INVESTING IN NEW LITERACIES FOR A COSMOPOLITAN FUTURE

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We live in a world that is increasingly mobile and digitally connected. In this rapidly globalizing world, mobility has become “the ideology and utopia of the twenty-first century” (Elliott & Urry, 2010, p. 8). Through affordable travel, mobile communication devices, social media, and online connectivity, new patterns of movement and forms of social participation have emerged. People and ideas traverse real and virtual spaces with greater fluidity, and new means of representation and socialization provide greater opportunities for the construction of identities and networks. Learners are able to exchange information with greater ease and collaborate in more meaningful ways. Through conversations with diverse speakers, they are able to articulate attachments and allegiances to issues, people, and places that lie beyond the boundaries of a nation (Vertovec & Cohen, 2002).

As learners move fluidly across online and offline spaces, the construction of cultures is no longer bound by geography (Appadurai, 1990). Because of short message service (SMS) and online messaging, we have begun to speak through writing, and this convergence has transformed literacy practices in unprecedented ways. With the abundance of multimodal affordances made available through digital media, learners have become increasingly capable of differentiating themselves through linguistic and semiotic resources. Social media platforms, online communities, and forums have become a significant arena in which identities are perpetually performed, curated, and transformed. Navigating these diverse discourse communities through different languages and modalities, learners need to develop new, continually evolving literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011) to claim the right to speak (Norton, 2013).

Because of the global flows of people and ideas, cultures can no longer be closed, homogeneous spheres. Instead, they take on a transculturality, a condition
characterized by the mixing and permeation of cultures and facilitated by migratory processes, communication systems, and economic interdependencies. Through the hybridization of contemporary cultures, nothing is ever absolutely foreign (Welsch, 2008), and learners immersed in this cultural hybridity are able to draw from multiple languages, symbols, practices, and modalities to encode and decode meaning. Trending tweets, YouTube videos, and Facebook memes that originate from different parts of the world have allowed learners to connect through shared global issues and cultural forms. The synchronous distribution of these texts and the transnational conversations around them are helping to forge a sense of global citizenship, the bedrock of cosmopolitanism (Beck, 2002; 2006; Dallmayr, 2013; De Costa, 2014; Delanty, 2006; Hansen, 2010).

Framing the Issue

The paradox of this new world order is that while technology has constructed new modes of cooperation and fostered a greater sense of global interconnectedness, it has also instigated greater social fragmentation and isolation. New modes of productivity have confined people to their own computers and ushered them into private spaces. They are simultaneously isolated and connected through a networked individualism where people are linked by scheduling, monitoring, surveillance, and regulation (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Jones & Hafner, 2012). While social networking sites provide us greater freedom to choose our communities and affiliations, they can also usher us into limited silos. By calculating what is trending or popular, these sites not only control the circulation of knowledge but also shape social and political discourse and the publics in which people participate (Gillespie, 2014). In a news service, the information that is pushed is tailored to the user’s preferences, consequently undermining the diversity of public knowledge and political dialogue. Because of algorithms that direct users toward like-minded people, they enter into “filter bubbles” where one finds the news one expects and political perspectives one already subscribes to (Pariser, 2011). This filter exists in social media where algorithmic calculations push status updates and activities of friends whom one already interacts with most frequently. These algorithms shape the interaction of people through a programmed sociality based on findability and compatibility (Bucher, 2013). Thus, those from similar professions, educational backgrounds, values, or lifestyles are ushered into their own affinity spaces. People can interact less with those from other social positions within their own local communities and instead isolate themselves in spaces that serve as echo chambers for their own convictions.

Further, while the discourses of mobility and transculturality may dissolve the notion of boundaries, this does not preclude the existence of peripheries and barriers of entry. Within flows and scapes still include inequality, and because culture is tied to economic relations and hierarchies, some cultures have greater opportunities to permeate others, and some cultural forms have greater legitimacy.
and value. At the same time, not everyone can take advantage of mobility, and there are disconnected learners who remain in very fixed locations. The experience of mobility is different for a jet-setting member of the global elite, a migrant worker from the Philippines, or a refugee from Syria. The very act of migration itself sometimes becomes understood as the natural result of the underdevelopment of specific countries, and being from a specific country can imply a certain aptitude or class (Kelly, 2012). In a study of immigrant learners, Gunderson (2007) noted how Mandarin and Cantonese speakers in Canada were considered to be from affluent families while Vietnamese speakers were understood to be refugees with limited economic capital. Implicated in a global class hierarchy, countries of origin position these learners in ways that refract this world economic order. As cultures mix and permeate, the ideological mechanisms that privilege some and marginalize others become more invisible. Thus, the challenge is in recognizing how these transcultural flows are themselves shaped by specific material realities and global inequalities.

In critically examining the notion of transculturality, a central question for educators is the extent to which we can claim to live in “cosmopolitan times.” Alternatively, is cosmopolitanism a construct best understood as an ongoing project in which educators seek to shape a cosmopolitan disposition or imagine a cosmopolitan future? While the discourse of cosmopolitanism has certainly reclaimed a space in the academic imagination, we also live in times where wars are being fought in the name of religion or ethnicity, where literal and metaphorical walls are being erected to protect boundaries when people seek refuge from war-torn countries, and where the fear of the Other has erupted into street clashes and xenophobic laws (Beck, 2012). In some countries, the failure of the economy stirs feelings of disappointment and anxiety, and immigrants are seen as threats to the economy (Adler, 2008). Culturally alienated or economically marginalized youth in developed countries have become targets of radicalization, and social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been used to recruit new, young members in terrorist organizations. Social media users who identify as part of a majority have no qualms publicly shaming those whose values or behavior run contrary to theirs.

Given these realities, the issue we wish to highlight in this chapter is that while the world has indeed become more mobile and connected than before, it is arguably also more isolated and fragmented. The mixing and permeation of cultures made possible through new modes of interaction is still circumscribed by power, and the digital tools that connect us can also be used to make us turn against one another. To use the constructs of transculturality and cosmopolitanism productively in the re imagination of education thus needs a more critical examination of its theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical implications.

The Challenge to Educators

The classrooms of many urban centres and developed countries are indexical of this new social order: diverse, mobile, transcultural. As the integration of
technology in education requires the development of new literacies, the investment of learners in their own learning becomes more complex. Originally theorized to examine the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to a target language (Norton, 2013), investment can be defined as “the commitment to the goals, practices, and identities that constitute the learning process and that are continually negotiated in different social relationships and structures of power” (Darvin & Norton, in press). Recognizing that learners position themselves and are positioned in different learning contexts, investment provides a critical lens to examine to what extent material and ideological factors shape the learning of new literacies. As learners perform multiple identities across online and offline spaces and negotiate their economic, cultural, and social capital, investment itself is complex, contradictory, and in a state of flux. What we need is an understanding of investment that responds to a diverse, mobile, and transcultural world.

In Canada, where one out of every five citizens is foreign born (Statistics Canada, 2015), this understanding is particularly crucial. As the country prepares to welcome 25,000 refugees from Syria, public schools will have children from refugee camps sitting beside those of entrepreneurs from Hong Kong. Coming from developed and developing countries, learners of diverse linguistic, ethnic, and social class backgrounds bring a variety of knowledges and practices to the classroom. They come equipped with varying levels of new literacies, and how teachers are able to address these complex sets of differences is integral to the investment of these diverse learners. In British Columbia, a newly launched Education Plan reflects the flexibility and fluidity of the new social order by devising a system that is student initiated, self-directed, and interdisciplinary. A greater mix and variety of pathways to graduation will allow learners to pursue studies that align with their interests and goals, and more opportunities for hands-on learning in trades and technical training will become available (BC Ministry of Education, 2015). As students navigate this new system with greater freedom, teachers also need to have more flexibility to decide how and when each student is assessed. They need to know the strengths of each and safeguard the system so that it does not become complicit with a “hidden curriculum” (Harklau, 2000), where underprivileged learners are socialized to prepare for low-wage and unstable occupations.

Given the paradoxes of the new social order, the challenge to educators is to reimagine a pedagogy that is able to build on the affordances of a diverse, mobile, transcultural world while addressing its contradictions and inequities. How can we provide learners with the critical literacy that will allow them to dissect the ideological mechanisms that reproduce these inequities? How can we as teachers reflect on the biases and assumptions that are embedded in our own teaching practices? How do we construct innovative teaching strategies that enable learners to pursue individual interests while remaining invested in a sense of global citizenship? Through a model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), what we would like to demonstrate is how a critical examination of identity, capital, and
ideology can help learners and teachers invest not only in equitable learning practices but also in imagining cosmopolitan futures.

**Investment in a Mobile, Fluid World**

Designed to apprehend what has become increasingly invisible and elusive in a mobile, fluid world, our model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015) provides a framework to examine how fleeting literacy events are indexical of more durable macrostructures of power (Figure 7.1). It draws attention to the institutional processes and systemic patterns of control that either enable or constrain certain literacy practices, and the different positions learners have to take as they occupy multiple spaces.

As learners move across space and time, ideologies collude and compete, shaping learners’ identities and positioning them in diverse ways. The value of a learner’s economic, cultural, or social capital shifts accordingly. It is subject to but not completely constrained by the ideologies of different groups or fields that determine how the capital of learners is legitimized and transformed into what Bourdieu (1987) calls *symbolic capital*. How teachers recognize the linguistic or cultural capital of learners, including their prior knowledge, home literacies, and mother tongues, can impact the extent to which learners will invest in the language and literacy practices of a given classroom.

To illustrate how this model can help illuminate the impact of material conditions and ideological structures on the investment of diverse learners, we draw on two case studies, discussed at greater length in Darvin and Norton (2014) and Norton et al. (2011). In these studies, Ayrton and Henrietta are learners of contrasting geographical and social locations. Ayrton was a 16-year-old Filipino male from a wealthy neighborhood in Vancouver, Canada, and Henrietta was an 18-

year-old female student from a rural village in Uganda. Both learners took part in studies that sought to investigate how access to digital resources impacted learners’ identities and investments. We use the three central constructs of the model to organize the discussion below.

Identity. Ayrton and his family immigrated to Canada through the Investor Class, which requires immigrants to have a net worth of at least CAN$1.6 million. His father was an entrepreneur who managed multiple businesses in the Philippines remotely, while his mother was a homemaker. The social position of Ayrton as part of a privileged class in a highly industrialized country made technology a regular feature of his daily life, providing him with all the affordances of learning. His parents and older siblings were all skilled users and served as digital literacy role models who shaped his conception of the uses of technology. His access to resources enabled him to claim the identity of a technologically adept user. For example, sharing his father’s entrepreneurial spirit, he signed up for an online course on currency trading, where he engaged in online discussions with adult professionals from a global network. By carefully curating his social media profiles and shifting language registers as necessary, he was able to conceal his age and express opinions about market trends and opportunities. Through this strategy, he was able to assert his place as a legitimate speaker in these spaces and gain even greater knowledge valued in capitalist contexts. Although it was his parents who paid a premium for this course, he described enrolling in the course as “one of the greatest investments” of his life.

Henrietta, on the other hand, never had any experience with computers prior to participating in the digital literacy study. Her village had limited electricity and no running water, and people lived with a per-capita income of less than one dollar a day. The researchers brought Henrietta and her peers to an Internet café in a neighboring town to learn how to use the web. She expressed her investment in digital literacy as follows: “My main interest in learning more about computers is to know how they use Internet, to communicate to people in the outside countries.” She recognized that knowledge gained through the Internet would enhance self-knowledge, as she would “learn more about [her]self through sharing view with Canadian people.” Her desire to “join the group of knowledgeable people in the world” expressed an imagined identity.

Capital. Each member of Ayrton’s family had a phone and a laptop or tablet (or both). One section of the house had a desktop with a printer. Their connectivity was seamless as they moved from Wi-Fi at home or school to LTE or 3G in public spaces. Whether technology was used for doing schoolwork, engaging in social media or getting news updates, it had been completely integrated into Ayrton’s daily life. He was visibly adept in it, multitasking with great ease while jumping from one application to another. Asked about what technology meant to him, Ayrton described it as a bridge “that connects me to people as far as Orlando in the United States or people back in the Philippines.” Because his privileged position allowed him to travel extensively, he did not seek to connect
to a generic “group of knowledgeable people in the world,” but he referred to a concrete network of people he knew in specific geographical locations with access to similar technologies. His possession of the resources, knowledge, and social networks allowed him to position himself as a legitimate participant and contributor in the different affinity spaces he occupied online. By interacting with equally resourced learners in his currency-trading course, he increased not only cultural capital in the form of entrepreneurial knowledge, but also social capital as well.

For Henrietta, on the other hand, developing her digital literacy to “join the group of knowledgeable people in the world” may prove to be unsustainable. Not only was her own economic capital limited, but the technological infrastructure of her local context was poorly resourced. In Henrietta’s case, both her own social location and the economic position of rural Uganda constrained access to the technology necessary for Henrietta to master literacies relevant to the knowledge economy. While she may have been driven by a strong desire to learn more about computers and to connect with other people, her social location made it very difficult for her to enter these new spaces of socialization. Even though her desire to engage in transnational conversations could be seen as a way to increase her social capital, how this perceived benefit would enable her to gain knowledge that advances her social mobility was unknown.

**Ideology.** When Ayrton spoke of the currency trading course as “one of the greatest investments” of his life, he reflected a very strong entrepreneurial disposition, undoubtedly role-modeled by his father. This identification aligns with neoliberal ideology that regards the individual as *homo economicus* or “an entrepreneur of one’s self” (Foucault, 2008), who is held completely accountable for his or her own economic success or failure. Ayrton’s investment in the imagined identity of a currency trader came with tangible measurements of success and translated into the accumulation of more economic capital. At the same time, his description of the migration experience reflected existing ideologies of globalism. “Moving [to Canada], I had to get out of that isolated world.” As a developing country that ranks low in the global class hierarchy, the Philippines was seen as “isolated” from the rest of the world, while Canada, as a wealthy, industrialized country, was made to occupy a more central position in this imagined “world.”

In contrast, because of the discourses of globalization and technology that constructed her conceptions of value, Henrietta positioned herself as inadequate, as one who was not sufficiently “knowledgeable.” This hegemonic view reflects ideologies where the global is privileged over the local, and the global North is seen as more knowledgeable than the global South. As she sought to gain access to affordances of learning like devices and books, systemic patterns of control also determined this access: the allocation of technology budgets to local schools, the development of connectivity infrastructure in rural Uganda, and business processes that impact the affordability of devices. Ideologies that privilege urban versus rural, middle versus lower class, or male versus female will also position Henrietta further and shape her capacity to gain other affordances of learning. In terms of
linguistic capital, although she spoke English, which has become the de facto lingua franca of the Internet, her access to valued forms of English was limited. Indeed, what she found particularly appealing about the Internet was that it gave her the opportunity to “understand more about English language.” As she noted, “I got communication. I have learnt the English language because the English in Internet has been very create, and it has arranged properly.” How interlocutors online and offline will position her as a teenage girl from rural Uganda, speaking a specific variety of English, will shape the dynamics of their interaction. Relations of power will shape her legitimacy as a speaker and the symbolic value of her linguistic capital.

While their investment in the language and literacy practices of their communities is shaped in different ways because of dominant ideologies and unequal levels of capital, both Ayrton and Henrietta recognized the power of the digital and envisioned more cosmopolitan futures. Henrietta aspired “to communicate to people in the outside countries” and believed that she would “learn more about [her]self through sharing view with Canadian people.” Her imaginary conception of the world outside Uganda stirred the desire to connect with others to better understand herself. For Ayrton, this future was tied to claiming a powerful imagined identity. “With how the world is just connected and how information is at your fingertips, you can be anyone or anything you want to be, and it’s just right there.” He recognized the connectedness of the world and its value in enabling him to claim ownership of a privileged future.

Through these two case studies, what we sought to demonstrate is that two contemporary adolescent learners from different geographical and social positions can have very contrasting experiences of this mobile, digital world. Although the learners may acquire similar literacies, their personal backgrounds, institutional structures, and access to resources will still shape their own conceptions of the value of these literacies. How they envision their place in a global community also reflects their own experiences of mobility. Dominant ideologies and the possession or lack of capital shape not only learners’ dispositions and practices but also their imaginations of a cosmopolitan future. Because of these differences, we need an understanding of cosmopolitanism that is not just an expression of a utopian vision but also recognizes and addresses existing inequalities.

### Cosmopolitanism and Educational Change

Derived from the Greek *cosmos*, the universe or the world, and *polis*, citizen, the term *cosmopolitanism* often refers to a sense of global citizenship. Replacing the discourse of multiculturalism, which is circumscribed by national boundaries and the notion of integration, it recognizes how mobility and transculturality have opened up a condition of unboundedness that transcends the model of the nation-state. Cosmopolitanism constructs the identity of the global citizen as one who is
both product and agent of cultural hybridity and a duly constituted member of an imagined global community (Beck, 2002). Because of the ease of travel and digital affordances, people are able to develop multiple attachments and a broad knowledge of the world. Grounded in lived and virtual experiences, this disposition understands the complexities of living within diversity as an integral part of coexistence (Hebert, 2013).

While models of integration involve adopting the cultural and normative standards of those who are native-born or “average,” cosmopolitanism is rooted in a desire to accept difference without the need to change it into the familiar (Appiah, 2006). For Vertovec and Cohen (2002), it is not a society but a set of interactive relations that is able to manage cultural and political multiplicities and represent “a diverse complexity of repertoires of allegiance, identity, and interest” (Hebert, 2013, p. 9). The global is not outside the social world but inside it, because almost every aspect of the social world is structured by global processes. In the same way that these processes are contingent, multileveled, and indeterminate, social reality itself occurs in the context of risk, uncertainty, and contestation and where the dynamics and boundaries of inclusion and exclusion shift constantly (Delanty, 2006).

That these boundaries still exist under conditions of mobility is key to the idea of cosmopolitanism that we assert in this chapter. For cosmopolitanism to become a generative construct rather than an empty abstraction, it must resist becoming an expansion of a romanticized multiculturalism that celebrates difference through essences while erasing inequalities. It must not be reduced to a universal order that can too easily be appropriated as a representation of Western ideals. Social lives are organized not in relation to one single complex of norms but in relation to many competing or complementary ones, a condition of polycentricity (Blommaert, 2013). As we speak of transcultural flows and scapes, the notion of polycentricity reminds us that centres and peripheries still exist and that they mutually influence each other at local and global levels in a state of constant flux. Thus the idea of cosmopolitanism that informs our work remains grounded in an understanding of diversity as a site of both struggle and opportunity.

Recognizing the asymmetrical relations of power that exist in local and global scales, critical cosmopolitanism as proposed by Delanty (2006) concerns itself with the internal transformation of social and cultural phenomena through self-problematization and pluralisation” (p. 41). It stresses the mutual implication of centre and periphery and seeks solutions to the problems of globalization by imagining new possibilities. This cosmopolitan imagination is made possible through an openness and a desire for societal transformation, while simultaneously recognizing that struggle constitutes the fabric of the social. Cosmopolitanism in this regard becomes an ongoing project rather than a current state or condition. We do not live in cosmopolitan times, but we engage in “cosmopolitizing practices” (Beck, 2012) so that we can achieve a cosmopolitan future.
Investing in a Cosmopolitan Future

The understanding of cosmopolitanism as both a transformative process and an imagined future complements the model of investment in a number of ways. Conceptualized to address the dynamics of a mobile, polycentric, and transcultural world, the model apprehends what has become elusive in a state of flux: the shifting capillaries of power. As learners navigate through spaces governed by colluding or competing ideologies and cultures, the model provides the theoretical tools to dissect how power operates. It examines how differences are negotiated in the language and literacy practices of learners and how the norms and rules of these spaces determine inclusion and exclusion. By locating investment at the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, the model is able to provide a framework for critical reflection, which is core to the cosmopolitan project. By examining the inequalities of the present, the model contributes to the pursuit of an equitable cosmopolitan imagination.

In order for learners to cultivate a cosmopolitan disposition, we need a critical pedagogy that rethinks the knowledges and literacies that have been traditionally valued in school. Learners and teachers alike need to reflect more critically on the worldviews that can limit the conception and pursuit of this imagined global community. By engendering more critical reflection, this pedagogy seeks to shape a disposition that transforms narrow self-interest into a sense of responsibility to achieve the global good. For learners to negotiate individual aspirations with a sense of global citizenship, they need to recognize the value of different knowledges, cultures, modalities, and languages and understand the material inequalities that circumscribe them. It must provoke them to examine differences in worldviews and discern how these enable or constrain a cosmopolitan imagination.

At the same time, for teachers to develop a more cosmopolitan disposition, the model of investment invites them to ask:

1. To what extent do I as a teacher recognize and respond to the material, unequal lived realities of learners and their multiple identities?  
2. What dominant ideologies and systemic patterns of control circumscribe these realities? How does my own worldview position these learners in specific ways?  
3. In what ways do I recognize or overlook, value or devalue the linguistic and cultural capital that learners come to class equipped with?

(Darvin, 2015, pp. 597–98)

These questions challenge teachers to recognize that the locally situated classroom is a microcosm of political economic forces that circumscribe a global world. A greater awareness of how these macro forces shape the investment of learners can help teachers develop more cosmopolitizing teaching strategies. This, in turn, has important implications for shifts in teacher identity (Norton, in press). Drama and digital storytelling are just two of many opportunities for teachers to develop
among learners a greater awareness of diversity and inequality. By inviting migrant learners, for instance, to compose and perform a one-act play that narrates their stories of migration, they are able to not only demonstrate the uniqueness of their cultures but also understand how the material conditions of their migration can be very different from each other’s (Darvin, 2015). In a Digital Storytelling Workshop that Darvin designed and facilitated for a high school in Vancouver (Darvin & Norton, 2014), students were tasked to produce a four-minute video where they shared their own experiences of moving to Canada. They stitched together pictures and video footage taken from their country of origin and, in some cases, used their mother tongue to narrate their experiences. These digital stories were then showcased in a Digital Story Festival to an audience of students, teachers, and school administrators. This activity allowed students to demonstrate the diversity of languages, accents, repertoires, and cultures that existed within their school. Because they structured their narratives according to the traditional plot outline of exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action, they were also able to share specific personal conflicts that circumscribed their migration.

By reflecting on each other’s narratives, students are encouraged to ask themselves:

How is my migration experience similar to or different from those of my classmates? What accounts for these similarities or differences? What knowledge do I bring from my country that my classmates can learn from? What do they bring that I can learn from myself? Because we come from different countries, how are our ways of thinking similar to or different from each other’s?

(Darvin, 2015, p. 598)

Such questions, we believe, are the building blocks of a cosmopolitan disposition. When learners are exposed not just to a diversity of cultural forms but also of worldviews and of lived experiences, they are also able to witness how inequality operates within conditions of power. By understanding how such inequality impacts the lives of real people, of their own peers, the hope is that learners develop not just a greater sensitivity to these differences, but a desire to contribute to a more just society.

As technology provides learners with more opportunities to pursue self-interest with greater autonomy, we need learners to invest in cosmopolitizing practices and to envisage a more inclusive future. Through a critical dissection of identity, capital, and ideology, the model of investment continues to challenge teachers and researchers to question the logic of the current world order and to address inequitable language, literacy, and learning practices. It enables an examination of how learners are positioned, constrained, or empowered as they navigate diverse spaces and perform a range of identities. The hope is for learners like Ayrton and Henrietta to overcome the barriers of their agentive possibilities and to cultivate a disposition where they not only seek personal benefits but also contribute meaningfully to a global community. The investment of learners in language and
literacy practices that can shape this cosmopolitan future represents much hope for literacy education in the twenty-first century.

References


