

On the Histories and Futures of Literacies: An exchange

Allan Luke & Natalie Thompson

NT: One of the biggest impacts of your work on my thinking is the idea that reading is not just a type of cognitive functioning that is ascribed to an individual, but a political and moral technology that was created to serve particular economic and political purposes. What purposes might reading need to serve in this current moment?

AL: Since the 16th century in European history reading has been the key means for inducting each generation into culture, values, ritual and everyday practice. The Protestant Reformation was the catalyst for the first large scale literacy campaigns in the Early Modern West, for the first inclusion of women and girls in civic and educational culture, and ultimately for the first universal public schooling systems. The aim was for readers to ‘decide for themselves’, whether reading sacred or secular texts. The ‘science of reading’ began with the first German tachistoscopic studies of eye movement in the 1860s and then became the foundation of American reading psychology in the early twentieth century (Huey, 1908/1968). What got left behind in the “great debate” (Chall, 1967) and scientific pursuit of the one ‘perfect method’ was Freire’s simple insight: when you learn to read and write, you learn to read and write the world. When we teach literacy, we are necessarily engaging in teaching values, beliefs, everyday cultural and social practices. Teaching is story telling, Kieran Egan (1986) explained, and we turn away from that at our own peril.

We live in an era where all of the institutions of “print capitalism” (Anderson, 1983) are in crisis and under attack: longstanding print and broadcast media, the rule of constitutional law and human rights, the common experience of universal public schooling, and universities and the pursuit of scientific inquiry. Even as we critically engage with new digital multiliteracies, social media and AI, there is a need to double down on the core traditions of print education. We need to read and write, to speak and hear, perform, make and shape stories about human values and social relations, citizenship and social institutions, science and the arts. This isn’t just about skills and jobs.

NT: It seems this idea that the purpose of being literate is to get a good job is often accompanied by a type of moral urgency that decoding proficiency become the primary obligation of schooling. In your chapter in the 8th edition of the important book, *Theoretical Models and Practices of Literacy* you remind readers of an unconventional argument that runs through much of your work: that “specific literate practices are never in-and-of themselves necessarily empowering” (Luke, 2025, p. 7), but that it matters how literacy is taught and what else is learnt along the way. Can you expand on why technical proficiency is not enough and what else might be needed?

AL: My point is that literacy in and of itself doesn’t

necessarily ‘empower’ or set you free or lead to wealth or invention or activism or social participation. It depends both on how its purposes and practices are shaped and taught by institutions like schools, churches and families—and it depends on how the social fields of work, life, media, and leisure demand and use it. When I first studied reading psychology as a graduate student in 1980, Richard C. Anderson assigned our class one of the early editions of the *Theoretical Models and Processes* volume, which at the time reflected the dominant paradigm debate, between behaviourist descriptions of the “simple view of reading” and emergent cognitive, schema-based models of comprehension. Reading then, was defined in terms of phonics, word recognition and comprehension. Something was clearly missing. My point is that there is no neutral psychological process called ‘reading’ that operates independently of meaningful ‘stuff’, semantic contents about values, beliefs, other human beings and the societies and environments we live in. Reading and writing are always transitive: they are always about something, and the lexico-grammar we see on the page is not simply phonemes translated into graphemes—it is the representation of relationships in and between worlds (Halliday, 1978). This is what Freire (1982) meant with the expression ‘reading and writing the world’. When we say that literacy is a ‘socially constructed’ process, then, it means that it is malleable, and can be shaped to a variety of human uses and practices.

NT: If there is no neutral psychological process called ‘reading’, then it makes sense that there is no neutral pedagogy either. Your argument also suggests that questions of pedagogy cannot be reduced to just technical proficiency. In 2014 you wrote a widely read and cited Hot Topic for ALEA on Explicit and Direct Instruction. It is interesting to read it in 2025 amid a renewed focus on explicit instruction in the form of commercially produced direct instruction. What ideas from that 2014 paper do you think remain generative for the debates we are having now?

AL: Literacy and language education is a matter of curriculum and pedagogy—of knowledge and human social and linguistic interaction. Explicit teaching of the code is a means to an end, a crucial entry point to an ongoing developmental process, one key juncture in a developmental curriculum. But it is not and cannot be taken as *the* curriculum per se—which we see happening in many Australian primary classrooms. Perhaps it is time to pull back from this total focus on ‘reading’ and rediscover the power of *language arts* in early childhood: oral and written, print and digital, aesthetic and multimodal.

My first 1970s practicum assignment as a student teacher was a Year 3 classroom in the Fraser Valley outside of Vancouver—teaching DISTAR, a highly scripted behavioural

phonics program that used ‘diacritical marks’ and colours to assist children to ‘sound things out’. My first work was teaching English as a Second Language to middle school Vietnamese young people using CRP (Corrective Reading Program), another highly scripted behavioural curriculum with graded, ‘accessible’ readers. Both of these were necessarily limited and constraining approaches. I recall the Vietnamese kids, wiser in their life experiences than most, laughing and making fun at the overly simplistic stories and content as we pivoted to a Freirian approach where they began writing and reading each others’ life stories.

My point is that explicit instruction in the code—alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, grapheme/phoneme translation of print to speech, visual recognition of orthographic and punctuation conventions—is important but should not be the sole guide to early literacy instruction. Peter Freebody and I (1991) acknowledged this in the four resources model. Explicit instruction is an advantageous way to teach some replicable behaviours and skills, which I observed in action during my three years working in Singapore classrooms and we included in our Australian work on “productive pedagogies”. It’s an entry point—necessary but not sufficient—and it is certainly not the whole gig. Literacy and language education is not simply about skills acquisition: it is learning about the world, what to do with texts, what they mean, how they mean, and their conventional and potential uses in everyday life. The ‘simple view of reading’ advocated in the current ‘science of reading’ debate assumes a linear developmental pathway (Paris, 2025)—that cracking and mastering the code leads to comprehension, memory, cognate participation in literacy events, and critical analysis and application. And what the empirical data shows us is that there are crucial thresholds where young readers and writers, including those who have ostensibly mastered the ‘code’ in initial literacy education, hit the wall when dealing with comprehension and meaning, engaging with specialised and disciplinary knowledge, genres and language registers, and when asked to engage critically with texts and the world (Tierney & Pearson, 2024).

NT: It seems, then, that the nature of the texts a teacher brings into a classroom is also significant. Early in your academic career you wrote a critique on the Dick and Jane readers, and basal-reader programmes more broadly (Luke, 1988). Since that time, you have argued that the texts used in classrooms are never neutral but are implicated in producing a type of literacy where the act of reading is framed in certain ways with controlled vocabularies, repetitive syntax and predictable storylines. Now, it seems that teachers are being strongly encouraged, if not mandated, to use predominantly decodable readers which control and standardise the language used to teach reading even more than the basal readers of your original critique. What can we learn from your original work about the limitations of these types of texts? Are there any new questions to ask in the contemporary moment, particularly as teachers are turning to generative AI to produce decodable texts?

AL: The Dick and Jane studies were part of an autobiographical journey: a study of the readers that many generations of us grew up with. That work also documented the political economy of textbook publication. The former highlighted a kind of ideological sanitisation of the content—a kind of systematic semantic dumbing down of family life and childhood. The latter economic study also highlighted a huge publisher profit from large scale textbook adoption in the US. It is easy to overlook the fact that literacy education textbooks and approaches are a huge multinational corporate enterprise—something that came up in relation to *No Child Left Behind* legislation two decades ago, in the current proliferation of ‘science of reading’ curriculum packages and commodities, and indeed, in the scathing and ad-hominem media attacks on ‘balanced literacy instruction’ in New York.

So as early as the 1920s, you had a convergence of forces pushing towards ‘scientifically designed’ early readers. At the time for the first generation of reading psychologists like Arthur Gates and colleagues this meant simplifying lexical content (e.g., Dolch word lists), repetition of key ‘sight words’, and repetitive use of particular digraphs and diphthongs—and accompanying these with Norman Rockwell style pictures of idealised White American families (and pets!). In these early days where word recognition was combined with phonics—we see this relentless search for a ‘teacher-proof’ method of instruction.

As for the deliberate grading and instructionally designing of texts: in part it’s a false dilemma. Many traditional print media, from newspapers to niche marketed magazines to adolescent and young adult fiction, have used mechanistic ‘readability’ formulae (traditionally based on measures of lexical density (number of morphemes per word) and syntactic complexity (sentence length)) without altogether compromising semantic content, ideological, scientific, literary and technical meaning. It is possible to create accessible early reading materials that are not meaningless, texts that speak to relationships, values and story—think of Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* series of entry reading materials and so many other texts. At the same time, to take the current dominant version of synthetic phonics as the major guiding principle of the curriculum is a mistake. It is an abrogation of teaching as meaningful, rich and culturally significant storytelling.

NT: The historical convergence of teacher-proofing and commercial interests raises important questions about who holds authority over literacy education. The fact that this recurs suggests that literacy reform is not just about evidence or pedagogy but power and institutional conditions. Barbara Comber, in a recent issue of *Practical Literacy* (2025), reflected on the significance of having people like you and Garth Boomer in senior departmental roles because of how you both brought deep educational and social justice understandings into policy work. She suggested that perhaps we “got too comfortable”, believing we had cracked it. Looking back, what conditions made it

possible for those socially-just literacies agendas to take root in education departments at that time, and what do you think has shifted since?

AL: I had one long conversation and meal with Garth Boomer in the late 80s about his groundbreaking work and experiences. These things are always part historical context and part shifting political opportunities, more than they are anything unique about folks like me and Garth. For me things opened up through generative discussions with Queensland Ministers of Education from across the political spectrum. There was a strong international case—corroborated by PISA, TIMSS and early transnational assessment work—that teacher professionalism, expertise and pedagogic repertoire made a difference. That the systems most successful at addressing increasing social class discrepancies in school engagement, performance and achievement—Finland, Singapore, Ontario—did so through highly trained, well paid and supported teacher workforces with a fair degree of pedagogic authority to adopt to the needs of specific cohorts, communities and changing local demographics. We also had early evidence in the 2000s that the approach that's now been taken up—of highly scripted, prescriptive instruction and curriculum—yielded transient early test scores increases but did not systematically 'close the gap' in longitudinal performance. As a result, a number of us working with government during this period exchanged ideas and resources: Linda Darling-Hammond, Kris Gutierrez, Jeannie Oakes (US), Pasi Sahlberg (Finland), David Hopkins (UK), Avis Glaze and Ben Levin (Ontario), Stuart MacNaughton (NZ), Andreas Schleicher (OECD) and others. So our work on the 'New Basics' and 'productive pedagogies' curriculum reform in Queensland was an extension of this international movement which ran for almost a decade before the Neoliberal testing/standardisation/accountability policy settlement took over. To be honest, the outcomes and consequences of this neoliberal model have been, ahem, unimpressive to say the least—with widening achievement gaps following widening socioeconomic gaps in lock step. Given increasing family poverty, ubiquitous digital culture, youth alienation and mental health issues, the changing nature of work and increasingly shaky social institutions—the prospects of scripted pedagogy in phonics turning this around are not great. But then, in times of social and economic upheaval, schools and literacy are the inevitable scapegoat, and equally, the illusory panacea (Green et al., 1981).

NT: I fear that this neoliberal narrowing of literacy to measurable performance creates precisely the conditions in which generative AI can easily displace notions of authorship and text production. Last year I gave a talk to a group of secondary principals about AI and the purpose of education. Regarding writing, I posed some questions around what might be considered a suitable use of generative AI for student writing: idea generation, drafting, eliciting feedback or improving a final draft. One of the principals in the audience asked me, if AI does all

these elements of writing so well, do we still need to teach children how to write? What would you say to this?

AL: Simply, the AI debate is a battle for the very soul of humanity: over who will control, house, edit, manipulate and restrict access to, and, quite literally, own and profit from the archive of human knowledge. If it's been five centuries of pillaged libraries, ritualistic book burnings and censorship of the print archive to date—the keys to knowledge, art, science and what will count as truth and wisdom, are now in the hands of privately owned and controlled algorithmic machinery. And this machinery is being shaped, controlled and manipulated by an elite cluster of American male techno-billionaires and their corporations. This is the threshold of techno-feudalism (Graham, 2023; Varoufakis, 2024).

Returning to your principal's question and each new technology that supplants forms of human capacity, skill and labour. Why bother teaching writing, why bother teaching reading, why bother teaching adding and subtracting, why bother teaching driving or cooking. If we follow the now taken-for-granted human capital argument—that the purpose of schooling is the targeted transmission of job skills—that's exactly where we land. Why bother with a washed-up old print institution like schooling if AI will replace any skills required of you and, eventually, take over the actual curriculum selection and teaching.

But I think there's a stronger and compelling rationale for teaching writing—and for teaching and practising all aspects of spoken language from conversation to public speaking to poetic and dramatic performance. When we write (and speak) we use grammatical transitivity to name and explain the relationships that we see—between things, places, objects, people, bodies, institutions, natural and environmental contexts and events (Halliday & Martin, 1993). Take away the ability to use grammar functionally—and in particular verbs, prepositions and deixis/reference—we are left gesturing at things and grunting. Consider the limited vocabulary and grammatical incompetence of key political and media figures in the USA: their public speech resorts to pointing, insult and insinuation, unmarked topic shifts and irrelevant digressions. They are left with basically nouns and adjectives and unable to explicate complexity of causation, of social and material relations, of body and environment, and of the world. We find the same phenomenon on social media, where even discussions of our favourite sports teams readily fracture into a series of polarised and polarising grunts and gestures. Conspiracy theories and the politics of paranoia rely upon a flattening out and misrepresentation of causation, agency and action. One of the key definitions of political populism is that it thrives on the reduction of complex social, political and environmental problems to simplistic causes and solutions.

And, if we sample AI generated 'news' on You-Tube or Tiktok—we're exposed to the key trope of AI writing and composition: redundancy and repetition, rather than explication, reflection, comparison, elaboration, digression and analysis. In his earliest studies of transition from

indigenous Uzbek cultures to written/print literacy, Vygotsky's student Alexander Luria (1976) made the case that the coming of print literacy brought with it significant changes in everyday thinking and capacity (including the shifts in verbal memory that Plato anticipated).

Of course, with each major historical change in dominant technological modes of information—something is lost and something is gained, much is transformed. But in this case, control and definition of the archive of human knowledge, memory and history are up for grabs. To this school principal, then, I'd say—the great social and cognitive experiment of a generation who can't write, a generation who have never sat down and read a book from cover to cover, and a generation of public figures who cannot speak in completed sentences is well underway. The potential effects are daunting and scary. I'm not sure we've got any choice but to persist with the project of critical education and literacies—with urgency.

NT: It strikes me that what you are describing sounds like science fiction: unstable archives, flattened public speech, outsourced conditions. If we accept the argument that reading requires more than decoding, that texts induct young people into particular ways of seeing the world and that reading and writing matter for more than just jobs, might we take science fiction more seriously? Could it be a pedagogical possibility not for entertainment or ideas about technological innovation but for developing the political and ethical vocabularies needed to imagine alternatives?

AL: The first great work of science fiction was Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, the 1726 Irish satire which predated the invention of the novel. While ostensibly Swift's take on British colonialism and its genocidal 'voyages of discovery', the Royal Society and the 'sciences' of empire—the most telling and relevant component of his description of the Flying Island of Laputa. There Swift describes a disembodied ruling elite who literally fly above their subjects—governing by proclamation from on high. For major moral axioms and scientific truths, they feed written text into a wooden frame which turns on mechanical handles. When their minions turn the frame—it recombines words and statements to produce 'truths'. Does this sound familiar? A ruling elite of technocrats/leaders on their own flying islands and a truth generating mechanical device? Swift's description was so salient that a century later in 1822, the inventor of the modern 'thinking machine', Charles Babbage, reassured the Royal Society that his proposal was not Swiftian parody.

Since 1984 and *Brave New World* there is so much relevant dystopian fiction, especially for young adults. For me, the two most impactful works of dystopian science fiction are Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. Both are about what happens when intergenerational exchanges of knowledge break down, when teaching as story telling ceases, when cultural memory and history are lost. Put simply, the consequences are knowledge control, technological surveillance and,

simply, total authoritarianism. These stories should be core curriculum—they're essential for any toolkit for planetary survival and human conviviality.

NT: It seems that this type of teaching will require teachers to be able to make informed, and creative, curricular and textual decisions. But the very practice of programming and lesson planning seems to be shifting. Late last year, Multilit posted a link to an article published in their own journal *Nomanis*, titled 'Three good reasons teachers shouldn't DIY their lessons', where the author questioned the dangers of teachers also being called on to be instructional designers. On the same day I read this, a principal shared with me the excitement within their staff about how much time generative AI could save teachers in lesson planning, allowing them to get on with the real job of teaching. From the perspective of social (and planetary) justice, what do you think is the real job of a teacher?

AL: First, on the limits of an exclusive focus on synthetic phonics—I'd recommend Scott Paris's (2025) discussion of the limits of the "simple view of reading". As he points out, this view of reading is synchronic and does not offer a developmental account of reading across a curriculum or lifespan. Further, Rob Tierney and David Pearson (2024) offer the best synoptic overview for teachers of the limits and contradictions of the 'science of reading' translated into policy.

Second, and more generally, standardisation and commodification of knowledge and pedagogy are deadly, especially under the auspices of equity. John Dewey knew this in his early twentieth century debates with psychologist E.L. Thorndike: sameness of instructional treatment is not equality of educational experience. What is being proposed is like replacing expert chefs and nutritionists with fast food: it satisfies hunger, but has longitudinal consequences for well-being and development. It saves time, reduces workload, gets one out of the parking lot earlier, and takes worry and decision-making out of a teacher's hands. But even for advocates of more phonics: isn't it better for teachers to know and selectively deploy instructional foci on specific diphthongs and digraphs than to simply download prepared texts?

This removal of thinking and decision-making, the separation of conception from execution is the hallmark of industrial deskilling of workers (Luke, 2025a). So what's underway is the transition from a skilled worker to the ultimate dream of early 20th century school reformers and behaviourist psychologists: a perfect Skinnerian teaching machine that asks no questions, does not deviate from the script, and engages in unthinking repetitive performance. Welcome to the assembly line, boys and girls, young and old.

The Nordic countries have adopted different blends of traditional and progressive education and curriculum—that are about wellbeing and development, knowledge and wisdom (*bildung*, *didactic*). In Indigenous cultures to this day, Elders are there to provide wisdom, to challenge and discipline young people, to share, shape and remember

history. As Vygotsky argued, the task of the teacher is to demonstrate and pass on expertise with tools, building collaborative zones of proximal development that are calibrated to challenge and engage learners. When we relinquish these key functions it is more than a de-skilling of a profession, it is about cultures losing heart and soul, about societies sacrificing autonomy, agency and capacity.

NT: The pressures you have described—standardisation, commodification, de-skilling—are unfolding amidst broader social and ecological instability. It seems that while generative AI poses a significant threat to education as we know it, and indeed to many of the social and cultural systems that sustain life, we must acknowledge that children are also becoming literate within the context of climate change, increasing civil unrest, late-stage capitalism, increasing inequality and increasingly pervasive social media. Should these realities influence what happens in schools? What must schools become to remain relevant and just in such a world?

AL: Teachers are Elders, pedagogy is an intergenerational process of reflecting upon and passing on wisdom, it is about gifting (Luke, 2019). If you want to be the first society in history that passes this role on to a machine, then go ahead and do it. The consequences for human knowledge and wisdom, for the dialogic formation of belief and values and for our societies and planet are potentially disastrous. We need to clear a space for working in and around a dynamic, living cultural canon of knowledge, ideas, judgement, wisdom. On this I'd agree with our most conservative critics, and I'd welcome a robust, dynamic and never settled debate over which literature, science, art, language and artefacts should be in that canon—especially in this multicultural society. But to hand it over into an AI sampling machine that filters, recycles and reconstitutes internet texts and images is not my idea of a culturally sustaining, conserving and transformative debate—much less to a sampling machine whose decisions are programmed by a bunch of American tech billionaires with no accountability, total surveillance, and unlimited power. For all of their problems, schools are the last social institutions standing where real human beings have to show up each day and read and write, speak and listen, reflect and interact, argue and collaborate. They are amongst the few remaining social institutions with everyday exchange and accountability to local communities. What better place to read and write the world, to learn to live together in all of our differences, and to create, curate and pass on human wisdom and knowledge.

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Recommended Readings:

- Atwood, M. (2003) *Oryx and Crake*. Anchor.
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