

Developing Literacy Primary Classroom

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Cover designer: Naomi Robinson
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in India by: Replika Press Pvt Ltd

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First published 2014

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2013951865

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4462-6728-8
ISBN 978-1-4462-6729-5 (pbk)

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS LITERACY IN TODAY'S WORLD?

Chapter objectives

- To understand what literacy is.
- To develop appropriate instructional approaches to literacy learning.
- To develop a repertoire of strategies to foster literacy engagement.



Key questions

1. How does the social context affect literacy learning?
2. How do literacy learners use literacy to construct meaning?
3. How do literacy users regulate their own learning?



Key words: best practice, context, literacy, new literacies, practice, process.

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion about what is meant by literacy in a changing multi-literate world. The discussion is designed to discover a number

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of dimensions of literacy practices that are appropriate in the contemporary classroom. This theoretical perspective will establish a foundation for teaching methodology, pedagogy and learning within a socio-cultural context. It examines the contemporary ideas and theoretical understandings of what literacy is and what is meant by literacy best practices.

It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. Together they raised two questions: what is the likely future of literacy, and what are the likely larger-level social and cultural effects of that change? (Kress, 2003: 1)

Literacy: a changing landscape

Globalisation has had a distinct influence on the pace of change in our culture and language. The pace of change in society has been given impetus by the proliferation of multimedia and information technologies (Kalantzis et al., 2002). In the above quote, Kress (2003) gives us an insight into the big questions that are associated with literacy in contemporary society. These changes have affected everyone – for example, children are now able to participate in twittering, wikis, blogs or in various social networking sites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr); obtain instant information from the web; or participate in a virtual environment through gaming or in a virtual world such as ‘Second Life’ (Walsh, 2011).

According to the UNESCO World Education Report, *Teachers and Teaching in a Changing World*: ‘the young generation is entering a world that is changing in all spheres: scientific and technological, political, economic, social and cultural. The emergence of a “knowledge-based” society is changing the global economy and the status of education’ (UNESCO, 1998:16). The challenge for you, as a teacher, is how to effectively design a curriculum to provide your children with the necessary skills to function in a rapidly changing technological landscape. This is particularly important since the new technological and social developments have been accompanied by rapid social, cultural, economic, political and educational changes. In this electronic, mediated world that we live in, ‘being literate involves the understanding of how different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning’ (Snyder, 2002: 3). New national language curriculums in the UK and Australasia are based on the notion that language is a socially situated practice, and a purposeful literacy curriculum needs to be implemented in classrooms (Karantzola and Intzidis, 2001).

Traditional print-based texts have taken on new forms and combinations that involve a more integrated approach to words and text in the post-modern environment (see Chapter 6). You will need to draw students' attention to images in texts, discuss how the images and texts relate to each other and identify any new meanings that might arise from the interaction. Thus, new technologies have positioned the learner so that there are many more choices and systems to navigate. In our contemporary society, children are not only reading from and viewing these technologies but responding to them by producing their own diverse, multimodal and digital text formats (Walsh, 2011).

There are two broad perspectives that have been identified within these changes and which will be discussed in this chapter. The first perspective is the effect of the technological changes that are inherent in reading, writing and producing on-screen compared with reading and writing print-based texts. The second perspective relates to the changes that are occurring in the social practices of literacy, which have changed and expanded exponentially with the development of Web 2.0 technology.

Print and technological changes

Literacy is a cultural practice and is also associated with personal identity and belonging in society. For many years, literacy has been regarded as a form of communication, a mere matter of developing a skill set and the ability to communicate effectively in the context in which the individual is situated. However, over the last few decades the social foundations of literacy, as observed in everyday environments such as schools, workplaces, and in broader cultural settings, have broadened contemporary thinking about what literacy is and how it can empower people in various circumstances. Your challenge is to understand how the varied needs of students within diverse communities and with wide-ranging multimodal forms of expression in which they communicate can be addressed in classrooms (Luke et al., 2003).

The literacy research has identified five factors that impact on reading within the socio-cultural context of the classroom (see Figure 1.1). This model recognises that literacy is the product of a complex combination of factors, and each of these factors, either individually or in combination, needs to be considered when designing the literacy curriculum (Snow, 2002).

Learners

Today's literacy learners bring a large repertoire of knowledge and abilities to learning tasks and texts of all kinds. To some degree, this will depend on their own background experiences, socio-cultural circumstances and opportunities to use various literacies at home, at school and within the community in which they live. Unfortunately, this is not a level playing field as some children have

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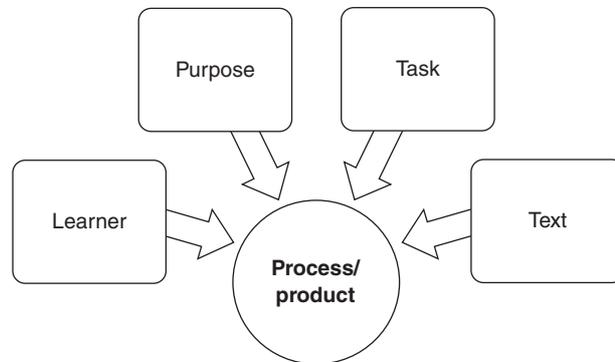


Figure 1.1 Factors that impact on literacy

had a much richer exposure to good literature of all kinds and ample opportunities to explore them. Learners are also limited by other internal facets such as: the breadth of their background knowledge, the efficiency of their working memory and their thinking processes.

Purpose

Learning is enhanced when the content is embedded in situations that are meaningful and valued by the learner. The chances of learning being meaningful and valued are maximised when there is a clear purpose for the task and the participants are aware of that purpose.

Task

Rich learning tasks are purposeful and meaningful activities that can be as diverse as creating a web page or designing a school garden landscape. Out of the task should come the need to develop a range of skills, which are necessary to the achievement of that task. A number of important strategies will be involved in the development of these skills, depending on the types of texts or resources used (Green, 2003). The nature of the task is also dependent on the role that the viewer, reader, writer, actor or designer assumed in completing the task (a discussion about roles and resources will be developed further later on in our discussion).

Text

Texts are what we construct or are constructed when we speak, listen, write or read. They are usually part of a discourse that is embedded in social

communicative acts that are situated in particular social institutions such as classrooms, libraries, friendship groups, clubs and homes. These institutions most often favour various artefacts such as books, magazines, videos, blogs, plays and myriad other products that support them and are situated within a much broader social discourse. In other words, when we write, read, speak or listen on particular occasions, we use specific forms of language and various objects, tools, technologies, sites and organisational genres to engage with others (Gee, 2003).

Process/Product

Literacy learning has often focused on certain products or cultural artefacts. For example, reading a book is an act of engaging with a cultural artefact, while typing a text message on a smartphone is an act of producing digital artefacts. In today's world, the act of sending a message is often just as important as the product itself. The process is concerned with social engagement while products are concerned with artefacts.

Table 1.1 provides examples of texts of various types and shows how these five elements interact in any literature-based activity.

Table 1.1 Examples of pedagogical practice and the factors that impact on literacy

Text	Task	Learner	Purpose	Process/Product
Examples of letters	Write a letter to the council to make comments related to a proposed development of a park next-door to the school	Knowledge about why people write letters and the particular features of the genre	To make comments and recommendations as future park users	Process: the processes that are used (including cooperative writing skills) to construct a letter; Product: a letter for a specific purpose
Audio podcast of the interesting features of the school and its surroundings	Identify and describe favourite places within the school environment	Knowledge of podcasts and the features of the genre; awareness of their surroundings	To create pride in the environment in which they are placed	Process: to develop planning and speaking skills to inform parents
A movie trailer depicting a science fiction event taking place in the playground	Engage with the science fiction genre using artefacts within the playground	Knowledge about the science fiction genre and science fiction films; knowledge about how films are made	To entertain and to develop an appreciation for the things that we use every day	Process: to develop basic filming and editing skills; Product: a two-minute film trailer that can be placed on YouTube

Vignette 1.1

In the following chapters, we will be looking at vignettes utilising practices that you may find in some typical classrooms. This first vignette is one about you and your own literacy endeavours.

Brainstorm and list the types of literacy practices that you might have engaged in over the past week. Choose one of those activities and copy the chart below (Table 1.2). Write your comments in each of the columns. After you finish, add this to what others have done so that a more comprehensive list can be constructed.

Table 1.2 Literacy practices

Text	Task	Learner	Purpose	Process/ Product

Questions

- 1 How do you use texts in everyday life?
- 2 How does the notion of purpose affect the other three components of the model?
- 3 What are the differences between process, product and purpose?

Debates in the teaching of literacy

There has been a somewhat heated debate that has been raging in literacy education for several decades concerning how reading should be taught. Back in 1955, Flesch published a book, which was one of the bestselling books in literacy education at the time, entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*, and claimed that the 'look-say approach' was responsible for the crisis in teaching reading. Later, he published another book (Flesch, 1981) in which the blame was placed on the 'whole language' method of literacy instruction in conjunction with a lack of explicit teaching of phonics.

Chall (1967) coined it the 'Great Debate'. More recently, this debate has reached such intensity that public confidence in literacy teachers has been undermined and many believe we have a literacy crisis in our schools (Snyder, 2008). Over this period of time, the 'debate' has taken on the form of polarised and very dogmatic points of view. In many circles, including the popular media, this debate has sometimes been referred to as the 'Literacy Wars' (Coles, 2003). Green, Hodgens and Luke (1997) claimed that this battle has become a permanent feature of the continuing educational dialogue and policy (p. 7). However, the debate has changed somewhat over this period from 'whole word' versus 'phonics' to 'phonics' versus 'whole language' (Cambourne, 2008).

One of the main literacy clashes concerns the very definition of literacy. This is because there are different views on how literacy can be defined and how it should be taught. In essence, these disputes focus on either a bottom-up (surface feature driven) or top-down (or conceptually driven) approach. The intensity of the debate may be due to a polarisation of opinion that has been fuelled by a narrow and very static understanding of what literacy entails. More often than not, these discussions focus on whether phonics should or shouldn't be taught, or whether the 'right' English grammar is also being taught. Newspapers have capitalised on this debate because it captures the public's attention and sells newspapers (Snyder, 2010). Publishers also tend to promote and market books to practise basic skills, so that teachers can teach to increase children's scores in high stakes testing.

In response to this controversy, the Australian and UK governments have advocated a 'return to basics' that includes the teaching of grammar and phonics (Le et al., 2011; Rose, 2009). The current call to 'return to basics' in language and literacy education shows a strong influence of ideology, public opinion and politics in literacy education (Le et al., 2011). Cambourne (2008) believed that just ignoring these 'debates' or 'wars' disempowers teachers and leaves them at the mercy of those who may be driven by their own political or financial agendas.

Fortunately, in more recent times, researchers have called for a more balanced approach that incorporates a combination of methods utilising a range of evidence-based pedagogies (Farris et al., 2004; Pressley, 1998, 2006). This balanced approach would seek to firmly develop students' skills and knowledge by teaching them to be able to transfer their abilities across a range of contexts. However, what must be emphasised is the essential social and contextual nature of literacy. Thus, your curriculum design should focus on providing a range of authentic cognitive, social and multi-modal dimensions and contexts for literacy acquisition and creation for students of all ages and stages of development (Kell, 2001). In the next section, you will be introduced to a number of dimensions of literacy practice.

Cognitive dimensions

According to Woolley (2011), there are three cognitive processes that operate simultaneously at different levels: (a) perceptual, (b) cognitive and (c) metacognitive. At the surface level, the learner is concerned with perceptual features such as signs and symbols. In terms of reading, the learner directs his/her attention to the graphic, phonic and linguistic features of the text. Essentially, at this level, the learner is concerned with the learning task and is guided by a bottom-up or surface-level process.

At the cognitive level, the learner uses a deeper level of processing that requires the learner to note the underlying ideas and to construct new

knowledge by combining or altering the new knowledge in light of their existing background knowledge. This is a type of transactional process that is guided by what is often referred to as a top-down approach.

At the third level, the literacy practitioner steps back from the learning situation to consider his/her actual thinking processes. This is a process of thinking about thinking. It is essentially a self-regulating process that is concerned with setting appropriate goals, monitoring progress, making decisions about appropriate strategies and reflecting on the adequacy of the learning task (Zimmerman, 2002).

In terms of the 'great' literacy debate, these processes are executed at different levels but are interdependent and often happen simultaneously. The third level is an executive function that coordinates the top-down and bottom-up functions of the first two levels. It is not a matter of one approach or the other but is an orchestration of all three.

Socio-cultural dimension

In the information age, there is much more of a blending of literacy practices. There is no longer a clear distinction between reading and writing, listening and viewing. Particularly with new electronic literacies, there is more of a combination of forms and literacy practices are defined more by the roles of the literacy user in contemporary contexts.

Freebody and Luke (1990) sought to incorporate the cognitive and social aspects of literacy by viewing the literacy learner as taking on particular roles in any literacy activity within their 'Four Roles' model. The role of 'code breaker' was mainly concerned with coding competence; the 'meaning maker' involved the learner with semantic competence; the 'text user' focused on pragmatic competence; and the 'text critic' was concerned with critical competence. More recently, Luke and Freebody (1999) revised their earlier model to consider 'practices' rather than 'roles' and referred to it as the 'Four Resources' model with the emphasis on: (1) breaking the code; (2) participating in understanding the texts; (3) using texts; and (4) analysing texts. Thus, literacy may be considered in a much broader context (Tindale, 2005). The basic proposition of the 'Four Roles' model is that effective literacy in complex print and multi-mediated societies requires a broad and flexible repertoire of practices. This repertoire is characterised as a set of roles that participants in literacy events are able to assume (Freebody and Luke, 2003).

Engagement with texts of all kinds positions the learner in different roles. Each of these roles will develop a range of competencies according to how learners interact with different technologies. Rather than treating competencies in terms of reading, writing, listening and viewing, literacy today is much more concerned with positioning the literacy learner as a participant rather than an inactive recipient of information. As an actor on the literacy stage,

these distinctions become somewhat blended, particularly when using multimedia. Even when using print-based media during writing, the writer becomes a reader, a listener and a viewer as well, depending on the role the student assumes moment by moment.

New technologies: Web 2.0 applications

Information technology can make a unique contribution to strengthening learning across the curriculum, including literacy and numeracy (Unsworth, 2001). It will become even more important to develop ICT skills to prepare for the technologies of the future. The increasing digitisation of information worldwide requires all children to develop digital literacy to enable full participation in society. Information required for work, finance, communication, leisure and citizenship will be mediated electronically. New technologies and Web 2.0 applications will be an essential part of all vocations and children not only need to learn to use specific technologies and applications, they will also need to understand how to use them safely and wisely. Therefore, the foundations for this digital engagement are best formed in primary school, where children's enthusiasm for ICT is most evident (Rose, 2009). The challenge is that educators must avoid creating a population divided on the basis of ICT haves and have-nots because this would pose a considerable danger to both economic wellbeing and social cohesion (Rose, 2009).

In a very short space of time, schools have progressed far beyond what used to be called computer-assisted learning, in which computers were seen as mere pedagogical aids or tools to assist conventional print-based learning. However, more and more children are becoming increasingly independent and are developing technological expertise beyond that of classroom teachers, and are using electronic media to share, socialise, collaborate and create. For example, they use mobile technology such as smartphones, PDAs, tablets and laptops to exchange messages and information via SMS and through online networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter (Alexander, 2010). Many of these 'tech savvy' children also locate information using Google and Wikipedia, and download music, DVDs, games and other material by using their mobile phones, PCs and laptops. Many of these children also routinely take photos, record videos and post them on Facebook.

Design

With increasing cultural and linguistic diversity in the world today and the multiplicity of communication systems there is a need for a much broader view of literacy than has been portrayed by traditional language-based approaches. The process of learning through literacy and the creation of literacy products

are the results of the designs or structures of complex systems of people, environments, technology, beliefs and texts (The New London Group, 1996). Design is important for blogs and will need to be carefully developed to reflect the author/producer and to engage an audience who can respond with text and images. While considering these differences, it is not possible to completely separate the processes of reading or writing on-screen from the social practices that accompany them (Walsh, 2011).

As reading and viewing are often interchangeable processes, reading should include aspects such as analysing, browsing, decoding, hyperlinking, interpreting, navigating, responding and searching (Walsh, 2011). As designers of meaning, we are designers of social futures, workplace futures, public futures and community futures. At the same time, it is the unique product of human agency: a transformed meaning. And, in its turn, the redesigned becomes a new available design and a new meaning-making resource (The New London Group, 1996).

Writing has moved towards a digital product that often contains quite sophisticated layout, graphics, photographs and images (Walsh, 2011). The theory of multi-modality (Kress, 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) contends that the simultaneous processing of different modes of text, image, sound and gesture in visual, media or digital text is a different function from the linear, sequential reading of traditional print-based texts (see Chapter 5).

Dimensions of literacies

Social practices of literacy have also changed and expanded exponentially through the development of Web 2.0 technology. For example, readers now have wireless access to Wikipedia, which is the world's most up-to-date encyclopaedia of the New Oxford and American dictionaries. Simply by placing the cursor before an unknown word, the dictionary meaning will appear at the bottom of the page for the reader. The search function on the Kindle, for example, enables readers to search for words, phrases and character names in an eBook.

The overwhelming concern for researchers and educators is whether literacy itself, as a social practice, will continue to change and need redefining as further online and mobile technology devices evolve and establish new ways of communicating. Literacy has enabled different forms of communication and communities to develop over a very short period of time. However, there would appear to be a current discrepancy involving the quality of different types of literacy practices students engage in at home on a daily basis. The types of texts students are exposed to and engage with at school need to be expanded to bridge this growing digital divide or gap between many poorer homes and the schools they attend (McKenna et al., 2011).

Rapid changes in digital communication have enabled reading and writing to combine quite complex relational aspects – images, music, sound, graphics,

photography and film (Walsh, 2011). Responding to animated icons, hyper-text, sound effects and the continuous pathways between and within screens for Web 2.0 and the intranet, we have only just begun to understand the process of navigating hypermedia. Kress (2003) argues that the shift from page to screen, from word to image as the dominant communicative mode, has profound implications not just for the ways in which we understand what is seen, but also for the kinds of relationships readers have with texts (Beavis, 2008). Reading and viewing are now regarded as much more interchangeable and fluid processes – for example, reading must now include other aspects such as analysing, browsing, decoding, hyperlinking, interpreting, navigating, responding and searching.

Durrant and Green's (2000) 3D model (see Table 1.3) proposes that there are three dimensions of electronic forms of literacy that you should consider when you are designing your curriculum: operational, cultural and critical. The operational dimension includes technical competence such as the 'how-to' of dealing with technology. This includes the basics of how to turn the computer on, knowing how to use a word processor or finding information on Web 2.0. The cultural dimension focuses on the meaning-making process within the technological and cultural contexts. It is the process of going beyond just knowing how to use technology to doing things in the world for specific practices and purposes. The critical dimension taps into aspects of history, context and power. It assumes that someone's story is a partial representation of reality and is usually connected with particular interests and cultural perspectives.

Table 1.3 Dimensions of literate practice

Dimension	Durrant & Green, 2000	Freebody and Luke, 1990	Woolley, 2011
Representational	Operational	Code-breaker	Factual (Task)
Cognitive	Cultural	Text participant Text user	Conceptual (Cognitive)
Reflective	Critical	Text analyst	Metacognitive

Vignette 1.2

Not only are people introduced to new forms of techno-literacy but technology has changed the way that we work and conduct our day-to-day affairs. It would not be uncommon to walk into your teenage son or daughter's room and see them multi-tasking in ways that you would not have dreamed about.

(Continued)

(Continued)

A typical example is Jessica (see Figure 1.2), who, while doing her homework, could be seen with an earphone connected to her iPod in one ear while asking her friend about a maths problem with a mobile phone held to her other ear. All of this is happening while Jessica is sitting in front of the computer typing a message on her email and to her Facebook page. Jessica's behaviour illustrates the point that literacy today comes in many forms and often these are presented simultaneously.



Figure 1.2 Jessica multi-tasking while doing her homework

Questions

- 1 How do you like to do your work at home?
- 2 Do individuals engage with literacy for different reasons than in the past? If so, what are these differences?
- 3 How would you as a teacher organise your classroom to cater for the learning preferences of your students?

What should you do as a teacher?

With the expansion of the World Wide Web and other multimedia technologies, students must now acquire new skills that allow them to effectively evaluate the quality of screen-based sources of information and the potential bias of

the material (Education and Training Committee, 2006). New digital technologies will only transform classrooms if teachers are interested in and comfortable with using them. However, there are dangers in using Web 2.0 technologies without some form of external or internal control mechanism. For children, the main issue is one of trust – who and what can be believed on Web 2.0 (Alexander, 2010). The challenge that you will be confronted with is knowing how to discriminate between and utilise the new technologies efficiently, ethically and responsibly, with a view to exploiting their educational possibilities (Lankshear et al., 2000). One way for you to do this is to collaborate with other teachers by locating and using Web 2.0 resources and sharing useful websites that offer free or inexpensive material. It is clear, however, that the social environment of the classroom will always play a central role in determining how your students use an electronic tool.

In the recent past, teachers have tended to use technology as a helpful tool for developing print-based literacy, such as using a word processor. However, technology in education has evolved to create new types of literacy. There has also been a greater emphasis on evidence-based best practices in literacy education. However, by the time research studies are published, the technology used in the classroom will have moved on and these studies may quickly become outdated soon after publication, so you will need to be constantly updating your knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

Globalisation has had a distinct influence on the pace of change in our culture, language, modes of communication and the way in which we think and interact. Scientific and technological advances have given rise to a proliferation of multimedia and information technologies. Although print-based materials will possibly never be completely replaced, the same factors of learner, purpose, text and task determine the quality of the literacy engagement and the literate futures of individuals.

Whatever form a literacy endeavour takes, it will reflect the socio-cultural preferences that influence individuals in the context in which they live. When teaching children, you need to focus not only on the products of literacy endeavours but also on the actual learning processes that give rise to and support them. While engaging with literacy, you should also consider three broad dimensions that consider the representational, cognitive and reflective aspects of literacy engagement. The differences will reflect whether or not the emphasis is related to cognition, socio-cultural or technological context. An examination of these perspectives should lead to a more balanced view of learning and teaching in literate contexts.



Discussion questions and activities



Points for discussion

- 1 List the various types of literacies that you would engage in in everyday life.
- 2 What sort of literacies would you imagine that someone your age would have engaged with 100 years ago?
- 3 How does our social context determine what type of literacy we will engage in?



Group activities

- 1 What do you understand by levels of engagement?
- 2 The Luke and Freebody (1999) model has had a name change from the Four Roles to the Four Resources model. What do you think is the difference and why do you think that this shift was made?
- 3 How would the Four Resources model promote a balanced approach to literacy learning?
- 4 Use a black bag to cover an unseen object and describe it so that others have to guess what it is. Discuss, 'How does this develop language?' and 'How does this develop visualising skills?'
- 5 Divide into groups of two. Provide each group with a picture of someone engaging in a literate activity. List the purposes that could be achieved using the particular technology or system. Make another list of other ways in which the same purpose could be achieved using another medium. Are there any differences? List these.



Whole-class activity

Obtain the book *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan (2007), divide into groups of about eight and simulate a literacy circle in the primary classroom.

Ask:

- 1 Why doesn't the author use words in the book?
- 2 What colours are used in the book?
- 3 Why do you think that the author used these colours?
- 4 What sort of city is depicted in the book? Is it similar to your nearest city? Is it a modern city or is it placed in another period of time?
- 5 What is a visual metaphor? How is it used in this graphic novel?
- 6 What are the giant vacuum cleaners meant to represent? Why do you think that the author used them in the story?
- 7 Why do you think the main character left his homeland?

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