



On Multiple Literacies and Language Learning: Video Production and Embodied Subjectivities

Joff P.N. Bradley *Teikyo University, Tokyo, Japan*

David R. Cole *Western Sydney University, Australia*

joff@main.teikyo-u.ac.jp

David.Cole@westernsydney.edu.au

Abstract

The dialogue below reflects on the cutting-edge research on video literacies being undertaken in several universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area in Japan and looks to link this up with equally progressive work being done in the Australian context (Cole, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014; Cole and Moyle (2010); Masny and Cole, 2012; Pullen and Cole, 2010; Cole and Bradley, 2014, 2015). It is the theoretical counterpart to the findings of the recent colloquium held by Joff P.N. Bradley *et al* at the National University of Singapore. Philosophically and in terms of educational pedagogy, the dialogue and discussion extends, undergirds and contextualises the development of affective, multimodal and engaged literacies and pedagogies through student-created and student-led video production (Pullen & Cole, 2010; Cole & Bradley, 2014). Bradley and Cole's recent joint and singular work considers what it means to present an embodied subjectivity (Bangou & Fleming, 2014) through multimodal, multiple literacies in the foreign language classroom (Masny, 2013; Cole 2013). The dialogue discusses one of the core focuses of the colloquium and considers the view that experimental and creative methodologies - that is to say, processes which encourage points of breakdown and breakthrough in education - are vital in sustaining critical and transformative pedagogies in the Japanese university setting. Without them, it is argued, students are left to spin endlessly on their own axes. So the University's traditional remit remains true - to nurture *Bildung* or self-cultivation, which is to say creation, image or shape, the overall purpose of which is to engender personal and cultural maturation - but it has to grasp also how students are utilizing and manipulating different technologies and media. Embracing and combining some of the tenets of the multiliteracies and Multiple Literacies Theory, student-led video projects, it is argued, is a way to short-circuit the obsession with the world of work, in order to return students to themselves as a site of self-cultivation - to "record and represent oneself" as Cole says in the interview below.

Key Words: Multiple Literacies Theory (MLT), multiliteracies, Deleuze & Guattari, video

Introduction

The edited transcript below was initiated by Bradley on March 2nd, 2015 and progressed through the month of April using email and Skype as a means of contact.

What is multiple literacy theory?

Joff P.N. Bradley: The purpose of this interview is to consider some of the emergent, ongoing concepts in higher education and to situate these in view of what can be broadly conceived as a philosophy of education, which is your specialty Professor Cole. A key approach which I'd like us to focus on as we proceed in this interview is the blending or merging of content, language and new technologies. I'd like to examine this not only in terms of the core issue of literacy, but also the series of new literacies which have developed in recent years - for example, multiliteracies, digital

literacies, multiple literacies theory and more recently pluriliteracies (Meyer *et al*, 2015). I would like to try and see how your theorization of new technologies, for example, can be differentiated from the New London Group (Cope *et al*, 2000), or from the multiliteracies approach more broadly. The first question would be then 'what is multiple literacy theory?'

David R Cole: Multiple literacies theory (MLT) (Masny & Cole, 2009) is a theoretical approach that I have developed, or helped to develop with Professor Diana Masny from Ottawa University. Myself and Diana had two different ideas about MLT, but we came to the agreement that multiple literacies theory crystallized some ideas on literacies and literacy theory and especially regarding where we'd like to take it. Obviously this is within the context of an evolving environment that includes video, the internet, and mobile phones that can seemingly do everything under the sun now. A good theory has to be able to explain these new ways to record and represent oneself and one's ideas.

Just to differentiate very quickly between the multiliteracies from the New London Group, and multiple literacies theory. In the 1990s multiliteracies came about as a collaboration between linguists and theorists such as Allan Luke, who was influenced by Foucault and discourse theory. This was still quite linguistically based, but took into account things like Gunther Kress's semiotics (1995). This pertained to the notion of meaning-making, but they called it design - which is a very important concept with respect to multiliteracies. So it was quite a phenomenological approach - connecting this big world of representation that we have through the internet, through different means of presenting ourselves, our ideas and meaning-making, and then to a theory of the mind, and how that works.

It is a semiotic, phenomenological approach, and so is quite a mainstream take on connecting education with business needs, or with different technologies, and using them to positively make meaning and connect together things like image, language, gesture, and space in a reasonable fashion. So that was a big focus on critical literacies and critical literacy through Foucauldian discourse - analysis of power, social justice, and things like that. Multiple literacies theory picks up on that, but tries to cut this connection between subjectivity and the mind, or this exterior world of representation, for example in video and in thought. It tries to contest the mainstream notion of what literacies are in terms of work, thoughts, and play in the world, and tries to interpret this through what Guattari calls a-signifying semiotics.

A-signifying semiotics

Joff P.N. Bradley: Could you possibly explain a little bit about a-signifying semiotics?

David R Cole: Again in contrast to Gunther Kress's approach to semiotics, which is indeed about making meaning, what it does say is a lot of literacy studies are actually not literacy studies as such, they are rather illiteracy studies. What people are doing is looking at all the things that go wrong in literacy, all the mess and mistakes. It's not actually helping often with articulation, for example, in new mediums like video. A lot of research has actually found that a lot of new technologies do not actually help students and their articulation of themselves - who they are, what they believe in, what they find truly interesting. Why? Because it takes an excessively mainstream approach. So students tend to reproduce what they see in the media, what they see on the internet as *themselves* when in fact it isn't. It's a false identity they're producing. Félix Guattari especially, who I've been highly influenced by, thought that you have to look at what escapes these mainstream modes of representation.

We do find moments of this in cinema. This is why we've been working on our book *A Pedagogy of Cinema* (2016), where we actually take stills from cinema or from things like documentaries, which seem to encapsulate a different way of thinking around image, around thought. We then use those for pedagogy, using them for what Guattari calls a-signifying semiotics, which escapes mainstream

representation. What multiple literacies theory says is that within any context there are all these embedded literacies going on. For example, in Australia, you've got more than 60 languages being spoken on the streets by an immigrant population and then you've got the indigenous languages as well.

Critique of representation

Joff P.N. Bradley: So the critique of representation is a key concept for MLT?

David R Cole: Such languages with their culture, thoughts, and values are not usually represented in the mainstream English-speaking classroom. Multiple literacies theory (MLT) goes the opposite way, and says, no, this is a resource for meaning making; but it's an asignifying semiotics, it's not a mainstream approach, it's not about the majority. Students make meaning outside of the classroom. MLT says we can actually take any of these minor literacies - which are all interconnected through the unconscious - through the fact that we're here in this environment, and we're living, and we're breathing, and we're chaotically doing things. All these actions create meaning, but we're not trying to dominate one or the other. It's not about trying to overlay other meanings with our meanings. It's not about the ego, it's not about who's the brightest, most powerful or most beautiful. It's about trying to - use is a bad word - *work* with all these minor literacies and the meaning making resources we have in the classroom. Students are definitely part of that.

Joff P.N. Bradley: Is meaning-making empowering for the students? Is it demanding of the students to be more autonomous in their learning? Or does it invariably remain teacher-centered?

David R Cole: The a-signifying semiotics goes hand in hand with the Guattari-inflected notion of what pedagogy entails. Guattari actually was a practitioner and worked at La Borde, a psychiatric institute in France, and he experimented with power, in the sense of rethinking the roles of doctors and staff in such institutions. Who are we in this classroom? What's your role? What's his or her role? This can be very scary for some teachers, because they're the ones who are being paid to get the kids through the class. Bringing in video or whatever medium as a *mediating third* (Bradley, 2012) is a powerful technology. It's not about me, or you. It's not about power, it's not about who's in charge, it's about the product, what we produce: *what is the video?* And how do we understand it? Is it in any way useful or meaningful, and how does it *do* something for us to articulate something in the world? And therefore not just to reproduce banal, commercial, capitalist rubbish. You have to get beyond the mainstream. You have to think about other artists, poetry, that which can help you to think differently about the media, about representation.

Joff P.N. Bradley: Can something like the meaning making generated from video, let's say the meaning generated from the use of play in the video contribute to that sense of escape? Does it do something which textual approaches cannot and if so how does it do it and what are some of the effects of that approach?

David R Cole: Video has a different quality to it, which is more immediate. It's all about the viewer and the viewed, isn't it? It's all about this relationship between spectatorship, and then actively participating in it. We can become, as Deleuze and Guattari say, machinically enslaved within these relationships, these image-based relationships just by watching TV, just by turning a TV on, or turning a computer on. If I look on the internet now, within seconds I'm bombarded by these very highly specific advertising regimes. These are semiotic. They seem to know what I desire somehow. They're targeting me. The question for our students using video is how can we think otherwise to that type of bombardment and immersion?

Video practice in Australia

Joff P.N. Bradley: May I ask how you've applied video in your own practice?

David R Cole: I've done it mainly for research purposes. I've done projects on using camcorders (Pullen and Cole, 2010) with middle school students who used it to record their reflections on their literacy learning, and then I've done research with African immigrants in Australia. I've given them small flip cameras (Masny and Cole, 2014), just to record their daily lives, and then discuss what it means, what these videos are about that they're recording. Research and video go well together I think.

Joff P.N. Bradley: What was the purpose of that, if I might ask, about the use of flip cameras?

David R Cole: It was actually a multiple literacies theory (MLT) project looking at immigration in Australia and Canada (Masny and Cole, 2007), and trying to understand the connection between very specific problems and challenges that the new immigrants face in the two countries, and then what possible ways in which these problems or challenges were overcome, either by external agencies or through their own ingenuity or their own ability to deal with immigration issues.

Joff P.N. Bradley: So video became essential as a specific way to explore their material lives as textually based literacies proved impossible?

David R Cole: We interviewed them and transcribed interviews. I went to their houses, sat and interviewed them. But this is not the same as videoing what happens in their everyday lives. For example, they videoed a wake. In the Dinka culture, during a wake, everybody they know comes to the house, and they sit in the house for a certain number of days. It was very interesting, almost being present as a researcher myself, looking at this experience of being in an African wake in Australia in a suburban house. You go past the house, but there's no way that you could ever visualize or understand what was actually happening inside. So the video gives you that sort of texture. It's the *real*, isn't it, a type of ethnography?

But I don't like the term ethnography, because it sort of assumes that we're looking at ethnic minorities and kind of trying to make them more mainstream. I think the Deleuze and Guattari approach or the multiple literacies theory (MLT) approach is that these videos, that these people are making, are kind of singularities. They're sharing very specific instances of time and space, and how they're coming together, and we can think about them in that way.

Deleuze and Guattari and the real

Joff P.N. Bradley: As you mentioned the real, how do you connect the idea of the real with desire - a very important concept for Deleuze and Guattari, and how does that work in practice?

David R Cole: That's a huge question in Deleuze and Guattari as I've been reading quite a lot about the new materialism stuff. There's a connection clearly in Deleuze and Guattari between Spinoza (Deleuze, 1988), where a lot of this desire stuff comes from, and then Bergson, vitalism, different kinds of theory of the real. The problem with philosophy, according to Deleuze, according to Nietzsche, is the real. The real is out there: life, chaos, blood, sweat, it's all happening, and what are the philosophers doing? They're sitting around pontificating this, that and the other, turning it all into language, logic, into a very boring philosophical, technical explanation of how the world works. Whereas the world always will trump it and do something else. To get closer to how the world works, Deleuze takes bits of Spinoza, which doesn't relegate desire to a sort of underling of reason or to something that's just to be thought out. Actually we're really taking desire seriously as we do the will, and as we do all motive forces that drive our thinking.

Nietzsche (1967) is the other figure, especially with respect to his theory of the drives, and how that connects with reality, and then nature or some sort of understanding of the physical world that doesn't negate the powers, the natural ... again you struggle against language here because often the concept of nature is riddled with romantic, scientific, all sorts of paradigms which pervade that concept and detract from the real, from desire.

Joff P.N. Bradley: Speaking of desire, one of the inspirations for the colloquium in May 2016 at the National University of Singapore with four colleagues from Hitotsubashi, Kanto Gakuin, Tokyo and Toyo universities in Japan is drawn from a video that was created some years ago by a female student at a university in Yokohama, Japan. Just to give you a quick synopsis of the content of the video, a student had a considerable crush on a foreign lecturer which interrupted her learning and his teaching to some extent. The year-long infatuation was never anything other than Platonic, and was the kind of experience that we have all had in life or at school, at one time or another. What was really astounding, was that the student in her own way worked through this experience by making a video with her friends. The video represents this experience comically, for example, with both of them having a mock pistol shoot out, with special effects later dubbed in. I think that was a really interesting way for them to work through a personal existential problem. The finished video was successful in that way and very funny, and mature in the end. Through making the video, the students were able to reflect on the emotional experience with humour and wit and draw something life affirming from it - such as the consolidation of their friendship.

In terms of language education, the students needed hands-on, by-the-book instruction, with somebody to work with them and teach them the grammar of the target language, the phonology, pronunciation and spelling and that kind of thing. The argument of Joe McKim, the professor in charge, is that after a certain point the explicit studying of the rules of the language becomes almost counterproductive and therefore at that point the students and teacher need to progress into a situation where students use the language but in some way forget that they're doing it. In a way, video production distracts them from the whole arduous task of learning the language in the sense that they are motivated to do the task at hand, they pick up the language naturally, especially by using drama and incorporating actions. Language is embodied, with the body active and in an affective relation to language acquisition when and where communication is made. This positive motivational aspect to video production engenders neural connections that assist the student to remember the vocabulary and the lines, intonation and so on. So when you get into similar communication situations, you can actually call up the same bits of language, the same chunks of language that you used in making the movie. That remains the view of the professor in charge. From your research paradigm, I wonder how you would respond or interpret such a video?

David R Cole: Having seen the excellent video, and commenting on the video of the Japanese girls who express their feelings for their lecturer, I suppose I would agree with the idea that the linear progression of language learning through understanding phonics, grammar, vocabulary building - all of these technical aspects of learning a target language are extremely important and need to be addressed - but outputs or use of that language, those things that are very connected to the feelings, the emotions, affectivity, the senses, what the student really is interested in, that is highly connected to progression in that language. If the student just knows a lot of technical aspects of the language, that will be removed from their more fundamental desire, their stronger more instinctual, intuitive behaviors. If those stronger forces can connect with language learning, then that clearly has a more powerful effect for the learner.

Student-teacher dyad

Joff P.N. Bradley: Could you say something more about the student-teacher dyad?

David R Cole: In the particular case you mentioned, there is a confusion to a certain extent between the students as learners and then the students as desiring the object of the learning, which isn't language but the user of the language. So in that confusion, clearly that could lead to complications and difficulties in the learning context. And these difficulties could seriously damage their relationship and the learning of the students. So this is where I would say a Deleuze-Guattari approach to understanding these processes differs from, for example, a straightforward psychoanalytical approach, which would look at repression and the particular ways in which individual subjectivities of the Japanese girls respond to sexuality or desire, to how they have been controlled and conformed from birth, for example, with the Oedipus Complex. But the Deleuze-Guattari schizoanalytic approach broadens that psychoanalytic approach out from merely registering the subjectivities as individualized and formed and reformed through the various ways in which their sexuality has developed into a bigger collective social platform and within that platform, desire can be seen to act in other synthetic, more social ways.

Joff P.N. Bradley: To contextualize this argument, could you explain a little bit more about the dialectic between Japanese and Western culture?

David R Cole: The desire for the lecturer might not just be one of individual desire, it might be expressing a relationship, for example between Japanese and Western culture. It might be looking at the roles of women in Japanese society, or against the roles of men and women in Western societies. So it might not just be a desire for one person or sexual contact or sexual liaison between the students and the teacher, but for a bigger gamut of desires which are part of contemporary global culture. Making a video of this kind is a chance to express all of those entangled, bigger desires which open up the arena for expression beyond the usual clichés or singular sense of sexuality from the students to the teacher. It creates a bigger arena, a bigger focus for representation and expression. So the video works on one level as a representation of that, but if it challenges a simple psychoanalytic understanding or a simple exercise to express this desire we can turn it into something that uses things like collage or images of video culture, from advertising, from all sorts of different sources that could look to mediate and transform particular singular desires into bigger, cultural, social questions; it could be very helpful to think about these desires in a schizoanalytic way (Carlin and Wallin, 2014; Cole and Bradley, 2016; Graham and Cole, 2012; Ringrose, 2012; Thompson and Savat, 2015; Sellar, 2015).

Joff P.N. Bradley: In terms of literacy, what are the ramifications for this approach?

David R Cole: In terms of literacy, in terms of building language, I've worked on two aspects of this: The multiple literacies theory, which is taken from Deleuze and Guattari, which simply put states that within any of these learning episodes and scenarios - like making a video of these desires - there are always multiple forms of expression. You can keep on dividing this learning environment into smaller modes of analysis, until you get down to very molecular modes of desires, motivations, feelings and senses - all of which can make a difference. So it doesn't just become a question of embracing this molar desire, desire for the lecturer, desire for Western culture, it can become a question of who the student is, what they think, what type of submerged feelings enter into this scenario as well as the bigger cultural and social senses of what the desire means. Multiple literacies theory applied to this particular scenario would look at different modes of representation, the ways in which desire can be cut up, used and thought of in different ways, especially in the Japanese context. Multiple literacies theory gives you that sense that literacies aren't just about English progressing in a certain way through writing more, but rather about the regressions and ups and downs of what it means to read, write, speak and listen in different ways, in multiple ways, in English and Japanese, in hybrid Japanese-English, and according to different

literacies and vocabularies that you can take or inject into this environment or that, in this expressive medium for example, from global media or from film, documentaries, videos, YouTube. It's an endless series or set of different semiotic registers and signs that can be brought in to cut up and play with the way in which desire works in the language learning context.

Furthermore, I have worked with the idea of affective literacy which tries to locate and work with the notion of affect. In this context between the lecturer and the student, with feelings of being in love and having this sense of contact and wanting to feel close to the lecturer. That situation is full of affect, a kind of potential, tension or energy. And that is a mode of expression as well. It's often not represented in language, it's not rational or sensible. It's hard to put down into words. But you can play with it, you can do things with it. Affects lead to other things, other interconnected emotions and senses. Not just feeling alone within that context, but rather how does the student relate to other students, how do they see themselves before or after. How do they resolve their sense of anticipation, expectation, wants, desires in the world for other people, other objects, other feelings, other emotions? Affect is about movement. It's about change, it's about thinking through the ways in which emotion and feelings and subjectivity aren't repressed or turned into diminutive senses but can really change the dynamic of the language learning situation.

Multiple Literacies Theory and affective literacy both work in this kind of Deleuzian sense to open up and play with and change desire, as much as a work of art. If you can get to that level, you can look at the positive transformatory effects of this methodology. I suppose what you've got to do then is to take this further, to think about cinema, art, philosophy. How does that dialectic get resolved, and how can we add other complex elements to it to make it more interesting? Otherwise it can be a very clichéd type of video production. So it is a question of trying to allow the students to express themselves, to create desire, but also to relate this to the larger world in which they live, and where desire is packaged, used, and is part of the sales promotional type of culture, which again takes us away from the a-signifying semiotics.

Joff P.N. Bradley: One of the problems with multiliteracies in my view is the undertheorization of the body. Yet in your work with Diana Masny the body is a central thematic. It seems to have a very important place within your framework, and from the practice of video-making with the students over the years, what I've noticed is the way the body is used in video production, the comportment of the body, the acting, the gestures. Video is a very empowering way for them to learn language in a very real sense, which multiliteracies doesn't pick up on. I was wondering if you have any thoughts about how your theory maps that out?

David R Cole: Multiliteracies is based on semiotics, and phenomenology. They explicitly say in one of their books that they're trying to connect phenomenologically with the experience of these types of literacies. Both semiotics and phenomenology tend to diminish the power of the body. The exceptions to that would be someone like Merleau-Ponty. His theorization of the body is a very conscious attempt to bring the body into phenomenology. But in terms of what we get out of the students, Spinoza seems to be a better way to understand what they really do, and how important the body really is to all thought, all articulation, enunciation - their affect. It becomes an affect theory approach to understanding what is their video production, why is it important, what it means. That can be more productive than the phenomenological analysis of it.

Video modalities

Joff P.N. Bradley: One of the main components of video production has been the use of different literacies and modalities in the generation of video - using subtitles, images, different speeds of frames and things like that - and of course multiliteracies does pick up on this celebration of different literacies and media - but what differentiates that approach from your perspective in particular?

David R Cole: Yes, the multimodal. I'm not necessarily criticizing multiliteracies as being a bad approach; it is not as simple as that. I think it can be good as an introductory way into understanding how to use these different modes of representation. But it doesn't go far enough. I suppose multiple literacies theory takes you further as you can apply a more rounded material analysis. I have been theorizing this under the banner of immanent materialism recently, and really trying to get into a deep material analysis of any situation, and you can do that through video.

You have to be able to push it, you have to know where to go, and how to use it, how to analyse it. I think you need to study examples - writers, philosophers, filmmakers - who have pushed the material analysis, material forces of nature as far as they can. This gives the students the intellectual and aesthetic tools, but it gives them a conceptual ability to go further than just a banal, obvious representation. Mixing up the different genres within a film production, using collage, using different time speeds as you say, mixing up the different ways in which video can be documentary, it can be time-lapsed, it can be a memory, time can go in different directions within the same film. From all of these concepts taken from different films, different artists, different thoughts, the students can put that into their production. That for me takes it further than multiliteracies into multiple literacies theory (MLT).

Conclusion

The critique of the insufficiencies of the student-teacher dyad (the linear passage from teacher as imparter of knowledge to student as empty vessel) has been undertaken in this dialogue to show how at once technology and multiliteracies may contest this dynamic and at the same time may engineer new forms of exploration of student identity, sexuality, race, class, and lifestyle choices. While video production may be disruptive to the aforementioned dyad it is also productive of new literacies and knowledges which the students bring into the classroom (their Outside) and which may, if wielded aptly, inspire and motivate students to reexamine assumptions about themselves, their families and communities and the wider society as a whole.

A-signifying semiotics as described in this paper is a means to redraw the flows of *capillary power* and relays of power/knowledge, which are active both inside and outside the classroom. MLT is well aware of critical feminist approaches (concerned with relations of power and dominance in patriarchal Japan for example) but is not delimited to the parameters of its analysis. In its place, MLT pinpoints languages, sub-culture, thoughts, and values underrepresented in the mainstream English-speaking classroom and reads them in terms of meaning-making. It is here that a-signifying semiotics returns to the meaning making generated outside of the classroom which prevents breakthroughs inside. It is concerned with those minor literacies - interconnected through the unconscious - which do not assume a dominant mode. It is therefore not prescriptive and does not look to reintroduce out-of-date clichéd plans and worldviews.

Glossary

Affect theory emerged in the mid-1990s and is closely linked with the “affective turn”. In terms of MLT, affect theory is interpreted through the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari. It distinguishes feelings as “personal” from affect as a non-conscious experience of intensity (Zembylas, 2016, p. 22).

A-signifying semiotics, which is usually attributed to Guattari, looks to account for those extra-signifying factors - technological, abstract, information - that organize social relations.

Immanent materialism is drawn from Deleuze and Guattari and is used as a means to analyse everyday life, to examine the complex ways in which we are affected by cultural phenomena in conscious and unconscious ways, and the ways in which desire is constructed as a consequence.

Multiliteracies is a term coined in the mid-1990s by the New London Group and is a specific approach to literacy theory and pedagogy.

Multiple literacies theory is a term that builds on multiliteracies but analyses moments of educational breakdown and breakthrough through the prism of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy of the body, affect and materialism.

New London Group

In their manifesto, the New London Group presented a theoretical model of the connections between the changing social environment facing students and teachers and a new approach to literacy pedagogy that they call "multiliteracies". This literacy pedagogy was developed, it was argued, in order to meet the learning needs of students to allow them to negotiate technological, cultural, and linguistically diverse communities.

Schizoanalysis is a critique of Lacanian psychoanalysis. It was coined by Deleuze and Guattari in the 1960s and is now used to examine educational phenomena in non-reductive, original and creative ways.

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About the Authors



Joff P.N. Bradley teaches at Teikyo University, Tokyo, Japan. He is currently researching about the teaching of critical thinking and philosophy through film in the CLIL/CBI classroom. Dr Bradley is interested in the becoming-Japanese of the Other and the becoming-Other of Japan. His previous articles include the coedited special edition ‘Educational Philosophy and French Thought’ (Cole & Bradley, 2015) and ‘Japanese English Learners on the Edge of Chaosmos: Felix Guattari and ‘Becoming Otaku’’ (Cole & Bradley, 2014). His book entitled *A Pedagogy of Cinema* is available from Sense Publishers and *Deleuze and Buddhism* (See & Bradley, Palgrave publishers) is due out in 2016.



David R Cole is currently the strand leader of globalisation research in the Centre for Educational Research (CER). Cole is Associate Professor in Literacies, English and ESL. Before becoming a university lecturer in 2004, David was an international English teacher for eleven years, working in Egypt, Colombia and the UK. Since 2004, he has held teacher education positions at the University of Tasmania and the University of Technology, Sydney. In that time, he has directed Bachelor of Teaching courses, been responsible for the Honours course, led doctoral writing groups and initiated distance learning programs. Cole is an expert in mixed methods educational research and the philosophy of education. He has been working on how to change educational practice through the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari since the 1990s in the UK.