Chapter 4

Unpacking Social Inequalities: How a Lack of Technology Integration may Impede the Development of Multiliteracies among Middle School Students in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on a comparative, qualitative study that explored social equity issues related to technology integration among middle schools located in the United States of America. Differences between economically privileged and economically disadvantaged school districts were explored to determine if inequalities related to technology integration generally, and the development of multiliteracies specifically, exist. Participants included middle school students from grades 5 to 8, and teachers and administrators from nine schools located in four different school districts. Data included transcripts from interviews and focus groups, observational field notes, and various school artifacts collected from the research sites. Using these data, an exploration of the contextual factors that might influence the inclusion of instruction for new literacies directly related to literacy activities on the Internet was conducted. The results suggest that a disparity does exist along economic lines and several contextual factors were identified that may impede the development of the new literacies including the use of the Internet as an information resource among middle school students in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade an upsurge of attention focused on technology integration in K-12 schools has inundated teachers everywhere. The Internet has become widely accepted as an information resource critical to teaching and learning in all subjects and at all levels of education (Forsyth, 1998; Pickering, 1995). Many argue that the Internet is the defining technology among our youth (Fallows, 2004; Hay, 2000; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Levin & Araféh, 2002) and developing proficient skills for using the many digital technologies that the Internet has introduced are essential for success in a global, knowledge-based economy (Friedman, 2005; Partnership for...
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21st Skills, 2004). As teachers struggle to keep up with the constant emergence of new technologies to motivate and engage their students, school districts are faced with the issue of where these skills fit within their curricula. As we shift our attention from reading and writing with book, paper, and pencil technologies to reading and writing in digital, multimodal, networked, and social information spaces, we need to rethink what skills and strategies are required of our students to successfully engage in Internet-based literacy activities and how best to address these skills as part of the curricula.

In this chapter, the development of multiliteracies, or new literacies, specific to reading and writing required when using the Internet are explored. The chapter:

- Provides an overview of the new literacies of Internet-based reading and writing and reviews the body of research in this area.
- Identifies contextual factors that may impact the development of new literacies and, in turn, raises questions about social equity.
- Provides suggestions to advance our thinking about new literacies, new directions for literacy pedagogy, and further research in this area.

BACKGROUND

This chapter is framed by an emerging theoretical perspective referred to as multiliteracies or new literacies (Coiro, 2003; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu, 2000, 2002; Leu et al., 2004). A new literacies perspective seeks to include the multiple text formats and multimodal environments associated with the complex literacy demands of the Internet and other networked technologies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Leu et al., 2004). Leu and colleagues (2004) define these new literacies as skills and strategies required when using the Internet and other information communication technologies (ICTs) that “allow us to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer questions, and then communicate the answers to others” (p. 1572). This view of multiliteracies focuses specifically on new literacies in relation to school-based literacy activities for learning, whereas other views of multiliteracies include a more encompassing perspective that address out of school literacy engagements (Gee, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and a pedagogy that fosters literacy development for work and community that help shape an individual’s social future (The New London Group, 1996). However, many researchers agree that Internet-based literacy is different than traditional print-based literacy, which necessitates a broadened definition of literacy to include the multimodal texts found in the digital environments of the Internet and other ICTs (e.g. Alvermann, 2002; Gee, 2000; International Reading Association [IRA], 2001; Kress, 2003; Leu, 2000; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002; Snyder, 1996; Tyner, 1998).

A New Definition of Literacy

The introduction of the Internet into school classrooms has been met with an array of new research, new curricula, new instructional approaches, and new definitions of what it means to be literate. A barrage of new terms has erupted concerning literacy over the past decade, including Internet literacy (Tyner, 1998), network literacy (McClure, 1997), information literacy (Spitzer, Eisenberg & Lowe, 1998), media literacy (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Hobbs, 1998), and digital literacy (Gilster, 1997) to name a few. These definitions and others can all be viewed as part of a New Literacies or Multiliteracies perspective (Castek, Coiro, Hartman, Henry, Leu, & Zawilinski, 2007;
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