Chapter 3
Posthuman Literacies?
Technologies and Hybrid Identities in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT
Social media and mobile technologies have introduced new means of networking, particularly in affluent post-industrial societies. However, the centrality of communication to these technologies is not always acknowledged. Drawing on the perspective of New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton 2001), this chapter examines digital media from the point of view of meaning making, discussing the complex ways in which multimodal semiotic resources are used in creating and maintaining digital identities. It argues that the use of these resources engages the subject in hybridity across digital, analogue, and embodied practice. The notion of “posthuman literacies” is proposed, drawing on Haraway’s notion of the cyborg (1991) and Hayles’ examinations of the posthuman (1999, 2006), examining meaning making in a context where the boundaries between analogue and digital, “human” and “machine” are disrupted, blurred, and ideologically freighted. It concludes with a discussion of how this analysis might apply to the context of higher education.

INTRODUCTION
Discourses surrounding new digital technologies are often dominated by notions of technological advance and innovation. In ‘developed’ countries in particular, this can be seen in popular understandings of mobile networked devices and social media. These technologies have enabled new possibilities for self-expression and communication across a range of contexts and purposes, such as in social networking, where participants construct distributed identities across a range of platforms.

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However, the centrality of communication and self representation to many of these new digital technologies is not always acknowledged. From the standpoint of New Literacy Studies (e.g. Barton 2001), communication within digital contexts should be seen not only as a technological means by which to relay information, but as a complex set of social practices in which identities are not only expressed, but also created in a reflexive relationship between communicative practice and the subject. This chapter will examine digital media from the point of view of language and meaning making, and will discuss the complex ways in which multimodal semiotic resources are mobilised in creating and maintaining digital identities. In doing so, it will refer to a range of technologies present in the higher education setting, covering educational software, and technologies used more widely in professional settings and social media.

However, crucially, these should be seen as constitutive of identities in wider social practice, leading to hybridity and mixing across digital, analogue and embodied practice. It will propose the notion of ‘posthuman literacies’ – drawing on Donna Haraway’s cyborg (1991) and Katherine Hayles’ (1999, 2006) analyses of the posthuman - to examine practices of meaning making in a context where the boundaries between analogue and digital, ‘human’ and ‘machine’ are ambiguous and highly problematic. It will then go on to discuss the implications of this analysis in the context of higher education, where digital media are widely used in ‘elearning’, but are also used by students via a range of practices which are seen as marginal or transgressive. The chapter will examine the implications of this analysis for staff and student identity apparent in both established and emergent practices in higher education. It will suggest that, although environments feature ‘affordances’ which may predispose users to certain type of practices and ontologies, participant agency and the multiple, partial nature of engagement in digital literacies mean that practices and identities /subjectivities are highly complex, hybridised and multivoiced. The implications for student identities will be discussed.

MEANING-MAKING AND LITERACIES IN THE DIGITAL UNIVERSITY

The field of literacy studies has responded to the shift towards digital practices, with a recognition and exploration of the increasingly multimodal and visual nature of meaning making practices in ‘the digital age’ (Kress 2003). A literacies perspective has also been brought to bear more specifically on ‘elearning’ in the university (Goodfellow & Lea 2007), in a much-needed analysis recognising the textual and socially-situated nature of engagement with digital technologies in higher education. Crucially, technologies are recognised in this conception not as ‘tools’, but as sites of social practice. Studies have also investigated the uses of Web 2.0 digital technologies in pedagogies focused on literacies in school classroom practice (e.g. Carrington & Robinson 2009). The notion of literacies has also been employed in the analysis of virtual worlds and gaming, requiring what Steinkuebler has called a ‘constellation of literacy practices’ (2007: 297).

This has provided a long-overdue perspective on engagement with digital technologies as a set of socially-situated textual and cultural practices, moving us away from the rather sterile, technically-focused discourse which has tended to dominate ‘elearning’. In doing so, this work has also served to direct attention to student/staff identities as those of embodied and situated social actors. The next section of this chapter will draw attention to the notion of hybridity and blurring between the digital and analogue, suggesting a ‘posthuman’ reading of particularly controversial
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