

Chapter 17

Writing For Social Action in Our Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author first describe the literacy pedagogy that he implements each year with a cohort of pre-service graduate students across two semesters to develop their social justice awareness, based in progressive education and critical literacy principles. The author then describes the social action writing unit of study that arises from this work, emphasizing multimodal forms of expression and especially the use of digital technologies. The author next focuses on two students who represent the digital composing process and products for social justice that students have created. Using multimodal systems of analysis, the author shows how designing multimodal texts informs pre-service students' understandings of social justice issues. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the convergence of multimodality and social action writing and implications for pre-service writing instruction and action research with classroom teachers in school settings.

INTRODUCTION

Educators have long advocated that the purpose of public schooling is to prepare citizens who will be active participants in our democratic society (Dewey, 1916/2008). Dewey's vision of public education was progressive in the sense that he advocated for transformative experiences that promoted social justice. This vision of public schooling calls for critical literacy – gaining the tools and insights to question and challenge existing power structures and advocate for equality, empowerment, and more humane treatment (Freire, 1970/2008).

Social action writing enables one powerful way to enact these visions of both progressive and critical pedagogies in schools. Teachers use writing workshop as a structure to enable social action writing (see, e.g., Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Epstein, 2010; Heffernan, 2004). They use problem-posing questions to guide students to realize social justice issues that they could write about or writing arises as the class explores social justice issues (e.g., Berden, et al., 2006; Vazquez, 2004). They then guide students through the writing process to produce writing with counter-hegemonic messages. Students' writing products might include letters to influential people, editorials, advertisements,

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speeches, even stories, poems, and song lyrics – basically, any forms or genres of writing that effect change. While social action writing might lead to digital and multimodal communication and products, they are not the primary emphasis of the work in this literature.

With my pre-service graduate students, I wanted to harness the power of a social action writing unit of study, but expand the process and products of writing by encouraging multimodal forms, including the use of digital technology. First, consistent with writing pedagogy research involving pre- and in-service teachers (Gillespie, 1991; Reid, 2009; Whitney, 2008), I realized that my students would be better situated to implement this kind of work with their own students if they experienced the process themselves. Second, state and national policies are increasingly demanding the integration of technology in pre-service preparation programs (CCSS, 2010; ISTE, 2008; NCATE, 2012; NCTE, 2004). I therefore aimed to design meaningful uses of technology as an integral part of the yearlong literacy program that I taught. By meaningful uses of technology, I mean the purposeful use of technology tools to expand meaning construction in the communication process (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Third, as I explain in the theoretical framework and show in the findings, I believe that multimodal design work expands opportunities to produce and communicate meanings for social justice purposes. In this chapter, I explain how this work unfolded, describe and analyze the products that my students produced, and explicate the learning that occurred. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the convergence of multimodal composition and social action writing, research implications for pre-service teacher preparation, and school applications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social action writing applies democratic principles of progressive education (Dewey, 1917/2008) and

critical literacy (Freire, 1970). Both Dewey and Freire posited that learning occurs when we have a real need for knowledge. This need arises when we are actively participating in meaningful experiences that extend beyond the personal, and instead, engage conjoint activity towards greater social good. Dewey stated: “If the living experiencing being is an intimate participant in the activities of the world to which it belongs, then knowledge is a mode of participation, valuable in the degree in which it is effective. It cannot be the idle view of an unconcerned spectator” (p. 290). For Dewey, experiential learning generated dispositions and self-reliance for problem solving. Dewey saw democratic education “as a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims” (p. 89).

To generate awareness of and work towards social aims, pedagogy must be inherently dialogic. Freire (1970/2008) asserted: “I cannot think *for others* or *without others*, nor can others think *for me*” (p. 108). Dialogic curriculum is generative and requires a genuine encounter between people, mediated by social concerns about the world. The ultimate enactment of dialogic curriculum is praxis, or “the reflection and action which truly transform reality” (p. 100). To achieve praxis, Freire advocated a problem-posing methodology. The teacher’s role is to “re-present” the students’ concerns about the world “not as a lecture, but as a problem” (p. 109) and guide them to develop critical perceptions and recognize inherent contradictions that illuminate potential actions. Through dialogue, the teacher guides students towards a state of *conscientizacao*, or a level of awareness at which students both perceive troubling situations and the actions that will challenge “the obstacles to their humanization” (p. 110). These principles informed and guided the practices that I intended to implement with my students.

While progressive and critical education principles provide the foundation for social action writing, multimodal theories provide possibilities for the process and products of expression. Modes refer to the cultural means that are available for

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