Chapter 3

Hybrid Identity Design Online: Glocal Appropriation as Multiliterate Practice for Civic Pluralism

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogy of multiliteracies aims to push our understanding of literacy beyond that of traditional reading and writing practices to include multiple practices of designing meaning that are often multimodal in nature. This chapter explores one of these multiliterate practices, that of hybrid identity design online. This process examines how native English speakers intermix local and global resources in strategic ways in a process the author has termed glocal appropriation. The chapter reviews the growing body of research on English Language Learners who utilize local and global resources to construct hybrid identities, which in turn allow for participation in English language literacy practices. To shift the focus to native English speakers, she presents a case study of one native English speaker’s use of local and global resources to design an online identity. She argues that through the hybrid identity practice of glocal appropriation, he is able to design new imaginaries of self, which promotes continued participation and, in turn, allows for literacy learning and spaces of civic pluralism.

INTRODUCTION

The Multiliteracies of digital electronic “texts” are based on notions of hybridity and intertextuality. Meaning-making from the multiple linguistic, audio, and symbolic visual graphics of hypertext means that the cyberspace navigator must draw on a range of knowledges about traditional and newly blended genres or representational conventions, cultural and symbolic codes, as well as linguistically coded and software-driven meanings. Luke (2000, p. 73)

Many studies document the expanding use of digital technologies by youth for purposes of personal expression and online sociality (cf. Ito, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Lam, 2006a; Lankshear, 2007). As Luke (2000) states above, these “cyberspace navigators” must draw on various sets of knowledge in order to make meaning and forge relationships with
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others. Often shaping these online interactions are the performances of various online identities. These online identities are increasingly hybrid, in that they draw on diverse and often multimodal resources made available online at the click of a button. The consumption and production of these hybrid identities is often motivated by social relations forged and maintained by sharing content in specific new, and increasingly commercial, media spaces.

There are a growing number of researchers who view online participation as active cultural production, wherein media users take up social practices, identity construction included, to forge new routes of agency and participation through active appropriation or redesigning of cultural resources (Black, 2005, 2006; Ito, 2007; Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Lam, 2000, 2006a, 2006b; Lewis, 2007; Lewis & del Valle, 2008; New London Group, 1996, 2000; Willis, 2003). The “Designs of Meaning” framework, a meta-language of multiliteracies, forwarded by the New London Group (1996, 2000) is especially helpful for examining how media users produce culture anew through processes of design and redesign of cultural resources. This framework views semiotic activity as a creative process of design, composed of three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned (New London Group, 1996, 2000, p. 20). In other words, when interacting with a text through production or consumption, one designs a meaning for the text by drawing on his/her available designs, or available semiotic resources, and in the process creates new available designs. In this sense, the New London Group positions this process of Design and Redesign as highly productive in that transformed meanings are created through Redesign of old materials into new combinations and thus become new Available Designs for future meaning making (New London Group, 1996, 2000, p. 23). This process of design and redesign helps to explain how individuals, through a continuous process of design, are able to negotiate their identities and in turn see new possibilities for their everyday practices.

The New London Group (2000) identifies two key practices of redesign, that of hybridity and intertextuality. They describe hybridity, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, as the creation of new practices and conventions of meaning via mechanisms of creativity and “culture-as-process” (p. 29). As for intertextuality, they discuss how new meaning can be forged through relationships between texts, their similarities and differences, and how these connections construct histories or “intertextual chains” of meaning (p. 30). Whether it is described as hybridity or intertextuality, both practices highlight the commingling and appropriation of cultural resources to bring about new meaning and produce culture anew.

Among these multiple practices of Designing and Redesigning is the construction or designing of identities. Gee (2004, 2006) in particular, identifies this practice of identity design as “self-fashioning” or “shape-shifting,” a design practice that is necessary for survival in today’s “high-tech, global, fast-changing world” (Gee, 2004, 2006). In other words these Shape-Shifting Portfolio People, as he calls them, must be able to draw on hybridity and intertextuality in order to craft and re-craft themselves multiple times, using the available social and cultural resources at hand in order to prepare for multiple jobs and careers (2006, p. 166). Gee further claims that the modern economy desires these hybrid, diversified identities to fit consumer niches. As a result, the youth of today are summoned to take up these self-fashioning and shape-shifting practices not only for purposes of job security but also for social aspects of life, such as marriage and interaction with peers (Gee, 2006). In Gee’s discussion of Shape-Shifting Portfolio People, multiple literacy practices and various social designs of identity converge to position fluid hybridity as a route to viability in today’s global economy. In other words, the Designing and Redesigning of identities are among
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