

Posthuman texts and the digital university (0313)

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The Age of Print is passing, and the assumptions, presuppositions, and practices associated with it are now becoming visible as media-specific practices rather than the largely invisible status quo. (Hayles 2012, 2)

Seminal work in Social Anthropology in the 1980s (e.g. Brice-Heath 1983, Street 1985) presented a radical challenge to contemporary understandings of literacy, moving away from the notion of a cognitive phenomenon residing primarily in the individual. Instead, these ethnographic studies argued for literacy as situated social practice involving multiple participants in a wide range of informal settings. These insights, combined with a new focus on the social and the critical in Applied Linguistics (e.g. Gee 1990) led to the emergence of new literacy studies (e.g. Barton 1998, Barton & Hamilton 1998), which focused on literacy in a range of social contexts, often foregrounding issues of power, social class and how literacy practices may serve to reproduce privilege and also constitute identities (e.g. Ivanic 1998, Lillis 2001). In recent years there has been a move has continued in the study of academic reading and writing, away from a predominantly cognitive view of 'literacy' as a binary focusing on cognitive capacities in the individual, with an emphasis on defining the individual as 'literate' or 'illiterate', and towards one which regards literacy as a complex set of socially-situated practices. The associated subfield of academic literacies arose from this strand in an explicit reframing of established conceptions of student writing in the university. Crucially, this critique was founded on a radical repositioning of the role of text and language, moving away from the notion of language as a transparent medium, instead reframing textual practice as a site of situated knowledge construction. This conceptual shift is of strong relevance for

this paper, as it marks an important staging post in a process of 're-embodiment' in terms of how we view textual practice, reminding us that all reading and writing is particular rather than abstract, and involves human subjects engaged in material processes which are socially, politically, temporally and physically situated. However, it might be argued that the field has continued to elide the status of objects, even in detailed analyses of communication in complex scenes of embodied social action. Latour (2005) argues that in the standard paradigm of social science, objects are not seen as part of 'the social', which is conceptualised as exclusively human. I will argue that objects in literacy and multimodality studies (despite the strong ethnographic leanings of the field) have tended to be conceptualised as 'tools' for communication, or part of the material 'context'. A recognition of the agentic role of objects would further 'embody' our conception of how we make meaning around texts, serving to anchor research and theory in the immediate, emergent and everyday process of material practice.

The paper will report on a funded project investigating the day-to-day material and textual practices of 12 adult postgraduate students, using multimodal journalling and in-depth case study interviews. The analysis will focus on the ways in which mobile devices, screens and print literacy artefacts work together as actors in semiotic practice, drawing on Hayle's (1999) notion of the *posthuman*. Attention will be paid to the roles these nonhuman actors play in the textual practices where processes are distributed across multiple domains, and across networked devices and technologies of inscription. It will explore in particular the transcontextual boundary of the digital / print and how objects are mobilised to create new assemblages of meaning, leading to a questioning of binaries around authorship and 'tools'. Illustrating these points with multimodal data, it

will argue that material objects play a central role in meaning-making practice, co-constituting texts and authorial subjectivities.

It will also present a challenges to some of the main ideas surrounding conceptions of what will broadly be termed 'literacy', drawing on the fields of social anthropology, applied linguistics, semiotics and media studies. In doing so, it will focus on how these fields have sought to research, theorise and account for technological changes surrounding reading and writing in society and education. It will conclude by arguing that although our understanding of these practices has been greatly advanced by a focus on literacy as situated social practice, this conceptual framing has fallen short in adequately theorising the role of material objects, in particular the material artefacts of literacy such as paper, pens, keyboards and mobile devices (Author et al 2013). Drawing on actor-network theory as elaborated by Latour (2005), posthuman theory (Hayles 1999, 2006) and new work in media studies (Hayles 2012), this analysis (Author in press) will explore in particular the transcontextual boundary of digital / print, and how objects act not only to create new assemblages – complex and evolving networks of human and nonhuman actors - but also to enable transitions across contextual boundaries, leading to blurring of binaries around authorship, presence and persistence of text.

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