

Chapter 9

An Inquiry into Young Children's Multimodal Media Practices

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores young children's interactive and authoring experience with digital media, such as smartphones, digital cameras, and touch-screen computers, in an informal learning environment. A visual ethnographic approach was undertaken in order to understand the social and multi-dimensional nature of media experience. The results indicate that children acquire digital media literacy at a very young age; that children's competency in digital media can be considered as a valuable form of cultural capital; and that children's digital media practices reflect their personal and family histories as well as broader social ideology.

INTRODUCTION

In the web 2.0 era we often say that children in this generation were born digital. Children nowadays are exposed to digital media at a younger age and for a longer period of time. A survey indicates that children six years old and younger spend more than two hours a day on digital media such as

television, DVDs, video games, and computers (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). A recent news article suggests that Apple's iPhone has become toddlers' favorite toy (Stout, 2010). More than just passive consumers, children nowadays actively produce new media content such as digital photos, Garage Band music, YouTube clips, and various social media through Twitter and Facebook, etc, in what Jenkins has called *participatory culture* (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Rob-

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inson, 2005). However, despite the enthusiasm and interest in children's use of digital media, debates about the advantages and disadvantages continue. In addition, easy access to the Internet due to wide adoption of broadband and internet-enabled mobile devices further causes concerns about exposure to inappropriate content and raises issues of privacy and protection. Hence, there is a need for deeper and more extensive research about young children's use of digital media. Previous educational research on technology as instructional tool has not fully addressed the complexity and the social nature of children's experience with digital media. Recently more emphasis has been placed on exploring and linking out-of-school digital media experience to formal educational settings (Burnett, 2010; Hobbs, 2006; Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2003). Accompanying such a shift in research focus is a new way of seeing digital media use as part of multimodal literacy practices and as a socially-situated cultural experience (Carrington & Luke, 1997; Jewitt, 2002; The New Media Consortium, 2005). This chapter will begin by reframing digital media in term of multimodal literacy and then present findings from a visual ethnographic study of young children's interactive and authoring experience with digital media. The results are interpreted in terms of Bourdieu's (1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Collins, 2000) social concept of cultural capital. By taking on a sociocultural approach, this chapter hopes to deepen the understanding of young children's emerging early digital media experience.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The term *media* often refers to a wide variety of information, communication channels, and technologies, and their content. The term *technology literacy* commonly refers to a skill or competency in the use of digital media, for example, using a word processor or looking up information on

the Internet (Lankshear, Snyder, & Green, 2000; Wonacott, 2001). Recently, in the fields of media study and literacy study, researchers see the use of and engagement with digital media as part of broader multimodal literacy practices that include all kinds of communicative modes and functional purposes such as visual, aural, verbal, tactical; physical, digital, virtual; social, cultural, political, etc. (Barton, 2001; Bomer, Zoch, David, & Ok, 2010; Hobbs, 2006; Kellner, 1995). This social conception considers digital media as part of varieties of semiotic resources, and the interpretation of which is essentially social and context-dependent (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999). Such a pluralistic perspective of media literacy practices rejects the traditional view of technological determinism, which asserts that technology determines cultural practices and social structures and that technology literacy can be taught in schools as a context independent cognitive skill (Murphie & Potts, 2003; Snyder & Beavis, 2004). Instead, it considers media literacy as a social practice that recognizes different forms of practices within contexts and takes into account the interrelationships among individuals, media, and social structures. It acknowledges an individual's own agency as he or she uses and interacts with digital media for his or her own meaning-making purposes. The goal is to provide a framework to elucidate how media practices, usually practices of those in a dominant social position, are utilized, legitimized, and privileged within a particular social power structure in order to help those in disadvantaged, marginalized positions (Boler, 2008; Freire & Macedo, 1987; Kellner, 1995).

Following this paradigm shift, the concept of *media literacies* used in this chapter encompasses more than simply the use of technology. It is seen as multi-dimensional, including all sorts of communicative modes and functional purposes, and is contextually situated (Barton, et al., 1999; Gee, 2000; Hobbs, 2006; Luke, 2003; Street, 2006). When we considered media literacy as a

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