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The sociomaterial workings of a college writing assignment (0084)

Programme number: A7

Research Domain: Digital University

Part 1 Abstract

The deployment of digital media in classrooms contributes to new sociomaterial assemblages when investigating how student writing is completed in classroom literacy events. Exploration and elucidation of these new assemblages is key to understanding the literacy practices which instantiate them. This research asks: what do these new *sociomaterial* assemblages look like? What types of digital literacy practices arise from them? And how do learners use them to influence and leverage educational, social, and professional progress?

Using an ethnographically-informed multimodal methodology, this study examines and problematises the impact of cyberspace on classroom digital literacy events through exploring how course assignments get done.

To write an assignment is to assemble a collateral network of realities as part of one's writing tactics. How students productively unfold and negotiate a sociomaterial assemblage emerges as a central issue, as it is significant to success in their written work, and enhances understandings of 'digital literacy'.

Part 2 BLIND PAPER

Introduction

The deployment of new digital tools in classrooms contributes to new sociomaterial assemblages, or 'actor-networks' (c.f. Law and Hassard 1999; Latour 2005), when looking at how student writing is completed in classroom literacy events. Exploration and elucidation of these new assemblages is key to understanding the literacy practices which instantiate them. Informed by actor-network theory, my research asks: what are these new sociomaterial assemblages? What types of digital literacy practices arise from them? And how do learners use them to influence and leverage educational, social, and professional progress?

The immediate sites of interest are UK college classrooms; the goal in each case, a course 'assignment' that needs to be completed and submitted for assessment as part of a portfolio of coursework. The unit of analysis is a 'literacy event' (Heath 1983), empirically observable events and interactions around texts as they happen. These events are conceptualised as an unfolding sociomaterial assemblage instantiated by the mobilisation of digital 'literacy practices' which are inferred or attained through ethnographic detail, and involve the empirical makeup of the activity unfolding, its texts, ideologies, and patterns of behaviour surrounding it (Scribner and Cole 1981; Tusting, et al. 2000).

This study outlines accounts of the trajectory of three students' writing assignments, the sociomaterial work that goes in to them, and the subsequent 'collateral realities' (Law 2011) enacted at the scenes. Such realities, according to Law, are "incidental", perhaps "unintentional", and "done in practices" (p. 156) at a scene of analytical interest, such as a digital literacy event. Rather than there being an immediate reality inside the classroom, with an external reality of less significance, to write an assignment is to assemble a collateral network of realities as the student leverages the tools and artefacts available to them via a judicious, and sometimes surreptitious, bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966) of digital literacy practices, as part of their writing tactics

My analysis attends to the ecology of these constituent practices (and their power differentials) to see how sociomaterial relations are assembled and their realities are done, as students write their assignments using whatever tools at their disposal. This performative position and conceptual shift is well integrated with the ontological re-orientation in the field of STS (studies of Science, Technology and Society). Notably Mol's (2003) tracing the coordination and trajectory of multiple versions of an object, namely the diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis, reveals how the disease was enacted in different parts of a Dutch hospital: the consulting room, the outpatient clinic, in radiology, the operating theatre, etc. In each of these locations a different version of atherosclerosis was produced, and it is by following the different practices, including such things as the patient's pain upon taking steps, does the single atherosclerosis actually become multiple or plural.

This study is an account of the sociomaterial workings of an assignment in a college classroom, as it is also a site where a plurality of realities is produced whilst it is being written: with digital literacy practices of a formal/curricular nature, professional, personal/social, friendship-based, etc all brought into play. These do not necessarily exist in a coherent way, despite their ostensible connection; some are capricious, others stealthily done, rehearsed behaviours, surreptitious work-arounds, and circumventions of institutional policies. The issue is how these digital literacy practices are enacted and how they interact

with each other as part of the teleological aim of completing an assignment. This builds upon recent research carried out in the field of Literacy Studies which explores the wide variety of sophisticated and complex literacies practiced outside of classrooms. One notable research project, extensively elaborated on by Ivanič et al (2009), challenges the assumption that a simple 'lack' of literacy holds learners back, and that the richness and complexity of their 'everyday' literacy practices can—and should—be a source of effective teaching and learning. My research builds on this by examining how learners tap in to and mobilise these everyday literacy practices themselves, making their own unsolicited alterations of classroom literacy events through, most notably, the connectivity of cyberspace.

Methodology

The study captures digital literacy events as real time screen recordings, with synchronised video recordings of participants' movements and vocalisations around the tasks during writing. The result is a multimodal rendition of digital literacy events on- and off-screen, allowing linguistic and multimodal transcriptions to capture the complexity of social and material actors' behaviour in a format amenable to analysis. Data are augmented by ethnographic observations to gauge the place of digital media in the classroom, and post-assignment interviews in which participants talk about their digital media practices 'inside' and 'outside' of college.

Preliminary findings

In observing how the classroom assignments take shape and how the students used digital resources in their work, initial analysis reveals an ad hoc use of material artefacts whilst writing, and interactions with actors not always in situ. The writing of assignments is far from linear or straightforward; the employment of digital media facilitates complex cross-network digital literacy practices which extend beyond the confines of the classroom temporally and spatially.

In the dominant ontological politics of the classroom there is no place for certain digital literacy practices and there remains a clear hierarchical distinction between 'curricular' usage of digital media and 'social' usage of it. Yet my analysis shows that whilst one ontological reality of the assignment attempts to prevail, it integrates a host of other 'collateral' elements: communications with friends, discussions about music, confusion with a search algorithm, utilisation of previous work and other digital literacy practices which find their way into, and support the completion of, the assignments. How students then productively unfold and negotiate a sociomaterial assemblage emerges as a central issue, as it is significant to success in their written work, and thereby undermines a monolithic understanding of 'digital literacy'. Such research will be valuable to educators and researchers who are interested in how students utilise digital media in order to fulfil their curricular goals, as well as supporting research methods which attend in detail to how student writing actually gets done.

References

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