It is now an oft told tale that we are living in the midst of a period of dramatic global economic change, co-evolving with and fuelled by an equally dramatic technological revolution. These forces combine to radically alter our work, civic and personal lives (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998, Drucker, 1993, Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996). At the same time, demographic changes are also occurring in classrooms, workplaces and neighborhoods throughout Canada, particularly in large urban centers. Emigration patterns, globalization, and information and communication technologies have created the challenge to design pedagogies that afford learners, regardless of age, race, class and background, an opportunity to realize their potential and to develop the knowledge and know-how to enable them to succeed in the so called ‘knowledge economy’. Literacy is viewed as a critical tool in this endeavor. However, in light of rapidly changing social and economic realities, it is timely to rethink what forms of literacy to teach and what pedagogical options are most appropriate for teaching different forms of literacy appropriate to these new times. This paper reports on preliminary analysis of two cases from high schools, in Vancouver, B.C. where teachers and students are dialogically engaging in such innovative work. The cases are drawn from a larger Canada wide SSHRC/INE funded research project entitled From Literacy to Multiliteracies: Designing Learning Environments for Knowledge Generation within the New Economy (Early et al, 2002).

First, the paper briefly situates the cases within the context of the larger study, next, through two vignettes, it reports the cases, one on media literacy, the other on ‘traditional’ and computer literacy, and finally, it draws insights and understandings from across these cases to sketch some emerging principles of a (multi) literacies pedagogy that has transformative potential for learners across the age span.

Situating the cases: The knowledge economy and a multiliteracies pedagogy.

As noted above, the nature of work has changed as a consequence of significant global economic restructuring. Old capitalist economies of mass production characterized by repetitive tasks and hierarchical management structures have given way to post-Fordism (Piore and Sable, 1984) in which workplaces opt for flattened hierarchies, and multi skilled workers contribute to decision making and problem solving. In this context, knowledge itself, particularly in the form of ‘value added’, has become a new form of capital. Moreover, in these ‘new work orders’ ‘old vertical chains of command are replaced by horizontal relationships of teamwork’ (Cope and Kalzantzis, 2000, p.11). According to Edwards and Nicoll, “The multi-skilled flexible worker has been promoted as paradigmatic of the economically successful organization, moving from task to task, team working, problem solving and learning as they do so” (Edwards and Nicholl, 2000). Despite the rhetoric, however, there are many scholars who are skeptical of the benefits
to workers of a new work order, and indeed the extent to which it truly exists. For example, Kincheloe asserts that this apparently “democratic discourse….can be used for hegemonic purposes. Instead of striving for worker empowerment, plans like these often degenerate into deceptive slogans designed to manipulate workers to support the status quo” (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 54). And according to the New London Group, 2000, “These new workplace discourses can be taken in two very different ways-as opening new educational and social possibilities, or as new systems of mind control and exploitation.” (Cope and Kalantzis, p. 12).

Despite, or perhaps more accurately because of, the controversies and contradictions in the discourses around the ‘Knowledge Society’, it is vital to rethink our basic tenets regarding the what and the how of literacy pedagogy, and to explore forms of pedagogy that have the potential to respond thoughtfully and constructively to the technological and social changes that we are now experiencing. In other words, we need to think about how to take advantage of the current context, ‘-as opening new educational and social possibilities’, to promote democratic education and human needs, rather than to primarily serve the needs of business and a globalized economy. It was to this end, that we invited teacher-researchers to collaborate with us to explore their multiple literacies praxis.

Multiliteracies

In our project work, we, like other educators who locate themselves within socio-cultural and situated learning approaches to literacy, make a point to talk about literacies in the plural. As Brian Street, who had a hand in developing the term multiple literacies in the1980’s, explains: ‘I prefer to work from what I term the ‘ideological’ model of language and literacy that recognizes a multiplicity of language uses and literacies; that the meaning and uses of language and literacy practices are always associated with relations of power and ideology, they are not simply neutral technologies ( Street, 1984, 139). More recently the term multiliteracies was introduced by the New London Group (1996) to highlight the relevance of new forms of literacy associated with information, communications and multimedia technologies and equally importantly, the wide variety of culturally specific forms of literacy evident in complex pluralistic societies. These ideas are also informing our work, even as we debate them. For like Street (2003), we see that the challenge is “to move beyond these theoretical critiques and to develop positive proposals for interventions in teaching, curriculum, measurement criteria, and teacher education in both the formal and informal sectors, based upon these principles… their sternest test (will be) their practical applications to mainstream education.”

So drawing on data from our on-going three-year multiliteracies research project, involving approximately 50 teachers and over 500 students and their families, in and out of schools, in Greater Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, we are currently addressing how literacy and pedagogy might be re-conceptualized to maximize educational development for all in this era of globalization and continuing technological change. And, from an analysis of critical case studies, we are taking up Street’s challenge and moving beyond simply theoretical critiques of traditional autonomous models of literacy and
from praxis, to propose some core principles to guide instruction, curriculum, measurement and policy development.

What follows, then, in the next section, is a glimpse into that work. It is an account of two cases that illuminate how some teachers, together with their students, have taken up the challenge.

**Vignette 1: Media Literacy**

This project was undertaken at Gladstone Secondary School, located on the East side of Vancouver. The school has a population of some 1400 ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Cantonese is the home language of the majority of students with some forty other home languages spoken among the student body. The media literacy and community relations course from which data is drawn is an elective course for interested students. For both teacher and student participants, a significant motivation for involvement was a desire to learn how to mediate the divide between how the school was perceived, internally, by students, parents and administration, and how it was viewed from the outside by the Vancouver community at large. The overriding belief of the former was that this was a great school; a school with many accomplishments of which they could be proud. However, this conviction was not shared in the broader public discourse. The school’s low ranking (257th) in the widely publicized Fraser Institute Report did little to change the public impression that this school was mediocre at best, moribund and dangerous at worst, infamous for a drive by shooting over a decade ago. So the class was established to embark on a public advocacy program that would, in the teachers’ and students’ view, simultaneously provide participating students with media and multi-literacy learning opportunities, while they were voluntarily engaging in the process of changing the school’s negative public image. It is the development of media and multiliteracies that is the focus here.

Early in the year, teachers and students met to determine guiding principles and strategies for the course activities: 1) Activities would be designed to read and interpret authentic media texts with particular attention to sensitizing students to how mainstream media positions people based on such factors as race, class, gender and social status. 2) Key messages about the school the students wanted to ‘voice’ would be articulated, appropriate media representations of those messages considered, and dissemination plans developed to target these messages to particular groups. 3) Media literacies (both literacy practices and events) and community outreach would be developed in as many languages and literacies of the communities as possible.

With these in mind, a large number of activities, big and small, were undertaken in the course of the school year. A brief and highly selective summary follows:

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1 During the year, the class became in many respects more like a ‘committee’ in structure. Some members were very involved in every activity, this was not the majority, most students joined in activities of particular relevance or interest to them, disengaged at times when they were busy with other school work or extra-curricular activities, and returned again later as their schedules allowed. In short, there was a great deal of flexibility and openness around participation. There was no lack of commitment, however.
1) A school opening reception was organized. Invitations to parents and press releases were prepared by students in multiple languages. Follow up phone calls were made inviting various media to interview students and staff who were organizing the event. Several local English and minority language newspapers and two local television stations covered the event, including interviewing the organizers. One of the television stations reported the story in the positive light, portraying a school respecting and embracing diversity, that the students had wanted, the other did a negative feature on high school students’ ‘provocative’ clothing, with accompanying footage. As Tim Mc Geer, the lead teacher-researcher on the project reflected: “This was a powerful lesson for both students and staff. We were all given real life experiences in the power, limitations and bias of the media. We were also reminded of both the risks and care we would have to take in our efforts to put our messages out to a ‘media beast’ with its own agenda to meet.”

2) In part because of previous media coverage and growing links with the media community, the group was invited to be involved in a special Remembrance Day program on the National on CBC hosted by Peter Mainsbridge. Students interviewed three Canadian war veterans who were captured by the Japanese in Hong Kong in 1941, and held in Prisoners of War Camps for 44 months In addition, they met CBC Newsworld Senior Producer, Mark Bulgutch, in advance, to learn more about the program, and to plan, prepare and write scripts for the event. During the filming of the show they were invited into the production studio truck to observe the Producer and CBC Newsworld Chief Director, Fred Parker in action throughout the hour long program. In addition, prior to the afternoon filming, students and staff participated in a noon hour forum with Peter Mansbridge …and students prepared interview questions to ask the journalist about his career and his understandings of how media works to present a message. These students had an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and learning and gain further media literacy skills when a CBC Radio reporter interviewed them and the veterans for a show that aired on November 10th.

According to teachers and students, through these events the students were not only gaining media literacies, seeing how media works, and seeing how collaboration and community outreach could affect social change, they were also seeing how this could be integrated with the learning of traditional aspects of print literacies and to many different curricular areas, notably English and social studies. This is how one student summarized the experience:

This show had a profound impact on all that helped to create it. From learning more about the Hong Kong incident and asking the questions we had prepared, to working with the CBC crew and helping create a TV studio in our Drama studio. There was never a point where I wasn't learning something new. Not only did I learn about our Nation’s history, and how a show is put together, but I learned a lot about myself and my fellow person. This was a day that went far beyond asking a question to three veterans; this was a day that changed my life forever. I grew as a student and as a person, and I’ll never forget the lessons I learned that day. (Steven Eastman, November 2003, School Newsletter)

iii) The school invited Mayor Larry Campbell to a ceremony honoring Gladstone students’ accomplishments in community leadership and service, of which there are many. Prior to the Mayor’s visit, students contacted a reporter from the Vancouver
Courier and invited him to do a piece on ‘social responsibility’ at Gladstone. The Reporter interviewed several staff and students. The Mayor had read this article before his visit to the school and he used it as a reference during some of his improvised remarks, a lesson for the students in how news travels and media influences. As well, City TV did a series of three pieces on the school and the ways students and teachers were working collaboratively to reach out to the community. This included the crew working with student’s organizers to stage a series of photo opportunities that would be television friendly. City TV also agreed to train two student reporters to cover the actual night of the Mayor’s visit. These students were given direct journalistic training by Mike Bothwell and his cameraman. They in turn passed this information along to their peers. The students learned how to interview, capture and then edit a television news story. The following day, other students were interviewed by CBC Radio about their experiences with the Mayor. City Schools and Tsing Tao, the Cantonese daily, also covered the event with student input.

One other major media event of particular note was a theatre/dance company Earthquake Safety Awareness’ performance attended by 700 students, parents, press and political dignitaries, including the Mayor and Federal Minister Stephen Owen. Several students interviewed the politicians after the play to put their views and commitment to action on public record. In June, the school was nominated by a number of prominent citizens who had been involved in various activities over the course of the year for MacLean’s magazine’s “School of Distinction” Award. In the August, 2004 issue of the magazine, Gladstone was acclaimed as one of the top 10 Best Schools in Canada. This significantly changed public perception. It was another lesson for the students on the power of media literacy to effect social change.²

Through different forms, journals, school newsletters, and reflective written pieces throughout the year, together with interviews with UBC researchers, accounts were provided of student (and teacher) perceptions of their learnings (McGeer and Early, in progress). Below are some quotes and excerpts that give a sense of what students reported they had learned:

“I’m always thinking about what the actual story is. ‘Cause I always think the media takes a different spin on it… I’m always thinking what they’re missing maybe or what stories they haven’t told and just how detailed they go into it and if they take into account their own bias, even though there’s not suppose to be bias but sometimes you may just not get the entire story”

² The teachers and students have continued their work this year. Activities include visits by and interviews with John Raulston Saul and Adrienne Clarkson, a group of students joining with the editorial board of the Vancouver Sun to launch a special city-wide project on high school students’ concepts of ‘The Educated Citizen’, and a documentary film being made of the process. The have also been instrumental in the successful ‘Drive on the Drive’ campaign linking schools in the vicinity of Vancouver’s multicultural Commercial Drive more closely to the local communities. The school no longer need concern itself with it’s public image, it is simply continuing it’s on-going agenda to do ‘good works’, read and construct local and world texts, and bring down some walls around the school.
"It’s] hard to completely trust a newspaper. I’m a lot more wary. I pay more attention to who..which reporter… is telling the story "

"[I’ve learned] [to pay more attention to news and newspapers…to read more critically…”

"[I’ve learned] ..media allows information to travel fast and that if you learn to use it right it is a positive way of spreading communication.”

“If you know how to use it, the media is interesting. Media was unattainable to me before this. This has taught me to connect with media for charity and social change. “

“…about writing and social skills from interviewing different types of people, we learn about new careers. We learn a lot (about school work) that goes beyond the curriculum.”

In short, the students had become more aware how the media constructs meaning, influences its audience, and conveys the beliefs and values they seek to impose. Conversely, they had become increasingly savvy about how to co-opt the agenda and use the media as tools to promote the kinds of changes they sought to bring about. In the process, they also had many authentic opportunities to develop their reading, writing and oral skills across a wide range of genre that schools traditionally promote. By giving and conducting interviews and by reporting to media at times throughout the year in their home languages, the students were also provided with opportunities to develop multilingual literacies and have their cultural identities affirmed.

Vignette 2: Family and Computer Literacy

Windermere Secondary, an East Vancouver school of 1300 ethnically and linguistically diverse students (36 home languages), is the site of a teacher-research project centered on a student/parent reading program. The major home languages represented, apart from English (3rd ranked), are Cantonese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Tagalog and Spanish. Improving upon reading skills is a recurrent goal at Windermere. Every five years the school undergoes an accreditation process that defines areas that might be improved. The last accreditation identified reading skills as the school’s number one concern.

The participants in this project were two teachers: Jack Miller, a respected English Teacher, and Jack Allen, the Teacher Librarian, twenty-seven grade ten students in an English class, and their parents. In early September, 2003 this class was tested for Reading and Comprehension ability using Gates-MacGintie Reading Test (Level E, Form 2) Twenty–three of the twenty–seven students in the class had parents who spoke a language other than English in the home. Vocabulary skills ranged from grade 4.5 to 10.7 and comprehension skills from 5.3 to 10.4.

As stated above, a motivation for this project was to improve students’ print-based reading skills. However, in order to combat what they perceived from experience to be an all too common loss of interest over the long term in programs such as USSR, Allen and Miller explored a different path. As a first step, they developed a home reading log form
requiring the adolescent students to read anything of their choice for 15 minutes a day, for one month, with their parents acting as monitors. A wide range of materials were chosen from the classics, through magazines to the Guinness Book of Records. Once this month-long trial period was over, the teachers collected each student’s “reading log” and every student was given credit in the form of marks for returning the completed form as requested. The teachers were delighted to see that every student and their family had engaged in the process. Building on this home-school connection, Allen and Miller took the next step by having students interview their parents on topics chosen from an extensive interest list. Parents were required to indicate their interest in everything from dirt biking to animal training, cooking to musical instruments. To further encourage communication, parents in turn were then required to interview their son/daughter using the same interest form. From the information from these interviews, students were challenged by their teachers to research and prepare for their parents a presentation, in Power-Point form, on a topic that would be, for the parents, ‘a gift of knowledge’ on a topic they were interested in but had no time themselves to learn more about. To provide a model, Jack Allen, an experienced ICT teacher, interviewed his 91-year old father. Based on this interview, and his father’s interests, Jack developed a quality Power-Point presentation for the grade ten class. He discussed not only the content but the form and format of the slides and emphasized his key points with “Tips For Effective Power-Point,” a presentation summarizing ways to maximize communication through this method. Issues such as amount of information per slide, layout, effective use of colour and graphics were considered. Students were encouraged and felt motivated by this session to develop their own Power-Points. Presentation to parents made the Power-Points an important medium to the students and they were keen to learn the technological information about design, inserting visuals, tables, using flash, adding music and making links that they needed to make the presentations as content rich and aesthetically appealing as they could.

Using the library’s comprehensive book and electronic resources, students researched a topic of interest to their parents drawn from their completed interest form. They were encouraged to use any model they wished but were directed to draw upon at least three sources from the library for their research information: books, a specialized reference or encyclopaedia, and websites. In the context of undertaking the research, the students were taught as required such ‘new literacies’ as: how to use a search engine effectively to locate information; how to critically evaluate the usefulness of information on a web-page relative to their purpose; how to determine from information on the web-page who created the information, how the author is positioned, and how this position may be shaping the information presented. Then, after further training in the library on how to translate research notes into a well organized, informative Power-Point presentation, students were advised to pre-book an appropriate presentation time with their parents. After the home presentation, parents, as participants in the project, were required to grade the effort in three areas: variety, enthusiasm and organization. Both parents and students were also asked for written comments as to whether or not the presentation was a worthwhile experience and what was gained by it. Just a few of the responses are provided below:
I was very enjoy this research and presentation. It’s very different from another kind of presentation. The things struggle me is the creative writing for not being bore and too long or too short. But I did it. I’ve a lot of fun. Look at those beautiful shine my eye. When I was looking through the information I often forgetting time to eat or sleep and bit out of control. It’s good. (Student)

I had to explain my presentation in English and Chinese. I found this parent interview project a great way to share knowledge about things. On Monday night, I made my Mum and Dad sit down in front of the computer and I presented my project to them. I wanted to do a good job, because this would show how I am doing at school. (Student)

I really enjoyed doing this project because it showed my parents how to use the computer and how to search for stuff. (Student)

[my son] works very seriously and discuss with me details in this presentation. I am impressed mostly with his presentation with Power-Point. It recalls very happy memories and I can also teach him more the techniques of photography during our discussion. (Parent)

After seeing the visual presentation, I was impressed with the quality of photographs and how she used the written presentation to complement the pictures. I thought this assignment was a very worthwhile experience. What really impressed me was that she has learned how to use the “tools” in the computer to present a very effective communication medium (Parent)

This project yields several insights, from both observation and participants’ responses, the most striking of which is the pleasure, engagement, and pride the students took in preparing and presenting this ‘gift of knowledge’ to their parents. Repeatedly they talked about how hard they had worked, how much fun it had been, and how the process had brought them even closer to their families. A second insight is that in authentic contexts such as these, where students have a real purpose and passion for what they are doing, they so easily and effortlessly acquire the important new literacies, of information literacies and computer literacies. It is also noteworthy the extent to which their print based reading skills, one of the teachers’ main motivations for the work, seemed to have improved. While acknowledging that many other factors are likely to be co-related to these findings, it is worth noting that when these students were retested in late April, for Reading and Comprehension ability using Gates-MacGintie Reading Test (Level E, Form 2) gains were evident. Vocabulary skills now ranged from grade 5.1 to 12.8 and comprehension skills from 6.7 to 12.5, with all but two of the twenty-seven students making gains, some quite remarkable, in their reading attainment.

Concluding remarks

A central aim of this paper has been to think about how to take advantage of the current context of technological and social change ‘-as opening new educational and social possibilities’, to promote democratic education and human needs with particular
relevance to developing learners’ “21st Century literacy skills” for lifelong learning and work. Two cases from a larger national study have been reported, illustrative of the way some teachers are approaching the challenge and opportunity. On the basis of a cross case analysis of these two cases, a sketch of some key principles that are emerging for a multiliteracies pedagogy will now be drawn. In the multiple – literacy pedagogies of these teachers’ praxis:

- pedagogy is connected in motivating and meaningful ways to social practices that are authentic and relevant in the lives of the learners. These practices link in some ‘real’ way to the human needs and interests of the students both in the present and the future and act as apprenticeship to enable them to make life choices. In these contexts for learning, the learners’ hearts, mind and spirits are connected.

- pedagogy is situated and, as such, multiple domains and literacies are interwoven and interconnected. Traditional, computer, informational, multimedia, multilingual literacies are not isolated but integrated, they are also vitally linked with topics and content knowledge of interest to the learners. No one mode is of representation is privileged each is considered for appropriateness for particular situations and purposes.

- pedagogy is built upon what the learners bring to the classroom, not only in terms of their knowledge and life experiences vis-à-vis multiple literacies, but importantly what they bring to the classroom in terms of how they want to be viewed and respected as human beings and how they wish to take their place in the world now and in the future.

- pedagogy is critical, and connected to a world outside the classroom. Students are encouraged to develop a critical consciousness of the world in which we live, to develop a self-consciousness of how language and literacies work not only to inform but also to influence and affect change in both individuals and communities.

In the context of the larger SSHRC funded research project, from which these data are drawn, we are in the process of a more extensive and rigorous cross-case analysis of the forty-plus cases we have researched along with our teacher partners. Cummins (2004) provides an account of how the OISE/UT Multiliteracies Project Team are currently articulating principles of pedagogy drawn from their work with educators in the Greater Toronto region. Early and Potts (2004), Early et al. (2005) report on principles emerging from analysis across other cases. Our collaborative work to date has revealed a complementary perspective. What is already evident in the emerging principles is that while the times may be new, in some regards the reconceptualizations of literacy education that we are calling for are not. They hark back to the work of such scholars as John Dewey, Freire and other progressive and radical educators who argue for authentic interaction, reflection and experience in the interest of, not only the individual, but also community and democracy. The new opportunities for multiliteracy opened up by recent technological changes allow these educational principles to flourish in exciting ways. The case studies are testament to this. Given the technological and social changes we are now experiencing, it is a matter of some urgency that literacy educators create frameworks that are innovative, inclusive, critical, rigorous and rich, linked in authentic ways to lives and communities beyond the walls of school or institutional setting. The participants in our project are working to make contributions to that end.
References
