Australian Journal of Adult Learning
Volume 64, Number 3, November 2024

Adult (multi)literacies for global equity/social justice in challenging times

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Literacy as a unified concept is no longer valid or useful for today's complex world, where globally we face many challenges and contradictions. Adult literacy is shifting rapidly, and the human need for visually communicating meaningfully and relationally - beyond 'reading and writing' - is vital for addressing wicked problems and difficult times. In this paper we ask, "What does 'literacy' mean for us now, as we prepare new generations of people, as we address severe health issues, poverty, state conflicts and the climate crisis is looming?" How can expanded understandings of 'literacy' offer educational hope and possibility for the many adults who have been shut out of the literacy club? How do we challenge the exclusionary colonial practices of 'literacy' and education that leave many bereft and having to settle for lives with limited opportunities and successes?

In the adult education practices we employ, we are looking beyond conventional 'classroom' and 'literacy' viewpoints to develop expanded and inclusive understandings of learning. In this paper, we share stories of encounters we have had with individuals who have, in different ways, been previously excluded from opportunities offered through learning 'literacy.' Using an asset-based lens, we consider ways in which these individuals have learned, and ways we have learned from them, as we collectively question the usefulness of colonial conceptions that limit, rank, classify and assign status by particular 'literacy' standards.

Keywords: multiliteracies, adult education, social semiotics, international, alternative

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Literacy as a unified concept is no longer valid or useful for today's complex world, where globally we face many challenges and contradictions. Adult literacy is shifting rapidly, and the human need for visually communicating meaningfully and relationally -- beyond 'reading and writing' -- is vital for addressing wicked problems and difficult times. As noted by Cope and Kalantzis (2023), "To state the all too obvious, the world has changed dramatically". In this paper we ask, "What does 'literacy' mean for us now, as we prepare new generations of people, as we address severe health issues, poverty, state conflicts and the climate crisis is looming?" How can expanded understandings of 'literacy' offer educational hope and possibility for the many adults who have been shut out of the literacy club? How do we challenge the exclusionary colonial practices of 'literacy' and education that leave the many bereft and having to settle for lives with limited opportunities and successes?

In the adult education practices we employ, we are looking beyond conventional 'classroom' and 'literacy' viewpoints to develop expanded and inclusive understandings of learning. We share stories of encounters we have had with individuals who have, in different ways, been previously excluded from opportunities offered through learning

'literacy'. Using an asset-based lens, we consider ways in which these individuals have learned, and ways we have learned from them, as we collectively challenge colonial conceptions that limit, rank, classify and assign status by particular 'literacy' standards. We consider how, through these exclusive colonial practices, educators have created the need for remedial 'adult literacy' programs that do not value multi-literacies that individuals offer. We begin by challenging normative uses of the terms 'literacy' and 'multi-literacy', particularly as they have been used as a primary mode of formal school-based learning. We recognise the need to adopt, or return to, understandings of learning that embrace rich modes of communication deeply embedded in global long-standing cultural practices of communities. We recognise the need for changing notions of 'literacy'; rather than drawing solely on a linguistic understanding, we are drawing on social semiotics as our theoretical frame – one which "construes that all communication practices are interlinked with social and cultural practices" (Yamada-Rice, 2015, p. 309) and enables exploration of ways that "meaning and representation are generated through languages, images, objects, or other modes in specific social contexts" (Holloway & Qaisi, 2022, p. 88). The overuse of the term 'literacy' to make determinations about educational stance and fit, intelligence, class, and culture, as well as to signal the importance of areas of learning (health literacy, technological literacy, financial literacy, emotional literacy) as they become the current social issues of note, serve to conflate the term 'literacy' with intelligence, social positioning, value, and possibility. Those who have not managed to reach designated literacy 'benchmarks', for whatever reasons, are relegated to more marginalised social positions as adults, continually seen in post-secondary and the world of work as less capable and in need of remediation. This use of 'literacy' to create hierarchies and social fragmentation is ongoing colonial practice, working to exclude those with no access or desire to reach benchmark literacy standards. Further, literacy pedagogy, as it has been conceptualised, positions the learner as a passive receptacle rather than an active participant in their learning. As the New London Group (NLG) (1996) described, the process of meaning-making needs to be reframed "around the concept of designer, as opposed to the traditional use of reader/writer, to emphasise the active and creative aspects of meaning-making and the use of multiple modalities... in representing and communicating meanings" (Serafini & Gee, 2017, p.3).

Building on the work of adult multiliteracies scholars, such as Holloway, Gouthro, Qaisi and Garcia-Barroso, we want to expand notions of literacy, multiliteracies, and adult education to recognise the rich and deep learning opportunities created by and for adult learners around the globe. As the NLG described in 1996, "languages need to make meaning" (p.59) and literacy needs to embrace the wide diversity in the nature of 'texts' and 'communication' that address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse populations. We need to acknowledge that western conceptions of 'literacy' remain exclusionary and limited, focusing on school-based education that may or may not enable successful lives for individuals and their communities. Further, we recognise that we need a greatly expanded notion of learning and literacy, including global ways of understanding the more than human world, in order to address the complex and critical issues of a planet in crisis.

We use social semiotics (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen; 2005) as our theoretical framework that, rather than supporting or supplementing notions of 'literacy', become the overarching concept under which normative notions of literacy, i.e., capacity to fluently read and write print text, is located. By focusing on social semiotics, we can untangle the convolutions and rigidity of 'literacy' definitions (as they are normally taken up in formal education and reinscribed through standardised testing processes) and begin to recognise ways in which many adults, locally and globally, have learned to effectively communicate and thrive in our complex global world. Social semiotics, as a "social theory about meaning and meaning-making in (inter-) action" (Gualberto & Kress, 2019, p.1), examines the multiple ways texts are created and 'read'. All texts must be understood and shared within a sociocultural context; language, through a social semiotics lens, is part of a much wider array of cultural resources that enable us to make meaning and is a social phenomenon (Gualberto & Kress, 2019). Social semiotics enable us to understand multiliteracies and our role in creating 'literate' youth and adults, in much broader and more globally aware terms. Working with youth and adults who have not accessed 'literacy' as it is framed in western formal education, social semiotics helps us to recognise multiple language acquisitions, communication across differences, embodied representations, and oral language, as legitimate and necessary forms of communicating, learning, and sharing knowledge.

Moving beyond the global north/western conceptions of education, we (Kathy, Bruno and Tanya) have seen great disparities in access to formal education, the types of education that are needed for individuals and communities in Jamaica, Uganda, and Brazil, and ways in which diverse forms of adult education need to be transported to communities in the global north and to our local contexts. We have witnessed youth and adults in these countries develop innovative, entrepreneurial, artistic and creative approaches to build robust opportunities for engagement in their communities and support of themselves and their families. In their countries, they use multimodal approaches for learning and communicating, supporting themselves and each other in local/national/international spaces. Some of these examples are shared below, and include many uses of multimodalities, including listening to marginalised voices, creating spaces for conversations, using the arts to develop and engage community, as well as teaching adults to read and write. These multiliteracies are manifested in many ways, including learning how to grow and market mushrooms for local communities, creating art to be sold in the local market, performing community dramatic/musical presentations, writing graphic novels, using conversation to connect with the community, creating new educational institutions, attending solar panel and brick-making workshops, finding creative uses for recycled materials.

Finding ways to interact effectively is our goal as multiliteracies educators working in communities local and global, preparing new generations of teachers, and struggling to continue learning ourselves. We ask, how we are addressing the educational and societal needs of adults today, and what can we learn about adult literacy through their own educational stories? Considering a Freirian critical literacy framework and drawing on Cope & Kalantzis' (2023) multiliteracies framework, we consider what adult multiliteracies look like in diverse contexts, and how we should recognise these in our complex colonial world of formal, informal and nonformal literacy learning. Our work builds on 'lifeworld learning' to enable meaningful access, to validate people's prior literacy knowledge, and to create more powerful (multi) literacies (Tett, Hamilton, Crowther, 2012) that also create socially just learning opportunities for adults worldwide.

Multi-literacies (as social semiotics), as we enact these in our teaching and community engagement, embrace different forms (visual, poetry,

music, dance) to enable learners to not only engage in dialogue, but to envision different realities for themselves so they can act and react upon social norms for change and development, interrogating issues of power through and with literacies (Vasquez, et al., 2019; Freire, 1970) – through visual, oral, technological, and embodied literacies that help design social futures and create an agenda for transformative change. It is the combined approaches to adult 'multiliteracies' in today's rapidly changing world that we need to address, and, in this paper, we describe ways in which we have learned to engage and change our approaches to meet the needs of our diverse adult audiences worldwide. By changing our own pedagogies, we are more able to recognise the limitations of our own western middle-class practices and widen the scope of adult multiliteracies.

The educational lives and practices of Kathy, Bruno and Tanya have been both separate and interconnected, created through complex pathways to deepening our understanding of ways in which literacy can support and limit educational futures. Tanya's educational experiences in Jamaica and Bruno's in Brazil have both informed/transformed their practices here but also helped Kathy, a Canadian-born educator, think more broadly about educational opportunities for youth and adults, both in higher education and community, and to develop richer understandings about complex educational pathways through her visits to Uganda. Their paths intersected through the teaching of a multiliteracies course in the same higher education institution, working with a relatively homogeneous group of teacher candidates. Through the conversations we shared about teaching multiliteracies, we came to interweave multimodal experiences and community arts-based experiences into our classes. Our previous and subsequent experiences have raised our awareness of the impact of multiliteracies, in classrooms and in the community – access to formal (multi)literacy education provides either a gateway or a brick wall. We then began to rethink the ways in which we needed to reconceptualise multiliteracy education in diverse settings, based on our experiences as shared below.

Jenny's story: Multiliteracies in rural Uganda: Hands of women

Jenny, a young woman from northern Uganda, and Kathy, a university professor in Education, had many conversations about Jenny's journey to become educated. She began school when she was seven years old,

but it was difficult for her mother to pay school fees. So, when she was nine, Jenny started a road-side business selling sugar cane, which she collected in the bush, and maize. She was able to give her mother a bit of money so she could make sure her education would continue. She continued her business, including her younger brother, during school holidays and was able to continue to attend until Senior 4, the equivalent of Grade 10 or "O" level. She was able to pay part of the school fees for her brother and, by the time she was 13, she was able to save a bit of money. When she was 14, Jenny got a job with Airtel selling sim cards in the community, drawing on the skills she had learned earlier to be able to talk to the community. However, she decided, after she started senior secondary, moving towards "A" levels, that she had to drop out of school so that she could pay for her brother's school fees. So, after her senior 4 certificate, she finished her formal education, instead selling cassava to support her family and pay her brother's school debt. Her brother finished his A levels, and then offered to support Jenny in enrolling in a vocational education program. At that time, she also decided to try doing art, using fabric to create collages representing people from different continents of the world, which she sold in the local market.

When Jenny was 21, she began working for the Geneva Global organisation, teaching children ages 8-14 who had never previously been to school. She worked with the organisation to encourage dropout kids in the community to attend school. She worked with the managers to recruit students and was then offered a job teaching in the project. She was fearful and ashamed that she herself was a dropout and had only completed Senior 4, but she was encouraged and selected from among 200 candidates, many of whom had higher education levels. She was taken through a two-week training program to handle children, how to make a lesson plan and set up a classroom.

Many of the 100 students she recruited were taller than her, and one of her older students was a very talented artist. Jenny realised that she could learn a lot from this student, and others, and was motivated to continue learning to become a teacher. She used music and art with her students so they could share their personal stories, encouraging them to do their traditional dances, express themselves, and hone basic multiliteracy skills. Using a multiliteracies approach that she had never been formally taught, Jenny encouraged her students to work collaboratively, to imagine, to work hard, and to appreciate education.

Jenny has since moved from the speed school where she began her teaching career, and is now founder of Hands of Women, a not-for-profit organisation that supports women in extreme need, those that the world has forgotten. She gathers women who are HIV positive, who are blind, physically and emotionally challenged, and single mothers who have no source of income to her organisation. They meet regularly, they are learning literacy skills, self-advocacy, child protection training, brickmaking, farming, fundraising, and handicrafts. Throughout their meetings, women take turns sharing their expertise, views, and questions. Although they would be seen as 'illiterate' through a formal education lens, these adults have many life literacies and areas of expertise. Jenny uses her learned and intuitive knowledge of multiliteracies to continue to support these women in need who were not able to attain formal schooling.

Enacting multiliteracy practices in a Jamaican context

Literacy takes on different and broader nuances in a rural Jamaican context of community engagement. Tanya reflects on her own experiences growing up in Jamaica, and then as an educator. She narrates, "When I think of literacy in the Jamaican context, I consider the rapidly evolving landscape of communication and what it means for the many folks immersed in community activism and development". She wonders, what does literacy mean for them? This is certainly more than colonial notions of reading and writing. Tanya considers how they would describe themselves if asked about their literacy. With this question in mind, she began to imagine literacy as robust and multimodal, continually shifting, serving a wide range of intentions, presenting both challenges and opportunities that traditional notions of literacy often fall short of capturing. She imagines literacy being understood as the full spectrum of skills and competencies needed to navigate the complexities of modern society and the many ways small Jamaican communities, many on the periphery, continue to navigate these and thrive, using multiple forms of literacies. Within many local Jamaican communities, there exists a rich tapestry of multiliteracies that offer alternative pathways to learning and empowerment that recognise the skills, knowledge and wisdom of adults who have surpassed the binary imposed notion of 'literacy'.

As a teenager, Tanya was heavily involved in community activism and

benevolence. She witnessed firsthand the power of local community people in driving change and transforming lives through their everyday actions. She recognised the privilege and honour she had of working alongside elders from diverse educational backgrounds (teachers, lawyers, activists, service men and women, bankers, farmers and many non-formally educated people), and one lesson that stayed with her was that all knowledge and literacies were valued. In a society that is often divided by class and educational status, many grassroots community groups represented unifying voices. She recalls the example of a community project undertaken in her community several years ago to solve the issue of water shortage during drought months. For almost a quarter of a century, a massive community tank stood empty, waiting to be repaired by the local government. Finally, community members came together to brainstorm ways to repair the tank. This group of collective thinkers included those with formal, non-formal and informal forms of education. What was most valuable in these sessions was the knowledge from members (many without formal education) on the history of the community tank and the methods that have been effective in the past to keep it running. The breadth of knowledge they shared on best drought practices based on their lived experiences was essential in getting that tank up and running. Tanya highlighted this example to make the point that when we think of adult literacy, we should think of collective action and self-determination. Every citizen should have the opportunity to participate fully in their society. As educators we can learn a lot from these communities, as Freire (2000, p.1) reasons, "we planned to engage students in praxis -- reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it". Through these practices, we can learn how to connect students with their out-of-school literacies that position them to deconstruct and redesign spaces and places that are mutually beneficial for community and society.

Multiliteracies help us remember and recognise that local communities possess specialised knowledge that the world needs and must value. This right to self-knowledge in these communities has been denied through external colonial impositions that dictate what knowledge should be like. In this collective decision-making that valued knowledge systems, literacy (in all its forms) provided opportunities for community members to envision a different reality for themselves where they act for change and development, interrogating issues of power through

and with literacies in many forms. Within these formal and informal learning spaces come rich opportunities to envision a different reality of literacies where dialogue and decision-making are facilitated through multiliterate means and encourage proactive engagement with social issues. Tanya asks, why shouldn't there be alternative ways of examining literacy in these contexts? What does this mean for literacy when we speak of collaborative and participatory learning experiences? Rethinking literacy through this lens recognises and positions it as a social practice contested in relations of power.

When Tanya thinks of her foundations in literacy, she thinks of the many round table sessions with the women of her community group teaching how to cook, knit, and make baskets or paper. She is reminded of the communication skills she developed in these non-formal settings that nurtured her as an educator and helped her to navigate the world with compassion and respect for all. Where is the space for this literacy? Where is the space for voices raised in unison and used in protest (for example, songs and drumming) in opposition to harmful changes at the local government level? As communication channels diversify, the concept of 'literacy' must evolve accordingly. Adult literacy must encompass a wide range of competencies essential for meaningful participation in society, as Tanya has witnessed, and a recognition of the many positive ways in which adults can learn and use diverse literacies to improve their lives and those of others. Adult literacies in Jamaican community settings call for recognising the multifaceted nature of literacy as seen through artwork in community spaces, dance, oral languages passed on for generations, drumming, and plant medicine, among many others. When we think of the many challenges we face globally and the need for us to address wicked problems, these literacy skills are essential. However, this view of (multi)literacies for adults becomes highly problematic when we seek active participation from citizens, but we do not value the creativity and innovation they contribute as we give precedence to the 'educated' of society in solving problems, despite the evidence they share to demonstrate the innovativeness of local people in addressing the many social, economic and health issues they face. Many individuals in local communities have informal learning systems and literacies that are compatible with their livelihoods and have survived many generations. Therefore, literacies in these contexts must mean something different as adult

educators embrace broadened conceptions of what makes a 'literate' citizen and individual. Homogeneity in knowledge and literacy is not what is needed; rather, a new understanding of the local in the global is necessary to build meaningful partnerships with communities to understand their practices, which can serve as powerful mediums for literacy development.

Multiliteracies are moments of realization: Selma's story

> *I was 17 and he was 23 when we got married. When I was pregnant with our last child, he started drinking and hit me. He hit me so much, when I was pregnant. I went crazy. I felt so lost. He did not allow me to see my children anymore [...] I walked in his house with a knife in my hand. I saw his new woman there. She did not see me. I grabbed her head from her back and with the knife, 'zap!' I cut one of her ears off. [...] that's when I faced prostitution for the first time. Suddenly I was hanging out here all the time and immersed in all the marginalisation that happens here at the train station. [...] We didn't have much money to buy crack-cocaine, so we would make our own. I would get the cocaine and mix with a tablespoon of ammoniac, cook it, turning it into a stone, so we could smoke it.*

Selma, a recycler and environmental agent. Selma was 56 years old when we first met in 2014 at the headquarters of the National Recycling Social Movement (MNCR) in São Paulo, Brazil. At that time, we were recruiting members of that social movement to participate in a large SSHRC (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) funded project that intertwined theories of social movement learning, critical pedagogy and the arts-based multiliteracies. Selma volunteered her time to participate in that study by video recording her life story and her participation in the MNCR. That same year, Selma was working as a recycler at a local recycling cooperative. A recycler is an environmental agent that works in recycling cooperatives in Latin America, collecting, separating, cleaning and selling recyclable materials. These agents work alongside the public and private sector to save valuable materials that otherwise would end up in landfill, as well as being environmental educators in their local communities. As part of her duties in the cooperative, Selma collected from the streets, separated, and sold

recyclable materials, reintroducing these materials into the production stream through the recycling industry. Although contributing to overall environmental health, the recyclers, including Selma, still represent one of the most oppressed and vulnerable groups of the population because their work is often associated with "filth". However, working as a recycler is a survival strategy for thousands of low-income marginalised families because recycling represents the main income generation for them.

Being a strong community leader and an MNCR representative was not always the case for Selma. Before getting involved with recycling, she used to run a butcher shop in her hometown in the state of Pernambuco in the northeast of Brazil during the late 1970s. However, a series of events, that started with her cutting someone's ears off, forced her to flee to São Paulo City, in the southeast of Brazil. Upon her arrival in São Paulo, Selma found herself being homeless, where she became heavily involved with narcotics and became a sex trader. At that time, she was also involved in robbery and small assaults, leading her to spend 12 years in prison. Once out of prison, Selma started working in a recycling cooperative and soon became an important political figure in São Paulo, an active member of the MNCR and a knowledgeable environmental adult educator.

Within this short glimpse of Selma's life, we raise two questions: What is the type of multiliteracies that mediated Selma's individual transformation (leaving a life of prostitution and drug addiction to become a powerful political figure)? and What can we, educators concerned with social inclusion, citizenship and community development, learn from Selma's story? To answer these questions, we consider adult multiliteracies as moments of realisation as mediators of individual learning and transformation. Selma's moments of realisation, self–discovery, and empowerment are achieved through her participation in the arts-based, multi literacies learning opportunities provided by the MNCR, the largest environmental social movement in Latin America, which in turn enabled Selma to become an environmental agent, and an engaged community leader.

> *The City needs to help us to teach other recyclers to work with environmental education, because we are way more than recyclers, we are environmental agents, because we clean the*

> *planet, but we need more support [...]*
> *So, we need to start perceiving ourselves as entrepreneurs, because we are entrepreneurial women, and women entrepreneurs must study, have to learn. These women need to open their minds and realise they are entrepreneur women. I am an entrepreneurial recycler. I am proud to be an entrepreneur in recycling.*

Selma calls her recycler colleagues to perceive differently the work they perform. She suggests their work goes beyond just collecting, separating, and selling recyclable materials, meaning they are environmental agents also responsible for promoting environmental education. This is evident when she utters: "to teach other recyclers to work with environmental education". Selma accomplished her invitation by suggesting that the recyclers should open their minds. For Vygotsky (2004), mind-opening refers to a resourceful faculty or action of constructing new ideas, images, or concepts of external artefacts by someone's creative thought mediated by external stimuli. In the episode above, for instance, these external stimuli can be represented by Selma's speech itself, because she is offering an invitation to other recyclers to perceive their work beyond the recycling cooperatives and underlining that they are, in fact, social activists.

The episodes provided above illustrate the evolution of Selma's discourse (moving from a life on the street to a community leader) and how such discourse can spark critical thinking regarding environmental education and recycling in her peers. For instance, Selma uses terminologies in her speech that are inherently feminist, when she claims she is a proud women entrepreneur, while inviting the other women to also perceive themselves as such. For Selma, the recycling cooperative is indeed an entrepreneurship, and they should all be proud of the work they do. However, to become a proud recycler, she suggests they need to study as well as see things from different lenses.

The richness of the evolution of Selma's discourse was enabled through the capacity building initiatives promoted by the MNCR. These learning opportunities were turning points in Selma's life because, before she described herself as a prostitute and drug addict, but later she perceives herself as a female entrepreneur who is proud of the work she performs. More so, through her discourse she can invite other recyclers to do

the same. This is evident when she tells them that they must study, learn and open their minds. These moments of realisation mediated Selma's individual learning and transformation by freeing her from an abusive husband as well as motivating her to leave the streets, the life of prostitution and drug abuse, and helping her to co-construct a new discourse that enable her to inspire other individuals to seek empowerment and freedom.

The MNCR is predicated upon the ideas of "conscientização" (Freire, 1970), which refers to a type of individual transformation in which a person becomes able to recognise hegemonic social, political, cultural, and economic constraints and to act and react upon these constraints. Before one can act, one must see and understand the world around them. But environmental issues and actors, particularly people such as recyclers, have been all but invisible to the larger society and therefore ignored as both people and, we would argue, as environmentalists. Freire, however, believed "conscientização" could work as a "truly liberating education" (p. 35) for those who are oppressed and ignored, as well as for the oppressors. The MNCR is therefore about opening windows for new ideas, for individuals to be part of the process of building communities as visible, responsible and active subjects.

Feminist approaches to individual empowerment and transformation are the main pillars of the MNCR because feminism problematises power structures by confronting, resisting, and subverting social, cultural, and political injustices. Feminism, regardless of gender, brings forth personal experiences, social structures, and relationships, while "fostering multiple, on-the-ground responses in people to enable them to work towards more respectful, healthy, equitable and sustainable conditions" (Clover, de Oliveira Jayme, Fallen & Hall, 2013, p. 15). Feminist theories (de)construct and (re)configure the lives of marginalised women (and men) and help them create new knowledge and (re)act upon patriarchal "status quo" that perpetuates oppression. Broadly, feminism empowers people that historically have had limited access to power (Moss, & Al-Kindi, 2008; Ackerley et al., 2006). From this perspective, empowerment is at the core of feminist theories, and part of the capacity building strategies of the MNCR.

The validation of Selma's knowledge by members of her community made her aware that she and the other participants were also creating

culture. During Selma's social interactions in her community, her peers realised that aspects of their lives had been created and conditioned by other people, and more importantly, they became aware that they were able to change them. According to Paulo Freire, learners are knowing subjects that during the process of *concientização* become intensely aware not only of the realities that shape their lives but also of their own capabilities to transform those realities, "*an awareness or consciousness that achieves the power of two, a duality of consciousness, knowing that they know*" (Perry, 2000, p. 110).

Selma's story should not be taken as an isolated phenomenon. Taking into consideration all the power structures, her long history of sexual abuse, drug addiction, time in reclusion, and her relationship with all the members of her community including her abusive husband, in that specific time and place we perceive Selma as a product of her own environment. That is, we, as human beings, in Goethe's words (cited by Vygotsky, 1962, p. 67) have "nothing within ourselves. All that is in us, is what is outside us", and Vygotsky (1962, p. 67) explains that "we become ourselves through others" and through our social interactions throughout our lives. In other words, who we are as human beings is co-constructed by and bounded to the context in which we are a part. For instance, in the midst of being betrayed and sexually abused by her husband, and having lost contact with her children, Selma had moments of realisation mediated by the adult multiliteracies strategies promoted by the MNCR. In Freirian words, at these very moments of self-revelation and empowerment, promoted by the social movement, Selma achieved a high level of "conscientização," because she realised that old ways of operating in the world (being exploited and abused by her husband) was no longer working for her. Therefore, she transformed. Selma was empowered to deconstruct and reconfigure her life by assuming more control over her life, in ways in which she first understood and second transcended patriarchal structures. In so doing, she was able to move forward into a new life as she developed self-awareness, recognising her human agency for positive change, thus individual transformation.

Implications for our practices

Through the stories shared above, Kathy, Tanya and Bruno have recognised the need to embrace social semiotics as a broad and inclusive

framework for teaching practices and beliefs. This shift has significant implications for the transformation of our own pedagogical practices and beliefs. First and foremost, social semiotics and multiliteracies enable us to appreciate the value of difference and recognise the assets that all individuals bring to their education and to their community. As we use multiliteracies to enable diverse ways of representing perspectives and understandings of situations and the world, we are better able to personalise learning for all of our learners – children, youth, and adults. We see the power of intergenerational collaborations, where youth bring new ideas to the wisdom of their elders and create stronger understandings. We are able to adapt our own pedagogical strategies to embrace the many voices that constitute our learning groups, valuing the Brazilian waste pickers, the Ugandan destitute women, the Jamaican farmers, with the same appreciation as our local university students. In addition to acknowledging the value of reading and writing, we also utilise oral language (conversation, presentation, spoken word), visual representations (art, video, social media), and embodied presentation (dance, sport, theatre) in our teaching. We have deeply embraced the move from 'literacy' to 'multiliteracies' as we recognise the many modes of communication that exist, focusing on meaning makers and meaning making. We value the richness of the lives of all learners at all ages and find spaces for everyone to be heard. We dispense with the narrow views of literacy that we studied in formal education programs as we find joy in the multiplicity of voices and views. We recognise the importance of context and strive to learn about place and space as we enact and embody multiliteracies. We embrace opportunities for us to learn along with our students and our community members, sharing space and expertise. We challenge the testing regimes that rank and judge learners; rather we seek unique and personal representations for engaging in the world. We listen, observe, learn, and reserve judgment.

Conclusion

Multiliteracies manifest in different ways in communities, urban and rural, local and global, wealthy and impoverished; we have an imperative to co-create meanings and understanding of literacies that honour and integrate community knowledge, values and practices. Cope and Kalantzis (2023) call for authentic pedagogy that is 'true to what practically needs to be known' (p.10) and they draw on Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism to highlight that education should be grounded in experiences rather than abstract disciplinary schemes imposed by adult educators and teachers. If we are to draw parallels to these notions of pragmatism and authenticity, we see the need for 'literacy' to be expanded, contextualised, and welcomed as such locally and globally.

As adult multiliteracies educators, we need to be vigilant in our social justice work, recognising that we continue to work and live in hegemonic colonial and patriarchal education systems that perpetuate middle-class values. Education systems continue to operate as gatekeepers that we need to challenge and remove, as we recognise the important contributions being made by Selma, Jenny, and the Jamaican youth. Limitations imposed by conventional and outmoded notions of 'literacy', maintained by formal educational systems, are much too narrow for today's complex and challenging world; we need to embrace the knowledges, voices, and experiences of our adult learners who have not had opportunities for, or have chosen alternative paths to, formal educational successes. Our work reminds us to learn from our community adult partners who offer new directions to our multiliteracies work that are inclusive, equitable, and diverse, much needed to address the significant global challenges that we all currently face.

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