) teach their appreciation; small writing assignments here and there (“little bits of science writing” and “little bits of creative stuff,” as Penny’s teacher calls them) teach their production. Note that these activities, most mentioned to me by Penny’ teacher, require extended time and/or focused attention for their successful execution.

Making Sense of Literacy: Penny’s Literacy Practices

Imports

Despite the presence in her classroom of literacy events⁴ that demand time and attention, Penny, when interviewed, generally recounts in-school literacy events that do not make such demands. She revels in her speed in copying weekly spelling words and takes great interest in the

fact that I recognize as literacy the quick numerical reading and writing she does to complete “Minute Math” and the scanning of letters (marking musical notes) she does to play her instrument in band. These examples of in-school literacy events acknowledged by Penny bear a striking resemblance to literacy events framed by many domains other than the school domain, as shown above. Comparison of Penny’s reported school domain text use with her total text use helps to reveal a pattern—a pattern that speaks to *practice*, to how Penny “makes sense” of literacy.

Across domains, Penny’s use of text functions in a sort of immediate feedback relationship with the environment, exemplified by, but not limited to, her reading of food packaging while shopping: Penny wants to eat a candy bar with peanuts in it so she skims the wrappers of various candy bars on store display, reads “peanuts” on one bar, and buys that bar and eats it. Here, reading serves as a means to an *immediate* end and need not take more than a few moments and a passing glance to meet that end.

While counter examples to this sort of reading (and similar writing) exist, they number few and far between; while Penny admits reading and writing letters and writing diary entries she, in the same breath, admits the rarity—and the corresponding novelty element—of such uses of text in her life. From data on not simply what Penny reads and writes but also why and how she reads and writes in- and out-of-school, I have come to see Penny’s uses of text as literacy practices governed by a particular understanding of how reading and writing work, by a “shopping for a candy bar model” or “immediacy model;” I have come to suspect that Penny has imported this immediacy model of literacy “native” to her out-of-school life—rooted in the text uses therein—into school.

One might wonder why Penny has done this importing. Underscoring the dangerous circularity of Penny's situation, my speculative explanation proves rather circular:

- To preserve a positive sense of self, Penny chooses to define that self (herself) in terms of validating experiences.
- Penny has such validating experiences out-of-school; for example, she “fits in” when she keeps up with the dance routines she and friends do on the pavement at The Court and she reaps smiles from friends and family members when she tells funny or dramatic stories.
- Penny does not typically have comparably validating experiences in-school; at least for the past two and a half years, possibly for longer, she has struggled in school, repeating the fourth grade and now “standing out” (according to her teacher) as one of the children who have trouble reading, especially reading aloud.
- Penny copes with her feelings of frustration and diminishment in school by superimposing her usual out-of-school talents and capabilities, “ways of being” (Gee, 1996), and understandings of “how things work” onto her school experiences.
- Transplants—whether medicine- or literacy-related—do not always take; Penny's importation of her out-of-school ways of using text and beliefs about using text, of the immediacy model, into school proves “improper;” it does not lead to school success and perhaps hinders school success as great differences exist between the time and attention requirements of her out-of-school literacies and mainstream in-school literacies.

And so, Penny again comes to the beginning of the cycle—she craves validation and does not get it from school.

Exports

However, Penny has not written off school, so to speak. She has accepted an “export” from me, her new tutor, and perhaps others. While Penny does not see many of the adults around her holding steady jobs (recall the economic depression at large in her city and concentrated in her neighborhood), she gravitates (perhaps in response) toward the idea of economic self-sufficiency. Hoping for this component of Penny’s potential future along with her, Penny’s new tutor and I have had several conversations with her about what sort of job one needs in order to attain financial stability and what sort of education one needs in order to obtain that sort of job. In discussing this path from education to job, Penny and I have “charted” how reading and writing in school in the fifth grade connects to high school achievement, which connects to college acceptance and achievement, which connects to job opportunities, which connects, finally, to having the money to support oneself and a family and having the skills to help people outside of family (working as a nurse or volunteering as a tutor, for example).

Though I have often wondered if these sorts of talks might “go in one ear and out the other” of 11 year-old Penny, Penny has memorized if not fully internalized the Steph-exported educational plan.⁵ During one CPLS interview, I asked Penny why she read her music in band, expecting her to say “to play my instrument” and dropping my jaw when she spoke to her reasons for all school reading and writing and offered this answer: “to get good grades, get an education, be like you.” Helping me to flush out the meaning of “be like you” (certainly a jolting and perhaps a problematic phrase), Penny fairly readily explained that she sees me as a “grown woman”—a self-sufficient woman—and a tutor, someone who helps people.

However, Penny did not tackle the meaning of the phrase “get a good education” with similar ease; Penny had no comments to make about what constituted an education until I asked her, “Does getting a good education mean getting good grades or learning stuff or both?” The

“correct” (Steph-pleasing) answer clearly marked for her, Penny answered, “Both.” It seems Penny brought conversation from months before to bear upon the CPLS interview without fully comprehending the meaning of her own words or, rather, the meaning of the words her new tutor and I had exported to her.

For Penny, “education” and in-school reading and writing function as tools devoid of instructions. Penny knows that she needs to use education, reading, and writing to reach certain life goals, but, operating via her immediacy model of literacy, she does not know *how* to use them to reach these goals. Penny’s teacher describes her as a non-participant in much classroom activity, including reading and writing activity; Penny agrees with her teacher’s assessment in content but not in framing, not in definition. Describing her behavior during social studies whole-class reading, Penny divulges that she sits with her textbook and notebook open, pretending to take notes in the latter, not following along in the former. While Penny clearly states to me that she *acts out* concentration on this social studies reading (and writing), she still deems what she does “reading in social studies.” According to Penny’s model of literacy, reading does not call for concentration—“faking it” appeases her teacher and does not disturb her own conception of what reading entails.

Conclusions: A Place to Begin

Recognizing school success as a means to a desired end and thus working toward it, Penny applies an available, familiar, ego sustaining, and (unbeknownst to her) inappropriate model of literacy—her out-of-school immediacy model of literacy—to school literacies and thus engages in them superficially and ineffectually. Penny truly believes that in pretending to read her social studies textbook she meets the literacy demands before her and, furthermore, truly believes that such an approach to school literacies will gain her the credentialing that I and others

have sold to her—sold to her but not adequately explained to her; Penny means it but does not “get it” when she says she reads and writes in school to “to get good grades, get an education, be like you.”

“Meaning it” without “getting it,” Penny complicates literacy theory and practice, and I suspect she does not stand alone. “Non-mainstream” students, children dubbed “at risk,” employ multiple strategies to weather incongruencies between in- and out-of-school literacy practices. While some children choose certain “life worlds”⁶ over others—shunning the practices of school and retreating into the practices of church, for example—other children, children like Penny, create consonance across in- and out-of-school abstract domains and actual spaces through the importation and exportation of certain models and valuations of literacy. Such children do not simply accept or reject; rather they refashion. In some cases, this transformative agency reaps success in- and out-of-school. In other cases, in Penny’s case, it does not. These latter cases reemphasize that children require not only an explicit “what” or even a “why” to navigate literacy events but also a “how.” Beyond informing theory and practice in this way, Penny’s collaboration with me has informed our relationship and serves as a caveat and a call to others who take on the privilege of acting as tutors or mentors.

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Footnotes

¹ A pseudonym.

² Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 252) describe non-dominant/vernacular literacy practices via contrast to dominant literacy practices—those practices "associated with formal organisations, such as...education, law, religion and the workplace" and "given high value legally" and in the cultural mainstream."

³ For example, academic essayist thought and pop culture expert knowledge.

⁴ Note the distinction between literacy events and literacy practices and see Barton & Hamilton (1998) for explication.

⁵ Perhaps this plan proved easy for Penny to commit to memory as it takes the means-ends form similar to that of her immediacy model of literacy.

⁶ See the New London Group's *Multiliteracies* for more on "life worlds" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000).