Chapter 3

Mobile Media, Mobile Texts:
Assessing the Abilities Needed to Communicate and Represent in the Contemporary Media Landscape

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ABSTRACT

By examining contemporary changes in the mechanisms and practices of representation and communication, this paper focuses on the copy-and-paste affordance fostered by mobile technologies and digital technologies at large. Its widespread use is affecting radically (1) the acceptability standards of (in)coherent patterns of text production, and (2) the criteria defining successful communication, which coherent cooperation to a mutual understanding is sometimes less relevant than the transformation and reinterpretation of texts according to the sign-maker's interests in participating to multiple communicative networks. In this light, by pinpointing the abilities required and developed in the use of mobile technologies, the paper hypothesizes possible paths for teaching in such a changed semiotic landscape.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing availability of (mobile) digital technologies for everyday communication and representation is changing the ways in which we produce, interpret and access information and knowledge. New semiotic practices are emerging that do not necessarily result in established genres with standardized conventions in well-defined communities. Rather, diversified—when not even conflicting—representational practices coexist together in the production of a wide range of texts within a myriad of different communica-

tive networks. In such a changed landscape, what needs to be taught to whom in what ways is an open question.

Aiming to provide some analytical elements to address this question, this paper examines the current changes in the mechanisms and practices of representation and communication, mainly fostered—or made more manifest—by the introduction of mobile technologies, and digital technologies at large.

In particular, the actualization of the copy-and-paste affordance results in semiotic practices changing radically (1) the acceptability standards of (in)coherent patterns of representation, and (2) the defining criteria for successful communication, in terms of individualized participation in transformative chains of semiosis rather than coherent cooperation to a mutual understanding. In the light of these changes, the paper concludes by singling out the abilities foregrounded and backgrounded by the use of mobile technologies and opens some questions on the possible paths for teaching.

CHANGES IN THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE: ABILITIES IN PLACE OF CONVENTIONS?

In the context of many-to-many forms of communication, digital media make the production of a wide variety of texts, which can be publicly distributed to and shared with anyone interested through interconnected spaces, readily available to a high number of sign-makers. The use of these media by a large number of producers in several networks has given rise to a wide variety of non-established genres, such as, for example, videoblogs, txts, tweets, blogs, or the whole range of artefacts forwarded in social network platforms—in fact, the very act of forwarding constitutes a new semiotic action which is actualized in a variety of different practices.

Such a varied semiotic landscape, in which often students seem to orient themselves (or, rather, navigate and participate) better than teachers, inevitably raises questions for schools willing to keep pace with changes. Specifically, within the actual breaking up of genres and the fragmentation/multiplication of contexts and communities fostered by the social use of digital media, what is to be taught in schools becomes an open and crucial question (see also Traxler, this volume). Should schools teach the conventions of new genres produced with new media? Yet generic conventions can be difficult to trace, and even when they are, these are nonetheless transient and ultra-specific (to a given moment, network, context and space; cf. also Böck, this volume). Should schools teach the 'how to'—how to use new media? Yet information on how to use it can be found in a much more thorough, targeted and distributed way on any online users' forum devoted to any given tool and medium. Ultimately, how can schools fill the gap between formal and informal contexts (both for learning and for text production and communication), i.e., what role can schools play if, say, rather than banning mobile phones in the classroom, they want to try and make some educational sense of the changes that their introduction in our everyday media landscape is producing?

Far from presuming to provide definite answers to these truly open questions—while firmly believing that educators know much better, in their practice, how to address them—the paper intends to offer a social semiotic reading of the current changes in the ways we make meaning, communicate and represent. Fostered by the introduction of mobile and digital technologies in our media landscape, these changes are foregrounding new types of abilities that are needed and developed in everyday communication and text production. The singling out of these abilities, it is hoped, can provide useful elements for educators willing to address the change.

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