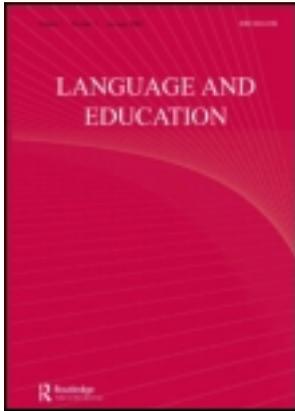


This article was downloaded by: [Mastin Prinsloo]

On: 25 June 2012, At: 02:12

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Language and Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rlae20>

Digital literacies as placed resources in the globalised periphery

Mastin Prinsloo^a & Jennifer Rowsell^b

^a School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

^b Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada

Available online: 25 Jun 2012

To cite this article: Mastin Prinsloo & Jennifer Rowsell (2012): Digital literacies as placed resources in the globalised periphery, *Language and Education*, 26:4, 271-277

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2012.691511>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

INTRODUCTION

Digital literacies as placed resources in the globalised periphery

Mastin Prinsloo^{a*} and Jennifer Rowsell^b

^a*School of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa;* ^b*Department of Teacher Education, Brock University, St. Catharines, Canada*

(Received 3 May 2012; final version received 3 May 2012)

The focus on electronic media as placed resources in this Introduction to this special issue draws attention to the varied and specific ways that media resources are taken hold of in divergent social settings. We argue that communicative resources of all kinds, in their uses and functions, are shaped by context and place, and we examine what that means for people engaging with new media resources, particularly people who are not part of the global mainstream. The case is made that research needs to take account of the specificity, affordances and limits of place, conceived both in geographic terms and as social sites that are shaped by politics, history, economics and cultural practices. At the same time, research has to pay attention to ways that electronic media offer translocal resources and practices for engagement. Digital media exist in the local and offer agency to users in the papers presented here, but not without the constraints that mark their status as persons located on the globalised periphery.

Keywords: digital literacies; new media; placed resources; global/local; difference; inequality

Introduction

Much of the digital and new media research takes place in predominantly Anglo-American or middle-class contexts. Sometimes the focus is on new media hardware and software as inherently or predictably resourceful, in terms of what they offer and how they work, regardless of how and where people are situated. Warschauer, in 2009, wrote that there was still much to accomplish in understanding how fundamental aspects of power influence the development and practice of digital literacies. In reviewing some key studies, he noted that:

the researchers have taken as a unit of analysis those who have been successful in the practice of new digital literacies. In each particular case, the motivation for that is well founded and the resulting scholarship is of great value to our field. Yet, taken as a whole, this body of research may present a less than complete picture of digital literacy practices today. (Warschauer 2009, 129)

One of the valuable things that the research that Warschauer refers to has shown us is how multimedia, interactive talk, writing, virtual objects and artefacts all co-construct one another in digital practices, and that imaginative engagement with interactive media foregrounds flexible and collaborative design and feedback as characteristic patterns of engagement with digital, particularly networked resources. Our emphasis in this Introduction

*Corresponding author. Email: mastin.prinsloo@uct.ac.za

and this collection does not deny the remarkable affordances, dynamism and social impact of new media, but does emphasise a different aspect. This special issue of *Language and Education* offers a selection of papers that study the take up of media, particularly digital media, in settings that can mostly be described as being on the global or social periphery, in Africa (Kenya, Uganda and South Africa), Greece and Australia, including the 'outback'. The studies feature accounts of individuals who improvise with the technologies that they have, and of groups of people who use these resources in ways that at first reading might appear novel and in particular cases are sometimes less than successful.¹ Rather than being simply accounts of deficit or disadvantage, however, these studies open up the space for us to enquire what further can be understood about digital literacies and new media from these settings than is explained in studies where such resources appear to operate seamlessly, in settings that are well known.

The focus on the new media as placed resources in this collection indicates our efforts to deal with questions of variability and specificity in how new media are encountered and used across socio-culturally divergent social settings, and across different social activities in the same or similar settings. The case for studying digital literacies and the new media as placed resources was made by Prinsloo as follows:

At the level of practice, the new literacies are never reproduced in their entirety across different contexts. They function as artefacts and as signs that are embedded in local relations that are themselves shaped by larger social dynamics of power, status, access to resources and social mobility. They are placed resources. (Prinsloo 2005, 96)

Our starting point in this introductory article is to elaborate on this view and to reaffirm the perspective that communicative resources of all kinds (language, literacy, new media and multimedia) in their uses and functions, are shaped by context, and to examine what that means in some detail. The 'placed resources' construct is part of a strategy to anchor a range of ideas and research that is concerned to study new media in peripheral settings under prevailing conditions of globalisation. This research attempts to take account of the specificity of place, and also to pay attention to how electronic media offer translocal, everyday resources and practices for engagement with the world.

There have been several motivations for this attention to place, or to context. Foremost for us is the now well-known emphasis in the New Literacy Studies paradigm (Barton 2007; Street 1984) on the situated and variable nature of what counts as reading and writing. Ethnographic enquiry into print-based reading and writing practices in this tradition produced evidence of substantial variety and specificity in the ways people used, valued, acquired and shared reading and writing across groups of people and across specific social domains within larger social groupings; and that power, politics and economics were central to these divergences and the value or lack-of-value attributed to such differences. Whereas there are elements of sameness in the language, semiotic and social practices of the middle-classes at a global scale, this might sometimes obscure the point that there is always a social and political, as well as historical dimension to the particular forms and functions that reading and writing take in particular contexts. This is a strong case, but the ethnographic focus of the New Literacy Studies has been challenged for having a weakly developed view of the social beyond the local construction of meanings and values, lacking a way of taking detailed account of how influences and forces outside the local produce and shape particular social spaces, and how semiotic resources travel and refigure translocally (Brandt and Clinton 2002). Indeed, the local, particularly under globalised conditions of mobility and diversity, has been described as a site of flows rather than solidity and semi-permanence (Appadurai 1996). Our concern in this Introduction on digital media studies across diverging settings is to not lose sight of the understanding that communication is a

socially situated practice while examining how space and place are shaped from without as well as from within, and from above as well as from below.

The attention to digital literacies as placed resources in a sociolinguistics of globalisation starts from the point about sign-based communication of all kinds (language and all other media as well) that form and function do not lock together unchangingly when texts and utterances travel and operate in diverging social spaces. Even if semiotic forms are similar or identical as they cross places and regions, the way in which they get inserted in social actions may differ significantly, precisely because it is in the nature of signs that meaning is placed 'on' them rather than residing 'in' them. Consequently, there may be huge differences in what they do across spaces. Harris (2000, 73) made this point while criticising Saussurian semiotics, that sign-based communication (in whatever modality) is not telementational, in that signs do not function as conduits, transferring already formed thoughts or messages from one individual mind to another, because communication is not something separate, outside of social processes and isolated from social influences. Forms of signification, he argued, do not exist as the same thing outside the context which gave rise to them, and 'there is no abstract invariant which remains "the same" from one context to another' (Harris 1995, 20). So, in this view, while it might look like the same multimedia text has travelled unchanged from one device to another, it is not functionally the same in a different setting, where it is engaged with for particular purposes, as part of different human activities. We see, for example, in this collection, how downloading music on cellular phones is a locally shaped activity in rural Australia, how video games are inserted into differing social economies and youth identity practices in contrasting settings around Cape Town, how 'computer skills' are differently constructed in working class families in Greece and in rural locations in Uganda and how Hollywood English language films are transfigured, received and engaged with differently in Ugandan towns.

This indeterminacy of meaning and function in relation to semiotic form is a key point in understanding sociolinguistics of globalisation. Drawing on Dell Hymes' (1972) emphasis on communicative competence (as opposed to syntactic competence) as being the fundamental point of what language is about, Blommaert (2010) pointed out that this commitment to the fundamentally social nature of language places context at the heart of what language does, that it is inextricably contexted rather than simply being influenced by context. Thus, he talks about language as a placed resource (Blommaert 2002) and we have taken this idea to think about new media in related ways. Meaning is related to social uses and these are shaped by place and context. For example, a multimedia text on screen, an image on a cellphone or a Hollywood movie are not functionally the same in different settings. They follow different meaning conventions, and require different skills for their successful use when they are part of divergent human activities.

One of the most profound consequences of this putting of social context at the heart of communication is the observation that utterances and texts of all kinds, and the ways in which these are performed by people, are constantly assessed and evaluated so that function and value are impossible to separate. Bourdieu (1991) pointed to the political and economic consequences that follow from this socio-communicative dynamics. He argued that semiotic resources are also and always signs of social value. As a result, *differences* in the use of communicative resources are simultaneously and systematically translated into *inequalities* between readers, writers and speakers. This happens because different uses of communicative resources reflect the system of social differences so that particular competencies function as capital, 'producing a *profit of distinction* on the occasion of each social exchange' (Bourdieu 1991, 55; italics in original). In their situated use of particular digital media, people bring their linguistic and cultural capital, their investments, their identities and their aspirations to this activity.

Such engagements are processes of intertextuality, where what is taken is shaped by what is brought. We create meaning when engaging with multimedia texts, as well as print texts, by making connections with other texts and images that we have read, seen or imagined on other occasions. The connections we make are influenced by our histories, our geographies and our expectations, in a process that is both individual and social, shaped by social place: our age, gender, economic class, affiliation groups, family traditions and cultural resources and investments. People make sense of the signs and actions offered to them within a frame of reference of their own experience, and guided by their interest and commitments at the point of engagement. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of *heteroglossia* refers to the process whereby a proliferation of meanings is potentially and fundamentally available in the reading of any utterance. Centripetal dynamics of the social and the sign are those that stress homogeneity and uniformity in social and sign-making practices (for example, in official or institutional contexts, in moves towards monolingualism and in processes of ideological conformity), and centrifugal dynamics are those that foster heterogeneity, diversity and multiple meanings. The interplay between these two dynamics produces media actions that are simultaneously both free and constrained. These dynamics between constraint and freedom operate on multiple levels, shaped by different sources of authority. The consumption and use of media on the social periphery consequently does not necessarily result in passivity, but can evoke creativity, resistance, agency and opportunity of diverse sorts, as seen in the appropriation of social roles and status by the interpreters of Hollywood movies in Ugandan towns, described by Aachen and Openjuru in this special issue. Indeed, the unpredictable imagining of new possibilities in socially constrained circumstances is one affordance of digital media, connected to the possibilities of imagining other identities. As Appadurai wrote:

While fantasy represents the concept of 'opium for the masses', implying passivity and 'false consciousness', imagination is the prelude to expression, which, especially when collectively expressed, may fuel action rather than preventing it. Thus, imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape. (Appadurai 1996, 7)

Appadurai (1996) further suggested that electronic media offer new everyday resources and disciplines for the imagination of the self and the world. He suggests that similarly social mobility and migration cause a new instability in the creation of subjectivities. In concert with the global flow of mass-mediated images, they produce diasporic public spheres, as also described in the work of Canagarajah (2008) on the dispersed identity processes of Sri Lankan Tamils living in the United States. Under these conditions the concern with place has to take on a complex sense of both locatedness and dispersal, where processes of cultural identity construction and maintenance transcend both linguistic identity and physical location.

Only through a situated and local account of digital praxis can we begin to see tensions, power imbalances and, at the same time, idiosyncratic use and understanding of the digital. Massey's (2000) work on space helpfully theorises a notion of activity space that informs our analysis of particular cases of digital literacies in practice. Activity space not only considers how each person is located in their immediate social environment but also how their activities connect them to other places and networks. An example from this special issue is a Ugandan schoolroom or house with poorly made floors and cementing, with a computer used by many to access email and acquire particular kinds of information.

Massey offers three propositions for thinking about space. First, space is a product of inter-relations and it is constituted through relations. Second, space is a sphere of possibility of the existence of 'contemporaneous plurality' (Massey 2005, 10). This concept of multiple

layered spaces helps us to think about the patchwork of articles in the special issue as a braiding together of discourses and networks within varied spatial arrangements and how these arrangements exist in relation to digital media and forms of communication. A third and final proposition that Massey offers us is that space is always under construction – ‘it is always in the process of being made’ (Massey 2005, 10). Within this special issue, this point recurs in the ways in which people just do things with technology. That is, they make technology their own by shaping it around place-based practices. Working across very different regional and national locations, the relationships between spaces are not always immediately evident. However, the value of being alert to resonances between spaces is key to taking proper account of the idiosyncratic nature of digital literacies.

In terms of place-based research, there have been several action research and practitioner enquiry projects in which teachers developed curricula that brought together a focus on literacy and place-based education to study with children, aged 8 to 13 years, the changing physical and semiotic environments of specific neighbourhoods and local regions. Some communities in these areas were undergoing programs of urban regeneration (Comber 2009), while others were living with land degeneration and severe drought in towns and settlements across the land basin of Australia’s largest and crucially important river system (Comber, Nixon, and Reid 2007). Comber and Nixon, in particular, have used the place-based approach combined with critical literacy to look at the ways in which children’s literacies of place can effect social change.

Thinking about agency, capital and technologies

There is a tension across the articles regarding individuals’ use, understanding and makeshift practices with technologies. Media texts and digital technologies used across these sites are often donated, cheaper, more basic versions of technologies, handed-down and remixed media that individuals shape to meet their own local needs and interests. Not having the financial wherewithal for and access to high-end technologies and newly released media, participants in the research studies shape their social practice around the social-cultural realities of their situations. Bourdieu’s (1984) theorizing of habitus and field is helpful in this instance because it enables us to locate social context and subjectivities within their digital improvisations. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984, 43) writes that, ‘the representation which individuals and groups inevitably project through their practices and properties is an integral part of social reality’. Research participants featured in these articles all improvise with technologies and media in varied and ad hoc ways with similar ends to those who have the affordances of higher tech and high-end technologies. Notions such as remix, which is fundamental to the twenty-first-century mindset with tools, media texts and technologies, are evident and embraced in contexts presented across all of the articles. Although the tools and objects used by higher socio-economic and more developed countries make improvising with media and technology faster and more accessible, similar practices and results are experienced by participants in rural Uganda or gamers living in townships outside Cape Town or Indigenous children in remote parts of Australia. Such participants make do with the tools that they have to make meaning. In this way, it is not necessarily about the technologies as objects *per se*, it is about how we mediate tools and technologies during social practice, which needs to be a theoretical push for researchers. Digital literacies are distinct from print literacies in this way because they work on a different logic and different epistemologies (Gee 2003; Sheridan and Rowsell 2010) and perhaps digital epistemologies might even offer symbolic capital for participants.

Reflecting on the special issue

All of the articles in this issue of *Language and Education* consider placed technologies in marginalised contexts. To begin with, Auld, Snyder, and Henderson present a research study with aboriginal children and their parents using mobile phones. Presented as an object that is part and parcel of everyday life, the researchers show how mobile phones give agency to members of the community, and they argue that there is potential to harness this placed technology in pedagogy. With a large corpus of data and rich analyses, there is a striking sense of how pervasive and naturalised mobile phone use is and the need for greater understanding of their communicative affordances.

Moving to Kenya, Kendrick, Chemjor, and Early consider just how situated digital literacies can be in a secondary schooling context. Combining a perspective on media as placed resources with a multiliteracies pedagogy as well as Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, they show how access to information and communication technologies (ICT) gave young women an entrée into new skills, even new life worlds. In one instance in the article, the girls interviewed a Member of Parliament and wrote up the event as journalists. Using props and costumes, the girls improvised on alternative identities that they would never have inhabited without experience in and access to digital domains and practices.

Norton and Williams take us to Uganda and present a more ambivalent picture of technologies located in place and space. Focusing on the local use of eGranary, a digital portable library, used in a rural Ugandan village, they present how six secondary students access the digital library within the constraints of a local library. There are mixed perspectives on the portable library because, while its appeal for participants remains strong, its effectiveness is sometimes compromised by the limitations of local life. A less than utopian picture of technologies helpfully addresses our overall point about the issues of power, access and the placed nature of digital praxis in marginalised communities.

Bulfin and Koutsogiannis cross different terrains, looking at the same age group and their diverse improvisation of digital literacies. Complicating a binary between home–school, they suggest that the variance between home and school is not that large or distant. There is far more fluidity between the two environments and it is just too easy to view school digital literacies as didactic, dusty and dreary. Instead, there are complex and clever mediations and negotiations between home and school that need to be extenuated to have a more nuanced and informed picture of digital literacies, and it might be more productive for researchers to think of technologies as multiply situated and multiply placed.

Walton and Pallitt present the gaming world and improvisation of gaming worlds by South African youth. Like Norton and Williams, they present less of a polyanna view of gaming and gaming worlds by examining a differential that exists between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. Digital games for computers and consoles are expensive and like other poor, marginal contexts in the special issue, children and youth featured in the article use outdated technology and gaming platforms. In addition, there is an othering of race and racial backgrounds in many of the video games which the authors highlight in their article. The authors call for a broader definition of games and game play that works far more on local practices and situated views of digital literacies.

Achen and Openjuru look at a different kind of media ecology compared with other articles. They investigate local mediation of Hollywood movies and how this negotiation of media texts reflects back on local social practice. Interpreted through the optic of local 'Vee-jays' (video-jockeys), Hollywood movies featuring actors such as Jackie Chan are showcased in video hall shacks known as bibandas. During viewing, Vee-jays offer local inflections and interpretations (like spoken and embodied subtitles) during viewing to mediate how the audience takes up, understands and responds to the movie. The article offers the special issue a local, placed version of remixing a media ecology in the local.

Technologies broadly, and media ecologies (Sefton-Green 2006) more specifically, are never neutral forms of communication, but instead their uses and understandings take their shape from contexts. Like objects and artefacts (Pahl and Rowsell 2010), digital media and technologies exist in the local and give agency to their users. Mobile phones, digital libraries, and videogames call on do-it-yourself practices (Ito 2011) where people 'just do things' with technologies, regardless of constraints. But constraints are stacked against so many of the participants in the research studies featured in this special issue that they remind us again and again that new literacies cannot be reified or universalised, and it is the discursive, multimodal practices used to improvise with them that are the key.

Note

1. These papers were first presented at the Mobility Language Literacy Conference held at the Vineyard Conference Centre in Cape Town in January 2011. It was hosted by three special interest groups of the International Applied Linguistics Association (AILA): Language and Migration, Applied Linguistics and Literacy in Africa and the Diaspora, and Literacy Studies, and co-hosted by five South African universities and the University of Stockholm, Sweden.

References

- Appadurai, A. 1996. *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin, M. 1981. *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, ed. M. Holquist. Austin, TX: Texas University Press.
- Barton, D. 2007. *Literacy: An introduction to the ecology of written language*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Blommaert, J. 2002. Writing in the margins. Notes on a sociolinguistics of globalisation. Unpublished written version of a lecture given in April, during a workshop of the Leverhulme Trust project on Language and Global Communication at Cardiff University, UK.
- Blommaert, J. 2010. *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1984. *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brandt, D., and K. Clinton. 2002. Limits of the local: Expanding perspectives on literacy as a social practice. *Journal of Literacy Research* 34, no. 3: 337–56.
- Canagarajah, A.S. 2008. Language shift and the family: Questions from the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12, no. 2: 1–34.
- Comber, B. 2009. Critical literacies in place: Teachers who work for just and sustainable communities. In *Decolonizing community contexts*, ed. J. Lavia and M. Moore, 43–57. London: Routledge.
- Comber, B., H. Nixon, and J. Reid. 2007. *Literacies in place: Teaching environmental communications*. Newtown, Australia: Primary English Teaching Association.
- Gee, J.P. 2003. *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harris, R. 1995. *Signs of writing*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, R. 2000. *Rethinking writing*. New York: Athlone Press.
- Hymes, D.H. 1972. *On communicative competence*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Ito, M. 2011. Machinima in a fanvid ecology. *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 1: 51–4.
- Massey, D. 2000. The conceptualization of place. In *A place in the world? Places, cultures and globalization*, ed. D. Massey and P. Jess, 45–86. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Massey, D. 2005. *For space*. London: Sage.
- Prinsloo, M. 2005. The new literacies as placed resources. *Perspectives in Education* 23, no. 4: 87–98.
- Sefton-Green, J. 2006. Youth, technology, and media culture. *Review of Research in Education* 30: 279–306.
- Sherridan, M.P., and J. Rowsell. 2010. *Design literacies: Learning and innovation in the digital age*. London: Routledge.
- Street, B. 1984. *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Warschauer, M. 2009. Digital literacy studies: Progress and prospects. In *The future of literacy studies*, ed. M. Baynham and M. Prinsloo, 123–40. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.