

Chapter 14

“A Genuine Moment of Liberation for Me:” Digital Introductions as Powerful Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that participation in a digital self-presentation has the potential to challenge inscribed approaches to learning and teaching. It draws from a study of preservice teachers at an Australian university, who were invited to create a digital introduction as part of their English teaching method course. Such a task offered students opportunities to experiment with shifting semiotic forms in ways unavailable to written introductions. Students were asked to critically reflect after the presentation on aspects of technology, representation and learning that were brought into focus in and through their presentations. A semiotic analysis offers insights into the potential of multimodality, as the digital introduction pushed the participants out of familiar territory, often producing creative and stimulating texts. Using Kress’s concept of synaesthesia, the chapter explores innovations possible in the creation of new possibilities in a multimodal space.

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INTRODUCTION

Bill Green (2001), speculating on the implications for subject English in the 21st century, points to 'the proliferating phenomenon of techno-textuality' (p. 249). Yet, research also suggests that in many classrooms, much textual study remains print-based (Papert, 1992, Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, Morris, 2010). If digital technologies are used in a classroom, it often occurs in a Web 1.0 environment where print material is merely uploaded. Limited interactivity and agency are demanded from the learners, who often 'power down' (Warschauer, 2003) to meet school demands, becoming disengaged from formal learning in the process.

Working in the second decade of the century, it is timely to reflect on such changes and whether shifts from print culture towards a digital culture have led to a substantive rethinking of educational practices. Narrowing the focus, debates over the past two decades argue how far digitally-based technologies have effected change in literacy pedagogies (see Green & Bigum, 1993, Bigum, 1995, Lankshear, 1997, Lankshear, Snyder & Green, 2000, Kress, 2003, Gee, 2008, for example). The possibilities for new kinds of writing afforded by digital technologies and social media now permeate digital worlds, if not English classrooms. A dimension of this shift has been the opening up not only of new kinds of content, but also of form, in terms of what can now be authored. It is the disruption and expansion of form that this study explores, and how the writers of the new technologies see the process as inclusive of literacy elements such as technology, identity and representation. I argue that the study, albeit small in scope, has resonances that extend beyond the English classroom environments, and even classrooms per se. The implications can be transferred to other settings where Information and Communications Technologies can be used as provocations for new kinds of writing.

The purpose of the project was to position preservice teachers as active and discerning participants within this digital way of knowing so that they could investigate these connections for themselves. Many school learners own a number of digital devices, and by virtue of having grown through various eras of computing and information technology, adapt to the shifting topography of digital life. Understandings from the digital activities could then be transferred by preservice teachers to local school settings as authentic practice, being both rooted in children's own textual play as well as in sound literacy pedagogy.

In this project, I created a digital introduction task to replace a traditional written student introduction, beginning a 12 month class in teaching method. The task required students to represent aspects of themselves digitally, present this representation to me and their peers and then critically reflect on the practices and technologies involved. One aim of the interaction was to push students into a less comfortable space. This space was created through their need to learn new technological skills, understanding the expanded capacity of the chosen technology to shape their purposes, as well as the choices they needed to make to characterize themselves for a peer audience. These 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Boler, 1999) were in turn constructed by me as generative learning conditions in which students might be thrust out of habituated print text practices. Meanwhile, the immersive possibilities of being engaged in processes of digital self-representations offered learning as demanding and pleasurable. Students were required to work at the outer edge of their expertise with ICT, keeping notes on their efforts and responses. The only instruction they were given was to minimize print and oral commentary as far as possible, allowing their chosen images to carry the weight of meaning (Kress, 1995).

The task was structured as an open-ended 'problem', grounded in a literacy concept. The framework I chose as the best fit for the task was Bill Green's (1988) 3D literacy model, which

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