

Literacy. An introduction

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In order to better grasp the complexity of (mediation of) culture the concept of literacy is taken as a starting point. To grasp the concept of literacy is very complex, because the concept has received different meanings through time and space, as well as different accents from various perspectives, disciplines and contexts. One of the ways to give meaning to the concept is by starting from the recent debate around the crisis of literacy. After all, since that crisis – in the eighties of the last century – a proliferation of books and conferences with the word literacy in their captions can be noticed. Literacy received ample publicity as well, and usually in terms of ‘the decline of cultural literacy’: youngsters were no longer able to write properly, they would not know their classics any longer, let alone possess any historic knowledge or insight. In short, the attention was inspired by disquieting announcements about waning or otherwise reading and writing skills with pupils and adults and a fear for a constantly diminishing reading behaviour and the impact this might have on the written and literary intellectual culture (Soetaert & Top 1996). Through this double concern one can recognize the two extremes in between which the concept of literacy is defined: from ‘the basic skill of reading and writing’ to ‘reading and assimilating of higher culture’.

As Hannon states, until about a quarter of a century ago literacy was mainly linked up with illiteracy (Hannon 2000:1). In this view, it is about the lack of ‘reading and writing skills’ and the repercussion of this on the socio-economical situation of the people involved. To remedy this last issue, a basic curriculum needs to be developed with a uniform and standardized set of basic skills, and matching unambiguous criteria, exact measurements and qualifications. The determining factor in this view on literacy was the belief in an ideologically neutral instrument in the battle against exploitation and unemployment (Jacobs & Van Doorslaer 2000: 39). As functioning in society is the central issue, the concepts of ‘functional literacy’ and ‘functional illiteracy’ are often used in this view on literacy.

This largely ‘economical’ perspective on literacy does not suffice for an article which deals with the complexity of today’s culture, however. Even though this cannot be generalized, it is still a fact that a majority of the population in a western democracy master the basic skills of reading and writing to an adequate degree. In other words, how can the concept of literacy offer an interesting perspective on how youngsters and adults deal with ‘culture’?

In order to answer this question, literacy needs to be described in such a way that it portrays the complexity of (mediation of) culture in a post-modern society and questions the assumption that a majority of the population would be sufficiently literate. Many publications indeed reject the view of literacy as ‘basic command of reading and writing skills’. Attempts to get past this definition, however, have turned the term into an umbrella concept which carries a lot of meanings, and can now stand for just about anything.

We will start this complex story with a reconstruction of the debate around the concept of ‘cultural literacy’. A somewhat strange concept, perhaps, since one can wonder if not any form of literacy is the product of a specific cultural environment. Quoting Meijer: “One never merely acquires a formal skill, but always a culture as well. Literacy is always cultural literacy” (1996:19). The concept has persevered because the adjective ‘cultural’ makes it clear that people are talking about contents, while the term literacy tout court usually indicates skills. It was precisely this dichotomy which in the eighties was the stake of a debate which not just constructed the meaning of a term like ‘cultural literacy’, but at the same time gave rise to an exponential increase of the number of publications focusing on ‘(cultural) literacy’.

1. Cultural literacy

The rise of the term ‘cultural literacy’ is the immediate consequence of a overall increased annoyance over the ‘deterioration’ of the knowledge of the traditional western cultural heritage. During the Reagan administration a debate started in the United States in which neoconservative forces in education and publications held the ideals from the sixties (power to imagination, educate for responsibility, teach skills) responsible for the putative cultural decline. ‘Back to Basics’ ideologists defended the importance of the cultural heritage they identify with traditional, national, moral and religious values. The return to tradition was thrown up as the nation’s cement against the modern relativization of values.

The most popular complaint no doubt was that of the decline of the reading culture. In *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1982) the American media ecologist Neil Postman suggested that through television reading would disappear altogether. It was claimed that the youngsters didn’t read (enough) anymore. After all, reading takes time and effort, and youngsters could or would no longer bring up the effort when culture can be consumed ‘more easily’ through the (popular) video and music culture. Postman’s critique was no less influential on the dominance and influence of the television a few years later, with *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Postman 1985): youngsters have been spoon-fed since their early childhood that everything should be fun, and this way a form of communication which has baleful influence on the school culture is interiorised.

In 1987 Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* becomes an international success. It reads like a plea for the book, and by this Bloom means the classics of our western culture (a tradition he begins with Plato). The message is clear: the classics should be read and defended by a small elite. This study should be taken seriously again, and should not be continuously interrupted by the May 68 ideals of social engagement or systematic critical distrust. Bloom further leads a crusade against

something he calls typically modern: a relativistic feeling of life without any room left for traditional values. There is only one certainty at the American universities, Bloom complains, namely that there are nothing is certain anymore. Out of a fanatic belief in the importance of openness, the renewal tries to avert any form of absolutism. The democratic, 'open', autonomous person is the target of the renewal movement from the seventies. Bloom was irritated by this openness which, according to him, led to a dangerous relativism. This is where Bloom situates the roots of the crisis: when there are no shared goals anymore nor any common vision, then the possibility for social contact vanishes. Bloom's complaint comes down to a paradox: the much-praised openness eventually leads to shattered prejudices, but offers nothing in return. This way, one doubts before one knows. Apart from this, Bloom's complaint addresses the entire modern society. Especially the modern youngsters had to suffer for it. They would be bent on instant satisfaction, and not yield enough power to invest or to be interested in the aims in the long run. The extreme audience orientation of the mass media can be found back at school in an extreme pupil orientation with pleasure as a main objective. Each and every time the message reads: blame education for the cultural decline, and particularly blame the progressive teaching methodologies.

A third person to formulate a practical answer to Bloom's complaint is E.D. Hirsch Jr., in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987). Hirsch offers a possible solution for the 'collective loss of memory': a list of names and terms that every literate person should know. The book was such a success that one year later together with Kett and Trefil he publishes a more comprehensive, thematically ordered list of 'what every American needs to know': *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Hirsch, Kett & Trefil 1988). With his book E.D. Hirsch Jr. is no doubt one of the most discussed preachers of the back-to-basics vision. His book was not just a bestseller, but also elicited a lot of reactions. On top of this he was able to establish the terms of the debate – cultural literacy – through the title of his book. Until today Hirsch keeps on defending and – what is more – practicing his ideas.

Hirsch states explicitly what kind of cultural literacy he has in mind. It is the knowledge, according to Hirsch, of which it is expected that the school passes it on; knowledge at a level above the average shared by everyone, and below the level of expertise of specialists. In particular, Hirsch refers to the reader of books and newspapers, the "common reader, that is, a person who knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture" (Hirsch 1987: 13).

The stress is on the literary culture because it is the most democratic culture, because no-one is excluded: "it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one's first culture, but it should be everyone's second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region" (Hirsch 1987: 21). This culture is necessary for a full citizenship. Hirsch says that becoming a member is easier when one knows this literacy.

The vision on (mediation of) culture presented by Hirsch is one that presupposes that culture equals knowledge of facts, that culture is something like a whole of ideas, explanations, references, in short a 'discourse' that certain people in the past mastered and which amounts to the western civilization. A revival of this shared knowledge would restore "the quality of yesterday's life (...), a life of greater moral and clarity and

social cohesion, less pollution and crime, more respect - respect for legitimate authority and respect for created beauty" (Lauter 1991: 263).

Still since Hirsch one cannot overlook the problem of culture anymore. And this also shows with the critics mentioned previously. A close lecture time and again brings up – somewhat hidden in between the many attacks – indications that Hirsch's claim is important after all.

Since 'back to basics', what one learns has become the subject of the debate again for left and right, after the how – method, motivation – in particular had been the central issue. As such the debate has led to the insight that (cultural) literacy is no longer an unquestionable, generally accepted unity of 'basics' like 'back to basics' implies, but should be interpreted in a broader way. Nobody talks 'empty': contents, tradition and community formation are essential aspects of communication.

2. Socio-cultural perspectives on literacy

In Hirsch's vision on cultural literacy there is a manifest lack of insight in the complexity of literacy in a global and multicultural world, because it focuses on one type of knowledge (facts and titbits) and comprising the cultural heritage of only one part of one nation (the United States, or the 'Western civilisation' by extension). For that matter, everybody knows that we cannot just turn back the clock: the 'basics' of today are different from yesterday's or tomorrow's.

Who is to determine what counts as 'higher knowledge' anyway? (Bruner 1986:142) When one – like Hirsch – wants to establish an ideal one always arrives at the same question: whose ideal? Whose culture? Whose literacy? An interpretation of that question somewhat more complex than the dichotomy knowledge versus skills, comes from a number of socio-cultural perspectives on culture and literacy: "he [Hirsch] is right" says Gee, "that without having mastered an extensive list of trivialities people can be (and often are) excluded from 'goods' controlled by dominant groups in the society; he is wrong that this can be taught (in a classroom of all places!) apart from the socially situated practices that these groups have incorporated into their homes and daily lives" (1990: 149).

The step of cultural literacy towards culture implies a sliding towards a broader perspective: from a knowledge domain (reading and writing education, literature) to the public sphere. An interesting development of the last decennium is the rise of an own field, an own discipline: multiliteracies. From this concept anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, etc, debate about literacy framed in a broad social perspective with social and political as well as pedagogical aspects.

Social aspects of literacy were among others studied by sociologists and social anthropologists. They researched how on the one hand literacy 'influences' man and society (Havelock 1963; Goody 1977; Ong 1982), on the other hand how man and society 'use' literacy in specific contexts (Heath 1983; Scribner & Cole 1981; Street 1984; Barton 1994). The first honour an evolutionist perspective and see people and societies evolve according to a linear, irreversible process. Literacy is seen as a confirmation and indicator of progress. The last see literacy in a 'contextual approach': literacy practices differ within the contexts of different societies, cultures and groups.

2.1. The importance of ‘writing’

Since the beginning of the twentieth century anthropology has the dichotomy ‘primitive’ versus ‘civilised’ as a central issue (Mead 1928, Lévi-Strauss 1955, among others). In *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) Lévi-Strauss puts that there are two strategic levels on which nature can be conquered by scientific knowledge. The one level is that of immediate perception and imagination; the second is far less tied to this. The first – the concrete thinking – is the way in which a lot of ‘primitive’ societies introduce order; the second – the science of the abstract – can be found in ‘modern’ civilisations. The question (that Lévi-Strauss does not ask) remains: how does a culture evolve from the one level to the other? For Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and Walter Ong ‘literacy’ and the invention of writing in particular is the answer.

Eric Havelock sketches in *Preface to Plato* (1963) the changes in the Greek thinking and the Greek culture in connection with the development of the practice of writing. Writing made man independent from the limitations of the oral culture: the situational restrictions, the human memory and the mnemotechnic tools (e.g. rhythm). In a further stage written language allows for a distantiation from the one who speaks or writes the words. Through this distantiation, demonstrated visually by the script, the condition for reflection has been given and new forms of thinking, judging, summarizing and comparing, etc, become possible. In other words, we get “an abstract language of descriptive science to replace a concrete language of oral memory” (Havelock 1963: 209).

In *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* Goody (1977) argues that the characteristic qualities associated with ‘primitive’ or ‘civilised’ society coincide with changes in the possibilities and modes of communication, in particular with changes brought forth by the written culture. Goody claims that the abstract (non personal) character of written communication had far-reaching consequences: the development of logic, the difference between myth and history, the rise of scepticism and the ability to criticize and modify dogmas.

Walter Ong offers arguments similar to those offered by Havelock and Goody in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), and goes into the recent history of media at the same time. Ong describes and compares the transition from an oral culture to a written culture. Initially there was a long transition period where the written culture shared many properties with the oral culture. According to Walter Ong it is only since the advent of the art of printing that the properties specific to writing start to overtake the oral properties that were still present. The printed book led to even more closed and linear forms of narrative and argumentation. The text became a closed universe. Ong shortly deals with the multimedial culture which has established itself dominantly in the western culture, even though not merely there, since the Second World War. Ong defends the thesis that we are dealing with a second orality here. Thanks to radio, television and film the spoken word has become an important medium for transfer of knowledge again. But “without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations. In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing” (Ong 1982: 14).

With the conceptions of Havelock, Goody and Ong the human history can be described as an evolution of orality towards written culture; a development which has brought

about penetrative transformations of the human cognitive structure and where in particular the advent of the alphabet and the written culture have brought important epistemological, cultural and historical changes. The critique on their propositions can be summarized under these three headings: evolutionism, reductionism and dualism. After all, their theories describe orality as something which has not yet fully developed, while the 'scriptification' is seen as a linear, irreversible process as well as an autonomous factor which in itself would lead to a restructuring of consciousness, logic, rationality and command over the world. This invokes reproaches of reductionism, and one historic development in particular is raised to the sole cause of very diverse and complex developments. Lastly there is also the attempt to force reality into a dual model of 'oral' versus 'written culture', ignoring the complexity of oral traditions and written culture, as well as the differences within and between different cultures. In short, the arguments presented by Havelock, Goody and Ong vary around the thesis that literacy is responsible for the 'great divide' (Finnigan 1973) between individuals (illiterate vs. literate) and cultures (oral culture vs. written culture). As such Lévy-Strauss's reformulation of the dichotomy primitive versus civilized to abstract and concrete thinking has been reformulated, only now in terms of literacy.

2.2. The 'ideological' model and the 'literacy myth'

Since 1980 research is published in which literacy is described as a social practice, since it is embedded in the specific context of the language user(s) and this from different disciplines: psychology (Scribner & Cole 1981), history (Graff 1979), social anthropology (Heath 1983; Street 1984, 1995), linguistics (Stubbs 1980) and socio-linguistics (Gee 1996). Their interest lies in how people use literacy, rather than how literacy influences people. As such relations are investigated between for instance literacy practices at home as well as at school (Stubbs 1980). The meaning of literacy in specific societies varies depending on the importance attached to literacy by a society or a group within that society (Heath 1983). As such, the definition of literacy in this vision will differ geographically and through time.

Brian Street describes this 'evolutionist' and 'contextual' vision on literacy in opposition to 'autonomous' and 'ideological' (1995). Opposed to the 'autonomous' model we find with Havelock, Goody and Ong, Brian Street has formulated an 'ideological' model. He puts the differences between orality and the written culture into perspective, and turns down universally valid properties for both forms of communication: "If there is any universal pattern to be discerned, it is that both oral and written tradition combine the continual reworking of key 'texts' with the continual assertion that each new version is fixed, immutable and thereby authoritative" (Street 1984: 102). Both traditions are equally flexible or inflexible and offer as much room for logic, abstraction or objectivity. Writing is no neutral datum; people who research 'writing cultures' needs to ask themselves which social elite benefits from raising the script to something trustworthy, and what ideology underlies all of this. In this model the stress is not so much on the technical aspects of literacy, rather than on the cultural and political-economical context in which literacy functions. More concretely this means that Street starts from existing local literacies in his projects, and takes into account the concrete needs of the (local) population, and considers literacy based on this all. After all, Street claims, no one is illiterate, there are merely different sorts of literacies. Literacy is described as a construction, as something which only gets meaning in a specific context. Time and place determine how we fill in what we mean by literacy. Therefore literacy is an ideology as well. Street stresses in his 'ideological'

model the power aspect which is connected with literacy: the western literacy has become very dominant and is forced upon many peoples (through colonization, for instance) (Street 1995). Until today international organizations that are engaged in literacy practices often claim that a certain degree of (western) literacy is required to come to a modern economic development. Literacy would yield more jobs and would improve the social mobility. Brian Street refutes this by pointing out 'hidden' motives. Illiterate people are stopped, not because they are illiterate, but because of social and ethnic reasons. As such Street links up with Harvey Graff's work, who has reconstructed the western history of literacy in *The Literacy Myth* (1979) and in *The Legacies of Literacy* (1987), and has tackled the myths associated with it. After all, just like there is a historic tradition which describes the (rising) development of the western rationality and culture, there is also a progressive belief which links literacy to economical improvement and democracy. Graff could not find a historic legitimation for this: "The reality [of national literacy movements] is more complex, is harder to face politically... the level of literacy is less important than issues of class, gender, and ethnicity; lack of literacy is more likely to be a symptom of poverty and deprivation than a cause" (Graff 1979: 18)ⁱ.

2.3. The 'social turn': Which literacy?

The problematization of the concept 'literacy' has since the beginning of the nineties of the past century led to the claim to break down the 'autonomous' thinking about literacy and to devote more attention to diversity (Stuckey 1991, Meek 1991; Bizzell 1991). Not much later many publications illustrate this complex vision of what traditionally is referred to as the (cultural) literacy, by adding the plural 'literacies' to the title (Street 1995; Gee 1996; Lankshear et al. 1997)ⁱⁱ.

Gee puts the attention for the complexity of the embedding of literacy in the social context within a broader trend in the social and human sciences, and talks about the 'social turn', where the focus shifts from theory and research by the individual to attention for interaction and social practices (Gee 2000:180-196). Literacy is no longer described as a neutral and individual cognitive or technical skill, but rather as a 'socially situated practice': "Each Discourse involves ways of talking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing, as well as the spaces and material 'props' the group uses to carry out its social practices. Discourses integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions and clothes" (Gee 1996: 127). Literacy is here described within a definition of discourse: 'Discourses' (Gee writes it with a capital to make the distinction with common language practices or daily conversations) are "our identity kits". Depending on the situation or the network in which one finds oneself, we make use of a 'kit', a tool to acquire new knowledge. Literacy has to do with mastering a specific kind of discourse, a skill which allows us to successfully communicate. The basic skills of reading and writing no longer suffice to be qualified as 'literate'; after all one can be literate in one discourse, and illiterate in another. Barton (1994:189) relates different kinds of literacies with different domains, such as the family, school, religion and work.

When literacy is defined within continuously changing social, cultural and political contexts, it becomes dependent on time and space, and a link is made between literacy and identity. The term literacy receives as such meaning in different societal domains. The list of domains where literacy is applied now is nearly endless: media literacy, visual literacy, environmental literacy, digital literacy, multicultural literacy, etc.ⁱⁱⁱ

In what follows we will plead for multiliteracies which can be seen as a meta-literacy which enables someone to switch to various forms of literacy. Therefore it seems necessary to devote a lot of attention to the literacy which is dominant in a particular society or context. This last aspect is of particular importance when one wants to participate to the debate about and on power. From a pragmatic point of view it could be recommendable to learn the dominant literacy as a 'toolkit'.

In any case it is safe to claim that all visions on literacy are embedded in a context.

2.4. Multiliteracies

In the nineties there was a remarkable interest for development of theories focussing on the concept of 'multiliteracies' and a growing number of studies illustrated the complex way in which variables like social class, gender, age and ethnicity influence this development (Freebody 1993; Heath & Mangiola 1991; Mangubhai 1993; Walton 1993). This international interest is particularly obvious in the cooperation of Australian, American and British researchers within the international Multiliteracies Project (New London Group 1996). They research not only literacy practices, but are equally interested in the implications for the curriculum and for pedagogy. The concept 'multiliteracies' was introduced by the New London Group to mark two important shifts in thinking about literacy. On the one hand there is the increasing pluriformity and integration of "significant modes of meaning-making, where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral,..." (New London Group 1996: 64). After all, especially through the integration of new media and the internet some new literacies imply qualitative new steps in the human communication. On the other hand the concept of multiliteracies focuses on the "realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness" (ib. 64). This plural reflects therefore also the complexity and the polysemic, pluralistic character of the access to the discourse of work, power, community and the critical engagement that goes with it, to develop a proper vision and practice.

During a conference in New London in 1994 a group of scientists developed a number of ideas which discharged into a commonly published manifesto which describes a few hypotheses with regard to the literacy which will be expected from their students in the future^{iv}.

The outcomes of their discussions were summarized under one heading, 'multiliteracies': "a word we chose to describe two important arguments we might have with the emerging cultural, institutional, and global order: the multiplicity of communication channels and media, and the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (New London Group 1996: 63). They claim that the languages one needs to be able to attribute meaning are changing dramatically in three different spheres of our life at this moment: at work, in our public life and in our private life. They summarize these changes as follows:

	Changing realities	Designing social functions
Working lives	Fast capitalism/post-fordism	Productive diversity
Public lives	Decline of the civic	Civic pluralism
Private lives	Invasion of private space	Multilayered lifeworlds

(New London Group 1996: 71)

The changes in the first sphere primarily include an equalization of the relations, next to an increasing flexibility: the vertical hierarchy is more and more replaced by loose cooperatives and teamwork. Such teamwork heavily relies on the use of informal, oral and interpersonal discourses. More and more people have to assert their opinions and negotiate. Furthermore, uniformity is less and less pursued, to the advantage of diversity. One can easily spot the discourse of management enter education: knowledge worker, learning organisation, teamwork, network, and so on. Educational innovation seems to be inspired by these new competencies which are required to function in new work environments. Education needs to do more than to play along with economic needs; people expect good education to critically reflect on this market-oriented thinking.

On top of this, in the public sphere the monocultural, nationalistic attitude towards citizenship is crumbling down, to the benefit of what the New London Group (1996) calls ‘civic pluralism’: in the public sphere as well, people should learn to cope with diversity and differences. Through mass media, but also through the increasing globalisation, the public sphere is more and more entering the private sphere, to the extent that one could talk about the ‘end of the public’. A broader cultural and linguistic repertoire is expected from the citizen to achieve this – broader than before when the state put forward one standard as the ideal (and with which the traditional educational system agreed).

At the same time the private sphere becomes more and more a public matter. Private and public gradually grade. Finally someone can belong to different networks or subcultures, so that everyone creates their own identities. These differences can also be described as ‘lifestyles’ in which again the (capitalist) market in general and the mass media in particular play a dominant role. These evolutions have among others this result: “As lifeworlds become more divergent and their boundaries more blurred, the central fact of language becomes the multiplicity of meanings and their continual intersection” (New London Group 1996: 71).

The concept of multiliteracies which was developed by the New London Group tries to link up with the recent societal developments, and therefore with the new demands required of literacy. It is a concept which tries to offer an answer to the disintegration discussed before: literacy can mean almost anything, with the possible risk that it becomes meaningless. The New London Group tries to offer an answer to this disintegration through the development of a concept that does not shy away from diversity. Not just the multitude of cultures, but also the multitude of text forms and discourses is integrated in their vision. The fact that they recognize the ideology which backs up literacy – or literacies – is also not unimportant: a discourse is a construction of reality, and more so from a particular perspective. Behind that perspective you will

find interests. Language is the most important vehicle to defend these interests, possibly by hiding them: “Grammar needs to be seen as a range of choices one makes in designing communication for specific ends, including greater recruitment of nonverbal features. These choices, however, need to be seen not as just a matter of individual style or intention, but as inherently connected to different discourses with their wider interests and relationships of power” (New London Group 1996: 79). This vision shows an affinity with Foucault’s vision on discourse and power: “One further implication might be that the acquisition of social identities is a process of immersion into discursive practice and being subjected to discursive practice” (Slembrouck 2003). The New London Group does, however, push the influence of similar discursive systems less far than Foucault, who claims that an autonomously thinking subject is an illusion. Foucault does not recognize ‘ideology’ as such, since truth to him is merely a discursive construction. The New London Group still anticipate a subject with a possibility for choice. They do, however, link up with the vision on truth as a construction, and power as a skill with which to dominate or manipulate the discourse.

The members of the New London Group added to their insights a new pedagogy as well, more specifically an addition of traditional pedagogies. After all many educational reforms seem to go along with new economic needs, but neglect the development of a critical perspective on these developments. The school is the institution par excellence to offer this critical perspective because it regulates the access to specific discourses: “Schools regulate access to orders of discourse – the relationship of discourses in a particular social space – to symbolic capital – symbolic meanings that have currency in access to employment, political power, and cultural recognition” (New London Group 1996: 71-72). According to them the school should no longer tame the pupils or advance social reproduction. For that matter, it has been pointed out before that literacy is a social construction, which can be aimed at maintaining social hierarchies. On the contrary, they should handle a “pedagogy of access”, where a pluralistic epistemology is developed “without people having to erase or leave behind different subjectivities” (New London Group 1996: 72). Creativity and cooperation should therefore be stimulated. Furthermore access to the media should be guaranteed, and a critical discussion about plurality and changing lifeworlds should not be avoided.

3. Conclusion

Various kinds of literacy have been and still are ‘discovered’. As such we get on the one hand the possibility to play along with cultural changes, on the one hand the concept covers so many meanings that it becomes difficult to handle. Still one can notice a number of changes when we map out the evolution of the meaning of the concept of literacy during the last few decennia:

- from functional literacies like basic reading and writing to oral and visual communication, including media skills;
- from an ‘assessment of arrears with individuals’ to the unlimited number of possibilities for the individual to position themselves in society;
- from an ‘individually, psychologically, cognitively describable skill’ to a literacy where all environmental factors should be taken into account;
- from a ‘neutral skill’ to an ideologically laden concept – because keeping in mind institutions and relations of power.

With this, Hirsch's claim as would there be a 'stable' shared knowledge is clearly brought down. Still the idea of a basic knowledge and the importance of a shared knowledge should not be rejected just like that. As Bizzell notes, "if no unimpeachable authority and transcendent truth exist, this does not mean that no respectable authority and no usable truth exist" (1998: 375-376). In other words, not all literacies are equal, because this would lead to a *laissez-faire* attitude. It is equally true that specific forms of critical literacy often give rise to a new form of fundamentalism. From this point of view one can see that Hirsch opts for a pragmatic solution and many of his critics for an idealistic – because often much less concrete – solution. After all, in a train of thought that renounces every authority and only takes into account the own autonomy, very soon all literacies are suspect. Only a standoffish attitude can be adopted, and it cripples every action beforehand. Nevertheless this is exactly a crucial element of cultural mediation: action.

The New London Group certainly does not avoid this question. One thing that can be attributed to the Group is their strategic optimism. The New London Group again breathes life into the modernist creed – that education can mean difference: the way in which curriculum and pedagogy are 'designed' determine "our social futures" (1996: 89).

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ⁱ This message has been problematized for a long time already, in the sphere of developmental cooperation, for instance, by Freire in *Cultural Action for Freedom* (1970) in which the process to adult literacy is described as a battle for freedom. But literacy as such does not offer any guarantees: “Merely teaching men to read and write does not work miracles – if there are not enough jobs for men able to work, teaching more men to read and write will not create them” (Freire 1970: 25). Becoming literate implies more than decoding written signs. It is a complex knowledge process in which the learner also critically reflects on the culture in which s/he lives.

ⁱⁱ Some ‘enlightened’ authors realized earlier than others the pluriformity of literacies: in his famous work *The uses of Literacy* (1969) Hoggart wrote exactly about ‘uses’ – in plural.

ⁱⁱⁱ The number of articles published recently in which new literacies are ‘discovered’ increases all the time. While writing his dissertation, Mottart encountered among others African American Literacies (Richardson 2002); City Literacies (Gregory, & Williams 2000); Global Literacies and the World Wide Web (Hawischer et al. 1999); Literacies Across Media (Mackey 2002); Local Literacies (Barton & Hamilton 1998); Silicon Literacies; (Snyder 2002); Situated Literacies (Barton et al. 1999); Electronic literacies. *Language, Culture, and Power in Online Education* (Warschauer 1999).

iv The New London Group met in New London (New Hampshire, USA) from 6 till 11 September 1994. Their manifesto was published in 1996 (New London Group 1996). The group consists of:
Prof. Courtney Cazden, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, USA
Dr. Bill Cope, Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia
Prof. Norman Fairclough, Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster University, UK
Prof. Jim Gee, Hiatt Center for Urban Education, Clark University, Massachusetts, USA
Prof. Mary Kalantzis, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia
Prof. Gunther Kress, Institute of Education, University of London, UK
Joseph Lo Bianco, National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia
Prof. Allan Luke, Graduate School of Education, University of Queensland, Australia
Assoc. Prof. Carmen Luke, Graduate School of Education, University of Queensland, Australia
Sarah Michaels, Hiatt Center for Urban Education, Clark University, Massachusetts, USA
Martin Nakata, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia