

Limitless literacies: Exploring a transdisciplinary approach

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March 31, 2025

A transdisciplinary approach liberates the education of literacies as a limitless enterprise, argues Patriann Smith, Ph.D.

Across a globe assailed by the contemporary challenges of not-too-distant pasts, besieged by obstacles threatening to almost irreparably doom our nations' presents, yet inevitably cognizant of a destiny to be instantiated by just futures, more than 8 billion people continue to rely on literacies to make sense of and navigate their worlds.

Schools, vestiges of colonial legacies, perpetually challenged by this milieu of Sankofan juxtapositions, like ostriches whose heads remain stuck in the sand, continue to render an architecture of learning that subscribes to an imagined notion of literacy and not the multiple realities of literacies – a dynamic reflecting the beholdenness to discrete bodies of what one can know regarding such limited literacy conceptions while somehow remaining oblivious to the transdisciplinary impetus increasingly mobilized universally through emerging understandings of the quantum world.

What is transdisciplinary?

Yet, transdisciplinary represents 'that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines' (Nicolescu, 2010, p. 22). And a quantum-informed [transdisciplinary approach to literacy research](#), practice, and policy (Smith, 2025) makes it possible to consider knowledge of the teaching and learning of literacies as limitless (Nicolescu, 2005).

Given that "literacy" – a longstanding and unmarked term which really for many, more accurately represents "English literacy" (Smith et al., in press) – has now been rearticulated as 'literacies' (Street, 1984) or 'multiliteracies' (Cazden et al., 1996), such a multifaceted and social process of engaging with and (re)creating the world, its texts, and sub-texts in numerous forms now allows for an understanding of its limitlessness.

Literacies as limitless

For knowledge of the teaching and learning of literacies to function as limitless, seven elements, articulated in the heuristic of "semiolingual innocence" and, in turn, identified using the lens of "Black immigrant literacies" (Smith, 2023, 2024a), have been identified, as necessary. These seven elements are: (a) purpose, (b) originality, (c) expansion, (d) imagination, (e) comfort, (f) flourishing, (g) interdependence, and (h) paradox. In this brief essay, I address the first and perhaps most fundamental element – "purpose."

Purpose for learning of limitless literacies

Pursuing a knowledge of literacies as limitless requires a sense of purpose to be established as the foundation of the teaching of literacies by teachers and of the learning of literacies by students. The archaic and colonially informed approaches to operating school systems based on discrete bodies of knowledge in an era where knowledge was restricted to a few and the dominance of colonial powers reigned supreme have fortunately now been upended. For instance, no longer does a 21st-century student rely on the teacher to provide what is somehow conceived of as a superior linguistic descriptor for a concrete item or abstract idea using what some have historically described as a supposed “Standard English” and others more contemporarily, as a “White Mainstream English” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012).

Similarly, such a student no longer finds it useful to be restricted to a limited range of designated synonyms for such a linguistic descriptor simply because they must abide by the historical or contemporary demands of an imagined Standard or Mainstream English. In fact, students now transcend this long-standing limitation, that has worked to curtail their literacies given the paradigm shift across the globe that now positions their “transnational nativities” (Smith, 2024b) to access a global array of Englishes (Canagarajah, 2012). They realize the limitless beauty of a global access to Englishes as well as to other named languages and the broader plethora of corresponding semiotics through which they can make meaning regarding tangible items and abstract ideas across their worlds.

Purpose for teaching limitless literacies

Much like students have acknowledged the paradigmatic shift that requires attending to a limitlessness of literacies, no longer does the teacher function as the long-standing colonially designated superior overseer of how a student, for instance, must use a supposed White Mainstream English or its range of designated English synonyms as the basis for what many have long believed is the only way to advance economically and socially in the world.

The student of the contemporary era understands all too well that it is the capacity to transgress that which is often designated as White Mainstream English norms even as they capitalize on the transnational nativity that they are afforded through the increasing “flattening” (Friedman, 2005) of the world, which becomes most rewarded in an era where the greatest attraction of making meaning through literacies is the unpredictable limitlessness of its authenticity, sincerity, and innovation.

Engineering schools as vehicles for limitless literacies

To achieve authenticity, sincerity, and innovation that affords students the privilege of knowing in ways that reflect a limitlessness of literacies steeped in purpose, the notion of schooling as it currently exists, though understandably terrifying, will continue to fail unless it is reimagined. Instead of discrete bodies of knowledge that have for so long curtailed, from the onset, what students must know about White Mainstream English literacy or other named languages to be somehow impossibly “proficient” in a given set of

superiorly privileged yet deficit norms, schools must be re-engineered to function, first and foremost, as the architectural seat of limitlessness through literacies – spaces of imagination for advancing innovation that can only operate to instantiate imaginaries through a harnessing of the purpose undergirding students' occupation of a rightful place in the collective consciousness that is our vast universe.

Further creating opportunities for this purpose to be iteratively and finally confirmed, often as a function of the developmental human process, schools can thus position the teaching of literacies solely as a function of, as well as with the intention to, excavate the deeply entrenched purpose that, though currently residing in every child, continues to be stripped away, so often, before they or their parents are capable of its redemption (Smith, 2024c).

Limitless literacies for a reimagined world order

A reimagined world order through which knowledge of literacies is pursued as a limitless enterprise can provide opportunities for rescuing at long last, the long-standing obscurity of quantum affordances possible through a design of intentionality where students' attention to their oneness with the collective consciousness, makes visible at a much younger age, the purpose for which they are here on earth.

Pursuits, if engendered in the absence of purpose, as we have seen colonially and post-colonially for centuries, will in the end, fail to achieve their goal until they have often inadvertently and relentlessly stripped all humans of their power to become the limitless versions of who they were meant to be. Alas, our students' just presents across nations continue to await a new world order of education that allows for a return to Ubuntu realities premised on limitless literacies. There, their purposeful access to codes and the meaning making they design, can become, at last, more intentionally interwoven elements of a quantum tapestry of their collective interdependence with all worlds (Mkabela, 2015; Seehawer, 2018).

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