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Editors’ Introduction

Literate Practices Are Situated, Mediated, Multisemiotic, and Embodied

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Sarah McCarthey
Paul Prior
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There is a broad understanding that literate practices are situated, not simply local but located within intersecting trajectories of discourse and action. Likewise, the field has widely recognized certain dimensions of mediation, if often focusing mainly on ways that digital technologies mediate texts at every phase of production, distribution, representation, and reception. The necessarily multisemiotic character of literate practice—that textual practices are never limited to a single mode of print or screen text—is increasingly widely acknowledged, but again often tightly focused on the multiple media (or modes) of digital screens and less so on the multiple semiotics involved in everyday acts of reading, writing, and text-aligned talk and action. On the other hand, images that strongly associate literacy with print and screen often lead, even now, to relatively disembodied notions of writing, yet literate practice necessarily involves people’s embodied acts and worlds. We believe that the three articles in this issue, among other points they make, highlight the ways situated and mediated literate practices are multisemiotic and embodied.

In the first article, “Examining Digital Literacy Practices on Social Network Sites,” Amber Buck reports on one in-depth case study from her research on undergraduate and graduate students’ engagement with social media. Ronnie, the student described in this account, is an intense user of multiple social media (with active accounts on at least 18 different sites). Buck did not limit data collection and analysis to her case study participants’ posts to social media: she also asked them to keep time-use diaries, sat with them at computers as they took her on a profile tour (recorded with screen-capture video) of their social network site accounts, and interviewed them about the ways they not only wove together or separated their postings to multiple social media but also blended their social media use with their activity in everyday settings of work, school, community, and home. Buck tracks the ecology of Ronnie’s social media practices—the ways he linked different social media or used them for focused purposes, the ways he represented different aspects of his identities on different sites, the practices he deployed to claim and control digital spaces, and the ways social media fit into his daily routines and mediated his everyday social interactions (e.g., tweeting to...
arrange meetings with local friends). Buck also notes the fascinating example of Ronnie’s construction of a false identity when, around April Fools’ Day, he created a profile for his “girlfriend” on Facebook and began composing her interactions with him and others on Facebook and Twitter. Ronnie’s authoring of his girlfriend is very locally intertextual (as she is largely composed through a pastiche of his other local female friends’ profiles) and is carefully aligned to everyday, embodied contexts, as he worked to account for her embodied absence in everyday interactions while locating her embodied presence elsewhere (e.g., at a family dinner at home). Unlike many other descriptions of the creation of alternate online personas that focus on the affordances of distance and anonymity, the primary audiences for Ronnie’s fiction are the friends he interacts with every day at home and school. Overall, Buck’s case study offers important insights into how college students are managing multiple, emerging social media and how social media use is laminated into the everyday practices and ecologies of their lives.

In the second article, “Kristina’s Ghetto Family: Tensions and Possibilities at the Intersection of Teacher and Student Literacy Agendas,” Denise Ives presents a case study of a sixth-grade student, Kristina, focusing on her self-sponsored writing of a play she named Ghetto Family and its uptake in the school by the teacher, other students, and the researcher during a unit centered on Gary Paulsen’s novel, Hatchet. Ives encountered Kristina and her play during a six-month ethnographic study of a sixth-grade classroom in an urban, predominantly African American, middle school that was facing problems associated with widespread student poverty and pressure from NCLB testing regimes (as the school had not met Adequate Yearly Progress targets for four years at the time of the research). Her methods included participant observation, audio- and video-taping of the focal lessons, document collection, and semi-structured interviews with students and the teacher, Ms. Wagner. The teacher-designed unit, which centered on the novel Hatchet, involved reading and discussing the novel in whole class contexts and literature circles, doing lots of teacher- or commercially produced worksheets, writing journal entries and essays, viewing a movie, and taking multiple-choice tests. Ives narrates how Kristina’s play became a complex source of friction. Although the teacher was interested in the play when Kristina gave it to her, she did not see it as relevant in the classroom. The researcher’s interest in collecting a copy of the document became an occasion to articulate Kristina’s interest in having the play performed. When Ives suggested such a performance to the teacher, Ms. Wagner was reluctant but agreed that it could be practiced and performed during lunch times. A group of willing students began practicing the play, but Ms. Wagner soon came to feel that Kristina and some of the other students returned from lunchtime play practice too unruly (e.g., giggling frequently, talking with one another) and decided to stop the practices: the play was never finally performed as had been planned. Ives goes on to note that by the end of the school year Kristina seems
increasingly resistant to school writing tasks. Drawing on Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic theory, which considers language as fundamentally heteroglossic, Ives sees this emerging history of Kristina’s play as a collision of the strongly centripetal forces of standardized curricula and dominant cultural ideologies with the centrifugal forces of a student who identifies with Black language varieties, working class urban Black experience, and literature featuring Black characters and situations. We would also note here, as we transition to discussing the third article, that the teacher’s ultimate silencing of Kristina’s play emerged through her reading of Kristina’s embodied behavior (acts of giggling or talk with other students) in the classroom much as the researcher’s reading of Kristina’s resistance emerged from watching her embodied forms of non-cooperation and disengagement while writing a final, exam-like essay on Hatchet in the classroom.

In the last article, “Voice Construction, Assessment, and Extra-Textual Identity,” Christine M. Tardy examines how a set of 10 ESL and 10 first-year writing teachers read and assessed the voices, texts, and identities of two second-language writers at a university. Taking up voice as “the amalgamative effect of the use of discursive and non-discursive features that language users choose, deliberately or otherwise, from socially available yet ever-changing repertoires” (Matsuda, 2001, p. 40), Tardy examines how having half of each group of readers see a short (approximately 5-minute) videotaped introduction by the two writers (in which they talked about themselves and their texts) while the other half of each group simply had the text itself affected reception of the text and especially construction of the authors’ voices and identities as writers, students, and people. Tardy mixes quantitative measures (as readers were asked to give a holistic grade, score different dimensions of the texts with a rubric, and respond to items offering perceptions of the authors) with qualitative interviews. She finds that the readers who viewed the videotapes differed in their grading, in their scoring of the texts on the rubric, and in their perceptions of the writers. These differences appear in both the quantitative scores and the qualitative interview data. It is striking that the differences between the video and no-video groups were quite complex—the videos seemed to have different effects depending on the writer and the text as well as on the readers’ professional locations (as ESL or first-year writing teachers). Overall, this detailed analysis of the ways even a brief experience of the embodied author behind the text, or of not having such experience, suggests how deeply and complexly embodied experience with authors (the norm in almost all educational and many other settings) or its absence (the norm in large-scale writing assessment) shapes readers’ perceptions of the text, the writers, and their voices.

As Beaufort’s (2012) recent essay review in College English reminds us, scholars in the field, as well as many practicing teachers and broader publics, continue to question the idea that writing is multisemiotic and to conceptualize writing and its reception in relatively disembodied terms, seeing writing, for example,
as essentially a question of the textual generic norms of discourse communities. These three articles all highlight and offer insights into the ways literate practice emerges in the nexus that forms as sociohistoric forces that stabilize discourses, identities, and technologies encounter the complex immediacy of embodied situations where writers and their audiences negotiate, if often quite asymmetrically, understandings of who is who, what the situation is, what texts signify, and how to proceed. The articles in this issue go beyond the notion that literate practices are situated, mediated, multisemiotic, and embodied, contributing insights into how the complex dynamics of such literate practices can be tracked and understood.

REFERENCES


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