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One Teacher's Journey through the Mediated Intersections

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Voices in the Field

Abstract

Reflections from an English teacher on how literacy is transforming, on the joys of learning from and with students, and on how an exploration of mediated intersections might impact the future of literacy education.

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“Man, Ms. Beach! Come on, yo! Keep it real. *That* is not real reading and writing!” As laughter filled the room after Dane’s (pseudonym) comment, I smiled to myself and responded, “Oh, but it actually *is*. It’s just not with paper and pencil.”

This conversation stemmed after I told my 10th grade World Literature and Composition class that we would be reading images, videos, and audio clips regularly as part of our time together. However, I quickly realized that while my students were reading and writing a lot outside of the classroom, they were not considering it “real” reading and writing, which they defined as what took place in my English class. For this reason, I realized that their definition of literacy was limited and only focused on more traditional activities with paper and pencil.

Yet, as educators and researchers know, “multiple forms of literacy have been named in the literature including information literacy, visual literacy, computer or digital literacy, and media literacy, but there is considerable overlap between these forms” (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009, p. 471). And due to these multiple forms of literacy, I was determined to incorporate the literacies my students were bringing with them into the classroom. “Just wait,” I told them. “Soon, you will realize all of the ways in which you are actually reading and writing, and more importantly, *how* you are engaging and being positioned to engage within those literacy practices.”

In my attempt to help connect my students’ out-of-school literacy practices to our work in the classroom, I began to see how media and culture help them continue to develop the critical reading (or consumption) and critical writing (or production) skills they need to navigate the mediated messages they encounter daily. I also began to see that my classroom needed to adapt to Gee’s (2012) notion of Discourses in order to render my students’ work with media and culture “visible, valuable, and meaningful” (p. 185). Even though “we live in an era surrounded by media that bombard us with messages through text, images and sound,” that fact alone does not “necessarily mean we recognize or understand its content or intent” (Considine, Horton & Moorman, 2009, p. 471). For this reason, when we critically explore the influence of media and culture on our classrooms, we develop an “understanding of ideology, power, and domination” to help us and our students explore “how power, media, and information are linked” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8). Again, within my classroom, these shared explorations helped me realize that there is an increasing need for my “students to actively and critically consume and produce in both the classroom and their lives outside of school, too” (Alvermann, Beach, & Boggs, in press). Thus, this article will focus on how literacy is transforming, how I have

tried to make connections for my students, and how these mediated intersections might impact the future of education.

Literacy Transformations

While some educators still believe the classroom is only for traditional print-based reading and writing, many researchers and teachers see that “young people are tirelessly editing and remixing multimodal content they find online to share with others, using new tools to show and tell, and rewriting their social identities in an effort to become who they say they are” (Alvermann, 2008, p. 10). Our students’ literacy practices are both narrative as well as connective especially as everything, such as advertisements and apps, people and companies, become more social (van Dijck, 2013). In other words, the social nature and connectivity of literacy practices gives everyone new ways to think and create. In fact, literacy is never limited. As Brandt and Clinton (2002) note, literacy infiltrates, disjoints, and displaces local life with many influences that define how it works within certain literacy environments. Influences never stem solely from the local, or one environment, such as the classroom. Instead, influences occur with “the transaction that takes place within that (literacy) moment: the consumption and production of media with the tools to disseminate ‘new’ information in a ‘new’ way created by the consumer, which invites new literacy forms that essentially connect everyone everywhere” (Alvermann, Beach, & Boggs, in press).

Yet, what do these connections and new literacy forms mean for our classrooms? Since social situations “call for critical approaches that make us aware of how [the] media construct meanings, influence and educate audiences, and impose their messages and values” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4), Alvermann, Beach and Boggs (in press) suggest that we should help students move past the obvious meanings and work on a deeper level with the texts in front of them by understanding the power that digital media afford within today’s connected society. And, because these mediated, “new” texts are constantly changing in form, they also suggest that this power includes helping students understand “why and how those changes are being made, including how different formats impact our reading of those texts” (Alvermann, Beach, & Boggs, in press).

Educators often focus on the critical component of media literacy that transforms literacy education into “an exploration of the role of language and communication media in order to define relationships of power and domination that are ultimately deeply embedded in ideological notions” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 8). For this reason, my students need to better understand how authors of the multimodal messages they are reading daily (including billboards, advertisements, music videos, newspaper articles, podcasts, and novels to name a few) are positioning and potentially manipulating them. In addition, I have found that by “helping students to understand how they are already being positioned in the real world by their critical productions (e.g. blog posts, tweets, lyrical raps)” (Alvermann, Beach & Boggs, in press), my students have more opportunities to connect to the information within our classroom in meaningful ways—ways that still help prepare them for whatever they will encounter on a state-mandated test *and* within their own personal lives. In other words, as Gee (2012) explains, “We live in and move in a material world; the things in it – objects, visual representations, machines, and tools – take part in our dramas of meanings as well” (p. 208). Thus, my students create “dramas of meanings” (Alvermann, Beach, & Boggs, in press) in all that they do; my job is to help them navigate and explore all of those meanings to make more meaningful connections with our classroom and the world around them.

Different Look but Still Literacy

While I continue to journey through the mediated intersections within my classroom, I will by no means claim I am an expert. After all, I am navigating these mediated intersections with my students, too. I, too, am learning *with* them. In fact, I find that my students often pick up on messages that I miss with my initial reading

of texts because I am not as familiar with certain cultures. Gee (2012) helps me understand our shared experiences as he explains the following: “Discourses are constituted by specific actions (performances) carried out by specific individuals, performances which are amalgams of words, values, thoughts, attitudes, gestures, props” (p. 192). For example, when my students allude to a meme or other saying that has generated interest in the news, in their lives, or in the novel we are reading, I have learned that the meme, the “new” text, is just as valuable and perhaps more relevant in regards to meaningful learning as the chosen class paperback novel. Nonetheless, I want my students to “recognize [that] how and where we situate ourselves in the world determines what and whom we wish to hear about and in what contexts” (Segall & Schmidt, 2006, p. 95). Thus, educators should look at literacy from the outside to see all of the active participants in place, including the authors, messages, and tools being mediated. In the end, the literacy objects (such as the remixed meme, the Tweet, the rap) are all active participants as the text changes due to the literacy situation. Again, literacy may look differently, depending on the socially mediated situation, but it is still literacy: reading and writing.

In my classroom, literacy looks like a lot of different things one may not normally associate with the English classroom. It includes discussions about blog posts, tweets, and Vines. It includes visual representations: hand drawn portraits to cartoons to pictures of famous world events. It also includes video memoirs, lyrics, and public service announcements. Media literacy education is a combination of all types of readings and subsequent productions, as well as remixes/pastiches of others and my students, too. Having an open mind to all that literacy can include provides me with a way to engage, challenge, and most importantly, connect multiple areas of my students’ lives for a more meaningful learning experience. When I value what my students bring into the classroom, I give them a chance to explore what “real world” literacies can look like in an academic setting. I also help them see that their out-of-school experiences are rich and powerful; I help them see that their voices matter in all forms they may be.

Though many educators question how using new literacies can be used when our students have standards to meet and tests to take, my answer is simple: we are still reading and writing. We are still citing strong and thorough textual evidence, determining themes, as well as analyzing characters and authors. We are still writing (a lot!) by distinguishing and developing claims. We are still using language and conventions of language. We are still speaking and listening. And, from my experience, we are collaborating more together and creating a sense of community within our learning environment(s) as well.

Continuing the Journey

In the end, I believe that if we, educators, do not focus on the new literacies our students are bringing into the classroom, which includes the mediated messages they are consuming on a daily basis, then they will not be prepared for the “new” messages they will be consuming in the future. While the texts may change, the foundational skills of critical thinking and reading are not, though the modes of critical consumption will continue to adapt to new forms of texts. And, perhaps the most exciting, and scary to some, fact is that media now allows our students to create in a variety of ways that extends beyond our classroom walls. We owe it to our students to help them make connections between all of their literacy practices. Perhaps our focus needs to not be on keeping these mediated intersections from occurring in schools, but instead inviting them in by “creating school discourse that is not separate and distinct from the blurred discourses of our lives outside of school” (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 203). After all, as Alvermann, Beach, and Boggs (in press) state, “When we keep our doors open to the possibilities of literacy, we create opportunities for all of our students to be valued in and out of school.”

Personally, for me to see how new literacies would work within my classroom, I had to take a critical look at my own literacy practices. After all, “as the teacher comes to understand more about his or her own inner world, he or she may become curious about the student’s inner world” (Sandlos, 2009, p. 69). Bringing

media and culture into the classroom can be intimidating, especially in the form of new, mediated texts. However, once I realized that reading and writing were still occurring, just in different forms, I knew that the past, present, and future of literacy were all intersecting before my eyes within my students' work. In addition, taking a critical look at our (educators) own literacy practices might mean we think about all of the ways we read and write today. Remember that Tweet? That Instagram post? That "booktube" video review? These are all reading and writing experiences. Furthermore, taking a critical look might mean stopping to look around us, in our classrooms and in our personal lives, and seeing all of the literacy connections we navigate and why we have those connections. Yet, whatever way we look at our own literacy practices, we *must* do it in order to better understand how and why we—students and teachers—are all reading and writing today. We owe it to ourselves, to our students, and to the future of literacy education.

Sometimes the best thing we can do as an educator is learn to "let go" a bit and remember that our students are "experts" in their own ways, too. Letting go does not mean forgetting about standards and not having high accountability; it just means we have to step outside of our comfort zones and evolve with the changes happening around us. In the end, we have to navigate these mediated intersections with our students if we are to ensure that our pedagogical strategies and classrooms remain relevant for them. Because if we do not, we are at risk of losing our students by devaluing their literacy practices—and their voices—while falling into the past that we have already quickly bypassed by choice or not. We—educators and students—are in these intersections together, and navigating them can be messy. However, once we see that the past is always with us in the present, we will start to see that the mediated intersections are only preparing us for whatever the future may bring.

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