

Chapter 14

Classroom Digital Interaction: High Expectations, Misleading Metaphors, and the Dominance of Netspeak

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ABSTRACT

As Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is increasingly adopted for literacy instruction in K-12 classrooms, careful attention should be paid to its instructional benefits and challenges. In this chapter, the authors take a careful look at how the metaphors of social interaction guiding teacher translation of CMC into their lessons mask the full range of affordances and limitations of CMC. Using a linguistic lens, they analyze teacher interviews and student online discussion data to make a case that using Classroom Digital Interaction (CDI) as a pedagogical tool requires a close look at the aims of literacy instruction and the constraints and affordances of computer mediated discussion.

INTRODUCTION

It is well established that new communication technologies have had a profound impact on language use, particularly with regard to written communication (Herrington, Hodgson, & Moran, 2009; Yancey, 2009; Warschauer, 2007; Jewitt, 2005). Writing researchers and linguists have paid increasing attention to the ways in which synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) engender new

forms of writing, writing in which the hybridization of spoken and written language is often strikingly divergent from the writing produced for academic or “official” purposes (Haas & Takayoshi, 2011; Goddard, 2011; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008; Crystal, 2006; Ferrara et al., 1991; Biber & Finegan, 1997; Davis & Brewer, 1997; Eldred & Fortune, 1992). For literacy teachers and researchers seeking to capitalize on outside-school writing practices as a way of supporting in-school achievement (Mahiri, 2011; Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Vie, 2008; Hull & Schultz, 2002), the use of CMC in the classroom is particularly intriguing

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ing, as it combines the generative interaction of discussion and writing (Dysthe, 1996; Nystrand et al., 1998) with students' everyday social practices in an increasingly digitized, multimodal communication landscape (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Coiro et al., 2008; Hull & Nelson, 2005).

There is considerable evidence, however, that teachers continue to struggle with using CMC in ways that maximize potential literacy learning, despite widespread access to and use of information and communication technologies designed for education (Beach, Hull, & O'Brien, 2011; Honan, 2009; Tearle, 2003; Cuban, Kirkpatrick, & Peck, 2001). Researchers have attributed teacher approaches to technology to a variety of contextual factors, including infrastructural obstacles, teachers' technological knowledge, and teachers' beliefs about the role of technology (e.g., Prestidge, 2012; Hutchison & Reinking, 2011; Starkey, 2010; Honan, 2009; Harris, Mishra, & Koehler, 2009; Stolle, 2008), but less attention has been paid to the ways in which the common metaphors for CMC (i.e., discussion, chatrooms, messaging, texting, collaborating) influence teachers' interpretations of how to implement communication technology for instruction. Metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have notably argued, structure our perceptions and shape our expectations. Thus, it is no surprise that metaphors for defining technology (e.g., e-book, tablet, email, chat) can be simultaneously helpful and dangerous, with descriptive language facilitating use of the "new" by evoking the "old", while also potentially ossifying our understandings of a particular technology and thereby clouding important conceptual differences (Eldred & Fortune, 1992). In other words, the metaphors we use to frame new communication tools both define use and obscure affordances of the technology. In light of the persuasive power of metaphoric interpretation, teachers' perceptions of CMC seem salient to the implementation of technology in classrooms, and particularly to the literacy classroom which remains organized

largely around print-based paradigms of writing and reading (Beach et al., 2011).

This chapter examines metaphor as an influential factor contributing to rudimentary uses of communication technologies in the classroom, drawing on interviews and observations to illustrate how metaphors constrained teachers' uses of a collaborative tablet reading platform for composition and discussion. Specifically, we look at the ways in which teachers' metaphors led to a conflation of digitally mediated and Face-To-Face (FTF) discussion that ultimately undermined their original purposes for implementing the online platform's embedded discussion tool. Following our analysis, we propose a pedagogical lens we refer to as Classroom Digital Interaction (CDI), which we conceptualize as a tool for practitioners to use when evaluating the affordances of learning tools that travel the range of oral, written and digital registers. A CDI lens encourages educators to take into account the pedagogical purpose of discussion in the literacy classroom, whether face-to-face or digitally mediated, and how pedagogical purpose and practical affordances of a register interact in a complex manner to support students' learning.

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE

In the fall of 2012, we were contacted by an educational technology company to examine how teachers were using a tablet application the company had created. The application takes the form of a collective reading platform that incorporates social media tools to encourage multimodal discussion and collaborative meaning making "inside" the pages of a digital book. Users can create reader profiles, participate in multiple book discussion groups (school and non-school texts; all books accessible through Google Play are available for download), post questions to other readers and answer notes, link to Web content, and create/complete quizzes and assignments. Users' interactions across these discussion-oriented communi-

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