

## Chapter 9

# Theorizing Media Productions as Complex Literacy Performances Among Youth In and Out of Schools

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### ABSTRACT

*In this chapter the author explores the ways media production represents sophisticated identity and cultural work, and therefore complex literacy performances, among youth as they engage in a play of genres and subject positioning in particular social (educational and community) spaces. Two major research projects in which youth participated in media production form the basis for theorizing in this chapter. Four cases illustrate the ways particular youth design new, hybrid multimodal genres, and how they engage in new models of authorship and cultural critique in this process. Although “youth culture” is often referred to as an undifferentiated phenomenon, this work is highly context-specific, revealing multiple and diverse sub-communities in which specific kinds of cultural and critical work are being undertaken. The author concludes with a challenge to transform schools and classrooms to reflect the increasingly multimodal landscapes in which youth reside.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the ways media production represents complex identity and cultural work among youth as they engage in a play of genres and positioning in particular social spaces. As is often argued, literacy “has now come to mean a rapid and continuous process of changes in the ways in which we read, write, view, listen, compose and commu-

nicate information” (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear & Leu, 2008, p. 23). Interactive technologies—as part of the new media landscape—provide increased opportunities for youth to develop the competencies to participate in contemporary culture (Jenkins, 2006).

The basis of theorizing in this chapter is two major research projects in which youth engaged in cultural critique through media production across learning sites in a large metropolitan area in western Canada. One site is an alternative secondary literacy

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program and another is a community-based youth anti-violence program.

I draw on the youth multimedia work in these two projects to illustrate how they take up the discursive and material resources available through video production to perform these complex literacy performances. Four cases are presented. The first case is a film by Kevin, a young man who struggled with traditional academic literacy skills but was able to re-narrate his literate identity through art and video work. In the second case, video productions by Lane, a quiet and creative young man, illustrate how he exploited multimodal material and discursive resources to express his creativity and provide an alternative perspective on literate performances in school. The third case is drawn from the work of two young women whose video illustrates complex subject positionings in relation to girlhood, youth and stereotypical representations. The last case focuses on a film by a young woman, Tracei, who exploits various stereotypical representations of youth in creating a music video in which she includes bodily inscribed gender statements and as well as media parody.

To inform this work with youth, my colleagues and I (Rogers & Schofield, 2005; Rogers & Winters, 2007; Rogers, Winters, LaMonde & Perry, 2008; Schofield & Rogers, 2004) have drawn from several theoretical frameworks, including work in multiple and critical youth literacies; genre, discourse, and visual/spatial theories; theories of social and cultural identity, agency and positioning; and feminist theories of embodiment.

## **BACKGROUND**

As I have argued elsewhere (Rogers & Schofield, 2005), work in multiple and critical youth literacies critiques the privileging of print literacies and supports hybrid and unsanctioned literacy practices in and out of classrooms (e.g., Moje, 2000; O'Brien, 2005). Newer perspectives acknowledge the fluidity of multiple literacy practices—those

that travel across spatial contexts and boundaries (Leander, 2003; Rogers & Schofield, 2005). From this perspective, it can be argued that youth become producers of new forms of literacy and media as they comment on and critique their social worlds (Burn & Parker, 2003; New London Group, 2000; Sefton-Green, 1998; 2006; Soep, 2006).

Theory and methods in the areas of genre, discourse and visual spatial theories also inform this work, providing ways of understanding the sites or spaces of production, image and audience, and also approaches to knowing the multiple forms (print, drama, art, film, and so forth) that youth layer and exploit in their quest to create meaning (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Rose, 2001). The theoretical framework we have used to analyze individual youth video productions (Rogers, Winters, & LaMonde, in press) examines what Rose (2001) describes as the site of production (the genesis of the work, the design, and the sources employed); the site of the image or film itself (composition, technique and tools of production, as well as the juxtapositions, transformations and hybridity of genres) and the site of audiencing (what is accomplished and how the work is received and re/interpreted). As Manovich (2001) has argued, new media culture brings with it new models of authorship, collaboration, intertexting, and remixing that are evident in youth media production. In particular, these cases illustrate the ways youth are flexible users of multimodal cultural forms, such as genres, and how they borrow, exploit, juxtapose, hybridize or transform media genres and digital and non-digital spaces for critical expression (Bakhtin, 1986; Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Lemke, 1995; Kearney, 2006; Kress, 2003; Manovich, 2001; Street, 1995).

Finally, theories of social and cultural identity, agency and subject positioning (Bakhtin, 1986; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998) provide a lens through which to understand the available positions that youth take up their media work; that is, how they appropriate and transform various

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