“…I believe that the sun has risen not only because I have seen it, but because by it I see everything else.” - C.S. Lewis (1945)

Finding Meaning

the past
interpreted
through
the present
interpreted
through
the past

In documenting how Emily, Tristan and Simon have used literacies on their own, and more importantly how they have used multiple literacies, I have gained insight not only into how the literacies process works, but also into how the children have each used different literacies to support their own learning, through taking what they knew in one literacy and applying it to another; scaffolding their own learning. Through my observations of the children’s literacies use and understanding, I have come to redefine literacies and even what I consider a literacy. Emily, Tristan and Simon have helped me to see that
literacies are complex in their conception and use and that all sign systems have the same underlying process and should be considered literacies. They have helped me see literacies as: multimodal, semiotic and motivated; social, and embedded within multiple layers of discourses; and involving specific social and cultural practices which are different depending on site and community.

Emily, Tristan and Simon also taught me that we need to see children as literate, and value their literacies learning. All children are symbol users and make meaning from and in our society. They are strong, rich, powerful, and capable literacies users. It is up to us to recognize this and support their learning. To summarize what I have learned from Emily, Tristan and Simon and to discuss my new understanding of literacies I have chosen to relate one story from each of the children.

**Emily’s Use of Dance to Become a Precocious Reader**

To illustrate Emily’s story, I would like to share how during first grade she went from being an average first grade reader to becoming a precocious reader. There were two significant influences that pushed her reading from being at grade level expectations, reading supported text in picture books, and turned her into a proficient reader and as someone who saw herself as a reader. The first significant factor was Emily’s interest in dance, specifically the *Nutcracker* ballet.

Emily was enamoured by *The Nutcracker* and decided to coordinate a performance of this ballet with her friends. At first Emily listened to the music and watched videos of *The Nutcracker*. We talked to a friend of ours, who
happened to be a senior in dance performance at university, about Emily’s interest in *The Nutcracker*. Julia volunteered to help Emily learn some of the dance steps and came by our house once a week to work with her. Emily was also enrolled in movement classes at a local dance studio. Julia later invited Emily to see her performance of *The Nutcracker* and invited her backstage (see figure 61). Afterwards Julia gave Emily the ballet slippers she wore in the performance. Emily was ecstatic.

This event motivated Emily’s interest in dance and *The Nutcracker* to a fever pitch. She quickly exhausted the library of age appropriate ballet books and videos and started to borrow coffee table books from the adult section of the library. She started to take an interest in the lives of ballet dancers when Liz (another friend of ours involved in ballet) gave her a copy of *On Stage Please* by Veronica Tennant (1979) for her birthday in February. I still remember my astonishment when I saw Emily return from the library with a huge book on the life of Baryshnikov. All the while Emily continued to practice dancing the dance of the snow fairies from *The Nutcracker*. In April, because it had not worked out for any of Emily’s friends to take part in her project, Julia arranged for her friends
in the dance program to fill in. Emily hand wrote invitations for family members and friends to attend the performance. And at the beginning of May Emily danced the dance of the snow fairies at the university practice studio (see figure 62).

Emily’s reading ability grew in leaps and bounds during this time largely because of her intense interest in ballet, specifically *The Nutcracker*. Her reading excelled so that there was nothing she could not read and by the spring Emily was reading *Little Women* (Alcott, 1995/1868). She used music, video, dance, talk, reading and writing to navigate through this experience. At every turn she used her prior knowledge and supports from multiple literacies to support her reading. All of these literacies worked together to complement and support each other in Emily’s literacies learning. Emily’s reading improved because of her motivated reading of dance related material and her reading worked to support and improve her dance.

Upon closer analysis another significant thread has emerged. That year
at school her teachers, Mr. V and Ms. E, were exploring the use of a critical literacies framework (Vasquez, 2004; Luke & Freebody, 1997) to guide language arts instruction and practice in the class. The students had been introduced to critical literacy circles when they met with their fifth grade reading buddies; I helped lead one as a parent volunteer on a weekly basis. During these times we read books dealing with critical issues like those found in *Sister Anne’s Hands* (Lorbiecki & Popp, 1998), *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), *Voices in the Park* (Browne, 1998), *White Socks Only* (Colman, 1996), *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997), *Just One Flick of a Finger* (Lorbiecki, 1996), etc. We used these books as touchstones for discussions with the students and made explicit connections between the books and the lived experiences of the students. The students regularly engaged in written response to the text we read and we would often use strategies like sketch to stretch (Short, Harste, and Burke, 1996). On several occasions the students dramatized a critical or significant scene from one of the books we were reading.

Through her experiences in this class Emily saw literacies as something that was related to her life and could be used to explore issues and feelings she was having. Books were real and meaningful in this class; they dealt with issues like racism, poverty, and other issues that affected the children’s lives (for further examples of how this class used critical literacy texts see Wood, 2002). The students in this class became familiar with using books to discuss serious issues and using literacy in significant ways that affected their lives. Literacies were used as meaningful and powerful shapers of the children’s lives. It was this
powerful teaching which melded with Emily’s own passion for dance that motivated her to excel in her reading.

**Tristan’s Use of Videogaming to Become a Reader**

To illustrate Tristan’s story I want to share how he used videogaming as a literate experience and as a catalyst to becoming a reader and to seeing himself as a reader. For a long time Tristan saw the reading Emily, Christine and I were doing as “real reading” (the reading of novels, newspapers and magazines, etc.), and he saw his reading of street signs and pictures books as less than reading.

Tristan’s journey to becoming a reader and a full member of the ‘literacy club’ started after he received a Nintendo Game Boy Color as a Christmas gift when he was seven (see figure 63). He quickly became bored with Tetris, the game his Gameboy came with, and wanted to buy a new game. Tristan and I researched together where to buy games, how much they cost, and which games were recommended by others for the Gameboy. Tristan decided to buy a used version of *Super Mario Bros. Deluxe* (Nintendo, 1999), a game developed specifically to sell his type of Gameboy, and one which seemed universally recommended, with his
birthday money. He was now eight years old and still did not see himself as a reader. Tristan began playing *Mario Brothers* immediately after getting the game home, but he quickly became frustrated, as the used game did not come with an instruction manual and he could only figure so much out on his own. To help him

![Figure 64: The cover page of the FAQ Tristan used to play *Super Mario Bros.*](image-url)
I went online with Tristan and we found several FAQ sheets and walkthroughs for the game (see figure 64). I printed the ones I thought were most useful but it was past his bedtime so I put them aside, intending to go through them with him when I came home from work the next day. Tristan found the FAQ sheets and walkthroughs the next morning and immediately began reading them; even though they were dense with text and were single spaced pages printed in 10 point courier (see figure 64). He used what he learned in the FAQ sheet and immediately started playing the game.

When I arrived home that evening Tristan showed me how far he had advanced in *Mario Brothers*, he showed me the FAQ and told me what he had learned. Christine and I praised his work and his reading. Tristan glowed. That night when he went to bed he decided to read a chapter book. After he went to bed Christine told me how he sat down and read through the FAQ on his own, intently focused for half an hour. This one small thing was the final piece in bringing Tristan to where he could see himself as a reader and join the literacy club. This is by no means how he learned to read, but was the key to helping him get over the hurdle of text size and knowing for himself that he could read text which was unsupported by pictures immediately on the page. Tristan’s experience with videogaming as a literate activity, combined with his past experiences with reading and his desire to figure...
out how to play *Super Mario Brothers Deluxe* on his own allowed him to successfully access the text and read the FAQ. He was highly motivated and had the ability to verify the meaning he read from the FAQ with his game play. These elements worked together to help Tristan see himself as a reader and to create meaning from the FAQ in a useful manner. Within a month Tristan was reading *The Hobbit* by Tolkien (1937/1999) (see figure 65). But this was not a one way transaction; Tristan used his ability as a reader to improve his videogaming and, specifically, to learn how to play *Super Mario Brothers Deluxe*. These literacies worked together to support Tristan’s learning, use and understanding in each.

**Simon’s Use of Comics as a Path to Writing**

To illustrate Simon’s story I want to share how he used his interest in and passion for drawing as a way of accessing the more traditional literacies of reading and writing through making comic books. Simon loves writing, drawing and building with Lego and sees all of these as literacies. For Simon literacies have always been about meaning making. But it was the world of art and drawing that he used to create meaning and understand the world. His art has always been social in its conception and use and his production of comic books was no different.

Simon was very familiar with and enjoyed the genre of comics. Tristan and Emily would read to him from DC Junior Comics, and other comics and cartoons. He had also seen Emily and Tristan collaborate on several comics and had
started to experiment with making his own comic books.

*Spy Dog* evolved when Tristan and Simon were writing together; Tristan was writing a book called *Spys* and Simon copied him, to which Tristan complained, so Simon changed the title of his story to *Spy Dog*, combining his interest in dogs and superheroes. *Spy Dog* (see figure 66) would consume Simon’s writing through to the end of this study and would include no less than six volumes; one of these comic books, *Spy Dog 4*, is over one hundred pages long. Outside of the sheer volume and time involved in the production of the *Spy Dog* comics, it was a place where Simon started to explore conventional spellings (see figure 55 & 67). Simon asked Tristan to help with the generation of the text in *Spy Dog 1* and in subsequent comic books would occasionally ask how to spell a word, but more often he would just apply what he thought was correct. Simon has an incredible memory and highly honed sense of prediction that he uses with excellent results in his writing.

Simon incorporated his experience with multiple literacies to create meaning in his comics. He used his experiences with videogaming, Lego, and
the Lego website to construct the design of his images and the structure of his comic books (see figure 67). He incorporated elements he found in the comic books that he read and were read to him (e.g. the dialogue bubbles, thought bubbles, etc.). He used all of these literacies together to powerfully create meaning in his comic books but also to support his meaning making, drawing on what he knew from these literacies to expand what he was capable of with writing on its own. He was intimately aware of this literacies use, stating, as he worked on a Spy Dog comic: “I love that I can learn to read and write at the same time.”

Spy Dog was a breakthrough for Simon; it was here that he was able to establish himself as an individual within our family. Comic book creation was one thing that he was better at than anyone in the whole family. He was able to
combine his love of drawing and writing to convey meaning in a powerful and entertaining way. Simon poured his unbridled attention into *Spy Dog* well past the end of the scope of this study.

**Literacies Model**

To help me make sense of how the children were using literacies I worked on developing a model that would explain what they were doing and help to clarify my own thinking. I started by building on Ken Goodman's reading model (1967) because I think it does a good job of describing what the children were doing.

![Figure 68: Basic literacies model (modified from Harste, et al., 1984)](image-url)
doing with reading and how reading works as literacy. But I used the expanded model suggested by Harste, Woodward & Burke (1984) because of their inclusion of pragmatics (see figure 68).

I have come to understand literacies as a complex system and see literacies as multiple, created, and used through a critical sociopsychosemiotic process (Wood, 2002). Literacies are critical. The way in which they are used, and this use itself, are as important as the literate act (Comber & Kalmer, 1997; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997). Whether the literacies user is aware of it or not, every literate act is either reinforcing or dismantling the hegemony present within the society in which it is produced (Cherryholmes, 1988); while at the same time literacies are positioning the user within a Discourse (Gee, 1996). Literacies are always social. Literacies are used to communicate or understand meaning between people, thus making them social constructions (Harste, 1999; Harste et al., 1984). Yet, a literate act always originates in an individual, whether through reacting, creating, or interpreting [psychological] (Y. Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1996). Thus literacies which are either being created or understood are done so through the filter of the individual user's immediate environment, his/her history, various experiences (Sumara, 1996), and Discourses. Literacies are ultimately semiotic in that they use signs to convey meaning or are symbolic in nature (Danesi, 1998; 2004). They are multimodal. Finally, any literate act is a process whereby each of these systems acts in concert to make meaning (Burke, 2000). It is impossible for meaning to be made independent of any of these process systems - critical, socio, psycho, or
Figure 69: Literacies as a Critical Socio-Psycho-Semiotic Process

Semiotic; the failure of one of these systems inhibits meaning making and the process breaks down. All literacies: art, dance, language, etc. use similar underlying systems in their meaning making. It is this similarity between these underlying processes that makes literacies use, understanding, and learning multimodal. During every literate act the literacies user uses four cueing systems to make meaning: semantic, sensory, syntactic and pragmatic (see figure 69), and it is in the interactions between these subsystems that meaning is actively created.
At the heart of the literacies process is semantics, or meaning, though all the cueing systems also work together to make meaning from literacies. At its simplest, semantics is meaning; the meaning derived from literacies and the meaning a literacies user brings to the text. Whenever we engage in any literate act we are trying to make sense of it. Meaning is a semiotic process, and the interpretation, or translation, of literacies into meaning is just as dependent on what a person brings to the construction of a literate act as the product itself. Meaning, then, is something that is mediated by each person and interpreted differently based on his or her experiences, discourse, and location, in what Louise Rosenblatt termed transaction theory (1989). Meaning is inherently related to the lived experience of the literacies user (Sumara, 1999; 1996) or the context from which the literacies use is being conducted.

Another piece of the literacies process is the sensory cueing system. The sensory cueing system is the way in which we interact with and perceive a literacy; this is typically the one area in which literacies are divergent. The way Emily makes meaning while she is dancing is different from the way she makes meaning while she is writing, which is different from the way she makes meaning while she is reading. This confuses some people into believing that this is the only cueing system because it often defines the ‘uniqueness’ of a literacy. In dance Tristan interacts with the literacy through movement and rhythm, while in reading he uses graphophonics, while in videogaming he uses visual, interactional, and auditory cues. The literacies user interacts with different literacies using different combinations of senses, and it is this, combined with
purpose, that makes literacies different and creates the need for there to be multiple literacies.

When understanding a literacy we also apply syntax, or rules, to the literacy. It is these rules that help us understand a literate act; it is this cueing system which gives literacies order and predictability. Admittedly the rules are more or less rigid depending on the literacies being used; for example the rules in modern dance are more flexible than in classical ballet and the syntax for written language is more rigid than for spoken language.

Finally, we are always using pragmatics to make meaning from a literate act. Pragmatics is the context within and around a literate act. Pragmatics on one level can be thought of as the context a literacy event occurs in; it is everything that has happened up to that particular moment and everything that is going to come after. Therefore, when reading a book you are using the pragmatic cueing system to apply your knowledge of what has happened in the book and what you believe is going to happen, to make meaning out of what you are reading at any moment. Pragmatics engages the literacies user’s past experiences with the particular literacy to help make meaning out of the current literacy event. So not only are you relying on the particular book you are reading, but also your knowledge and experiences with reading in general; added to this is your experience with reading a particular genre or author. Pragmatics is also the experiences a literacies user brings to the literacies event to make meaning. Your understanding and knowledge of the particular content being discussed in the book influences your understanding of the text. Emily used her knowledge of
dance and *The Nutcracker* to make sense of the increasingly difficult texts she was borrowing from the library, and in the case of the coffee table books was able to use the pictures as a support to help further her understanding.

We use these four cuing systems within a semiotic discourse to make sense of any literate event. Even more, when literacies are working together and we allow the overlap of learning, it is easier for us to understand and make sense of a literate event. The cueing systems in each of the literacies being used scaffold each other to support learning and understanding (see figure 70). As we add more literacies our chances of having our message understood by others or

![Figure 70: Multiple literacies as scaffolds for learning and understanding](image-url)
understanding a message ourselves increases significantly. Each of the literacies scaffolds our understandings, and working together they assist the meaning making process, as has been demonstrated by each of the children’s stories. A powerful example of how this is used today is television advertising; the average advertising spot has been reduced from one minute down to fifteen seconds. The advertisers are using multiple literacies: art, music, spoken language, text, etc. to make their meaning more easily understood by viewers, thereby greatly reducing the time needed for the advertisers to get their message across.

Conclusions

Emily, Tristan and Simon used different literacies to define who they were and to construct a literate identity. They each engaged with literacies in powerful and life transforming ways. They did not emulate their siblings, but instead seemed compelled to find a way to distinguish themselves as individuals. Literacies allowed the children to do this through what Michelle Knobel and Colin Lankshear refer to as the Ethos of a literacy (2007). Knobel and Lankshear are referring to the new ethos, or way of being, that new literacies make available for literacies users and I think this does a good job of describing how Tristan takes on the ethos of a gamer when he engages with videogames as a literate practice. But this idea of ethos I think goes beyond the new literacies. Each of the children used different literacies to explore ways of understanding and being in the world; Emily became a dancer and a reader, Simon became an artist and a writer.
These literacies allowed the children new ways to be in the world and with which to construct their identity.

The children also used multiple literacies together to help them learn, understand and create meaning more fully. Each used their motivated interest in a preferred literacy to access other literacies. Emily used dance to more fully become a reader; Tristan used his interest and experience with videogaming to see himself as a member of the literacy club and to access reading as a literacy; Simon used drawing as a way of exploring reading and writing. Using literacies they were precocious at, they scaffolded their learning of another literacy; in each of their cases a traditional literacy.

Reading and writing, more than any other literacy, are emphasized and used throughout our society. They are the primary ways we communicate, making experiences with reading and writing more frequent than any other. The children were literally bombarded with meaningful purposes for using and having to understand reading and writing. In fact, it seems the use and understanding of these conventional literacies by Emily, Tristan, and Simon was unavoidable because of their pervasive nature within our society. The fears of those who think that schools are not emphasizing these literacies enough and that children will not be able to function within society without a great deal of direct instruction in reading and writing are misplaced. With the exception of Emily, my children explored the use and understanding of these conventional literacies without formal instruction. The children were best able to use and understand the conventional literacies of writing and reading when they used other literacies as
supports, had authentic reasons for using these literacies, were supported by each other, were supported by Christine and me, and were immersed in a society where the use of these literacies was ubiquitous.

My children taught me that we need to broaden our definition of literacies and value multiple and new literacies, not just reading and writing, and accept and value home and out of school literacies. Literacy is so much more than decoding the words on a page. They helped me see that we need to treat literacies as complex and create situations where multiple literacies are encouraged. We need to help children make connections between new, multiple, and traditional literacies within these contexts. We need to value children as capable, powerful, and successful literacies users. But most of all my children have taught me that I need to relax and trust them, valuing the literacies they are using right now.

The evidence from my children suggests that we still have much to learn. This study needs to be broadened to take into account the voices of children from different discourses. We need to see if, as I believe, the direction suggested by my children is unique to our situation or if it is something that is common to more D/discourses. Regardless, we need to reconsider what we thought we knew and believed about literacies, and embrace complexity, thereby gaining deeper insight in order to better support our children in their literate lives.
Figure 71: Emily, Simon, and Tristan (at the end of the study) (ages 11, 5, & 8)