

## FOSTERING CREATIVE LITERACY: THEORETICAL CONDITIONS AND PEDAGOGY

**Spyros Kiosses**

Department of Greek Philology, Democritus University of Thrace

GREECE

skiosses@helit.duth.gr

### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the creative dimension in the pedagogy of multiliteracies to be fostered in contemporary educational settings. As it is argued, *functional* (understanding and interpreting various multimodal texts/representation products and their functionality in various sociocultural contexts) and *critical* literacy (interpreting and criticizing the ideological construction and purpose of the texts) has to be complemented by *creative* literacy, in order to make up a more comprehensive triptych, providing a definition of the concept of literacy which should be abided by in modern schooling. These three aspects of functional-critical-creative literacy respond to all representation activities in which the modern social Subject is involved, throughout the daily communication and interaction with the environment: from the production of written or oral discourse, to the audio, visual, digital interaction and meaning-making, in various representation codes.

**Keywords:** Creative literacy, pedagogy of multiliteracies, literature, creative writing.

### INTRODUCTION: THE DEFINITION OF LITERACY

Literacy encompasses a wide range of skills and knowledge which modern man has to master, in order to be an adequate and effective communicator in changing settings of human interaction. Over the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the above term, as used in international bibliography, has undergone the process of semantic broadening to meet the needs of this continuous expansion. Writing and reading constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure effective communication in all sorts of communicative situations of the modern sociocultural environment which are related to discourse in written, oral or digital form, and its various contexts (images, symbols, maps, sounds, music, videos and so on).

In this light, literacy does not only refer to the grasping and assimilation of vocabulary, grammar or syntax of a particular language and the out-of-context mechanistic production and comprehension of utterances incorporated in this particular language. Rather, it is mainly associated with the knowledge of cultural codes and conditions which enable man to utilize this specific language effectively and communicate ideas in a wide range of situations and contexts. Within the framework of a similarly expanded use of the term, the following premises may be accepted:<sup>1</sup>

- the representation and knowledge transfer, as well as individual and collective expression, are not exclusively or predominantly associated with print language, but employ various semiotic resources and meaning signification mechanisms. Thus, the term literacy incorporates additional semiotic modes and resources (visual, audio, electronic, digital), which do not merely form a multimodal ensemble along with

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<sup>1</sup> For the meaning, forms, content, types of literacy and their importance in educational and social contexts see Baynham (2002), Cope & Kalantzis (2000), Gee (1996), Kress (2003, 2010).

discourse, but intertwine with it, constituting various multimodal “texts” to be read and interpreted by modern man (Tyner 1998).

- literacy constitutes a compilation of knowledge and skills gradually acquired by the individual within formal, non-formal and informal education throughout his lifetime. The aforementioned knowledge and skills endorse his active and substantial involvement in social, financial, political and cultural practices associated with determining the individual and collective identity of modern man. Therefore, the advancement of literacy affects and is, at the same time affected by, social, economic and class-related factors and issues such as gender, race, age, profession, and so on.
- literacy grants the individual access and participation in other communities, collectivities and/or power groups which are different from the one he belongs to. It potentially constitutes not only a means of personal development and advancement within the context of a social group, but also a generator of social mobility.
- all in all, literacy is not merely a linguistic or educational term and concept, but it is inextricably linked to social, economic, political and ideological issues: it grants or declines access to knowledge, information and power.
- in modern multilingual and multicultural societies, the abundance of communicative situations generates substantial linguistic diversity. Literacy, therefore, is associated with various cultural fields, social practices, educational and scientific sectors where human communication occurs. Various types of literacy have emerged, such as school-related, academic, family, social, digital, information, visual, technological, economic, mathematical, moral, emotional, religious, environmental, media and others.<sup>2</sup> Multiliteracy is an umbrella term which encompasses various forms of literacy. Within the framework of the aforementioned fields, knowledge and skills which render the individual an active and effective partaker of them are determined, as well as the educational process leading to their acquisition, the aims and the means ensuring evaluation or the achievement of particular goals.

### THE FUNCTIONAL-CRITICAL-CREATIVE ASPECT OF LITERACY

As it is obvious from the above, literacy is no longer considered a confined, stagnant and impermeable system of knowledge and/or skills, but rather an open and ever-evolving process, which constantly interacts with the social and cultural environment of each historical moment. It is therefore an educational as well as a social and cultural concoction. Furthermore, all aspects and variations of literacy in the above-mentioned sociocultural fields are highlighted to signify on the one hand its *functional* dimension, as an instigator of the active involvement of the individual in social practices, collective values and institutions, and on the other hand its *critical* potential and momentum: the individual must be able to estimate and judge these particular practices, collective values and institutions, and also challenge them whenever he sees fit, within the context of a fair, democratic multicultural social co-existence.

This paper attempts to highlight and stress a new aspect of literacy, namely *creative literacy*, which must be fostered during the educational process, so that students meet the expectations of sociocultural conditions.<sup>3</sup> The definition of the term ‘creative literacy’ hinges on the

<sup>2</sup> In certain contexts the term ‘literacy’ appears to be misused, as a synonym for ‘aptitude’ or ‘intelligence’. However, it should be stressed that this particular term concerns (and should be confined to) language usage, as well as the production and intake of various text types, within the framework of the aforementioned sociopolitical practices and communicative situations, rather than cognitive, social or other skills, in general, which are not directly related to language.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘creative literacy’ was introduced by Woods (Woods 2001) and further elaborated on by Healey (Healey 2009, 2013, 2015).

following premise: besides the disambiguation and interpretation of, occasionally polysemous, reading material, the awareness of the ideological and cultural conditions which predetermined its formation, the grasping of the communicative and explicit, implicit and tacit purposes of a text and its function in particular social situations and practices, as well as the development of the reader's critical awareness of the above (*functional* and *critical literacy*), there is a compelling need for a 'creative' response to a text (*creative aspect*). Through creative activity, the individual has a better grasp of the original text and the meaning signification mechanisms involved, and at the same time his critical thinking skills are enhanced as a result of utilizing the same or similar meaning signification mechanisms for the formation of new 'texts' (in a broader sense of the term), employing similar or alternative representation modes (written, electronic, oral, acoustic, tactile, gestural etc.), for establishing the purpose and ideological framework of this text. Above all, innovation, initiative, and flexibility-enhancing skills are developed, which are essential if the individual is to meet the demands involved in modern economic production circumstances, in his participation in the community, as well as in the identity formation.

### **CREATIVE LITERACY AND THE PEDAGOGY OF MULTILITERACIES**

The spotlighting of the creative aspect of literacy stems from a fundamental change which has occurred over the past years with regard to social practices and representation modes. According to Cope & Kalantzis (2009: 172), modern man, in his capacity as a worker, citizen and person, is more and more required to be user, player, creator and discerning consumer rather than spectator, delegate, audience or quiescent consumer. He has to be able to navigate from one domain of social activity to another. A typical example elucidating this premise involves cases of interactive gaming narratives (Nintendo, PlayStation, X-Box, etc.). Children familiarize themselves with the idea of actively taking part as characters in immersive stories, making decisions on the characters' behalf, in other words having access to increased levels of agency. They get to decide what the outcome will be, i.e. determine the end of the story; therefore, they are co-authors of their own virtual reality rather than witnesses, autonomous players rather than spectators, users rather than readers of narrative (Gee 2003, 2005). Likewise, children can build their own song/ movie/video playlists instead of settling for the humdrum ready-to-use lists smugly provided by programmed TV, radio or CDs. They can search for and select various forms of online information and entertainment and have access to 'informal' channels of communication, download internet streamed videos and have access to products contrived by individuals (and not by companies or institutions), while they simultaneously create and upload their own digital products. In other words, they devise their own cultural products as well as their own communication channels, addressing an audience which they approve of and regard as important, usually peers who share their interests and have access to the same tech gadgets and devices.

The concept of creative literacy, therefore, is not only integrated in the theoretical framework of the *pedagogy of multiliteracies*, as postulated by the New London Group, but it is asserting a dominant place in it (Cope & Kalantzis 2000, Cope & Kalantzis 2009, New London Group 1996). In this context, the construction and reception of texts are not defined by means of replicated representational conventions, rendering the reader a passive recipient or a reproduction agent of received, sanctioned, acceptable and familiar representational forms (e.g. grammar rules and literary canons). On the contrary, a dynamic concept of representation as a 'Design', as a semantic schema or meaning-making device, both during sense making processes (reading, listening or viewing) and during communicative processes (writing, speaking or making pictures). *Design* is a concept encompassing three aspects, as viewed by multiliteracies:

- a) *Available Designs* – existing patterns and conventions of representation, in a certain cultural environment, found and findable resources for meaning (modes, genres, discourses),
- b) *Designing* – the active process of meaning construction, the device for putting to use, interpreting, (re)appropriating, disseminating, reconstructing and/or transforming Available Designs
- c) *The Redesigned* – the way in which man and the world are transformed through the process of *Designing* and the production of new *Available Designs*, as a result of the aforementioned process (Cope & Kalantzis 2009: 175-178, New London Group 1996).

Thus, at the heart of this new approach to multiliteracies lies the concept of creative *transformation*: learning is regarded as a process of recreation of the self, which promotes and brings about cultural dynamism and diversity. This transformative pedagogy of multiliteracies comprises the following knowledge processes (Cope & Kalantzis 2009: 184-186):

- *Experiencing*: the diverse experience the student brings to the learning situation (experiencing, and reflecting on, the known), as well as immersing in new situations, data and texts he/she is exposed to through education (experiencing the new),
  - *Conceptualizing*: the active and profound cognitive understanding, categorizing, generalizing, building of mental models or conceptual schemata (conceptualizing by naming and with theory),
  - *Analysing*: processes which entail functional and critical capacity, drawing conclusions, examining relationships between cause and effect, explaining patterns in text, exploring chains of reasoning, evaluating one's and other people's perspectives, interests, motives, etc. (analyzing functionally and critically), and
  - *Applying*: the application of knowledge and understanding to real world situations, testing their validity, and the innovative and creative interventions in the world, "making the world anew with fresh and creative forms of action and perception" (Cope & Kalantzis 2009: 186).
- Another aspect attached to the aforementioned ones is *weaving*, i.e. the process of oscillation back and forth between older practices, of turning back and building on previous knowledge and transforming it by bringing it to a new setting, a cross-connection leaving behind the outdated, one-size-fits-all curriculum intending to create uniformity.<sup>4</sup>

All things considered, the creative engagement and fruitful intervention to the learning process on the part of the student constitute a vital element for the configuration and the effectiveness of the process itself. According to Cope & Kalantzis (2009: 175), "literacy teaching is not about skills and competence; it is aimed at creating a kind of person, an active designer of meaning, with a sensibility open to differences, change and innovation. The logic of multiliteracies is one that recognizes that meaning making is an active, transformative process, and a pedagogy based on that recognition is more likely to open up viable life courses for a world of change and diversity."

Consequently, *understanding/interpreting* (close reading of various multimodal texts/representation products and their functionality in various sociocultural contexts), *criticism* (the detached interpretation of the ideological construction and purpose of the texts) and *creation* (creative response to the understanding/interpretation and criticism of the text)

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<sup>4</sup> The processes revise and enhance the framework of the four components of transformative pedagogy, namely *situated practice*, *overt instruction*, *critical framing* and *transformed practice* formulated by the New London Group (New London Group 1996). In a nutshell, *situated practice* has to do with experiencing, *overt instruction* with conceptualization, *critical framing* focuses on analyzing and *transformed practice* on applying (Cope & Kalantzis 2009: 187).

make up a more comprehensive triptych, providing a definition of the concept of literacy which should be abided by in modern schooling. These three aspects of functional-critical-creative literacy respond to all representation activities which the modern social Subject is involved in, throughout the daily communication and interaction with the environment: from the production of written or oral discourse, to the audio, visual, digital interaction and meaning-making, in various representation codes (Graff 1995, Woods 2001).

Creative response to various ‘texts’ which modern student-citizen is exposed to may assume an assortment of symbolic forms depending on the type of Discourse employed, the underlying (or desirable) role of the individual with regard to it, his critical standpoint, as well as the particular purpose and reasoning associated with the text. In other words, it may concern text building, employing the same or alternative semiotic codes, on the same or a different text format, within the context of the same or opposite attitude, of a similar or alternative communicative purpose and recipients. Their participation in the creative process therefore actively engages students not only in the mechanics of text-building but also of Discourse types altogether, as it is within their framework that the texts were built and conveyed a particular meaning in the first place. In other words, students have the chance to practice all potential processes that concern construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of meaning; decoding and recoding functions of various verbal and cultural texts. The individual is expected to be creative not only in terms of art and technology, but also in a wide range of social practices associated with his daily life, in a variety of semiotic modes and making the most of modern means which are at his disposal. Creative literacy aims at developing skills that the individual needs to meet the demands of his multi-dimensional role as *homo creans* under current sociocultural conditions (Eder 2016).

### **Creative literacy, literary representation and creative writing**

As for *literary discourse* in particular, creative literacy provides a new approach to literature as a whole and its merit as cultural capital. While the art of discourse during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having assumed the form of a top-notch and impermeable (western) canon, was associated, in terms of creation, with an elite group of the enlightened and the charismatic, and, in terms of interpretation and critical analysis, with a select few who constitute the knowledge aristocracy, creative literacy puts forward an alternative premise: it challenges what used to be the unquestionable authority of the author, regarding students as potential authors and granting them access to text formatting and meaning signification mechanisms. At the same time, the concept of literary genres and of conditions of literary production are considered to be ever-developing, permeable and negotiable categories; as a battlefield and friction point of conflicting aesthetic modes, interpretations and ideology, in which modern representation modes and means can be incorporated (for instance pop art and ‘pop culture’ products, non-fictional texts, movies, commercials etc.) (Healey 2009: 31, 2015).

In the light of the above, ‘creative writing’ within the school context is not addressed as a supplementary method or as an optional activity limited to literary didactics, but rather as a process of creative literacy, as educational policy and pedagogical philosophy which pervades produced educational work in its totality. Healey (2009: 29), postulated that creative literacy is “not only the ability to make literary works, but more generally: the ability to use language (along with visual images and many other media) to produce complex emotional and psychological states in an audience; the ability to think and communicate in associative, metaphorical, non-linear, non-hierarchical ways; the ability to craft evocative stories with fully



realized characters, personas, voices; the ability to manipulate or destabilize received meanings and to produce new meanings.”<sup>5</sup>

Creative literacy draws from and simultaneously fuels divergent and innovative thinking, being impervious to conventional schemata and putting forward alternative perspectives and newfangled data combinations, which is a quality deemed essential in modern socioeconomic circumstances. The skills which are acquired and enhanced within its context are not only pertaining to literature, but also to all text formats and scientific domains associated with the crafting and interpretation of texts: language-related subjects (ancient and modern Greek, foreign languages), history, social sciences, philosophy but also geography, science and so on (Healey 2013). The texts which are forged within the context of the aforementioned factors, should be addressed taking all three aspects of literacy into consideration: functional, critical and creative. Students must be encouraged to delve into the communicative function, the rhetoric and the ideological perspectives and patterns of the above texts; to detect the ‘authority’ which derives from the texts – and which is forwarded by them, as well as the ideas they intend to shed light to and convey to the world; to adopt a critical perspective when addressing the ‘plot’ of all types of narratives which are crafted in a wide variety of discourse types; to creatively reconstruct the aforementioned narratives and put forward their own representations, bearing in mind the experience, interests, standpoints, values, worldview and ideology – their place in the world as individuals and social subjects, in an eloquent, convincing way, which is appealing to the recipients of the forged ‘texts’. First and foremost, however, they must realize the responsibilities involved in articulation as an act of communication and social transaction, and come to terms with the fact that the texts they produce are bound to be reviewed and possibly criticized by their recipients.

### **CREATIVE LITERACY AND LITERARY GENRE**

An additional shift which has to be taken into consideration within the context of creative literacy is the semantic broadening of the term text, or in particular, literary genre, in modern cultural and technological conditions. The art of discourse may be created, conveyed, perceived and grasped in various forms by means of numerous semiotic resources and representation modes; it may be the product of a combination of various modes such as visual (still and moving image), audio (music), gestural (motion), spatial (dancing); it may be produced and delivered in the form of an oral, visual, digital text or even hypertext, using a variety of delivery channels through assorted media platforms (book, magazine-print or digital-internet, poster, graffiti, text messages, emails, blogs, twit, wiki, social media posts, chat rooms, blogspots, YouTube etc.). New technology has not only had an impact on the definition of text format but also on literary standards and the media platforms employed. Technology has become the part of the environment within which literary representations are crafted, but it has also transformed literary studies and literary criticism (Earhart 2015, Hammond 2016, Hayles 2010 Hockey

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<sup>5</sup> According to the same researcher, the term ‘literary literacy’ also refers to a modern dominant production tool in post-industrial American economy. At the same time, it defines the new ‘middle class’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a more and more potent agent of subject configuration, of access to social power, and of elevation and integration into this class (Healey 2009: 29 - 43). In this sense, “Creative literacy is perhaps not so much a shift from consumption to production, then, as the full realization of consumption-as-production, and the creative subject has increasing opportunity to be active and generative. If the mid-twentieth century subject asserted some creative agency in the way she read certain books, watched certain movies, and wore certain clothes, today ordinary middle-class people have access to a wider range of techniques and technologies to more actively produce a social identity”. However, “the new creative subject is less interested in making permanent objects of art or literature but celebrates the performative, the ephemeral, the spontaneous, the simulated, and the absent” (Healey 2009: 41).

2000). ‘Literariness’ under the current circumstances must be regarded as an ‘act’, within the context of a communication process. The definition of the literary genre must be expanded, so it is no longer confined to the traditional definition and perception of it; it does not only consist of ready-made *texts* (i.e. written pieces woven/crafted in advance), but also of texts-in-the-making, of ‘events’ created, actualized and activated as performed and received. The literary ‘product’ can therefore be more or less tangible or intangible, more or less interactive or non-interactive, more or less fluid or nonfluid. It can employ one or multiple semiotic resources; it can be long lasting or ephemeral – its life span coinciding with its reception time.

## CONCLUSION

As was demonstrated above, fostering creative, in addition to functional and critical, literacy in education is an issue of crucial importance, as it helps students realize not only their role as recipients of various texts but also their capacity – and right of – becoming authors, making the most of numerous representation media. Therefore, within the context of creative literacy, students are expected to grasp their standpoint and responsibilities as subjects and objects of diverse discourse modes and social practices, throughout a process of recurring acts of reading and re-writing the world (Freire & Macedo 1987).

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