Chapter 12
iLiterate: Exploring iPads, Multimodality, and Writing Pedagogy in Secondary English

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ABSTRACT

Digital technologies significantly shape and mediate adolescents’ writing practices. Consequently, this chapter investigates the relevance and use of emergent technology in Year 8 English classes in an Australian high school. The importance of this study stems from the introduction of the Australian Government’s Digital Education Revolution and the growing prominence of technology in local schools. Building on sociocultural perspectives and new literacies scholarship, this case study critically considers how iPads influence student writing. Moreover, it examines what pedagogical strategies teachers use when implementing iPads in their classes to support student learning outcomes. Findings from this study contribute to our understanding of how digital tools influence students’ collaborative learning, multimodal practices, and writing processes.

INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been mediated by available tools. From quill pens to touch screens, tools shape both the production and distribution of the written word. While prior research indicates that technology can support young adults’ writing in online spaces (Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013), it is important to examine how it can promote student engagement and achievement in schools (Baker, 2010). The purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into how tablet devices, specifically iPads, are used to support the writing practices of Year 8 English students. Specifically, it offers an Australian perspective on the relationship among literacy, technology, and pedagogy, which is significant at both a national and international level.

In Australia, recent policy initiatives and curriculum changes place an unprecedented im-
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portance on educational technology. This can be linked to the introduction of the Digital Education Revolution in 2008, which included greater investments in infrastructure and school-based support for technology and a 1:1 laptop initiative for students in Years 9-12, the latter of which will cease in 2014. At the same time, the looming implementation of the new national curriculum emphasizes students’ development of technology skills and teachers’ integration of digital tools and online resources. A three-year formal evaluation of the Digital Education Revolution in the state of New South Wales indicated that teachers report more positive beliefs about technology and more student-centered practices (Howard & Mozejko, 2013).

Despite the move towards increased technology in Australian classrooms, standards and assessment practices do not always reflect this change. For instance, the Australian Curriculum does not recognize the evolving nature of writing production as it continues to prioritize writing that is driven towards high stakes assessment. This is also evident at the state level; in New South Wales, Year 12 students must take the Higher School Certificate English exam, which focuses on extended pieces of both critical and creative writing. The English Teachers Association (2010) believes that “Information and Communication Technology skills are not closely integrated into the content and are not of a sufficiently high order” in the current curriculum (p. 13). This has implications for young adults’ writing practices as well as how their content knowledge is formatively and summatively assessed in a digital age. The Digital Education Revolution has the least impact for students in Years 11-12 (Howard & Mozejko, 2013), which may be due to the focus on traditional pen-and-paper assessments in the senior years.

This chapter draws on a sociocultural framework to explore how iPads are implemented in Year 8 English classes. It begins with a literature review of multimodality and English pedagogy to situate the study. After detailing the research context and methodology, the study offers key findings related to teachers’ writing pedagogy and students’ writing practices in a digital age. It builds on previous research on iPads to focus specifically on the process of multimodal composition, where students work outside of traditional practices and integrate visual, aural, and kineikonic elements into their work (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009). In particular, this chapter considers:

- How do teachers implement iPads in their classrooms to enhance Year 8 students’ multimodal competencies?
- How are young adults’ writing practices shaped through the use of iPads in schools?

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Framework

This chapter understands literacy and developing literacy processes through a sociocultural framework. A sociocultural perspective on literacy education entails the belief that the nature of literacy shifts with societal change (Baker, 2000; Daiute, 1993). Here, literacy can be understood as an artifact of culture, which means that literacy education has shifted from being a private possession (Gee, 1991) to a “semiotic, public, and transitory” element (Baker, 2010, p. 16). Freire and Macedo (1987) posit that page-bound and static texts still pervade most classrooms and are divorced from the cultural contexts of students’ lived realities. For literacy educators and researchers, a sociocultural perspective offers insight into how societal and technological developments impact educational practices.

New Literacy Studies scholars consider the varying forms of literacy and the impact on the practice of literacy education. According to Gee (1999), the New Literacies Studies seeks to examine literacy, including literacy that is integrated