

Editorial: English as mediated literacy: Revisiting mode and medium

KATHLEEN TYNER

Department of Radio-Television-Film, University of Texas: Austin

ANDREW BURN

Institute of Education, University of London, UK

This issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* focuses on **English as Mediated Literacy: Revisiting Mode and Medium** with an international collection of articles related to the integration of new literacy tools, texts and media in the English curriculum.

The rapid and ubiquitous proliferation of new media literacy tools and texts create opportunities for widespread innovation, and challenges the traditional English, Language Arts analysis and description of the processes of literacy in a digital world. The authors of this issue address these changes in articles that draw upon their personal experiences, research, teaching, and participatory responses to the tools, texts and discourses of new media in both formal and informal contexts around the world.

Since the introduction of moving image media in the late 1800s and through the mid-century introduction of computing, there have been numerous attempts to integrate new media tools and texts in the learning environment, first those in the analogue age, then those of the digital age. More often than not, these have been framed as transparent content delivery vehicles or as motivational attractions to spark student interest in tasks related to reading, writing, listening and speaking. When positioned as opportunities for the critical examination of media as parallel to literature studies, media literacy has often been marginalized in the classroom as adventures in popular culture. Alternatively, it has been confined by official curricula within the realm of the factual, framed by a discourse of suspicion. Literature is routinely approached in a mode of reverential appreciation; media texts in a mode of suspicious interrogation. At the same time, the creative production of media texts by students has not been well represented in English curricula internationally, only rarely seen as an extension of the cultural production usually occupied exclusively by “writing”. As video editing software became freely available on every computer, then, no wholesale move has been forthcoming at national or state policy level to include the “writing” of media texts in English curricula, either in the Anglophone world or anywhere else.

Nevertheless, contemporary literacy practices permeate the school environment. There is a growing acknowledgement among practitioners, researchers and the general public that the tools, texts and discourses of new media represent much-needed pathways to personal growth, social capital, workforce development, and civic engagement. The widespread uses of digital tools for production, global distribution and remix of “amateur” media challenge every aspect of the formal learning environment from discipline-based education, to the role of the teacher, to the actual design of school classrooms and buildings. In the process, it is clear that the participatory practices of new media have also changed the pedagogies and other classroom design elements needed to leverage students’ literacy practices in the world outside the school walls. The authors in this volume contribute ideas to bridge the

informal literacy and learning practices of students with the formal practices of the English, Language Arts and Reading classroom.

At the same time, however, the modes and media of the new semiotic landscape are more than communicative and cultural tools in the context of English and Language Arts curricula. They are also objects of study. Just as children learn to communicate and represent *through* language, they also learn *about* language and about the cultural phenomena which use it – in particular literature. By the same token, media educators have always asked what students might need to learn *about* film, comicstrip, television drama. In the age of new media, despite the century-long history of film as a major, world art-form, and the half-century of television as a site of popular culture, neither medium is securely-rooted in the curricula which address communication and narrative fictions. In this respect, how children might learn about “old media” is still a pressing question, especially in the primary or elementary sector, where well-established practice is more rare. In this issue, then, we include Becky Parry’s article about a young learner, exploring how his extensive knowledge of film (and indeed computer games) might inform the development of his print literacy skills, and his writing in particular.

The question of how “new” media might offer different possibilities for expressive work in education is complex. On the one hand, it clearly offers greatly increased practical access – most obviously to editing technologies, but also to the authoring of games, music, and visual design. The advent of the participatory internet clearly also offers new opportunities for the exhibition and distribution of media texts, for avatar-based life in persistent virtual worlds, and for social interaction. On the other hand, as Manovich points out (2001), the dividing line between “old” and “new” media is by no means clear. The sharing of a teenage mashup video on Youtube is clearly new in its mode of exhibition and reception; but the “grammar” of its filming and editing are continuous with the century-old practices of moving image composition.

The challenge facing media and English teachers is how to conceive of the texts they have always lived with, whether these be literary or filmic, as newly computable, and what their students need to learn about this. Recently, scholars have argued that the computing process is essentially linguistic and, like language, evolves and changes over time. As such, contemporary literacy, including computing, is a dynamic concept that can still be contextualized within traditional, historical frameworks for orality and alphabetic literacy, linguistics and poetics (Biggs, 2008).

Given its social and cultural complexity, the attributes of literacies and their social uses can be a contentious area of study and, when applied to classroom practice, the debates raise important questions about the purposes and direction of public education. As research and assessment of new media literacy practices emerge, it is increasingly clear that the tools, texts and genres for various literacies can be reconciled, in part, through an acknowledgement of their unique discourses. These discourses have to do with the fluctuating nature of genre, but also with the relationship between content and form for each medium. Contemporary English and Media teachers are left to navigate a rapidly changing, cross-disciplinary, and technology-rich environment for new media literacies with uneven access to supportive knowledge networks, pre-service apprenticeships, or in-service professional development. The authors in this volume showcase some of the

innovative strategies and conceptual frameworks that can be used to support and bridge old and new media.

In his article, “Composing with DV in English language arts teacher education”, David Bruce argues that the English, Language Arts and Reading field can thrive if it focuses on what it does well – reading and composition – and expands those parameters to include the use of new media tools and formats. Bruce details two examples that incorporate his experiences with video as a reading and composition tool for teacher education and professional development in New York (USA).

A focus on technologies alone has been criticized as an overly technologically determinist approach to the analysis of digital literacy. Nonetheless, literacy tools and texts are one factor in the analysis of the social uses of literacy. In particular, the way that technologies shape content and the way that audiences create meaning from various genres, according to medium, is one area of literacy studies.

In the 1960s, Canadian scholars Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong foreshadowed current discussions about the way that various communication technologies shape content (McLuhan, 1964; Ong, 1982). Their colleague, Edmund Carpenter, followed with early work that shaped the fields of visual anthropology and media ecology (Carpenter, 1972).

In a nod to these scholars, key concepts for media literacy pioneered by media educators in Canada in the 1980s, specifically cite and highlight the interplay between form and content:

Form and content are closely related.... Each medium, as Marshall McLuhan noted, has its own grammar and codifies reality in unique ways. And so, different media will report the same event, but create different impressions and messages. Each media has a unique aesthetic form. Just as we notice the pleasing rhythms of certain poetry or prose, so ought we be able to enjoy the pleasing forms and effects of different media (Pungente, 1989, p. 6).

In this issue, Neil Andersen, a media education pioneer in Ontario, describes the way that he learned to embrace the study of media form and content in his teaching practice. His article, “Media Studies’ gift to language and literature study”, captures the excitement of teaching about – as well as with – a broad range of multiliteracies. Andersen shares field-tested media study strategies that he uses to enrich literature study in the ELA classroom. His experiences resonate as contemporary educators transfer a wider range of new media forms and practices to their practice.

A number of articles in this issue address the increased emphasis on critical production as well as critical reading in the uses of new media texts. Early in the transition from analog to digital, community-based media programs focused on citizen media production as a pathway to civic participation through media literacy (Higgins, 1999). Building on existing print, radio and cable models, youth development organizations offered access to media production equipment, training and screening/distribution opportunities through community-based media programs that leveraged youth media skills and interest in popular culture for a diverse range of purposes, including vocational, academic, preventative health and artistic. Community-based youth media programs continue to bridge the gap between formal

and informal literacy practices and offer access, training, showcases and soft skill development through non-profit programs and in after-school settings, particularly in arts education (Sefton-Green & Soep, 2007). In this issue, Damiana Gibbons analyses the production of youth video in a US community arts program. She shows how the representation of identity is a complex process for young people, involving the negotiation of tensions between local community, peer preoccupations and expectations of youth media arts organizations. At the same time, she offers some answers to the question about the opportunities of new media, using Bakhtin's chronotope to explain how these new kinds of moving image text move fluidly through a series of times and spaces, their meanings continuously and subtly shifting.

As many scholars have noted, the uses of literacy are various. As such, new media can also be used as a pathway to civic participation, authentic learning and social justice initiatives. Through case studies, ethnographic techniques, action research and informed practices, these educators convey their successes and struggles as they integrate new media into the traditional curriculum.

In the provocative "Sex, literacy, and videotape: Learning, identity and language development through documentary production with 'overage' students", veteran youth media practitioner and author Steven Goodman provides a case study of teens who learn about sex education through a documentary program in a partnership between the non-profit Educational Video Center and a New York City high school. Using action research and ethnography, Goodman provides a fascinating account of the teens' engagement with identity formation, skill and knowledge acquisition, participatory learning environments and cognitive apprenticeships as they engage the topic through the documentary process.

In a very different context, that of South Africa's multiethnic high schools, Franci Cronje also describes how video production can make new kinds of identity play possible for teenagers. Her findings are, however, that these young film-makers are more interested in iconoclastic images of gender-crossing and global youth culture than in the sober issues of ethnic identity that might be expected from a multiethnic group of this kind. The value of digital video production here seems to be the opportunity presented by popular cultural genres such as soaps to playfully dodge the heavy weight of national expectations about identity, and seek pleasure in kinship with global teenage preoccupations.

John Potter's article is also about digital video and identity, this time with older primary school pupils. Their use of video to represent their memories of their school life offers possibilities for how identity can be "curated" using the resources of digital video production. It also, however, raises questions about the adequacy of a text-oriented semiotic theory to account for the place of embodied subjectivity in such a process. The lesson for English and Media teachers may be that, even if we expand the semiotic repertoire included under the "literacy" umbrella to the modes and media of contemporary communication, we still need to account for the "soft" technologies of body and voice, the affective qualities they bring, and the subjective cohering of the communicative act which they demand (Leander & Frank, 2006).

Social practices related to new media such as convergence, participatory culture, increased mobility and social networking spark intensive discussion about their place

in the formal ELA curriculum (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ito, 2008; Jenkins, 2001, Jenkins et al., 2006). As computers become increasingly pervasive and ubiquitous, research about the strategic uses of augmented reality, virtual worlds, simulations and games also lead to intriguing ideas for the optimal design of environmental spaces for social interaction and learning – both offline and *in world* (Brown & Thomas, 2007; Carr et al., 2006; Castranova, 2005, 2007; Gee, 2003; Salen, 2008, Tyner, 2009, 2009a).

In “Using a studio-based pedagogy to engage students in the design of mobile-based media”, James Mathews from the University of Wisconsin (USA) recounts his experience with the Neighborhood Game Design Project (NGDP), a curriculum intervention that engages students in mobile games and interactive stories using augmented reality, data visualization, mapping technologies and GPS-enabled mobile devices. Working in collaboration with researchers from the University of Wisconsin’s Local Games Lab, Mathews explores the use of mobile media to support place-based learning. In the process, his innovative research adds insights that guide the innovative design of learning spaces that support and leverage the affordances of new media literacy tools, texts and practices.

However, while online gaming, virtual worlds and augmented reality are raising these kinds of questions and possibilities, we should remind ourselves that many young people are still playing boxed console and PC games, sometimes with online components, sometimes not. What school students might learn about games as a cultural form, in the same sense as they learn about literature or film, remains an under-developed area of English and Media education, with little research scrutiny of classroom practice. Arguably, the current debate in education represents an overshadowing of the study of games as a cultural form by the possibilities of games as vehicles for learning; or as models of more effective learning (Gee, 2003). Equally plausible might be the argument that this imbalance will, over the course of time, invert, as “serious games” for learning take their place alongside the range of other pedagogic technologies, and games as an important art form of the late Twentieth and early Twenty-First Century become a more urgent consideration.

In this context, Anthony Partington reports on research with his Year 8 (12-13) English and Media class, in which adventure games are the object of study. The students make their own games using the purpose-designed authoring software Missionmaker (Pelletier, 2005; Buckingham & Burn, 2007). However, Partington shifts the focus of attention from the more obvious issue of the students’ production of games to the issue of their own cultural experience of games, and how this informs their work. For English and Media classrooms, which all too often, if unintentionally, leave students’ media cultures at the door, this exploration productively addresses the cultural aspect of media literacy (indeed, literacy in general), and continues the well-established defence of popular culture characteristic of media education in the UK tradition.

What pressing questions are posed, then, for English and Media teachers, by the articles in this issue? We will identify three.

Firstly, what does it mean to expand the practices of literacy in education to include the modes and media of the digital age? These articles suggest some ways in which

the multimodal texts of digital video and games might be approached by educators, both in terms of re-conceptualising the semiotics of literacy and in terms of a decisive shift from critique to production in work with young people in both formal and informal sectors.

Secondly, it seems likely that teachers should recognize that, while new media in the form of the participatory internet offers distinct opportunities, in particular for the global exchange of media texts and for the “collective intelligence” proposed by Henry Jenkins (2006), older media are still with us. The tools and texts of the first wave of digital culture lie alongside the social networks of Web 2.0; while the styles, grammars and representational strategies that began with photography in the 19th Century still inform the visual cultures of the 21st. Neophilia should not blind us to cultural history.

Thirdly, as we have argued, form and content are indivisible. The grammars of the digital age are of no interest without the expressive purposes to which young people put them, whether these be the “glocal” social exchanges of the participatory internet, the political debate of youth documentary, or the explorations of identity characteristic of playful engagements with new media by young people. Identity is not a common word in the discourse of English teachers. The lesson of many of these articles is that perhaps it should be.

REFERENCES

- Biggs, S. (2008). *Transculturation, transliteracy and generative poetics*. Paper presented at the European Electronic Literature Conference, University of Bergen, Norway (September 12). Retrieved April 15, 2010 from <http://hosted.simonbiggs.easynet.co.uk/texts/trans.htm>
- boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13. Retrieved July 1, 2009 from <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>
- Brown, J.S., & Thomas, D. (2007). The play of imagination: Extending the literary. *Games and Culture*, 2, 149-172.
- Buckingham, D., & Burn, A (2007). Game-literacy in theory and practice. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 16(3), 323-349.
- Carpenter, E. (1972). *Oh! What a blow that phantom gave me!* NY: Holt, Reinhart & Winston.
- Carr, D., Buckingham, D., Burn, A., & Schott, G. (2006). *Computer games: Text, narrative and play*. London: Polity Press.
- Castranova, E. (2007). *Exodus to the virtual world*. New York: Palgrave,
- Castranova, E. (2005). *Synthetic worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gee, J. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York: Palgrave.
- Higgins, J. W. (1999). Community television and the vision of media literacy. social action and empowerment. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 43, 624-644.
- Ito, M., Lyman, P., Carter, M., & Thorne, B. (2008). *Living and learning with new media: Summary of findings from the digital youth project*. Chicago, IL: MacArthur Foundation.

- Jenkins, H. (2001). "Convergence? I diverge," *Technology Review*, 104, p. 93. Retrieved July 1, 2009 from <http://www.technologyreview.com/Biztech/12434/>.
- Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A., & Weigel, M. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st Century*. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Leander, K., & Frank, A. (2006). The aesthetic production and distribution of image/subjects among online youth. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 3(2), 185-206.
- Manovich, L. (2001.) *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. London: Routledge.
- Ong, W.J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. London: Methuen.
- Pelletier, C. (2005) The uses of literacy in studying computer games: Comparing students' oral and visual representations of games, *English Teaching: Critique and Practice*, 4(1), 40-59.
- Pungente, J. (1989). The second spring: Media literacy in Canada's schools. *Educational Media International*, 26(4), 199-203.
- Salen, K. (2008). *The ecology of games: Connecting youth, games, and learning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Retrieved July 1, 2009 from <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/dmal.9780262693646.vii>
- Sefton-Green, J., & Soep, E. (2007). Creative media cultures: Making and learning beyond the school. *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education*, Volume 16 (pp. 835-856). Utrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Tyner, K. (Ed.). (2009). *Media literacy*. NY: Routledge.
- Tyner, K. (2009a). Breaking out and fitting In: Strategic uses of digital literacy by youth. In S. Livingstone (Ed.), *Digital literacies: Tracing the implications for learners and learning*. Economic and Social Research Council Seminar Series (March), 3 (pp. 28-36). London: The University of Oxford & The London School of Economics and Political Science.