Chapter 4

Constructing a Third Space: Positioning Students’ Out-of-School Literacies in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Burgeoning technologies are changing the global practices of youth to embrace a form of literacy which encompasses both skills and multimodal forms. In Barbados this has been perceived as disengagement from conventional literate practices and has caused concern in the wider Barbadian community. This view is reinforced by the seemingly ubiquitous engagement of youth with various forms of communications technology rather than traditional text. This chapter presents some insight, in the context of a Barbadian secondary school, into an action research project which sought to bridge the existing divide between traditional and semiotic literacies. This investigation confirmed that students were engaged in literate acts in diverse ways. The creation of third space required revised assumptions about the nature of literacy and redefined roles for teachers and students. This chapter concludes with recommendations for increased dialogue, collaboration and professional development among Barbadian secondary English teachers on issues related to literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural social interaction, online reading and jargon-based text messaging, all commonplace out-of-school activities of youth globally, are regarded by some as a significant threat to conventional notions of literacy. More and more, young people are gravitating towards forms of textual communication that are considered unacceptable to those who believe in the sanctity of the printed page. What is even more disconcerting to those who disapprove of these practices, is that the unconventional forms of communication seem to be invading the hallowed walls of the school: the seat of academic learning. This situation often squares up as a battle between those who eschew
the apparent defilement of the academic portals and the youth who, born into a world where technology and all that it enables is commonplace, use this resource in all aspects of their lives with some ease. Indeed, this ease and familiarity with which this generation interacts with technology has led some to label them “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). It is apparent that even when those who recognise the urgency and need to reach today’s youth in the academic setting acknowledge that this might be possible through the use of the technology, their own discomfort with it seems to inhibit their movement in that direction. This tentativeness and unease displayed by the generations on whom the technology was apparently thrust, has earned them the brand “digital immigrants” (Prensky, 2001). As mentioned earlier, this virtual standoff between the “natives” and the “immigrants” is played out in literacy classrooms around the world (REF), including in Barbados, a small state in the Caribbean.

In Barbados, there is much concern in the education sector about the apparent fall in literacy among today’s youth, a fall often attributed to this generation’s seeming preoccupation with technological tools and gadgets. Some express the view that this preoccupation has made significant inroads into young people’s ability to read and their willingness to engage with print, especially “worthwhile” literature (Moore, 2008). This issue has been the genesis of considerable misunderstanding concerning the roles of the accepted literacy practices of previous generations influenced by British colonial rule and the popular, though marginalized, international, digital and social literacies of contemporary youth. For instance, Felicia, one of the teachers who participated in this investigation, made a comment which summarized her impressions about our discussion of literacy.

“Those questions were really tough. Tough, because they were really searching. They seemed to be really honest.”

Felicia’s opinion reflects the emotion and the avoidance that characterizes much of the conversation about contemporary forms of literacy in Barbados.

This chapter shares the findings of a study in which we explored and documented the perspectives of Barbadian teachers as literacy instructors and examined students’ viewpoints concerning their out-of-school literacy interactions. A major facet of the investigation was the creation of a classroom space that specifically addressed the processes of creating a bridge between marginalized and accepted literacies. The project took place from 2011 to 2012 and was framed by four questions:

1. What are the literate behaviours of adolescents?
2. What are the teacher Discourses which may impact on the development of third space?
3. What are the processes in developing third space linkages to literacies in school-based English classes?
4. How can students’ funds of literate knowledge be used to develop third space linkages to literacies in school-based English classes?

The discussion which follows explores the notions of literacy, language and identity, students’ multi-literate practices and teacher Discourses. Also examined is the role of these factors in synthesizing traditional and emerging forms to create a third space.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Perspectives: Literacy, Space, and Identity

The theory of third space as articulated by Bhabha (1994) and Soja (1996) accompanied by the notions of multi-literacies (The New London Group, 1996) and Discourses (Gee, 2005) provides the