

Chapter 12

The Writer in the Reader: Building Communities of Response in Digital Environments

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ABSTRACT

Digital reading environments are redefining the relationship between reader, text, activity, and sociocultural context. This chapter explores the nature of engagement, collaboration, and reader/writer response, as sixth-grade students from Ireland and the United States read and responded to electronic books within the context of an online global literature circle. In response to the readings, students composed digital thinkmarks, which served as springboards for subsequent written asynchronous message board discussions. Findings from this qualitative case study suggest that peer collaboration in an online literature discussion forum enabled the construction of social identity, community building, and a sociocultural situated response and engendered immersion in, involvement with, and interpretation of texts.

INTRODUCTION

Digital texts and digital interactions permeate our daily lives (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008), while digital reading environments are redefining the relationship between reader, text, activity, and sociocultural context (McEneaney, 2006; Rand Reading Study Group, (RRSG), 2002; Reinking, Labbo, & McKenna, 2000). The International Reading Association (IRA) (2009) emphasized the importance of integrating Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

into current literacy programs. An important step towards such integration involves redefining the notion of what constitutes text, as teachers seek alternative text sources including digital texts and electronic books (Booth, 2006; Kucer, 2005). Digital texts in electronic book formats offer the possibility of “scaffolded digital reading” environments (Dalton & Proctor, 2008, p. 303), which are flexible, supportive and responsive to the needs of students, through embedded multimodal supports, such as text-to-speech functionality, built-in dictionaries, and customizable font size (Hall, Strangman & Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, digital texts afford readers the role of writers, as they annotate or highlight passages or words

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within the text and author digital thinkmarks, or notes, to capture and archive fleeting responses and thoughts as they read.

In a traditional literacy classroom, students read print texts, respond to reading in written response journals (whose only audience may well be the classroom teacher), and exchange ideas in traditional face-to-face literature discussions. In such instances, knowledge is mostly transmitted, not conducted (Carico, Logan, & Labbo, 2004). However, in the new literacies classroom, students assume diverse responsibilities as consumers and producers of information and effective learning is increasingly dependent on social and collaborative learning strategies which can potentially reach far beyond their classroom walls (Dwyer, 2013; Larson, 2009; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro & Cammack, 2004; Malloy, Castek & Leu, 2010; Wolsey & Grisham, 2012). The National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) (2013) urges teachers to use technologies to intentionally build cross-cultural connections and collaborative relationships within a global community. In this way, students can redefine the boundaries of the classroom (Beach, 2012) to move beyond local context and culture to build “cosmopolitan dispositions and habits of mind” (Hull & Stornaiulo, 2010, p. 89). In this chapter, we will describe how students from Ireland and the United States read e-books on digital reading devices (Amazon Kindles) and participated in ICT-based literature circle discussions where they authored responses to text on an asynchronous message board. These experiences allowed them to interact with and respond to the texts in new and innovative ways.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The study was underpinned by a range of diverse theoretical perspectives to allow for the consideration of “multiple perspectives from a constellation of theories and methodologies” (Harrison, 2008, p. 1292). These viewpoints included (a) new

literacies perspectives, (b) sociocultural perspectives, and (c) reader response theories. Each of the theoretical perspectives, explored in the sections which follow, affords us a lens to view the complexity of literacy in the 21st century from cognitive, cultural, social and affective dimensions.

New Literacies

At present there is no single, unifying, theoretical perspective in the research literature to explain the evolving and deictic (Leu, 2000) nature of literacy in the 21st century (Reinking, 1998; Rideout, Foehr & Rideout, 2010). Perspectives include ‘Multiliteracies’ (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; The New London Group, 2000) drawing on the multimodal nature of digital literacies within a global communication network in a flattened world (Friedman, 2005). ‘New Literacies Studies’ (Gee, 2003; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Street, 1998) situate digital literacies within sociocultural perspectives, viewing literacy in terms of semiotic contexts, new discourses, social purposes, events and practices. Rooted in socio-constructivist and cognitive theories, ‘New Literacies’ perspectives (Leu, Kinzer, Cammack & Coiro, 2004) recognize that “social contexts have always shaped the form and function of literate practices, and been shaped by them in return” (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek & Henry (2013, p. 1151). Therefore, new literacies are constantly evolving, requiring new skills, strategies and dispositions to fully exploit the potential of digital literacies to enhance literacy, communication and learning. The juxtaposition of these multiple perspectives challenges educators to transform reading and writing instruction in response to emerging technologies and new possibilities for communication and collaboration across the world (IRA, 2009).

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