

Chapter 3

“Memeration”: Exploring Academic Authorship in Online Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how digital authorship in graduate education can broaden conceptions of scholarly engagement. Using a blog created by one of the authors in the context of a graduate literacy course as data, the authors explore how digital authoring practices influence both what counts as scholarly activity and how individuals approach scholarship. They analyze this blog using a framework that addresses four characteristics of academic writing in online spaces: remix, paratext, curation, and audience. This inquiry is guided by the following questions: What are implications of regarding multimodal practices as forms of scholarly work? What does it mean to invite multimodal work in graduate education? What are affordances and challenges of engaging in multimodal scholarship? In conclusion, the authors discuss several interconnected ways that multimodal authorship can contribute to renewed visions of what counts as writing, literacy, and scholarship in graduate education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the potentials of digital authorship in graduate education to challenge and broaden conceptions of scholarly engagement. We explore how multimodal forms of expression—“situated configurations across image, gesture,

gaze, body posture, sound, writing, music, speech, and so on” (Jewitt, 2008, p. 246)—influence both *what* counts as scholarly activity and *how* individuals approach scholarship, in form and substance. Our inquiry is guided by the following questions: What are the implications of regarding multimodal practices as forms of scholarly work? What does

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it mean to invite multimodal work in graduate education? What are the affordances and challenges of engaging in multimodal scholarship?

We take up these questions in the context of collaborative research conducted in a graduate literacy course Rob taught at the University of Toronto, in which he invited participants to engage with research in literacy studies through the lens of their situated understandings and experiences. Alisa and Eveline were participants in the course. Using a blog created by Alisa in this course as data, we explore how digital authoring practices, including mashup and remix, allow for scholarly resources to be collected, combined, transformed, and shared in new forms.

The blog title, “Memeration” is a remixed term, referring at once to Richard Dawkins’ (1976) conception of “memes,” a term he coined to refer to culturally transmissible units of thought, and the biological phenomenon of “murmuration,” in which thousands of starlings flock together to form a cohesive yet leaderless whole. Within the context of the course blog, the term *memeration* is reflective of a larger theory pertaining to the transmission, connectedness, and integration of ideas within individuals’ intellectual and social networks. This concept is a heuristic that guides our analysis.

We situate this study within a shifting landscape of literacy that has challenged educators to develop new ways of teaching with technologies as well as new methodological and conceptual approaches to documenting and theorizing new literacy practices (Gee, 2010; Jewitt, 2005, 2008; Kress, 2003; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Rowsell & Burke, 2009; Simon, 2011). We begin with an overview of the “digital turn” (Mills, 2010) in literacy studies, in particular blogging as a form of popular and scholarly engagement. Following a brief discussion of context and method, we analyze Alisa’s blog using a framework that addresses four characteristics of academic writing in online spaces: *remix*, *paratext*, *curation*, and *audience*. In our conclusion, we look across the

discussion to suggest some challenges this work presents, and describe several interconnected ways that multimodal authorship can contribute to renewed visions of what counts as writing, literacy, and scholarship in graduate education.

BLOGGING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE: SCHOLARLY ENGAGEMENT IN A DIGITAL DOMAIN

Following the so-called “social turn” (Gee, 2000), the “digital turn” in literacy studies (Mills, 2010) has inspired explorations of practices within what is variously referred to as “new literacies” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007), “new literacies studies” (Gee, 2010), or “digital literacies” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008). This research attempts to capture the rapidly changing nature of literacy, foregrounding, to varying degrees, technologies of literacy, as well as the political and cultural contexts, practices, and relationships within which they are embedded. Technology is a means to power, rather than powerful in and of itself (Simon, 2011; Street, 2011). Yet for researchers and educators, digital literacies have become catalysts for challenging inherited definitions of reading and writing, for reimagining pedagogies, and for exploring new forms of engagement, interaction, and authorship.

Research on digital writing has explored new media practices and youth engagement with “new literacies” in school (e.g., Leander, 2007; Siegel, 2012; Simon, 2012) and in their out-of-school lives (e.g., Gee, 2010; Ito, et al, 2008). Researchers in multimodality have argued that it is no longer possible to think of textual engagement and authorship in purely linguistic terms (Kress, in Bearne, 2005). For example, Rowsell and Burke (2009) argue for the need to conceptualize online textual engagement in relation to design-based frameworks (e.g., New London Group, 1996). Similarly, Jewitt (2008) describes new writing practices in terms of “reconfiguration of the

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