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Young People's Engagement with Digital Literacies in Marginal Contexts in a Globalised World

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Claims about the complex ways in which young people's lives are entangled with digital technologies abound, yet insufficient theoretically informed empirical research has been conducted to examine how they use them and with what impact. This special issue of *Language and Education* presents theoretical and empirical understandings of young people's interactions with digital technologies in schools, homes and communities, and examines implications for educational development in four contrasting sites. The final paper considers the implications of the research for an investigation of young people's use of information and communication technologies in Uganda.

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Social practices in the main areas of everyday life within modern societies – in work, at leisure, in the home, in education, in the community and in the public sphere – have all been affected by changes in technology, institutions, media, the economy, and the rapid movement towards global scale in manufacture, finance and communications. Intrinsic to this understanding is recognition of the intimate connections between global flows, particularly of information and ideas, and the use of new technologies and learning. Learners today need new operational and cultural knowledge to acquire access to changing forms of work, civic and private practices in their everyday lives (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Being literate under these new conditions involves much more than simply knowing how to operate the language system; learners also need to develop strength in the cultural and critical dimensions of literacy, when mediated by the use of new technologies (Lankshear & Snyder, 2000).

However, the changes associated with the use of digital technologies are not equally distributed both within nation states and between them. The extent to which individuals, families and communities are able to fully participate in society and control their own destinies, taking into account a variety of factors related to economic resources, employment, health, education, housing, recreation, culture, and civic engagement impacts directly on the way they take hold of the new media resources.

The research collected in this issue has started to develop in-depth case studies of the particular ways that electronic forms of meaning-making, communicating, learning and acting socially are shaped by local configurations, in South American, African, marginal European and working class Australian contexts. The comparative empirical research provides the substance for an important question: how might we engage young people, who are not at the core of the dynamics of the globalised world, with new media in educational settings?

Theoretical Considerations

As a group of colleagues, who are working in a loose consortium across four countries, we have met face-to-face on several occasions to discuss our independent, yet related research projects. Our most recent meeting was at the Monash University Prato Centre, Prato, Italy, in April 2006, where we discussed some shared theoretical understandings about investigating the use of new technologies for literacy purposes in educational settings. Our starting assumption is that communicative activities, including those associated with the new electronic media, are shaped by immediate interactive dynamics and by wider social practices. Reading and writing, in print or on screen, appears as not exactly the same thing, in their uses, functions, modes of acquisition and status, across groups of people and across specific social domains within societies. Whether, and under what conditions, access and use of electronic media offer opportunities for particular users is therefore something that has to be established by situated research, not assumed.

Claims have been made about the benefits which follow from introducing young people to some basic procedures that focus on managing reading and writing when using electronic media. In the US, the No Child Left Behind Act, passed by the Federal Government in 2002, ratified a wide range of initiatives, many of which are designed to improve reading outcomes in schools, and to address inequalities in educational outcomes. The Act has a section devoted to technology (Title II, Section D), with the stated goal: 'To assist every student in crossing the digital divide by ensuring that every student is technologically literate by the time the student finishes the eighth grade, regardless of the student's race, ethnicity, gender, family income, geographic location, or disability'. The digital divide referred to in the Act features strongly in most discussions with regard to non-Western, marginal or working class social contexts. For example, researchers at the World Bank have argued for the developmental potential of the new media technologies, claiming that they offer developing countries 'unprecedented opportunities to enhance educational systems, improve policy formation and execution, and widen the range of opportunities for business and the poor' (World Bank, 1998: 1). However, simple models of technology transfer coupled with basic skilling strategies have proved unsuccessful (Snyder, 1998; Warschauer, 2003).

Researchers writing from middle class contexts around the globe have argued that children's literacy activities involving computers prior to and outside of school are typically more frequent, richer and more meaningful than those they encounter in school (Gee, 2003; Green & Bigum, 1993; Luke, 2000; Reinking *et al.*, 1998; Snyder *et al.*, 2002). Clearly, this contrast between in-school and

out-of-school experiences with the new literacies only works when such digitally rich, out-of-school encounters with computers are available to children, which is seldom the case in the contexts we are concerned with here. Related research has demonstrated that digital learning opportunities in out-of-school contexts can be created with positive outcomes for students from less advantaged neighbourhoods (Hull & Schultz, 2002; O'Hear & Sefton-Green, 2004). However, other research suggests that access to computers in home settings does not always translate into successful use of these resources in schools, particularly where the linguistic and cultural practices of home are very different to those of schools (Angus *et al.*, 2004).

Skills-based and digital divide notions assume that these literacies have a general applicability regardless of how the local is differently configured. They also assume that these literacies operate in a generalised way, enabling the seamless flow of information and communication so as to produce global coherence and networking. Such perspectives study digital literacies as simply trans-local, in their capacities to set up exchanges and communicative practices, when they are precisely *not* simply trans-local, but local as well. For example, Leu *et al.* (2004: 15) identify the key 'new literacies' as

- using a search engine effectively to locate information;
- evaluating the accuracy and utility of information that is located on a webpage in relation to one's purpose;
- using a word processor effectively, including using functions such as checking spelling accuracy, inserting graphics, and formatting text;
- participating effectively in bulletin board or listserv discussions to get needed information;
- knowing how to use email to communicate effectively; and
- inferring correctly the information that may be found at a hyperlink on a webpage.

This list implies that the 'new literacies' are core skills of an operational and generalisable nature. But the recurring word 'effectively' in the various examples and 'correctly' assume a universality and generality of function and practice which is not appropriate or helpful for understanding the differentiated, situated and enculturated ways in which digital practices happen.

A range of theoretical resources, debates and perspectives have pointed to the situatedness of communicative sign-based practices, and those theoretical perspectives raise serious doubts about whether digital literacies operate in such a transparent, trans-local way. Work in the New Literacy Studies (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996, 2003; Prinsloo & Breier, 1996; Street, 1984, 2005), in sociolinguistics influenced by the work of Hymes (1974), Blommaert (2005) and Rampton (2003), in social semiotics (Harris, 2000), shaped by the work of Halliday (1994), Kress (1997, 2003), and Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), and the work of Vygotsky (1962) and Bakhtin (1981) have emphasised the situated ways in which language and other communicative practices work. They have drawn attention to the ways distinctive forms and functions of meanings are shared by groups of people who sustain and modify them as part of their collective social practices.

These research resources have started to show that communication practices do not have an autonomous effect which automatically applies outside the context which gave rise to them (Street, 1984). Reading and writing, in whatever modality, appear as not exactly the same thing, in their uses, functions, modes of acquisition and status across groups of people and across specific social domains within societies. Socially located individuals draw on particular sets of perceptual, cognitive and cultural procedures and resources to make and take meanings from texts. Applied to both discourses and texts that include multimedia texts, the meanings that are made are not static, or irrevocably embedded in the text itself. Meaning is related to the readers' *uses* of the text. What might look like the same multimedia text on screen is therefore not functionally the same in a different setting. It necessarily follows different meaning conventions, and requires different skills for its successful use, when it functions in different social contexts for different purposes, as part of different human activities.

It is also apparent that digital media have a computational and procedural dimension, which is the key to their functioning. This procedural dimension is not noticed, however, when the emphasis is on the simulated, surrogate or virtual reality dimensions of computer activity where computers are thought of as transparent delivery mechanisms. But the coded algorithms that make up particular software clearly allow some actions on the part of users and not others (Lessig, 1999). Computer software comprises rule-governed procedural genres, designed to facilitate a limited set of interactions (Mateas, 2005). The ideal is that the designer and users share some common understanding of the activity at hand, and that users share the designer's vision of what range of activities are useful or enjoyable (De Souza, 2005). Software development is therefore both socially situated and intertextual in distinctive ways, at the level of coding, which is not often noticed when the procedural genres are familiar to the point of 'obviousness' in particular social contexts. In social settings which differ from that in which the software was designed, expectations, conventions and transactions do not necessarily follow the same procedural logic as is anticipated in its design.

We are thus encouraged to pay attention to the range of contexts in which persons who are engaged in sign-based, communicative activity are situated. When computers or other media are inserted in a particular setting, to bring about certain results, they encounter situated social practices that do not necessarily result in these resources being used in a way that promotes social development and participation, as might be conceived by the implementers. Digital divide logic overemphasises the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of other factors that allow people to use electronic media for meaningful ends.

The Focus of the Papers

The studies go beyond digital divide logic to address the question of how the new literacies of digital communication travel across place and time. In South Africa, Brazil, Greece and Australia, the contributors examine what happens when digital communication practices are functioning, dysfunctioning and taking on new functions in diverse and multilingual settings. The larger question

which they all address is how studies of situated encounters and uses of digital communication can inform educational understandings of the ways in which children engage in the new literacies in and out of school. How can we develop models for school-based engagement that takes account of the local dynamics, orientations and resources that constitute the situatedness of such communicative practices across social contexts?

The crosscultural studies share certain understandings: social context, far more than hardware, shapes the use of new technologies; new technologies do not hold the key to human progress; new technologies are neither causes nor cures as the social context in which they are used or not used is all-important. Together, the articles shed light on the ways in which different social contexts contribute to how the digital technologies are used.

The discussion of the digital divide thus shifts from gaps to be overcome by providing hardware and software to the challenges of effectively integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) into communities, institutions, schools and societies. The physical availability of ICT is important but the interest of the research represented in this issue is more focused on the development of people's capacity to use ICT to engage in meaningful and productive social practices. Each article examines the ways in which different modes and experience of access to technology contribute to social and economic stratification or inclusion.

The papers attempt to explain digital literacy practices among young people. As the social, economic and political conditions of each site are different, the local realities vary. A particular emphasis is on social inclusion: the investigation of local manifestations of access to technology and an exploration of the possibilities of using digital technologies to bridge the social gaps. Questions include: how do children from home backgrounds where digital resources are scarce, encounter such resources in school and other settings? What are the educational problems and potentials encountered by such children in regard to the new technologies?

In Brazil, the focus is on the curriculum implications for groups with little access to technology and networks. In South Africa, the focus is on the ways that information technologies such as computers and the Internet are encountered by children who live in local communities which are excluded from or on the margins of the networked information economy. In Greece, the interest is in examining young people's literacy practices with the aim of using the data to develop a new generation of curricula that might not only narrow the gap between Greece and other member countries of the EEC, but also contribute to constructing critical and parallel cosmopolitan subjects. In Australia, the focus includes consideration of the complex connections between digital literacy practices and disadvantaged communities.

Denise Bértoli Braga addresses the lack of access to the new media and digital technologies in Brazil, where only a small fraction of the population has access to computers and an even smaller percentage has domestic access to both computers and the Internet. Under these conditions, she examines the complexities around the collective sharing of software and computers linked to the Internet across institutional, cultural and class divides. She asks, 'what bridges may be built between the literacies associated with the use of new media on a global

scale and the need for new forms and strategies of education on the local scale? Do the literacies required by the new media somehow present themselves as implicit or embedded in the technology, or are they taught, learned and/or adapted or transformed to suit the communicative, educational and social profile of the local community?

Marion Walton's paper is set against the context of the South African government's commitment, since 1994, to rebuilding the school system that had formed a major cornerstone of Apartheid. The Khanya project was established in 2001 to provide computers for Western Cape high schools. With a focus on teaching computer skills, Khanya reports that project schools have improved their literacy scores on standardised tests. However, improved test scores do not necessarily mean that children are being equipped with literacy practices required to learn in a digital age. Walton shows that a reliance on brief, simple skills training for teachers does not account for the complexities and challenges that teachers encounter in introducing computer use in their classroom settings, nor with the ways that children take these on in classroom settings. Her research raises the question: 'what would effective training and in-service support encompass, in such settings, to allow effective and productive engagement with digital technologies?'

The two papers from Greece describe different aspects of the same large scale national study. Dimitris Koutsogiannis presents a theoretical framework for researching the out-of-school digital literacy practices of Greek adolescents. However, his aim is to move beyond the context of Greece to discuss broader theoretical and methodological issues related to research designed in order to examine literacy practices in the era of globalisation. Based on data generated from local and global developments in a particular geographical region, Greece, his article suggests that it is necessary to take account of historical and geographical dimensions, as well as recent global developments. To capture the full complexity of the situation, he suggests the use of an eclectic combination of approaches and methods.

Examining the data collected together with Koutsogiannis in their joint project, Bessie Mitsikopoulou explores the effects of learning English and the use of new technologies in the everyday life of Greek young people (14- to 16-year-olds). Drawing on ethnographic data and detailed interviews with students and parents, the article focuses on young people's everyday literacy practices as well as on their views of the importance of English and new technologies. She identifies two emerging rhetorics, which are based on different perceptions of skilling and progress. The rhetorics are underpinned by two distinctive discourses: a 'progress and development' discourse, which is more locally oriented, and a 'cosmopolitan' discourse, which has an internationalist orientation.

Scott Bulfin and Sue North examine young people's literacy practices as they use digital technologies in formal and informal education spaces in Melbourne, Australia. Of the four countries participating in the crosscultural project, Australia is the most affluent and economically stable. In contrast with Brazil, for example, more than 90% of 15-year-olds in Australia have computers in their homes. However, this statistic is misleading when examined through the lens of social and cultural capital: the quality of the young people's access varies significantly according to the complex interplay of a number of key variables.

Bulfin and North's paper suggests a view of young people's use of digital technologies as 'negotiated practices'. Rather than emphasising the boundedness of school, home and community spaces, they argue that young people's practices around digital technologies flow across these spaces, making simple distinctions about use in each problematic. The paper reports on preliminary findings from 10 ethnographically oriented case studies of 15- to 16-year-olds from contrasting schools in and around Melbourne, Australia. They use Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and Gramsci's notion of an 'inventory of traces' to analyse two case studies, suggesting that young people's engagement with school learning might be characterised as a dialogic negotiation of a complex range of practices that flow across and between school – home – community spaces.

The final paper is written by Harriet Mutonyi and Bonny Norton. Norton was also a part of the Prato meeting, invited as a critical friend. Her comments draw on her encounters with the contributors and our broad discussions about young people's use of new media in April 2006. She has collaborated with Harriet Mutonyi in the writing of this piece based on their joint reading of the papers that comprise this special issue.

Final Comments

All of the papers included in this issue demonstrate the contributors' commitment to contextualisation, which is matched by a commitment to ethnographically oriented methodologies. Each local study investigated young people's digital literacy practices by questionnaires, observation, interviews, examination of participants' records of digital activities, and discourse analysis of representative texts and artefacts (Blommaert, 2005; Gee, 1999). Each local study included the detailed recording and selective collection of situated examples of engagement with the new media such as diaries which proved useful for describing the temporal flow and nature of digital lives. The shared approaches to questions of methodology and epistemology held by the researchers facilitated more or less similar approaches to the analysis of the data at the local sites.

The research reported here has produced fresh understandings of the relationships between young people's use of digital media and their literacy practices in many of the dimensions of their lives. The studies have observed variations in their digital literacy practices according to the site of practice, and also according to the geographic location, socioeconomic status, gender and cultural diversity. Together the set of studies opens up the discussion of the complex relationship between the local and the global when examining digital literacy practices.

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