

Opening the case of the iPad : what matters and where next?

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Opening the case of the iPad: what matters and where next

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The iPad is probably the most commonly used mobile device in our schools today. It has attracted the attention of literacy teachers and researchers who sense the possibility of introducing new kinds of practices into the classroom – practices that may be more in step with the literacies of everyday life than some of those we are accustomed to seeing in schools. But as the educational potential of touchscreen tablets has taken hold, developers have been quick to exploit the new market, producing apps for parents to invest in early advantage for their children and for teachers looking for magic bullets to improve performance data. As a result of this much of the discussion around iPads and education has focused on the kinds of apps that might be used to support children's literacy learning. For their part, literacy researchers have explored the possibilities enabled by different kinds of apps, drawing parallels with long established and highly valued early literacy practices such as story making (e.g. Kurcikova, 2017) and story sharing (e.g. Merchant, 2015).

What emerges from this work, however, is that apps are only part of the story. Tablets, themselves, are always 'placed resources' that get taken up in particular ways as they enter particular kinds of relationships with people and other things (Rowse et al., 2013). Social, cultural and material factors come into play as children and teachers use them in different ways in educational contexts. This means that in thinking about how children make meanings in relation to these new devices, and the opportunities and challenges for literacy educators, we need to raise questions about the specificities of their appearance in classrooms. How *are* they used by children and teachers? How might we understand the meaning making that goes on around tablets in classrooms? How might different ways of thinking about such practices generate richer understandings of children's experiences, and problematise easy conclusions about what might work for children's literacy? And, perhaps most radically, how might tracing the multiple and complex relationships that bring tablets into classrooms in the first place prompt us to re-frame what matters to us as literacy educators?

These are some of the questions addressed in a new edited collection that we are compiling with Alyson Simpson and Maureen Walsh from the University of Sydney, titled *Mobile Literacies: the case of the iPad* (forthcoming from Springer). In this article, we briefly showcase themes explored in three of the book's chapters drawing on classroom studies conducted in the UK, the US and Australia – studies that show promising lines of enquiry and innovative practice.

Maureen Walsh and Alyson Simpson address the complexity of tablet use by introducing the concept of 'multimodal layering'. This is a way of examining what happens as 'semiotic modes closely associated with a text are reframed in new contexts'. Simpson and Walsh look at 10-11 year olds in New South Wales, Australia who worked through multiple texts in the process of creating a radio commercial. Students used iPads to access and read fast food facts and made handwritten notes as they developed their ideas. They used apps like GarageBand to produce their commercial, and then presented it to peers and discussed the content in video interviews. Walsh and Simpson describe the layers of meaning that were involved as each successive text became part of the development of the next as it was reframed and repurposed. Simpson and Walsh explore the interplay of semiotic systems that unfolds when children draw on a variety of modes on screen and in print in this way, tracing the movement between individual, communal and collaborative activity. Not only do they illustrate how digital and non-digital opportunities so often interweave during the process of composition, but also how the layering of different textual engagements may be supportive to children's in-depth conceptual understanding. They argue that

In proposing this concept we acknowledge that various theorisations of modal complexity already exist. However, we see the need to expand these conceptualisations by investigating not just how modes interact at the textual level but also how modes interact at the contextual level, in this case the classroom, which leads to changing meaning making possibilities.

Simpson and Walsh's study provides a compelling example of what can be achieved when opportunities are provided for children to develop multimodal compositions on iPads.

Working in the US context, Debbie Rowe and Mary Miller explore the need to take account of social and cultural factors in working with digital devices, showing how tablets and digital cameras can be used in young children's multilingual composing. A whole range of apps provide templates through which children can create e-books through adding audio and visual content as well as written text. Rowe and Miller explored what happened when young bilingual children (4 year olds and 2nd graders) were given this opportunity. The children used digital cameras to take photographs at home and school. As photos travelled between sites they provided plenty of material for discussion. The children then composed multilingual e-books using the app *Book Creator* to import their photos. They later shared these e-books with their peers on a large screen at school. The project provided a rich opportunity for 'sharing language capabilities and cultural experiences' (Miller and Rowe), but also raised questions about how such projects sit within wider educational provision. Miller and Rowe found, for example, that speakers of some minority heritage languages (such as Somali and Arabic) did not engage as much as Spanish speakers in creating voice recordings. They only started to do so when other opportunities for valuing and using these languages were introduced into the classroom. As Rowe and Miller write,

... it is clear that the affordances of digital tools are not fixed, but instead are constructed in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which the tools are located. Though all children used the same digital tablets for composing in Years 1 and 2, they constructed the affordances of the tablet's sound recording tool differently. Our analyses suggest that the ways children took up invitations to compose dual language recordings were shaped by their personal experiences and language capabilities, the languages spoken by peers, the language ideologies shaping school instruction, and the designed and implicit ideologies embedded in eBook composing activities.

Tablets then do not exist in isolation; the opportunities they present need to be seen in relation to other classroom practices and to what is, or is not, valued.

Karen Daniels provides a different take on the situatedness of tablet use by focusing on how young children played with a series of commercially produced 'educational' apps in an early years' classroom in the north of England. Drawing on a year-long ethnographic study of children's literacy practices in the first year of their

schooling, she notes how 4-5 year olds took up apps in a multitude of ways, sometimes in line with what app designers had apparently intended and sometimes subverting them to generate other possibilities. Daniels notes for example how two children played with the app *Story maker* by Lego Friends ©. The app is designed to encourage young players to create a story using a range of pre-designed templates, for example dragging stock figures into the story as characters. The children Daniels observed did not engage fully in the rather complex process of story making using the app, but found other ways of integrating it within their play, such as dragging a series of characters into line to form a 'pop group' which then, in turn, became the focus of even more conversation.

On another occasion she watched as two other children played *Toco Robot Lab*, which requires players to drag an on-screen robot through a maze. If the robot hits the side of the maze (due to imperfect manoeuvring) it crashes and falls down, and this is accompanied by a loud noise. Finding this noise entertaining, one child adapted the game, deliberately crashing the robot in order to generate the noise, and then sharing this accomplishment with his friend amid much hilarity. The children regularly talked, laughed and played together around shared screens. Daniels argues that the learning potential resides in the collaborative activity stimulated by the apps, rather than the more narrowly conceived literacy activities in their design. She writes,

Many of the apps were designed as tools to support forms of knowledge which are written into the statutory curriculum, for example, the literacy activities above and other apps related to shape and number recognition. The apps involved short activities with pre-determined pathways that were repeatable. Such goals are only a part of what is realised as children collaboratively and creatively take up apps in classrooms [...] Given the opportunity, children readily draw on their cultural experiences, resources and communicative repertoires and use these to transform the world into something of significance to them.

Each of these studies foregrounds a different aspect of children's tablet use, and each places different emphasis on tablets as devices that mediate reading experiences. We're interested in what happens as we hold together these perspectives, in how each one alerts us to different kinds of things we might notice about children's engagement.

In his book, *Researching your Own Practice: The Discipline of Noticing*, John Mason (2002) argues that in supporting children's learning, we need to be adept at focusing in on the detail of what is going on in order to understand what matters to children and how this plays out in what they learn. He reminds us that, as we notice, it is helpful to shift the frame in terms of what we are interested in looking at. Simpson and Walsh, Rowe and Miller, and Daniels do this in different ways. They each give us different ways of framing our noticing. Of course, there are many other frames that variously foreground the social, cultural, material and embodied dimensions of interactions with tablets, and support our analysis of what's going on in classrooms when children and tablets come into dialogue with one another, and more of these are included in the *Mobile Literacies* book.

It could be argued that these ways of thinking about tablets reflect perennial concerns about how children make meanings with texts. They revolve around literacy practices and processes, and their relationship with the social and cultural lives of children within and beyond the classroom. Perhaps they are a timely reminder that what has always mattered still matters, that we need to remain attentive to what children do and how they engage with each other as well as with the learning resources we provide. We end this article, however, by musing on other ways in which we might think about the place of tablets in literacy education.

The examples we have showcased here focus on relationships between individuals (teachers and children) and things (tablets and sometimes other classroom paraphernalia, too). But what if we explored some of the other relationships essential to holding tablets in place in classrooms? What if, in addition to following the mobility of children and the ways in which tablets *move with* children, we also considered where tablets and their constituent parts *move from and to* in the journeys into and out of educational settings? We might consider for example the environmental implications of mineral extraction and the production of e-waste, the working conditions of those involved in tablet production, or the ways in which corporate and speculative commercial interest frame what children get to access and use in schools. Engaging with such issues doesn't perhaps feel very much like literacy education. In the UK, we might parcel them up with things like 'environmental education' and 'citizenship' which exist at the fringes of mainstream schooling; in the US, they might come under the remit of

social studies. But if we chose to explore such topics with children, this might involve the production and exchange of all kinds of texts, providing a critical purchase on what often seems inevitable.

Alternatively, we might shift our attention to some of the broader implications of mobility, including the movement of people, things and ideas. Although it is common practice to celebrate 'global connectivity', and the ways in which technology crosses boundaries, attending to mobility alerts us to unevenness in the concentration and scarcity of resources, as well as to the gateways and platforms that control and regulate the flow of people, goods or information. We can see this in differential access to tablet technologies which all too often reflects the patterning of social, economic and cultural life. Lemphane & Prinsloo's (2014) study of mobile technology in South Africa is a powerful reminder of this. But also, there are the institutions and institutional infrastructures that both humans and non-humans are tethered to and the territories that these help to produce. Modems, codes, curriculum mandates, fibre optics, cybersafety policies and App Store accounts create part of the hidden territory in which everyday classroom interaction with touchscreen tablets occurs. How we think about this hidden territory as professionals, and with the students we work with, is surely a pressing concern for literacy educators. A consideration of these concerns forms part of what we recommend to teachers in their work with iPads and other touchscreen tablets:

- Take time to observe how children engage with these technologies. What do you notice about what they know, what they can already do, and what matters to them?
- How does children's use of iPads relate to what they feel is valued in the classroom? Consider how far the wider classroom ethos and organisation supports children's open-ended, exploratory use of tablets and apps.
- Plan opportunities for children to move between different apps and to use a range of print and digital media as they work on a particular project. Encourage collaboration.
- Expand notions of critical literacy to focus not just on texts or literacy practices but on the devices that mediate those texts. For example, encourage children to

investigate how tablets are produced, the resources used, and working conditions of those that produce them.

- Explore with children how the technological infrastructure shapes the kinds of texts children can easily access and the kinds of audiences they can reach.

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