

## Literacy in the Contemporary Scene / *Letramento na contemporaneidade*

Angela B. Kleiman\*

### ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine the relationship between literacy and contemporaneity. I take as a point of departure for my discussion school literacy and its links with literacies in other institutions of the contemporary scene, in order to determine the relation between contemporary ends of reading and writing (in other words, the meaning of being literate in contemporary society) and the practices and activities effectively realized at school in order to reach those objectives. Using various examples from teaching and learning situations, I discuss digital literacy practices and multimodal texts and multiliteracies from both printed and digital cultures. Throughout, I keep as a background for the discussion the functions and objectives of school literacy and the professional training of teachers who would like to be effective literacy agents in the contemporary world.

**KEYWORDS:** School Literacy; Digital Culture; Multimodality

### RESUMO

*Neste trabalho examino a relação entre letramento e contemporaneidade, tomando como base para a discussão o letramento no mundo escolar e sua relação com os letramentos de outras instituições do mundo contemporâneo, a fim de determinar as relações entre as finalidades contemporâneas da leitura e da escrita (em outras palavras, o que significa ser letrado na contemporaneidade) e as práticas mobilizadas e as atividades realizadas na escola para atingir essas finalidades. Através de diversos exemplos de situações de ensino e de aprendizagem, são discutidas práticas de letramento digital e textos multimodais, os multiletramentos das culturas impressa e digital, mantendo como pano de fundo da discussão os objetivos e funções do letramento escolar e a formação do professor que quer efetivamente atuar como agente de letramento do mundo contemporâneo.*

**PALAVRAS- CHAVE:** *Letramento escolar; Cultura digital; Multimodalidade*

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\* Universidade Estadual de Campinas - UNICAMP, Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil; [akleiman@mpc.com.br](mailto:akleiman@mpc.com.br)

Recently I visited the night classes for Adult and Youth Education (EJA) in one of the best municipal schools in my city, with the purpose of taking pictures of their senior students. It was impossible not to make a comparison between the EJA classes I knew in 1991, when I started to research adult literacy education in a small bedroom community in the state of São Paulo and these of today. I observed these night classes for only one night, a rather small and not at all scientific sample, but it is without any scientific pretenses that I start this paper with my impressions today filtered through my experiences of almost a quarter of a century ago.

I was uneasy the whole night long and could not explain why, especially since today's classes were vastly superior to those observed in the 90's.<sup>1</sup> In today's school one could feel the respect for the student: well-lit classrooms, lunch, available didactic materials and resources, nothing locked or prohibited. Twenty-some years ago, EJA students were undesirable visitors in the school, and even the slightest traces of their nocturnal presence were erased: there were no names, birthday dates, or any other reminders of their presence in murals on the school walls or iconic resources used in the class. Although there were not any signs of the night students' occupation in the classrooms this time either, the interdiction was self-imposed: there was not any time for it, according to the teachers.

On the three classes I observed on that night, all the activities - reading and text interpretation using different semiotic systems - were relevant to advance the students' literacy, and the strategies used by the teachers were also adequate: use of previous knowledge to come up with reading hypotheses, dictionary use to discover the meanings of unknown words in the written text, production of a written paragraph interpreting a statement of the protagonist of a movie they had just watched. There were not, as in the past, desperate attempts to give an answer, any answer, to the students' questions; undoubtedly the teachers today do not believe that they have to be omniscient, and that is a healthy change if compared to the archaic behavior that does not make sense in this time of liquid post-modernity (BAUMAN, 2005), fluid, flexible and filled with uncertainties, when knowledge, which they can no longer assume as their property, is available at the stroke of a key.

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<sup>1</sup> These classes, memorable because of the inadequate training of the teachers, were discussed at length in a book in which all the participants, including the EJA teachers, participated. See Kleiman; Signorini et al. (2000).

I became aware that my discomfort was due to the emptiness of the four walls - the self-imposed absence of a literacy environment<sup>2</sup> - and to the nature of the class itself.<sup>3</sup> Regarding this, although the topics were relevant, the procedures eluded common sense: starting from the student's previous knowledge and culture is important, but staying on it, without advancing the topic, turns not only the class but the teacher irrelevant as well; using the dictionary is a useful practice for their whole life, but flipping page after page for several minutes because basic rules<sup>4</sup> about how to use it properly are unknown makes the activity lingering and wearisome. Interrupting a lively debate about the movie watched among the students, to go back to the written question and answer model (an action that can be based on a concept about writing in which orality and oral interaction are not relevant to learn to read and write) can be very frustrating for the students, since it ignores specific cinematographic language conventions that could be better explored.

If we focus on the conception of the teaching object - the written language - of these three classes, we can conclude that, although better prepared and more consistent from the point of view of the desired objectives, little has changed in a quarter of a century in relation to the contemporaneity of the written language practices mobilized at school: as it was in the 90's, today's school practices do not consider the space and time in which they happen, nor the subjects' history.

Actually, these practices do not date back just to that decade, but are indeed centenary: if today we do not use the blackboard anymore, or the "silabário" (syllable practicing book), or the mimeographed text; if the lesson changed its name from "rudimentary writing" (FRADE, 2011) to "beginning literacy," the concept of writing is still independent from the subject, from history, non-situated in time nor space, in total opposition to oral language usage. "Scientific modernity" has not been able to replace

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<sup>2</sup> We understand as literacy environment the physical environment of the classroom, with a large variety of books, newspapers and magazines available, with plenty of posters, texts, symbols and icons pleasantly displayed on the walls, thus making it a stimulating multimodal text; and a literacy agent (teacher, assistant, volunteer) who loves reading, knows how to tell stories, and feeds the student's desire and curiosity for writing.

<sup>3</sup> Literacy genre or event is a controversial distinction that is not relevant to our discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Such as: "the dictionary lists the singular form of the word," "the dictionary lists the infinitive, not the conjugated verbal form," "the alphabet principle applies to the whole word," just to mention those principles the ignorance of which disturbed the search of the students we observed.

literacy school practices from the beginning of last century<sup>5</sup> and it looks like it is also losing the battle today, since the social functions of reading are not guiding the teaching practices, which do not consider the purpose of using the written language, or the social context in which EJA courses usually take place.

Observations like these raise other questions about literacy in the school world, in relation to the literacies of other institutions in the contemporary world: What are the contemporary objectives of reading and writing in today's world? Which are the practices and activities carried out at school to achieve these objectives? What does it mean to be literate nowadays? Which reading social modalities may not be ignored by our contemporary world's institutions?

In the following sections we will discuss two aspects of literacy practices in the world today, keeping school literacy as background for the discussion.

## **1 The New Technologies**

When we speak about literacy in the contemporary world, digital literacy immediately comes to mind. But, in a society such as the Brazilian one, which is both simultaneously advanced technologically and has a huge percentage of unschooled or minimally schooled population, digital literacy issues cannot be dissociated from print literacy and from illiteracy (functional or dysfunctional) in large segments of the Brazilian population.

Due to the internet, nowadays an individual in front of his computer – here and now - may also be on the other side of the world. According to Kleiman and Vieira (2006, p.121), “the mobility and free transit, free from social ties, from geographical landscapes and from stratification, granted by this sort of cybernetic paradise, could certainly provide some kind of omnipotence to the individual.”<sup>6</sup> However, these identity re-compositions, based on access to information, are not universal, nor can they break the barriers that some institutions, like the school, have built over the years to safeguard

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<sup>5</sup> Not even in the 80's and 90's, according to Chartier (2011), who carried out an extensive study about the subject, from a historical perspective.

<sup>6</sup> Text in original: “a mobilidade e o livre trânsito, livre das amarras sociais, de contornos geográficos e da estratificação, por essa espécie de paraíso cibernético, certamente conferiria certa onipotência ao sujeito”.

ways of accessing knowledge consecrated by tradition. Breaking this mold is even harder when the digital access itself is considered.

Access to information is considered the watchword of the Internet Age. According to Santaella (2004, p.19),

A suggestive difference between information and durable goods lies in their replicability. Information is not a preserved quality. If I give you information, you have it and so do I. We go then from possession to access. This differs from possession because access searches for patterns instead of presences. It is because of this reason that the digital era has also been called the culture of access.<sup>7</sup>

Issues about digital access are not so evident when the availability of this technology seems to be present everywhere in public places of passage such as bus stations, airports, LAN houses and even schools, and when it seems that everybody can have a computer, cheaper with every passing day, and sophisticated cellular phones. However, recent studies, such as Kalman (2004) and Vianna (2009), show the importance of the appropriation strategies by individuals who want to enjoy the advantages of digital literacy. The appropriation process of a technology or of any other media resource - the access - depends on the strategies devised by the subjects themselves to use such technologies. The availability of these resources concerns the existing material conditions; without a personal construction, the available resource is unusable. There are many available resources to which, however, very few have access.

Such strategies are basically personal. Be it for work or leisure, or the registration of experiences, for study or for artistic expression; be it for reception or consumption, or for creation or distribution, the user builds, by himself, a personal and unique trajectory/journey in his search for information. According to Santaella (2004, p.15), the new technologies, and the means and languages created to make them usable, “have as their main characteristic, the capacity to provide personal choice and consumption, in complete opposition to massive consumption.”<sup>8</sup> And this, according to the same author, is a fundamental process of what she calls “digital culture.” The

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<sup>7</sup> Text in original: “Uma diferença significativa entre informação e bens duráveis está na replicabilidade. Informação não é uma qualidade conservada. Se eu lhe dou informação, você a tem e eu também. Passa-se aí da posse para o acesso. Este difere da posse porque o acesso vasculha padrões em lugar de presenças. É por essa razão que a era digital vem sendo também chamada de cultura do acesso”.

<sup>8</sup> Text in original: “têm como principal característica propiciar a escolha e consumo individualizados, em oposição ao consumo massivo”.

internet audience is not massified, but differentiated, segmented, dispersed, heterogeneous, as a result of the searches and personal choices provided by the new information technologies.

However, we should not forget that, at the same time, the digital experience is relational, dialogical, involving human relationships that are becoming wider and more complex. For some, such as Santaella (2004) - who approaches these transformations from a cultural point of view - they are revolutionary; for others, like Gergen (2000) - who assume a psychological perspective - they have the power, in principle, to dilacerate identities.

Let us look at two examples about the possibilities of a digital experience becoming meaningful - revolutionary or dilacerating - in a person's life, due to access strategies that are either taught or denied to him.

In the first example the school exercises and activities are responsible for closing whatever possibilities there might exist for the students' appropriation of a cultural practice. There is no transformation of a given cultural practice at school,<sup>9</sup> because of the enormous distance between the practice in social life from what is presented to the students. The social practices of the new digital literacies, that, in theory, could become part of other written practices, thus making access to the digital culture possible, cannot gain space in the classroom, because of the strength of literacy practices sustained by the school traditions, in one of the examples observed by Cavalcante (2013), which involved, nominally at least, the genre 'e-mail' in a school located in the northern state of Acre.

Cavalcante (2013) describes a sequence of activities that start with the teacher handing a photocopied text to each student – consisting of 'an e-mail' followed by some activities. After reading the text aloud, the teacher asked each student to copy the text in their notebooks, because they would need it to answer some interpretation questions in their next class. After this first class that involved copying and reading the text, Cavalcante informs us that the aforementioned teacher told the class that the genre to be studied was the 'e-mail'. Following this, he compared e-mails to letters; emphasizing elements related to text-structure, such as the vocatives used, the development of the body of the text, and closing elements, such as farewells and the sender's signature, and

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<sup>9</sup> As it usually happens when the practices from other institutions are introduced, because of the specific characteristics of the situation, such as the school objectives.

asserted that people who write e-mails do not worry about formal language. Soon after, he asked his students if anyone had ever written an e-mail, but did not establish a dialog with the two students who raised their hands to answer that they had. According to the researcher, the teacher continued his class by comparing the size of a cellular phone message and an e-mail. Later he revisited the text by asking what could be considered as the topic of the e-mail. A student offered an answer but, according to Cavalcante, the teacher read another answer previously prepared. He repeated the information that people who write e-mails “don’t care about grammar” and proceeded to read some words in the e-mail that corroborated this statement. He asked some oral questions about the text for the students to locate the information. He told the class that he himself “had little experience communicating through e-mails.” To end this class about genre, on the third day, he proposed to the students to write an e-mail, as was instructed in the photocopy. The teacher asked them to refrain from “writing just a sentence, it had to be a text of at least ten lines” and to pay attention to the content.” The students read their ‘e-mails’ in that same day.

From Cavalcante’s narrative it becomes evident that, among all the strategies the students could have developed in the previously described class, none of them involved becoming familiar with writing and receiving e-mails, as a tool to contact and communicate at a distance in a virtual world, as it is common in social life outside of school. The words in contemporary discourse acquire, in the teacher’s social voice, different meanings in the school communicative situation, filled with the voices from tradition, to whom the teacher is clearly giving an active answer (VOLOŠINOV, 1973).<sup>10</sup>

The second example, also from a learning situation, although not in a school,<sup>11</sup> shows that agencies other than the school can perform the digital culture insertion of those people that, despite being the focus of many social insertion policies, are still marginalized and outside their reach. In this case, brought to us by Santos (2005), two illiterate ladies, 57 and 62 years old respectively, enter directly into the digital culture,

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<sup>10</sup> VOLOŠINOV, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>11</sup> The activities were realized in a poor neighborhood in Campinas that shelters a large ‘favela’, where several NGOs and developing agencies act. It was part of the Healthy Community Project, developed by State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) at the time.

without going through the printed culture,<sup>12</sup> when they are taught to read and write using the Internet. This approach allows the women to enter the printed and digital world simultaneously. The two women, accustomed to using traditional methods to access and register information, living on the fringes of both the digital and printed cultures, suddenly start using information technologies of the contemporary world.

According to Santos (2005) the literacy process (including learning to use the alphabetic code) was developed while the ladies accessed the internet, searched for virtual pages, accessed the electronic mail, opened and closed programs, all this in spite of both having declared that, before the process began, they could not even imagine what 'this Internet' - that they wanted to use in order to contact their children who lived far away - could be.

In Santos' view, the use of analogies facilitated the comprehension of the functions of some of the icons (backward, forward, starting page, mail, research, etc.) and, in the visited pages (Danone, Unicamp, Cadê, Museu Histórico Nacional), the observation of the illustrations, the text disposition and the ways in which the pictures and pages could be viewed (maximizing and minimizing) became the foundation of both the ladies' digital literacy and alphabetization process. The decoding itself, of letters in words, or of words in captions, became a strategic way to understand the icons' functions. For example, when the mail icon in the toolbar was recognized as an envelope by one of the women, even though she had never addressed an envelope or sent a letter by regular mail, she associated the icon to the electronic mail - a kind of mail that need not be visited physically so a letter could be sent - because the function of both types of mail was known. To the other student, the incoming mail's 'little box', where she looked for her name, was similar to a mailbox for regular letters.

The two students needed Santos' mediation (in her double role as literacy agent and researcher) to realize the procedures required for writing, sending, searching and reading the messages. After resorting to the hypertext clues they found on their paths, the functions related to some of the mail tools that were used more frequently, or were more easily recognized, started to make sense to them.

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<sup>12</sup> Santaella's (2004, p.13) terminology. The author distinguishes six kinds of cultural formation: oral culture, written culture, printed culture, mass culture, media culture and digital culture, depending on the channel used for information transmission that can, according to the same author, "not only mold thought and sensibility, but also encourage the creation of new sociocultural environments."



The apprentices used image decoding strategies, as well as association strategies with the literate world (decodification of words such as their own first name or the name of an often visited website) to make inferences. According to Santos (2005, p.111) “word and image performed the function of providing sense for a soon to be executed action.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, it was the hypertext, internet’s multimodal and multisemiotic text that gave meaning to personal search and choices as it happens in the digital culture, with its new information technologies.

In the first example discussed in this section, the teacher, cornered by the need to follow curricular guidelines based in theories that he barely understands, and without strategies or practical models, tries to bring the contemporary, the genre theory through the use of a digital genre, to the classroom, but he does so in a biased way, barely recognizable to the researchers and professors that were, ultimately, responsible for his training. This situation is very similar to those observed 25 years ago: the content and the technologies for the reproduction of teaching material have changed - photocopying machines substituted the mimeograph, but the methods remain unaltered: copying in the notebook, non-reflexive action in response to the curricular demands. The teacher’s social interlocutor (VOLOŠINOV, 1973)<sup>14</sup> is still the school’s traditional discourse.

The difference between this and the successful example of beginning literacy through the Internet is due to the fact that the activities in the second example are part of a proposal free from any demands regarding the adoption of a specific theory or curricular matrix and that legitimizes the knowledge of the two students - illiterate, poor and elderly - in order to attend to their specific needs and desires.

The three different ways of working - the improved traditional class, the traditional class masqueraded as a digital class and the digital class - happened in this millennium, therefore they are all contemporary, because they are related to new working demands in order to attend to new social demands from real people who live in the world of digital and printed cultures, and know they are on the fringes of what is socially valued. However, the three strategies are not all equally successful in creating opportunities for the students to leave the space/time of inequalities they occupy.

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<sup>13</sup> Text in original: “palavra e imagem desempenhavam a função de fornecer o sentido da ação a ser executada”.

<sup>14</sup> See footnote 10.

## 2 Which Texts? Which Literacies?

In digital literacy, the text or hypertext has an organization in which verbal language, image and sound<sup>15</sup> contribute to meaning, and requires reading what the reader himself chooses, in which order, whether he is highly proficient or a beginner in the written language acquisition process, as seen in the example discussed in the previous section, in which each of the women beginning to learn to read and write defined her entrance points in the Internet pages and traced her own reading pathways.

The impact of a digital text, with its combination of several languages each with a specifically way of signifying; the progressive increase in the number of images in texts where the verbal language used to prevail; and the interest in studying this mutant ways of communication defined, in 1996, a new research object to the “New London Group,”<sup>16</sup> that is, multiliteracies. In the pedagogically oriented text in which the group researchers declared their principles, the authors advocate for a much broader literacy conception than the one the schoolwork is based on, and propose teaching multiliteracies, that is, the inclusion in the curriculum of all forms used to represent meaning in different semiotic systems - linguistic, visual, voiced or auditory, spatial and gestural - inter-related in the multimodal contemporary text.

The many, and multiplying, contemporary practices of intersemiotic literacies require from the reader and text producer an increased expertise in reading and information-extracting skills and approaches in which text interpretation (and production) entails the combination of several media. Because of its relation with the more recent information and communication technologies, such as digital literacy, and its open and multiple conception of texts that exist in the context “of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalized societies” (CAZDEN et al., 1996, p.61), a proposal for multiliteracies teaching as a successful way for inclusion in the written culture is a synonym of contemporaneity.

According to Chartier (2011, p.59), multiliteracies entail the abandonment of a type of discourse that professes “the slow, thoughtful and exhausting reading of a closed

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<sup>15</sup> In this section we will focus on examples in which the images play an important role.

<sup>16</sup> The group’s seminal text was signed by the New London Group, a collaboration between these Australian, British and American researchers: Courtney Cazden; Bill Cope; Norman Fairclough; Jim Gee; Mary Kalantzis; Gunther Kress; Allan Luke; Carmen Luke; Sarah Michaels and Martin Nakata, all part of the International Multiliteracies Project.

corpus, of carefully chosen texts, read and reread from generation to generation,”<sup>17</sup> that, according to the author, reigned in France until the 1960’s and until much more recently in Brazil, where we may perhaps trace the emergence of an alternative discourse back to the decade when the National Curriculum Guidelines (PCN) were published, in the late 90’s.

When we analyze the official teaching curricula in the country’s several states and municipalities, we realize that graphic novels, illustrated books, newspapers and popular magazines are tolerated, but not acknowledged as objects for study and analysis. The social meanings from different verbal and non-verbal forms that are usually specific to a culture – words, letters, colors, font types, layouts, drawings – and the way they are intentionally mixed to resonate and build other meanings by graphic artists, advertising agents, draftsmen, and cartoonists are not taken into account in the interpretation of multimodal texts and their numerous supports, even though the image is occupying, even replacing, the written word in many communicative situations in diverse literate institutions.

According to Dondis (1973, p.182), visual literacy “implies understanding, the means for seeing and sharing meaning with some level of predictable universality.” In fact, the imagery elements of international communication strengthen the possibility to participate in the globalized world, despite linguistic barriers.

When the ability to interpret and express oneself through iconic visual modality is developed, the individual develops criteria which go beyond his intuitive and innate abilities in order to interpret images, as well as beyond personal tastes and preferences conditioned by context, by fads, by socioeconomic restrictions. Knowledge promotes interpretations based on a sense of adequacy and esthetic pleasure, and, in turn, this level of development creates autonomy, because it involves both the mastery of the modality and the power to control its effects.

The less passive and more participating the people who benefit from multimodal and intersemiotic texts (from multiliteracies), the bigger the chance that their reply to iconic language might entail using a “visual intelligence” (DONDIS, 1973) instead of malleable intuition that may be manipulated by those that hold the ‘authority’ or speak authoritatively (BAKHTIN, 2004). Considering this, the New London Group is right in

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<sup>17</sup> Text in original: “a leitura lenta, atenta, exaustiva de um corpus fechado, de textos escolhidos com cuidado e relidos de geração em geração”.

claiming that multiliteracies are pedagogical objects relevant to the contemporary school student.

Nevertheless, the contemporaneous dimension of teaching literacy practices is not just related to teaching what is avant-garde from a technological viewpoint, or whatever is more functional and, so, more helpful outside of school, although both are important aspects to determine educational objectives. Contemporaneity is related to flexibility and respect of the culture of others so as to guarantee the student's (fairly) tranquil acquisition of new ways of making sense through writing in the technological society in which image and text reign. Being contemporary involves listening to what others want and taking advantage of the flexibility of the new practices and ways of being and meaning so that the conditions for the student's satisfaction of needs and wishes may emerge.

Let us see an example, not as a suggestion for an activity, but as a proposal from which we can derive some general principles to create didactic activities with relevant contents for contemporary life. The example shows us that, more than a literal comprehension of a new concept, or a rigid embrace to a theoretical model, like multiliteracies, or digital literacy, or genre, the teacher, or literacy agent, needs to build activity matrices that are independent of the socio-historical conditionings and restrictions that impinge upon school communicative situations. These are activities that build upon the resources to which the students have effective access, and are based on a deeper understanding of theoretical issues, which, in turn, demands an active comprehension of the complexity of the theory that informs practice, thus making the "sign adequate to the conditions of the given, concrete situation" (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.68).<sup>18</sup>

It is important to remember that a superficial reading of the theory, that lies behind activities in which the student's active comprehension is irrelevant to continue the emergent dialogue in a class, shows us, in turn, the lack of congruity between the word of the university professor and the responsive attitude of the teacher in initial or continued teacher education courses. If we believe, as Bakhtin postulates, that "when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude towards it" (1986, p.68), then the

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<sup>18</sup> See footnote 10.

contribution of university professors for the stream of language-speech (VOLOŠINOV, 1973, p.96)<sup>19</sup> at school is undeniable.<sup>20</sup>

The activity focuses on the multiliterate dimension of writing practices in the context of initial courses for literacy, usually offered during short periods, from one to three semesters, before the student starts to study the basic program (corresponding to grades 1-4) in EJA courses.

For some time now the specialized literature has shown that one of the great motivations for adults and senior citizens<sup>21</sup> to attend for the first time, or to go back to the classroom after decades and decades of hard work, has to do with the desire to build a “literate” identity for their dealings with financial, commercial, bureaucratic institutions, such as banks, installment institutions, the National Identity Registry, and so forth. And, to these students, this new identity is inextricably related to the capacity of signing their own name (KLEIMAN, 2000; PEREIRA, 2014).

Established by decree in France, in 1554, signatures became mandatory to validate documents in public legal documents (FRAENKEL, 1995); we could, therefore, maintain that its appearance coincided with the emergence of the printed written culture in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Times change, however, and in the digital culture, to use Santaella’s (2000) designation, the electronic or digital signature can substitute some of the signature functions, that, according to Hawkins (2011, p.7-8), are: authentication of signer’s identity, data integrity, or non-adulteration, and non-repudiation, evidence that the signer knew what he was signing. Today, the objective of these adult and senior students to avoid having to place their thumb fingerprint on a document because they cannot sign their own name, may seem obsolete, bizarre, even shortsighted, considering that we live in a time when, in Brazil, we do not even have to sign to authorize a credit card charges because of PIN numbers, and more so when we consider the grand overall educational objectives of EJA, that aims to teach literacy for citizenship and life, inasmuch as the student will have to, to quote just one such objective from one of the national guidelines, “recognize and value the scientific and

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>20</sup>This premise guides the research program of our Teacher Literacy Group, Lattes Platform, [http://dgp.cnpq.br/dgp/faces/consulta/consulta\\_parametrizada.jsf](http://dgp.cnpq.br/dgp/faces/consulta/consulta_parametrizada.jsf)

<sup>21</sup> Much more common, in fact, for senior women.

historical knowledge, as well as literary and artistic productions as part of humanity's cultural heritage" (MEC/AÇÃO EDUCATIVA, 2001, p.47).<sup>22</sup>

To sign one's name, however, is a form of self-expression, authorship and identity. It is unique and represents us publicly. It is connected to changes in our life phases, changing when we pass from youth to adulthood and to old age. And so, learning to sign means much more than learning how to use script to write one's name. A signature becomes the image we present to the world of institutions and public relations, an icon through which we want the world to see us.

Those who are schooled at the right time create the signature that will represent them worldwide by practicing writing their full name, with or without artistic embellishments, during long periods, multiple times, trying out different possibilities in their notebooks while 'listening' to the teacher in the classroom. A monogram with their initials or some symbol that only makes sense to its creator can become the first signature, as in Fig. 1:



**Fig. 1:** Illustrations of possible signatures

On the other hand, these activities - play-like exercises of identity affirmation by teenagers and preteens - are unviable for adults or senior students who begin their schooling when they are 40, 50, 60 or 70 years of age. These students 'must' first practice printed letters, copy words from the board and thus, when they get to the end of their course, after one or two years of beginning literacy classes, they finish the course without achieving 'their dream' of learning to sign their own names, their greatest wish and the reason for coming to school.

Teachers believe that the act of signing one's name may not be the object of teaching, because, as their pedagogical training programs usually state, first it is necessary to teach the alphabet, in capital letters, and the students need to learn to write

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<sup>22</sup> Text in original: "reconhecer e valorizar os conhecimentos científicos e históricos, assim como a produção literária e artística como patrimônios culturais da humanidade".

their own first name using such letters, then small printed letters may be learned and only after these stages, the students may be taught handwriting. These may well be very important subjects, but not to the adult who is a beginner reader and writer at this late stage of life. Is it really necessary for the adult to wait as long as the child who learns handwriting in the third year of schooling, after many hours of practicing capital letters and motor coordination? Or, even worse, is it possible that we are imitating the practices used in non-local, foreign contexts, where children are taught how to read and write using their personal tablets and, therefore, cursive writing is futile and no longer is part of the curriculum anymore?

In the Brazilian context of EJA classes, in remote zones<sup>23</sup> of the country, it makes much more sense to consider the act of signing as a multimodal text, with elements of iconic and verbal languages, as a form of activity closer to the art of calligraphy rather than as the painful gesture of writing one letter of the code being learned.

Dating back to a writing technique from the medieval scribes, prior to printed writing, such as calligraphy, doesn't mean dating back to the medieval scribes' copying practice,<sup>24</sup> since the student will have to invent, use his imagination, create, the same as artists and calligraphers do, as in Fig.2.



**Fig. 2:** Alexey Chekal, Ukraine; Jaime de Alabarracin, Spain; Jean Larcheer, France<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Such as in the school in the Saquinho community, in Bahia, described by Pereira (2014), where the senior and adult women participated in the TOPA Program – Todos pela Afabetização (All for Literacy) – with a duration of 08 months, or 360 h/class. According to Pereira, the research participants declared several times that they wanted to fulfill their dream of signing their names but after two semesters of class they still had not accomplished that goal.

In the program's website, initiated in 2007, we read that the program is also in charge of the training of literacy tutors, generally junior high school graduates from the community and of the production of teaching material, among other actions. The training of literacy tutors, Brazilian Sign language tutors, interpreters, translators and group coordinators, a fundamental part of the program, is realized in institutes, public and private universities, that are selected annually to become Training Units. According to the program's site "Bahia's TOPA was structured so as to attend to the teaching-learning process specificities, respecting the local reality." Also according to the website, "the community specificities are considered case by case" (<http://institucional.educacao.ba.gov.br/topa>).

<sup>24</sup> Like many children in schools today, who copy from the board without understanding what they are copying.

<sup>25</sup> <http://calligraphy-expo.com/eng/Personalities/Participants.aspx>.

Printed media texts imitate, more and more, the organization of the quintessential inter-semiotic text - the hypertext - and provide increasingly freer readings, in which different ways of communication contribute with different meanings. School is a place for invention - of projects, genres, texts. And calligraphy is a way of writing that allows the subject to interpret texts that he cannot read, be it because he does not know the language in which it is written or because he does not know the writing system. In other words, calligraphy may be treated as if it were an art image, and be part of the lesson activities, as in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3:** Andrea Wunderlich (2008)

To give a new meaning to a little used technique, redefining it as a hybrid language – between word and drawing – that allows for graphic and emotional expressiveness definitely involves multiliteracies and, in consequence of that, the practice is contemporary. It is likely that it would be more interesting, modern and comprehensive to have as reading objects illustrated books, or advertisements that although short (an advantage to the person learning to read) exhibit all the characteristics of the multimodal text that uses several semiotic systems. But the personal path of the local practice would be lost.

To make monograms, drawings and free arrangements of letters may seem odd without the context that makes the activity meaningful. But literacy practices are situated and local, and this implies keeping in mind the student's literacy history. Chartier (2011, p.60) reminds us of this when she states:



Since we know how to read and also have memories of our learning, our experience as a reader and old student structures our reception categories, even against our wishes. If, furthermore, the researcher is an educator, the didactic absurdity of a method really stands out, even before he can describe it. The syllabic method of memorized reading is absurd regarding the contemporary objectives of reading, but it may not be so, if we consider the old intentions. That means that reading itself has a history.<sup>26</sup>

A history that, to make sense nowadays, has to incorporate the student's history. And the un-alphabetized adult has a history as or more important than the validated and tested curriculum.

### **Final Considerations**

Crystalized concepts about curricula, programs and methods, no matter how good they are, are incapable of handling all teaching and learning needs, and they may interfere negatively in conceptions of school literacy.

The contemporary teacher is familiar with his students' knowledge and capabilities and is capable of developing strategies to rescue some of this knowledge, understanding and practices, so he can use them in the construction of literate practices that are important in social life.

In this paper, we argued that, in the spaces and conditions that contemporary society allows, the individual may develop, at any time, new and multiple literacies as a response to the demands of a culture dominated by image and writing - printed and digital - which is characterized by fast and successive changes. Undoubtedly, in this context, schools may innovate and dare with the purpose of capturing the multiple and plural quality of the literacy phenomenon, in which meaning relations are defined by the multiplicity of the semiotic systems involved, and by the constant transformations that originate and affect them.

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<sup>26</sup> Text in original: "Como sabemos ler e temos lembranças da nossa aprendizagem, nossa experiência de leitor e de antigo aluno estrutura nossas categorias de recepção, mesmo contra a nossa vontade. Se, além disso, o pesquisador é um pedagogo, o absurdo didático de um método salta aos seus olhos, antes mesmo que ele possa descrevê-lo. O método silábico, da leitura de cor é absurdo em relação às finalidades contemporâneas da leitura, mas talvez não o seja, levando-se em conta as finalidades antigas. Isso significa que a própria leitura tem uma história.

Literacy, in these times of change and transformation, has a big impact on people's lives, since it becomes indispensable for the citizens' survival in the society of technology, information, transformation and transience. And to follow the new demands of the contemporary society, the student needs to read, interpret and take a stand. However, to act in the contemporary world the student himself has to develop strategies to access the information and choose a path that makes sense to him. The literacy agent, who may be the teacher, a volunteer from the community, or a researcher, guides the student's work by providing the relevant materials and models for meaningful activities.

We highlighted the role of school in the preparation of subjects capable of enjoying the advantages of the contemporary world through examples of teaching activities from which we could extract an important general concept: just as the student may not limit himself to the role of an uncritical consumer of products and ideas, the teacher also has to become a producer of his own thoughts, creating teaching activities that are meaningful to the student through his engagement in practices to access, select and use of multimodal texts in our digital culture. If the school is required to form autonomous, emancipated, non-automated subjects, university education must also form teachers that do not limit themselves to the 'application' of theories favored by academy so that they may understand such theoretical discourse not as commands for immediate action but as, according to Bakhtin (1986, p.69), "genres of complex cultural communication," to be pondered on and, after careful consideration, related - complemented, polemicized, transformed - by other genres from pedagogical discourse. And for that, just as the school teacher with regard to his students, the college teacher must consider his student in the teacher education course as a true participant in the communicative situation.

Nowadays literacy has become a vector in the constitution of a free individual, capable of contributing to social change. In our reality, with a still high percentage of illiteracy (functional or not), this makes a huge difference. The relations between literacy and power, often discussed from the perspective of literacies validated by prestigious institutions, have, in the school, one of its more expressive exponents: by focusing on the literary canon, the consecrated classics, the institution loses sight of functional readings, for everyday use, although they are essential to achieve the student's objectives. This needs to be changed for the school to become less elitist,

traditional and authoritarian, and for it to begin to endorse the goals of contemporary education and to disseminate literacy practices - practices for accessing the information in that society - among those who have been kept out of school through Brazilian history.

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Translated by Emiliano Iglesias – [emiliano.iglesias@gmail.com](mailto:emiliano.iglesias@gmail.com)

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