What is at stake in literacy education is what we teach people to “do” with texts—intellectually and culturally, socially and politically. Nations, communities, cultures, and institutions have always deliberately shaped these practices. We are not exempt, nor is our teaching simply a neutral, technical, or scientific matter. Our work involves helping kids decide which texts are worth reading and writing, how, where, and to what ends and purposes. This is an ethical and social responsibility.

The events since 9/11 provide a moment for reconsidering the nature of education in what has become a more interconnected and complex world. It has disrupted the key policy assumption that the purpose of education is the scientific production of job skills. The educational debate that we as an international community of teachers, teacher educators, and literacy researchers need to have isn’t an acrimonious inward-looking discussion of scientific evidence and methods. The imperative of learning to live together ethically and justly has been put back on the table. Our students need a literacy education that provides critical engagements with globalized flows of information, image, text, and discourse.

Reading and writing have always been tools that take us across borders, build bridges across cultures and communities, and enable us to see and hold up to critical scrutiny the competing and complex texts that vie to influence our beliefs, everyday lives, moral commitments, and social investments. Yet schooling that is parochial and inward-looking as well as xenophobic and defensive can have disastrous consequences for individuals, local communities, and nations.

One of the abiding concerns of educational philosopher and activist Ivan Illich was education for a new ethics of global community. Borrowing from Illich (1973), we could remake literacy as a tool for conviviality in what have become difficult and risky geopolitical, cultural, economic, and social conditions. That is, we could begin to view literacy and multiliteracies as part of students’ tool kits for understanding, critiquing, and engaging with the global flows of images and texts that they confront daily.

Reading and writing have always had this potential. Umberto Eco (1986) once referred to text as “machinery for constructing possible worlds” (p. 246). Teachers have always known that texts have the capacity of transporting us to other lives and places, to engage with “Other” cultures. Texts can do so fictionally, deceptively, empathetically, critically—with a host of effects. In this regard, whether in traditional print forms or digital/online forms, literacy has been a communications technology with the capacity to compress time and space. We can show students how to use literacy to go inward and outward, to engage in comparisons and understandings of other possible worlds, discourses, and ideologies. This simultaneous universe, the “global village” envisioned by Illich and Marshall McLuhan (1968/2001), becomes accessible through one’s capacity to read and write, whether online or off.

As teachers, we engage the powers of text in several ways. That capacity can be used for an existential fleeing from the world, a suspension of the local and the pursuit of texts and discourses “Other” to immediate experience. That is, literature study can be enlisted to disengage readers from a reading of the world of globalized “scapes” and moments of information and capital that have become increasingly important and troubling. While this kind of fantasy literacy might have immediate psychotherapeutic and aesthetic purposes, it also has the potential to take the principal purposes of text as disengagement...
with the world. Indeed, this was Flaubert’s point in Madame Bovary. In contrast, many of us were trained to use various teaching strategies, such as language experience, journal writing, and project work, to make literacy education more “relevant” to kids’ local experiences. This thematic teaching ranged from studies of local wildlife to discussions of community activities. Our belief was that this teaching increased levels of interest, motivation, and student voice. But the question for this kind of curriculum is whether it intellectually or textually or critically “goes anywhere.” There is often limited articulation into broader conversations about how local contexts, experiences, and issues fit with the parallel discourse that form the material bases of changes in local communities. It could entail using writing, media production, and online communication to participate in virtual communities and transnational dialogue. It can involve reading multiple texts that compare competing accounts and stances on events, cultures, and places. It can entail working intertextually not just across different media and genres, but also across cultural and historical texts and contexts. Our aim is to shape literacy practices that are about engaging and managing the images, representations, and texts that constitute identity, work, and ideology, and, finally, those that engage with other cultures and sensibilities. The risk here is one of recognizing the difference between information and knowledge, and perhaps subtler and more important, the difference between knowledge and its ethical applications in social and cultural action.

We need something more than this. The very stock and trade of cultural and economic globalization is the borderless traffic in texts, images, information, data, signs, and symbols. The challenge is for a critical literacy education that connects a “reading of the local” with those of other possible worlds, times, and places. A critical literacy education can engage students with the flows of effects between the time/space locality that they live in and other places and spaces that are represented in the multimediated texts around them. And even further, they may have access to and engage with conversation and dialogue that takes them into the heart of both what is possible and what is not yet.

An approach to critical literacy curriculum can involve using the Internet to audit and analyze the global flows of work, goods, and discourse that form the material bases of changes in local communities. It might sound, there are prototypes in the extensive literature on the teaching of critical literacy and critical language awareness (e.g., Fairclough, 1992). Such models do not discard basic knowledge about print codes, grammatical metalanguage, enhanced automaticity of skill, or metalinguistic awareness. Instead, they set out to ensure that these are lodged within broader curriculum contexts that are not dated, trivial, or simply intellectually and sociopolitically empty.

I have no doubt that by the time this short piece goes to press, geopolitical events will have caught up with us. I am now teaching and writing in Singapore, having worked in Australian education for the past two decades. In both of these countries, we are having robust debates over the future of education—over new forms of globalized and multilingual citizenship, new economies and cultures built around signs and symbols, new forms of work, identity, and practice that will be required in these very difficult and risky times, and, most importantly, learning to live together in our differences rather than in spite of them.

The Chinese word for bridge (qiao) is often used as a metaphor to describe the way in which diasporic Chinese cultures have maintained complex linguistic and social, cultural, and economic networks in the face of difficult histories (Ong, 1996). The western term “cosmopolitan” was invented in the 18th century by Immanuel Kant (1795) in his seminal effort to describe what it might mean to be a citizen whose responsibilities were to the world and went beyond the narrow boundaries of nationality and nationalism. Both of these ideas point us in directions for reinventing and rethinking the
purposes of education. Perhaps we need a critical approach to literacy education that is about engaging with texts and discourses as a means of bridging space and time, critically understanding and altering the connections between the local and the global, moving between cultures and communities, and developing transnational understandings and collaborations.

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—Marilyn Carpenter