Chapter 3
Tagxedo: Using Digital Technologies to Support the Writing of Students in an Alternative Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on Latino students in grades seven through nine in Opportunity Class, an alternative school for students with disciplinary problems at their comprehensive school sites, who used the free software tool called Tagxedo to generate stronger thinking and writing. More specifically, this chapter focuses on a study of students’ digital writing through Tagxedo, and how they used Tagxedo as a way to metaphorically and symbolically represent their thinking, and as a tool to support their writing and thinking. This study took place over two years with two different groups of 13 students, each studying different inquiry-based units of study. Located in critical multimodality as a theoretical frame, this chapter positions digital writing as a critical endeavor, one that understands that modes are not neutral, and every choice made by the designer/writer of a digital text has intention and purpose.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing access to digital technologies in many parts of the world has changed the conditions of possibility for literacy events resulting in the development of new diverse literacy practices (Janks & Vasquez, 2011). The current generation of students are out-of-school creatives, driving how expressive technologies are used and circulated and, as a result, how schools will respond, adopt, and adapt new literacies practices (Vasquez, Harste, & Albers, 2010). For students, YouTube, cell phones with still, video, and audio capabilities, and other digital devices are not new; they are the everyday tools used to communicate in or navigate their worlds (Albers, Harste, & Vasquez, 2008). According to a Pew Report on teens and
technology (2013), 78% of teens now have cell phones, and 47% own smartphones; 23% have tablets; 95% use the Internet, and 71% have access to a laptop or desktop at home with Internet access (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). As such, digital tools and software are accessible, and offer students innovative ways to write and understand language concepts, incite their interests to make meaning-making, play with and transform written text, and create new texts.

This chapter reports on a study that involved students across two years (N=26; 13 per year; 22 Latino, 4 other) in Oscar’s mixed grade 7-9 alternative program who created word clouds using Tagxedo on PC tablets and class computers in their language arts/social studies class. These Tagxedos were part of a larger inquiry project to support their writing and representation of meaning. Tagxedo is a free software program that turns written text into word clouds, and frequency of word use in a text highlights as larger font. Tagxedo has embedded shapes, colors, and fonts, but is flexible in that it allows users to upload their own shapes and fonts. Specifically, in aggregate, we discuss two groups of students across two years who used Tagxedo as part of their units of study. Students in year one (2011-2012) created Tagxedos as part of their study of Touching Spirit Bear (Mikealsen, 2002), a young adult novel about an angry and defiant teenager who, after beating up a 9th grade classmate nearly to death, is sentenced to prison. He is offered an alternative approach based on Native American traditions in which the victim, offender, and community work together to rehabilitate the offender. Students in the second year (2012-2013) used Tagxedo as part of an inquiry-based unit on the topic of their choice.

Although Tagxedos may be considered a less significant tool for writing, in these classes, Tagxedo was the force behind why students in both years became more interested in writing and inquiry. Located theoretically in digital writing as social practice, this chapter positions digital writing with Tagxedo and use of PC tablets as a critical endeavor, one that understands that all modes and digital tools/software are significant in how and why students write. Our research questions included the following: How do students respond to Tagxedo as a tool for thinking and writing? How do students use symbol to convey their thinking and writing? and To what extent does Tagxedo offer students alternative ways to express their thinking and writing?

This chapter describes the context of Opportunity Class (OC), the units of study around which Tagxedos in this chapter were generated, the Tagxedos themselves and students’ focused play with features of Tagxedo (e.g., shapes, fonts, backgrounds, colors, etc.) to create a visual rendering that captured the essence of their learning, students’ responses to creating Tagxedos, and students’ increased interest in diction from their work with Tagxedo. We also discuss how Tagxedo was used as a way to critically analyze Internet text for key themes and topics, which then enabled students to understand which sites were valuable for their writing and which were less so. The chapter concludes with implications for teaching digital texts/writing with an eye towards critical pedagogy.

BACKGROUND

Related Literature

Public and private schools in the U.S. currently serve more than 10 million Latino children ages 5-17 (Pew Hispanic Center, n. d.). Nearly 20% or one in five students across the US is Latino. Labeled as problems in schools, the lives of Latino children are often undervalued, and even dismissed especially with the adoption of the Common Core State Standards by nearly all of the States and territories. Further, rather than assume the position that Latino children come to school with deficit knowledge and experience, educators, policymakers, and researchers alike must value, respect, and