

Chapter 18

New Literacies in New Times: A Multimodal Approach to Literacy Learning

Hsiu-Ting Hung

National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology, Taiwan, R.O.C.

ABSTRACT

The focus of the chapter is two-fold: on one hand, it seeks theoretical understanding of literacy as social practice; on the other hand, it explores how emerging technologies afford and transcend the practice of literacy in social interaction. The chapter begins with a re-conceptualization of literacy from the perspective of New Literacies Studies and outlines key principles pertaining to the plural notion of literacy to provide a theoretical context for the discussion of a multimodal approach to literacy learning. The chapter then links the development of the emerging literacy approach with the advent of technology to explore new possibilities in language and literacy classrooms. Vignettes of emerging technologies, more specifically, social networking services are also presented to demonstrate possible pedagogic uses of multimodal resources in education. The chapter concludes with directions for future literacy research, promoting a multimodal approach to learning that attends to teaching and learning with emerging technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy has historically been an important instrument of knowledge transmission and transformation in human society. While means of knowledge evolves, conceptualizations of literacy and literacy practice evolve as well. Just as the advent of information technology lead us to reconsider how literacy

is traditionally conceptualized, they also direct us to reshape the ways in which literacy learning and teaching are practiced in educational contexts. In response to the changing nature of literacy in the digital age, this chapter has a dual focus: on one hand, it seeks theoretical understanding of literacy as social practice; on the other hand, it explores how emerging technologies afford and transcend the practice of literacy in social interaction.

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Drawing from the work of contemporary New Literacies Studies (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Street 1998; Gee, 2000) this chapter explores a multimodal approach to literacy learning (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Jewitt, 2004; Jewitt, 2008) that extends conventional notions of literacy beyond print. A multimodal approach to literacy learning is concerned about multimodal affordances of technology for learning and is often associated with the integration of technology in education. Increasingly, technologies are ubiquitous in all aspects of our lives and have become revolutionary mediums that significantly affect how people learn and interact. A recognized New Literacies Research Team at the University of Connecticut pointed out that technology possesses within itself the potential for the continuous redefinition of literacy (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008). As a result of decades of studies on print literacy, numerous pedagogic practices have been developed in traditional schooling; however, much less is known about the literacy development and pedagogic potential affiliated with technologies in and beyond the classroom. This chapter, therefore, attempts to broaden our understanding of literacy and explore what a multimodal approach has to offer in the learning and teaching of literacy practices in the digital age. The chapter will provide introductory background information on a paradigm shift from “old literacy” to “new literacies”, with emphasis on New Literacies Studies. Next, a pedagogic approach to literacy learning derived from the conceptual framework of New Literacies Studies is discussed to highlight the importance of multimodal literacy and explore possible pedagogic uses of multimodal resources in learning, particularly social networking technology. Directions for future research based on a multimodal approach to literacy learning are then suggested to advance studies and practices of technology in education.

BACKGROUND: “OLD LITERACY” TO “NEW LITERACIES”

A commonly held dictionary definition of literacy is the ability to read and write. This traditional view of literacy is usually referred to as functional literacy that involves these two basic skill requirements. Literacy researchers generally adopt this view in assessing and reporting literacy statistics on a national scale. It is probably for this reason that for decades literacy practitioners in school settings have predominantly emphasized understanding and producing print-based texts. In recent years, New Literacies Studies (hereafter, NLS) emerged as a developing framework with the social turn movement in education (Gee, 2000). It builds upon a wide range of perspectives from sociology, educational psychology, applied linguistics, and cultural anthropology to illustrate the social nature of literacy and its interplay with social contexts. The use of the adjective “new” is purposeful with NLS researchers’ intention to emphasize its differences from early literacy studies. At the risk of oversimplification, “old” literacy is used in this chapter to generally refer to the conventional view centering on reading and writing as fundamental skills necessary to function in society – the dominant view in the field of literacy research prior to the rise of NLS.

According to the NLS framework, literacy is conceptualized as social practice (e.g., New London Group, 1996; Street 1998, 2003; Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2000). The term practice in previous literacy studies, such as international surveys of literacy, is usually associated with drill and practice that entails the notion of learning to do something by repetition. Within the NLS framework, however, practices are understood as “general cultural ways of utilizing literacy” that usually exist “in the relations between people, within groups, and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.8). Clearly, NLS researchers

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