

Chapter 3

Convergence: A Framework for a “New” Critical Literacy

Jennifer C. Stone

University of Alaska Anchorage, USA

Ryan A. Schowen

University of Alaska Anchorage, USA

ABSTRACT

Online participation is becoming a significant part of many young people’s recreational literate lives. Nonetheless, the range of online literacies available in children’s out-of-school lives is rarely addressed in school-based literacy curricula and instruction. To address this gap, this chapter develops and illustrates a critical literacy framework based on Jenkins’ (2006) concept of “convergence.” Building on Jenkins’ theory of convergence, the authors pull together ideas from media studies, multiliteracies, and semiotics to develop a cohesive framework for unpacking the textual practices, practices of consumption, and social networks common in new media. The authors then illustrate this framework through an analysis of ideologies of gender in popular websites among elementary-age children, including Barbie, American Girl, Transformers, and Hot Wheels.

INTRODUCTION

For contemporary youth living in developed countries, computer and Internet access have risen significantly in recent years. Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005), in a large-scale survey of children living in the United States, found that 96% of youth ages 8-18 have Internet access in home, school, and/or community settings. Of the young people surveyed, 74% now have Internet connections in

their homes. Additionally, the survey found that children spend an average of 48 minutes per day using the Internet for recreational purposes, including visiting websites, playing games, instant messaging, chatting, e-mailing, and creating websites.

Without a doubt, online participation is becoming a significant part of many young people’s literate lives. Nonetheless, the range of online literacies available in children’s out-of-school lives is ill-addressed in school-based curricula. Similarly, as Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) found, children’s online literacy practices largely are unmediated at

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home, as well. At best, schools address these new literacies in terms of evaluating information and safety; at worst, schools fail to address critical online literacies and focus solely on old literacies that do not adequately prepare young people for their present and future educational, civic, personal, and work lives. While, of course, evaluating information and safety are central concerns for addressing digital literacies, such curricula do not address the need for a critical literacy framework that can account for new media technologies and literacies connected with online participation.

This chapter develops a critical literacy framework based on Jenkins' (2006) concept of "convergence." Building on Jenkins' theory of convergence, we pull together ideas from media studies, multiliteracies, and semiotics to develop a cohesive framework for unpacking the textual practices, practices of consumption, and social networks common in new media. We illustrate this framework through an analysis of ideologies of gender in popular websites among elementary-age children. Although a focus on critical literacy has been central to work on multiliteracies from its inception (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; A. Luke, 2000; New London Group, 1996), when enacted in classroom spaces, critical literacy tends to focus on older media—such as magazine ads, books, television, and newspapers—leaving teachers and their students hard-pressed to find ways to talk about online texts and literacy practices in productively critical ways beyond evaluating information and safety.

The authors (henceforth referred to as we) argue that understanding young people's unofficial uses of digital literacies can open essential pathways for designing literacy curricula that are simultaneously relevant to their out-of-school lives and that prepare them for the complex, technologically-mediated literacy activities that are becoming central to our culture. We do not argue that such forms of popular media necessarily should be incorporated into school curricula or that we should encourage youth to participate

in these websites; rather, our concern here is to illustrate the sorts of websites that attract youth and to unpack how we might use such sites to develop a "new" critical literacy.

BACKGROUND

Critical Literacy and Popular Websites

There is wide variation in how critical literacy has developed in educational contexts around the world. Critical literacy, as it has been taken up in many North American contexts, is akin to higher order thinking. Developing skills such as inference, metacognition, response to literature, and analysis of authorial positions are the primary foci of this approach to critical literacy (see Alvermann, Moon & Hagood, 1999; Myers & Beach, 2004; Vasquez, 2004 for examples of notable exceptions). As Allan Luke (2000) argues, such interpretations of critical literacy focus on the development of skills and strategies in individuals rather than on the relationship between texts and the broader social, cultural, economic, and political contexts in which they are used. In other words, this version of critical literacy is remarkably uncritical in both its focus on individual development and its failure to address the situated nature of literacy.

It makes sense, then, that the majority of curricular trends and common classroom practices surrounding online textual practices in North America tend to focus on depoliticized versions of "critical" media literacy or un-critical concerns involved in online reading. Much of the work that could fall under the umbrella of "critical" media literacy tends to address narrow aspects of online reading, such as evaluating information (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 2003; Leu, 2005) and maintaining safety online (Goodstein, 2007; Willard, 2007). Indeed, the majority of research on websites in education focuses on how websites support and extend

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