

Chapter 14

Digital Writing and the Role of Critical Pedagogy in Preservice Teacher Education

Peggy Albers

Georgia State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on writing and the work of design (van Leeuwen & Kress, 2001) in creating digital projects. More specifically, this chapter focuses on a study of the digital writing, and the choices that preservice teachers made when they designed, developed, and wrote one minute Public Service Announcements (PSAs) that addressed social issues they saw operating in adolescent literature. Located in critical multimodality as a theoretical frame, this chapter positions digital writing as a critical endeavor, one that understands that modes are not neutral, and every choice made by the designer/writer of a digital text has intention and purpose.

INTRODUCTION

More so now than ever, the Internet affords us an ease in writing; we can download photos, music, information, videos and integrate them into multimodal projects and writings. Writers choose from a huge range of media texts, and integrate them into blogs, Websites, multi-genre papers, and videos posted a range of social media sites. With such accessibility, the media choices that writers make must be taken into consideration, especially in light of the messages that these media send. Print and digital-based technologies provide opportunities for textmakers to use a range of modes as semiotic resources to shape processes of making meaning. The move from page to screen (Kress, 2003) has significantly shifted the material and social affordances of modes to carry different parts of the messages for different purposes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; van Leeuwen, 2005). Further, learners are finding new spaces in which they can produce and re-produce messages using image, sound, video, space, linguistic resources to create complex messages. The new generation of learners is out-of-school creatives, driving how expressive technologies are used and circulated and, as a result, how schools will respond, adopt, and adapt

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new literacies practices (Vasquez, Harste, & Albers, 2010). Said differently, in schools, learners of all ages are being asked to remix modes to create more complex, and often digital texts, to express ideas and/or learning. The attention paid to the importance of integration of digital resources to create more complex messages has been great (Vasquez, 2010). Although a great deal of work has been done on the significance of new literacies in language arts teaching and learning (Albers, 2011; Alvermann, 2008; Beach & O'Brien, 2009; Hull, 2009; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Norris, 2004), much less has been done in the area of analyzing critically the modes that comprise multimodal projects designed, developed and written by students, and even less with those created by preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs, the focus of this chapter. Uncritical adoption of digital modes for writing has garnered critique (Albers, 2011; Janks, 2010; Janks & Vasquez, 2011). With increased attention to the *design* of digital artifacts or projects, rather than *use* of modes to create artifacts or projects (Dobson, 2007), multimodal compositions created in classes across age levels not only must be studied in light of the compositions themselves, but the design choices that are made when composing these digital texts.

This chapter focuses on writing and the work of design (van Leeuwen & Kress, 2001) as urban preservice teachers created digital projects, specifically Public Service Announcements (PSAs), advertisements that advocate socially desirable behavior and attempt to deter aberrant behavior. They were asked to digitally compose 30-60 second PSAs around social issues they saw operating within adolescent literature taught in the Atlanta metro area. PSAs as a genre allowed me to introduce PSAs as a persuasive genre, connect this genre to literature, the focus of this methods course, and the study of how modes operated in these PSAs. PSAs are a large part of advertising within many spaces including television, Internet, billboards, and in schools. PSAs abound with messages that encourage students to study hard, avoid bad behavior, be healthy and fit and so on. In fact, significant funding for Internet advertising was allocated by the U.S. government's National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign in order to pay "particular attention to youth social settings where pro-drug messages are increasingly prevalent" (Office of National Drug Control Policy [ONDCP], 2008). With the PSA so prevalent in people's everyday lives, I designed this three-year study with three different groups of preservice teachers to understand how these soon-to-be teachers designed messages of persuasion through digital technologies, as well as what social issues they chose, and the modes they chose to convey their persuasive message. Several questions guided this study: "How do the modal and design choices (image, music, movement) that preservice teachers make convey a persuasive message about a social issue they saw operating in their self-selected novel? What discourses underpin these choices? and How do these modal and design choices position the viewer to respond to the social issue in particular ways?" I studied these texts as "multimodal ensembles" (Jewitt, 2008) especially in regard to the modal affordances, both socially and materially. *How* something is said is shaped by the resources (e.g., visual, audio, musical, spatial) as much as how the resources shape the message, or *what* the textmaker intends to say.

A critical perspective on the analysis of multimodal texts aimed at persuasion and action has seen little attention in the literature, and thus, creates an important space for interrogation for how meaning is conveyed as well as the resources used to convey it. The significance of this work lay in the increased attention to media literacy, and the ability of learners not only to create digital media products, but analyze them critically. Theoretically situated in critical multimodality, this study provides insights into aspects of digital writing (e.g., modal choices, topics, remixing) not often addressed, and positions writing as a critical endeavor; one that allows space for critical discussions not only of social issues, but how social issues are presented to persuade viewers into taking action of some sort (e.g., buying, donating, stopping

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