

Chapter 6

Colliding Pedagogies: A Call for Diffractive Digital Literacy Teacher Education

Julie Rust

Millsaps College, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter uses an equity lens to examine learning in makerspaces with a focus on the role that literacies and technologies play in these spaces. The authors examine ways that makerspaces bridge formal and informal learning and serve as important contexts for community building and mentorship. This piece includes a review of the literature aimed at building a deeper understanding of the principles that underlie literacies practices, collaboration, and learning engagement. Critical perspectives address the need to center equity and inclusion at the core of these learning environments. The authors offer principles and recommendations for designing, organizing, expanding, and sustaining learning-through-making opportunities for all learners.

BACKGROUND

Digital technologies have shifted the perception of literacy in distinctive ways: from individual to social, from passive to participatory, from monomodal to multimodal (e.g. Alverman, 2008; Vasudevan et al., 2010; Rowsell & Wohlwend, 2016). Youth are reading and writing more than ever before, but are also doing so in much different sorts of bite-size genres; easily searchable databases (e.g. Google), Tweets, Insta-gram captions, and choose your own adventure hyperlinks on news stories. These shifts have undeniably changed the ways in which we make meaning of the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). It should come as no surprise, then, that this changing landscape of tools, platforms, norms, spaces, time, and humans has impacted the possibilities, tools, and expectations within literacy pedagogy. Students are expected to learn, not just how to write an essay in English class, but how to design and present a persuasive Powerpoint, how to make a book trailer on iMovie that entertains, and how to utilize a wide variety of stylistic tones depending on the anticipated audience. As a result, becoming a literacy teacher

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today is, in many ways, a much more crowded field of expectations and possibilities, choices and decisions (Macalusi et al., 2016; Brass, 2014).

At the same time, literacy researchers have increasingly rejected a dichotomous view of meaning-making. Youth do not distinctly categorize “in school” and “out of school literacy”. Instead, they move throughout their days in a flow of offline, online, in-school, and out-of-school meaning making practices (Buck, 2012; Leander & McKin, 2003; Hollett et al., 2017). Because of this, considering the impact of digital technologies on literacy pedagogy is not an enterprise of replacing this with that; it is an additive journey. Literacy educators do not have the luxury of disposing of traditional literacy skills instruction in order to make room for digital practices. Rather, literacy pedagogy today requires a both/and approach.

This chapter shares findings from action research that examines how five teacher candidates negotiated seemingly-irreconcilable views about best practices in literacy education that emerged as they facilitated after school clubs for 4th-6th grade youth. This heavily practice-based middle literacy course pushed preservice teachers facilitating youths’ production of digital products to confront a series of pedagogical crises. Specifically, this study explores two questions: (1) What competing literacy instruction priorities emerged for TCs during the course of the semester? (2) What tensions were provoked by the enactment of three progressive tenants of literacy instruction (teaching multimodal literacies, fostering creative self-expression, and providing authentic audiences for youth’s work)? Diffraction (Barad, 2007) is utilized to theorize the ways in which the different competing literacy goals that TCs (teacher candidates) experienced produced, not mere conflict that needed to be resolved, but an embrace of “living in the borderlands” (Anzaluda, 1987) of both/and rather than either/or. Finally, a hybrid set of literacy pedagogy priorities in the digital age is conceptualized for teacher educators, researchers, and practicing teachers interested in rejecting simple binaries that commonly exist between traditional and digital literacy pedagogies.

CONCEPTIONS OF LITERACY PEDAGOGY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Competing aims in literacy instruction are perhaps most vividly exemplified in the 1980’s “reading wars”, which swept early childhood/elementary literacy fields. In both political and education circles, great tension arose between the “phonics” camp (focusing on explicit teaching of isolated skills) and the “whole language” camp (focusing on developing rich socioculturally situated experiences with meaning-making). Despite the fact that such battles raged decades ago, a recent re-emergence of these polarized sides (now often dubbed “science of reading” versus “balanced literacy”) has reignited the fight (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/nataliewexler/2018/09/10/hard-but-important-words-about-why-so-many-kids-struggle-to-read/#489c0fdf6322>). Science of reading proponents argue that youth most need explicit isolated skill instruction to improve their literacy skills, while balanced literacy proponents argue that explicit skill instruction is just one component of quality literacy instruction: even more central is a contextually-rich experience with literacy practices for meaning making with a range of texts and audiences. These well-worn dichotomies have re-surfaced in a variety of ways, with a variety of contexts. Smagorinsky (2018), for example, argues against English Education that emphasizes more practical resources such as “high-leverage practices” (TeachingWorks, 2013), and instead promotes a more nuanced emphasis on context and relationships.

Exacerbating the division is the fact that separate conferences and entire bodies of scholarship exist for each side, those that foreground a skills-based or “autonomous” approach to literacy instruction and those

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