Thirdspace: A Perspective on Professional Development

Preparing Students and Teachers for the Digital Age: A Review of the Literature

With the abundance of new technologies and a changing global landscape, literacy in the 21st century looks very different. Kinzer (2010) explains that today’s youth are spending increasing amounts of time outside of school communicating through technology, resulting in changes in schools’ literacy practices. As a result, traditional reading and writing practices, still prevalent in many classrooms today, may not be adequate to prepare students for a “wide range of reading and writing purposes and practices” (Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 476).

Unfortunately, until very recently the role of technology as a meaning-making process has been largely unacknowledged by those who make policy for our schools. Using technology to develop more traditional reading and writing skills related to print-based literacy has dominated the curriculum for children in the lower grades, while newer pedagogies that focus on promoting collaboration and creation of digital, multimodal texts have been relatively scarce (Wohlwend, 2010). The good news is that changes in policy are under consideration. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), for example, drafted a proposal in 2011 that encourages early childhood educators to provide children with opportunities for playful, hands-on engagement with technology tools and digital media as both consumers and producers of content.

It is important, therefore, that students learn to develop their digital literacies along with traditional skills in reading and writing (Kajder, 2004). To accomplish this, teachers must be knowledge-
able about new technologies; they must create new spaces and possibilities for learners along with existing print-based literacy practices. Unfortunately, many teachers still struggle when it comes to technology fluency and integration in the curriculum (Resnick, Rusk, & Cooke, 1999). They need to learn how to design instruction that promotes the use of digital tools “authentically, purposefully, and effectively” (Kajder, 2004, p. 6).

Traditionally, there have been a number of avenues to support teacher change and enhanced professional growth. These have included inservice education, continuing education, staff development, curriculum writing, teacher mentoring, and collegial circles. Recent research in the field, however, offers additional suggestions for ways to educate teachers so that they are more effective in the classroom.

According to Kopcha (2010), Plair (2008), and Wright (2010), professional development today needs to focus less on “how to” workshops and more on pedagogy that will support teachers in designing meaningful learning experiences for their students. They believe that teachers must be involved in creating learning opportunities with technology in order to understand firsthand what the process involves. Kopcha (2010), for example, proposes a mentoring approach where teachers support one another by creating a community of learners and teacher leaders who model technology use as they work on digital projects. Active involvement in using digital technologies will enable teachers to better understand how to develop the types of learning activities that will be engaging and meaningful for their students, many of whom are familiar with these practices in their lives outside of school.

Additionally, effective professional development must be collaborative so that teachers can have a voice in shaping their learning experiences to make them relevant for the work they do in the classroom (Goodman, Helterbran, & Fennimore, 2004). Professional development must also strengthen teachers’ sense of identity and help them focus on creating nurturing classroom communities (Casbon, Shagoury, & Smith, 2005). Research has shown that when teachers have a sense of ownership and choice in what they are learning, they are more likely to invest in expanding their pedagogical practices (Polly & Hannafin, 2010).

Although studies reveal that professional development courses and workshops play an important role in educating teachers and keeping them informed, reflecting on my own experiences in the classroom has led me to consider a new paradigm for professional development, one that takes place inside the classroom in collaboration with students. Over the last few years, I have come to understand that my development as a 21st century teacher, skilled in the use of technology and media, has been a result of working side by side with my students and colleagues in what has been termed the Thirdspace (Brooke, Coyle, & Walden, 2005; Gutierrez, 2008; Soja, 1996). According to Gutierrez (2008), this theoretical space allows for students to build upon not only what they learn formally in school, but also what they learn informally outside of school as they “reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p. 148). Thus, the traditional social roles and power structures that situated students in a subordinate position in the classroom are replaced by classroom communities where the role of the teacher and student, novice and expert, intersect, “creating the potential for authentic interaction and learning to occur” (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997, p. 372).

Exploring the notion of Thirdspace has meant that instead of me being the only one to assume the role of leader or mentor in my classroom, my students have taken on additional responsibility. Together, we enter Thirdspace as we move inside “an existing space to create a different way of acting” (Brooke, Coyle, & Walden, 2005, p. 368). Thus, I can draw upon my students’ knowledge and help expand their potential to incorporate new roles and leadership in the course of their own learning. It is this Thirdspace in my classroom where it becomes possible for my students and me to redefine what counts as knowledge and learning.

Finding these new opportunities comes from “kidwatching” (Goodman & Owocki, 2002) and carefully listening to my young learners who teach me all about their world outside of school.
Thirdspace exists in the work my first graders and I do together; it is a place where they are teaching and I am learning as much as a place where I am teaching and they are learning. How does Thirdspace happen? Take a look in my classroom.

My First Grade Today.com

Technology has enhanced the way we learn in my first-grade classroom. Although all the children report that they have access to technology at home, our classroom space provides new opportunities for children to share their out-of-school practices as well as learn what other students are doing at home. Each morning our day begins with routines that require the use of our classroom computers. Daily attendance is recorded online, emails are checked, iTunes turned on while students select books and buddy read at our classroom library. After our morning meeting, which includes a morning song, a student weather report, a student-written morning message, and a read-aloud, my first graders are eager to get up and move. During writers workshop, we listen to music from iTunes. A science lesson streamed in from Discovery Science provides my students with a visual component that often helps support learning. Virtual experiments give way to inquiry and classroom experiments. Our math program often begins with a visual demonstration lesson animated on the big screen before moving on to concrete practice.

Computers are available for students to create and write stories, read books online, draw, play games, and watch classroom presentations that we have recorded on our flip camera. Students can use the flip camera to record other students performing a readers’ theater production to be shown in our class that week, as well as any other events they deem important. Students often videotape their presentations to be uploaded to our classroom eboard (an electronic communication portal similar to a webpage) and presented to a larger audience. In these ways, hybrid practices—ones that blend traditional text with digital, visual, musical, and spatial modes of communication—provide students more choice as readers and writers and afford a wider range of meaning making (Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Warschauer & Ware, 2005). Programs such as Microsoft Word, Comic Life, iMovie, and PowerPoint support the students’ participation in meaning making that is “dynamic, fluid, multilayered, and multimodal” (Razfar & Yang, 2010, p. 117). In conjunction with traditional writing, these engagements foster my young writers’ imaginations and invite them to design and create digital texts that incorporate multiple modes of meaning.

Using the tools of technology in our first-grade classroom keeps my students interested in learning and always full of questions regarding how they can use our classroom tools (see Fig. 1).

GarageBand: a software application that allows users to create music or podcasts.
http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/

PowerPoint: a Microsoft product for producing slide shows that can incorporate text, photos, graphics, video, and animations.

Comic Life: a desktop publishing computer program to create comics with templates for photo layouts and speech balloons.

iTunes: a digital media player application used for playing and organizing digital music and video files.
http://www.apple.com/itunes/

iMovie: a video editing software application that allows Mac users to edit home movies.
http://www.apple.com/ilife/imovie/

iPhoto: a digital software application that enables users to import images from digital cameras, scanners, picture CDs, and the Internet.
http://www.apple.com/ilife/iphoto/

KidPix: a program for children that features tools for drawing, painting, erasing, inserting text, and adding sound.

Tuxpaint: a drawing program for children that uses basic drawing tools for drawing, painting, and erasing.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tux_Paint

Figure 1. Technology tools and websites
These “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) have only known this way, although being born into a digital world does not necessarily mean that children’s opportunities and experiences with technology will be the same. Their questions, suggestions, and creative problem solving inspire me. As a teacher of young children, my business is to listen carefully when they share their world with me. I try to stay informed about things they are interested in, including board games, dolls, Webkinz, Bakugan, Beyblade, and other elements of popular culture (Alvermann & Xu, 2003). Many popular culture texts and computer games “have become the kinds of materials that children ‘read,’ have access to, and participate with as literate beings in the new millennium” (Vasquez, 2006).

**Students as Teachers: Trying Out New Modes of Practice**

One afternoon, I learned about the online games that my students were playing at home. During writers workshop, some students asked me if they could play a game from the Internet. While they were only allowed to play the games that are on our classroom computers, their enthusiasm for these out-of-school activities prompted me to try to learn more about what these games involved and why the students seemed to prefer them. Intrigued, I sat with them at the computer as they easily navigated to the digital software site. I asked if they could teach me how to play and they did.

What was interesting was their skill as teachers. They did not direct me in a step-by-step fashion, but instead sought to involve me personally. They asked me a few questions about my interests and then told me to click on a particular software site that involved designing a new room. They encouraged me to begin and watched over me, offering pointers on how to add furniture, change colors, and finally impose some music that “matched,” as they put it. Their expertise in playing on interactive sites, understanding the rules, and teaching others how to engage with the software supports Gee’s (2003) contention that we need to broaden our views of literacy to include skills that “have the potential to lead to active and critical learning” (p. 46).

What I learned from this event was not so much the mechanics of online room design but the realization that having classroom access to such programs as PowerPoint, iTunes, iMovie, and Comic Life had been instrumental in unleashing their potential as digital communicators. The students were not only skilled in using the technology as a tool to make meaning, they were also motivated to share their expertise and take on the role of mentor (Prensky, 2001). They taught me that what they were learning at home about technology was something I needed to draw upon in the classroom. They offered me new ideas for programs and activities that would enhance our literacy curriculum. In the months that followed, I watched and listened to what they did, what they said, and what they asked.

Since many of the students’ conversations focused on computer games they enjoyed playing at home, I took the opportunity to familiarize myself with them and actually join in their play during our “free” center activity time. Over several days, I learned about activities such as painting on the screen and games involving math and language arts.

In an effort to make access to these sites easier for my students, I created a space on our class eboard labeled “games,” which meant I would not have to worry about students navigating the Internet unattended.

One of the students’ favorite activities was creating and printing digital paintings from a program called Tuxpaint. I realized that these paintings could be used as illustrations for stories they were writing during writers workshop, so I contacted our school’s technical support liaison to assist us in importing pictures into a desktop folder. Aware of this program’s potential to enhance the students’ writing, I invited them to retell a story I had read aloud to them by creating a PowerPoint presentation. Each student’s part of the retelling was represented on an individual slide containing their own original digital images and captions they had typed. I arranged to share the presentation with the parents, which made...
for a most rewarding experience for my young student “teachers” and for me as their “student.”

Over time, we worked together on a range of new activities using technology familiar to 21st century children (Kinzer, 2010). Using the KidPix program, the students created individual and class digital stories, digital poetry, and digital art. They designed infomercials using PowerPoint and iMovie. With the class flip camera, they recorded readers theater productions of classmates reading and acting out stories. They also created videos with the flip camera, added music, and uploaded their work onto the TeacherTube site. All of these projects were then posted to our class eboard to share with families and other classes in the school, providing the students a wider audience for their work. Last, we created a bulletin board to showcase the kinds of activities involving 21st century literacies that we had incorporated into our classroom (see Fig. 2).

Expanding Digital Literacies into Practice

At the same time as I was experimenting with new digital literacy practices in the classroom, I had an opportunity to attend an educational conference about using podcasting to help children explore social issues in the world. The presenter, Vivian Vasquez, discussed critical literacy in practice (CLIP) and podcasting as a way of creating a student-centered curriculum in which the class could learn about and challenge the social and political issues in their communities and the larger world. Using digital tools such as podcasting in this way positions students as creators of content and advocates for social justice as they demonstrate what it means to be literate in the 21st century (Albers, Vasquez, & Harste, 2008; Vasquez, 2010).

Like Vasquez (2004), I try to create spaces where my students can engage in literacy practices that may contribute to social change. Her work prompted me to revisit and rethink some of the ways I approached social action in my classroom in hopes of empowering my students. Eager to learn more about podcasting, I enlisted Emma and Ally (pseudonyms), two tech-savvy fourth-grade girls from my school, to teach me.

During the next few weeks, the girls visited my classroom on their lunch break and helped me navigate several podcasting programs. These interactions took place while my students were working independently on their reading or writing during our literacy block. Sitting beside them, I reached for my pen and paper to take notes as they instructed me to “just watch. It’s easy.” Emma and Ally took turns coaching me as I navigated GarageBand, a software application that allows users to create music or podcasts and import pictures from iPhoto. They also taught me how to use Soundzabound for music clips. The girls’ expertise was not only helpful to me, but also to many of my first graders who came over to watch during these “tutoring sessions.”

Not long after, when I was conferring with a student during writers workshop, I noticed an unnatural quiet in the classroom—the kind of silence that got me up out of my seat. Huddled around one of the classroom computers were three students. As I approached, I noticed one student trying to exit the site. I inquired as to what they were doing, and one of the students told me they were making a podcast! Very curious, I pulled up a chair and asked them to show me what they had done. It turns out they had started putting in some musical tracks from GarageBand. They told me they had wanted to surprise me.

Figure 2. Our 21st century literacies bulletin board
Amazed that they were even ready to attempt this, I watched what they had created.

Working as a small group, the students had begun to craft messages about peace so they could “play it to the whole world.” One boy in the group explained that he thought they should include art into their presentation, so I enlisted two students to take photographs with my digital camera and import them into iPhoto. I was impressed by their facility with the program and their use of the related terminology: “click on photo,” “drag and drop the picture,” “pick a jingle,” and “save as.” In this Thirdspace of my classroom, the students not only imagined a new type of curriculum and a new way of communicating to a larger audience, they also assumed a leadership role that tapped into their out-of-school literacies.

Our first podcast, Project Peace, was inspired by *The Peace Book* by Todd Parr, a story I had shared with the class many times throughout the school year. After I encouraged them to share thoughts that had some personal connection to their own lives, they came up with messages such as “Peace is being respectful,” “Peace is sharing,” and “Peace is taking care of the environment.” Listening to first graders discuss ways to make the world a peaceful place was powerful. I saw how traditional literacy practices involving paper and pencil could be transformed into a multimodal presentation that combined student-created artwork, student voices, and background music. We shared the Project Peace podcast with other first-grade classes, colleagues, and students’ families during our school’s annual Literary Festival. We also encouraged students and visitors to share their own messages of peace on our class graffiti board (see Figs. 3 and 4).

My collaboration with first- and fourth-grade students had changed the nature of teaching and learning within the classroom. I became just as much of a learner as the students, while they took on the role of teacher with ease. This shift in the teacher’s role is not uncommon in today’s classrooms, where students often have more expertise as a result of their out-of-school engagements with the computer, Internet, and media (Collier, 2008).

**Engaging Colleagues in Digital Professional Development**

While I continued to explore digital literacy practices within the classroom, I felt a desire to reach out and share what I had learned with the other teachers in my school district. I designed a 10-hour professional development course titled Digital Literacies. Teachers who signed up for the course received 10 hours of credit that could be used toward their annual professional development requirement. My intent was to encourage teachers to examine and participate in the types of digital literacies that were an integral part of their students’ lives.

In keeping with a Thirdspace framework, which challenges assumptions about knowledge and competing discourse communities, I also wanted to pro-
vide an experience that would enable teachers to see the value of students’ out-of-school literacies in addition to their more traditional school literacy practices, thereby enabling them to help students “navigate multiple texts and communities successfully” (Moje et al., 2004, p. 39). To accomplish this, I planned to share some of the digital projects and podcasts my own students had created and uploaded on YouTube. I also planned to demonstrate the importance of providing students with personal agency by sharing three different digital productions, each based on the same poem. In this way, the teachers would see how the students utilized different modes of meaning—including sound, images, color, and movement—to craft personally designed interpretations.

My Digital Literacies course filled almost immediately, and I had to add a second section. Elementary and secondary classroom teachers, along with art teachers, physical education teachers, and language teachers, signed up. Nervous about teaching my colleagues, I reminded myself that my elementary school students were not intimidated by having me as their student and, in fact, had done an admirable teaching job themselves. Shortly thereafter, I started receiving emails from teachers who had registered for the course. They expressed frustration about how they were using technology in the classroom and excitement about having the opportunity to learn about new digital literacies and related teaching practices.

Part of the course focused on studying examples of online communication, including YouTube videos of literary texts and digital poetry created by professional writers as well as students and teachers. I also shared my first graders’ work with podcasting digital poetry and digital storytelling. These models offered opportunities for my colleagues to discuss the important role that these new Discourses (Gee, 2008) and knowledges play in their own lives as well as the lives of their students (Moje et al., 2004). Using the same kind of hands-on approach that worked with my first graders, I invited the...
teachers to try some of the digital tools independently and collectively. As they collaborated with one another, they engaged in discussions about the challenges they faced as novice digital learners, and together we reflected on how their insights could be helpful in their work with children. We also discussed how so many of our students were adept at using technology and could actually serve as mentors/teachers themselves.

Following this, I asked teachers to create their own multimodal presentations. My hope was that they would start their journey with something personal and meaningful to them and begin to imagine what this might look like in their own classrooms. I asked them to give thought to what their own students would want to create given this task. The course ran for several days, which provided the teachers time to practice using iPhoto, Internet clipart, and photo sharing sites such as Flickr. The teachers also explored the process of downloading music from Sounzabound.

On the final day of the course, the teachers presented their work. Included among the presentations were a digital story about a teacher’s child from his birth through his second birthday and a “Did You Know 3.L?” which featured a teacher’s third-grade students presenting an infomercial about digital practices taking place in a 21st century classroom. A physical education teacher created a presentation to use with parents and other educators entitled, “What Your Child Does in Physical Education Classes,” which she posted on her personal eboard for parents to view. Similarly, the world language teacher created a “Welcome to French 101” that took the audience on a walking tour of France with French music to delight the senses. She highlighted the changing global world and the benefits of knowing how to communicate in other languages.

Teachers had an opportunity to express their personal voices through these multiple modes by exploring content of interest to them as well as coordinating image, color, sound, text, and movement according to their own designs. This process of crafting their own digital and multimodal presentations helped them understand and appreciate the importance of providing students with a wide range of choices when using technology. More important, the teachers came to appreciate that these digital literacies were, in fact, a new and important language, a language that deserves recognition in the classroom curriculum as a significant form of communication.

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### INTO THE CLASSROOM WITH READWRITETHINK

While students interact with a range of print, visual, and sound texts, they do not always recognize that these many documents are, in fact, texts. By creating an inventory of personal texts in the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan, “Defining Literacy in a Digital World,” students begin to consciously recognize the many literacy demands in contemporary society. Students begin by brainstorming a list of items that combine different ways of expressing ideas, such as a poster or DVD. After the lists are shared, list items are identified by type of text (audio text, video text, etc.). Students then create an inventory of significant texts that they have engaged with over a specified period of time, and discuss why it is important to interact with a variety of different types of texts. With this start, they create a working definition of literacy; as they continue to investigate texts at home, at school, and in other settings, they continually refine this definition.


—Lisa Fink

www.readwritethink.org
required for those who live in the global and digital world that characterizes the 21st century.

The final hour of the course did not just end with a celebration of the teachers’ accomplishments as digital learners and creators, but also with a new vision for their teaching. As the teachers began to think and talk about new pedagogical practices—ones that value collaboration, encourage students to select topics of personal interest, and position students in a leadership role—I realized that the classroom for my course on Digital Literacies had transformed into a Thirdspace where teachers were being asked to “imagine” how curriculum could be instead of being told how it should be (Brooke, Coyle, & Walden, 2005).

Final Thoughts

As Palmer (1998) points out, Teaching and learning are critical to our individual and collective survival and to the quality of our lives. The pace of change has us snarled in complexities, confusions, and conflicts that will diminish us, or do us in, if we do not enlarge our capacity to teach and to learn. (p. 3)

As technology continues to change the way we live and work, literacy educators must keep abreast of how digital texts and social media impact what takes place in schools. My own experiences learning and teaching in the Thirdspace have helped me to understand the importance of professional development that encourages teachers to provide spaces within their classrooms for acknowledging and building upon students’ individual funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1990) and out-of-school literacies. In this way, we can empower them to become more active and socially engaged citizens (Moje et al., 2004) and create opportunities for them to be collaborators and leaders (Wohlwend, 2010). We must look to our students for support, since they are on the front line of change (Kinzer, 2010).

As I exit my classroom at the end of the day, I think to myself, “It is hard to imagine what might be next.” Then I remind myself that my students will probably show me.

References


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