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Abstract

This paper focuses on literacy and digital technologies. Recent research by the author identified important changes in how respondents worked with information and communicated, which were mediated by digital technologies. These changes may be viewed as changes in their literacy practices. Notions of literacy should perhaps increasingly incorporate these new practices, which would involve concomitant changes in curricular and pedagogical practice.

While the notion of digital literacy has gained currency in recent years, popular discourse around the term remains limited. The concept is frequently framed in terms of technical skills, and accessibility, rather than other cognitive and social issues that may have greater impact on learning, and education. Furthermore proficiency in the manipulation of certain technologies may be masking other deficiencies, for example in information literacy and critical thinking.

This paper describes research that focuses on understanding emergent literacies, by exploring the *"social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world"* (Hamilton, 2002, p.176) and how they are understood in relation to learning. The aim is to move towards a framework for literacy, or a "constellation of literacies", in a digital environment. The paper presents initial findings from a pilot study.

Introduction

The starting point for the research in progress that is described in this paper is the idea that, as the use of digital technology increases, the nature of literacy (or literacies) may be undergoing substantial change. Current popular discourse around the notion of digital literacy is often framed in terms of technical skills and accessibility. Though important, these issues are principally related to the initial adoption of the technology. Less attention is paid to cognitive and social issues that may have greater impact on learning and education. Any new framework for literacy would require investigation of the interlinkage between digital and conventional literacies, and their contexts, and, following Hamilton (2002), literacies that blend the two worlds will *"have their origins in the purposes of*

everyday life". The research constitutes an initial exploration of some of the ways in which the use of digital technologies mediates literacy (and vice versa). The research project aimed to identify shared elements as well as differences, in the new literacy practices that accompany increasing participation in digital contexts across a wide range of users, in an attempt to provide some pointers towards a framework for literacy, or a constellation of literacies, in a digital environment.

The background - changes in views of literacy

A range of insights from fields as varied as anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, sociocultural theory and critical pedagogy have informed and influenced changes in understandings of literacy over the last decades. An exploration of the literature reveals a complex and somewhat fragmented evolution, however the changes can be described in terms of two substantial shifts; first in relation to the relative importance ascribed to context in understandings of literacy, which have led to a reduction of emphasis on one unique literacy, and second to the ways in which the nature of the context has changed, especially due to the increasing ubiquity of digital technologies, which has led to an increasing emphasis on modes of literacy other than text.

The importance of context

The work of authors such as Gee (1990), Street (1995), and others proposed a series of new understandings of the nature of literacy, in which it is viewed as a social practice rather than as a collection of technical skills. In this view language and literacy are seen as embedded within, and constitutive of, their social contexts. Literacy then becomes the mastery of the discourse of a particular community or context, and it is no longer possible to speak of a single literacy. Another key idea that emerged in this collection of work (collectively known as the New Literacy Studies, NLS) is the idea of literacy as "*practice*". Rather than a set of skills, literacy is an activity. Beavis (2002) describes the range of activities involved in Pokemon and views them in terms of "*social practice*" (p.48); Lankshear and Knobel (2002) describe the behaviours involved in the eBay ratings system as a "*new literacy practice*" (p.15). It is important to bear in mind the scope of the term "*practice*"; the activity of meaning making through language is not limited to a specific behaviour or action, it also includes the concepts and meanings ascribed to that action. The practices involved are also always embedded within a social context and cannot be

considered independently. Street speaks of “*social literacies*” (1995) and Hamilton asserts that literacies are defined by the “*social and communicative practices with which individuals engage in the various domains of their life world*” (2002, p.176).) Literacy as a social practice involving meaning making that varies with context and is not uniform, since each context is different and has its own set of literacy practices.

Changes in the Nature of the Context

The other major thread in the literature can be seen as changes in the nature of the context, or the ways in which this context is viewed. One change relates to views of language itself. Street speaks of the dialogic nature of language, describing it as a “*continually negotiated process of meaning making as well as taking*”. This dynamic Bakhtinian view of language implies that literacy practices are likely to be similarly flexible and dynamic, changing and recombining in relation to contexts, the range of practices present in these contexts and the meanings ascribed to them by individuals and communities. Other changes refer to new understandings of the nature of the text itself. Digital technologies change the nature of “texts” and their contexts. Kist (2005, p.3) speaks of the “*staggering changes in media choices that have occurred*” and “*what they mean for how to define literacy*”. The change also relates to the contexts the text forms part of. Bigum (2002) observes that the most important change afforded by new technologies is a change not in information provision but in relationships. Literacy as a social practice is an activity in context, principally involving interaction with others.

Critical Literacy

In much of the literature there is also an affirmation of the need for a critical awareness in literacy practice. Street describes the NLS understanding of literacy as “*ideological*”: literacy practices vary with social context, culture, gender and identity and there is always a contest around the legitimacy of different literacy practices and the predominance of some over others. Appropriateness to context becomes a key issue and it becomes harder to prescribe a single “literacy”. In this respect the importance of the emerging range of websites and applications that are available to allow users to manage their literacy practices, often described as Web 2.0, should not be underestimated. In the new multimodal, digital context, this implies that understandings of literacy should extend beyond the ability to manipulate the technology; the user needs to be able maintain a

certain critical distance. Snyder (2002) identifies certain characteristics of the material and cultural conditions that she sees as shaping our lives: fragmentation, superficiality, and the failure to engage with the present and insists that we need to find ways of living with the “*shift in the landscape of representation and communications*”. To do this it is vital to be critically aware of the forces that underlie these changes.

Researching Literacy Practices

Snyder (2002, p. 173) mentions a variety of characteristics of current literacy practices: “*Speed, instantaneity, flexibility, mobility, on-the spot readjustment, perpetual experimentation, change devoid of consistent direction and incessant reincarnation are some of the hallmarks not only of web literacy practices but also of real life cultural and social practices* “. But it is not easy to cope with or inhabit this landscape. It is vital to find ways to map this kaleidoscopic universe of literacy practices. This poses important questions for the researcher. The need to make research manageable, rigorous and valid perhaps creates a tendency towards 'micro' approaches. Burnett (2002) emphasizes not just a shared discourse but also shared understandings of our worlds (p. 141). In this view research on literacy should go beyond descriptions of activities to an understanding of the meanings we ascribe to our literacy practices. Research should aim to identify not only practices but also the understandings that inform them.

Much of the literacy literature focuses on the young. A discourse explicitly centered on lifelong learning appears to be largely absent. In the NLS there is an emphasis that literacy practices take place throughout people’s lives, not just within the space carved out by institutions. This indicates a need to explore not just the literacy practices of the young but of a range of segments of society in a range of contexts (for example cultural or linguistic contexts or in the domestic, personal and institutional contexts). I therefore proposed to work with three very different contexts: professional adults in Mexico City, teenagers in Eastern Spain, and older people (over 55) in South East England.

The Research Question

In this view of literacy as a kaleidoscopic, shifting set of practices that take place in dynamic contexts and involve activities and interactions by and between people the practices themselves may be too plural, too mercurial to describe, but it is likely that there

are inter-related patterns of concepts and meanings intertwined with the practices themselves. To identify common patterns would contribute to an understanding of the complex range of literacy practices. The objective then was to focus on the meanings people ascribe to their behaviours in contexts. These meanings are likely to be linked to issues such as how individuals perceive themselves, and their contexts, to what extent they think explicitly about, or are aware of, relations within those contexts, and how they inhabit them. This led to the following research question:

What patterns can be identified, across different sociocultural contexts, among advanced users of digital technologies (digital residents) in relation to their identities as “literate” individuals, their critical understandings of their literacy practices and the contexts in which they take place, and the ways in which they structure and manage these practices in order to make sense of the contexts they inhabit?

The Methodological Approach

One of the challenges involved in this research was that neither the practices nor the meanings ascribed to them may be easily accessible. They may not be understood as “practices” and it is quite possible that they are embedded in an individual's life in such a way that the subject may not always be fully conscious of their meanings. An approach that looks at surface evidence, observing behaviours or collecting numerical data about the frequency of this or that usage or habit is likely to be insufficient. It is necessary to allow the participants to articulate this in their own words, so that these meanings can emerge.

In the context of literacy practices around digital technologies, an ethnographic approach this poses considerable problems, since the practices, though socially situated, largely involve individual (or very small group) activity in front of a screen, which precludes participant observation to a large extent. Indeed, in this context any kind of observation poses substantial methodological challenges, as Jacobs (2004) research on instant messaging makes clear. Furthermore, though it might be possible to identify a particular context and participate in it, the aim was to explore literacy practices across contexts. To participate meaningfully in a range of groups in the timeframe available was likely not to be feasible. However, it is worth emphasising that the methodology shares some of the principles involved in ethnographic approaches. First among these is the idea that meanings should not be imposed externally by the researcher. A grounded approach

(Glaser and Strauss, 1967) allows descriptions and conclusions to emerge from the words of those interviewed. It can be seen as a style, rather than a specific method or technique. Within this style there are two basic key principles. The first is that an iterative cyclical approach is involved, in which constant comparisons are made of the different sets of data that emerge; this approach provides a strong base for conclusions that will be grounded in the data, and continually cross-checked. The other key principle is the idea of adaptability. While grounded approaches may begin with a literature review, to give a map of the territory to be explored, and start out with a sample group or groups, and instruments to explore them, these are not seen as fixed.

Access to people's understandings is not simple. In order to avoid the risk of interviewer influence narrative was adopted as a way of allowing the respondents own words to emerge. Narrative is familiar to all, we all tell stories, and our stories can be understood as ways of structuring our experience and understanding our lives and our contexts. As a person tells their story, they are able to organise the experience in ways that are meaningful to them, and accessible to the researcher. The research methodology in the initial study described in this paper involved an initial interview, in which the objective was to elicit narrative descriptions of people's literacy practices and their understandings of them. The questions, perhaps better described as prompts, were designed to be as open ended as possible so as to allow the interviewees the freedom to tell their own stories. This, after an initial thematic analysis, was followed up with a second interview to further explore and amplify the results of the first interview with the participants.

The use of a grounded approach has implications for the analysis process; in the same way as the conclusions that may emerge will derive from my interpretations of the accumulating data, it is both necessary to contrast them with the interviewees (the second interview) and recognize that the analytical methods and frameworks used may evolve as the research progresses. The interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, coding for different aspects that are relevant to the research questions.

The aim of the initial study was to pilot the approach and the two interview instruments to find out to what extent the instruments are appropriate, and to what extent the data collected helps to address the research questions. The study has shown that the approach functions appropriately, since a range of relevant themes have emerged.

Findings

With respect to identity, provisional themes include, among others, the following: the idea that to be a net user is to be in the vanguard of society (this is especially true for the Mexican participants, and more so among the workers in rural education), and in contrast to this idea of the net as “*normal*”, an acceptance that it is now part of life “*You can’t be turning back the clock*” (Ben, UK). There is also a tension between the idea of online identity as transparent; “*people expect transparency*” (Barry, UK) and identity as a guarded, private issue, for example “*I won’t let my mother see my profile, but not because I have anything special to hide, I just won’t*” (Silvia, Spain) or “*I don’t want to be that public*” (Enrique, Mexico). Another theme is the idea of identity as defined, to a greater or lesser extent by the nature of one’s online network of friends, and social relationships as mediated to different degrees by technology: “*I use phone or email depending on the people and the speed with which they reply*” (Anne, UK). There is a related issue of social pressure to be online “*I started using Tuenti, (a social networking site) because my friends all insisted*” (Sara, Spain)

There are also different degrees of emotional attachment to the technology; Magali in Mexico referred to the “*distress*” she feels if her friends cannot find her connected, while Brian in the UK felt “*exposed and naked*” without email. This is sometimes expressed in terms of dependence: “*I can’t imagine myself without it*” (Irma, Mexico) or almost a ‘biological’ relationship: “*It is under my skin*” (Brian, UK). Another area is the level of difference between one’s identity and the profile in a social network, which for Alfredo in Mexico “*isn’t part of the way I live on the Net*”, or for Sara in Spain “*If you don’t have it (the profile) you are out, but I don’t get much out of it, it’s not me*”.

The interviews also provided interesting insights with regard to criticality. A key recurring term was “*trust*”, often mentioned in terms of a lack of it, and this was related particularly to the nature of the information online, people and organisations and of the Internet or the technologies themselves. This was often linked to the absorbing, all-encompassing nature of the “*unimaginable fount*” (Irma, Mexico) that is the Net, “*if I use it at home I know I will waste more time*” (Magali, Mexico), and the ubiquity of the technology; “*even the offline stuff is facilitated by technology*” (Angela, UK). There is also a theme around the value of social networks, “*I wouldn’t recommend Facebook, it’s just a big natter*” (Brian, UK). The importance of discerning and distinguishing between sources of information, and the quality of the information was also mentioned “*Google is OK for finding hotels but if*

you want deep knowledge you have to put in much more work” (Angela, UK), and there is also a sense of the need for criteria in using the Net, and preoccupations about others, *“my sister is always posting photos and labelling people, she uses it completely differently, she has some really strange friends”* (Sonia, Spain). Despite awareness however, especially among the UK group but also others, there is also a lack of urgency, or perhaps an apathy due to powerlessness *“We have the concerns but we don’t really do anything about it”* (Anne, UK).

Related to these themes are themes relating to the way people manage their use, and a range of tactical approaches are used, from managing one’s online presence *“I reply on my schedule”* (Ben, UK), *“I post a minimum of photos”* (Rosa, Spain) to staying offline and refusing to be directed by the nature of the technology, (which are arguably strategic approaches that define the reach of the space, rather than how it is inhabited). In tension with these “critical” behaviours, are themes relating to the degree of integration of technology into lives *“you have been in front of a screen all day and yet you chat or even read a book online, I am in an online book group...”* (Eduardo, Mexico) or *“I am permanently online”* (Barry, UK). Technology for some provides a an extended, external memory (a theme that may link across to identity), a source of agility, and a substitute for previous technologies; *“nowadays my fingers hurt if I take a notebook and pencil to a meeting”* (Alfredo, Mexico)

As can be seen, there are a range of themes appearing; some concentrated more in one group than others (at present) and others that clearly cut across the groups. There are also overlaps between the areas that will need exploring. The second interview was useful for this purpose; the process of analysis frequently threw up questions that needed further exploration, metaphors that could be expanded and avenues that permitted further exploration.

Future work

This initial study has shown the approach and methodology of this research to be viable. The next stage of the work is to apply the case study approach with specific participants. Following this the next stage will be to apply the approach to a wider range of participants, within these target groups initially in order to go in to more depth with regard to the themes that emerge. Further publications will document the work as it progresses.

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