Title: Revisiting critical literacy in the digital age

Single sentence teaser

Mobile devices are now in the hand of the youngest of students, but what are the critical questions that we should be asking about their use?

Abstract (150 words)

In an age of environmental crisis, financial instability, widespread migration, and political extremism, the case for critical literacy is pressing. Navigating criticality in the digital age however is challenging, not least because digital media, digital devices and digital architectures are implicated in broader social, cultural, commercial and political activity. Critical literacy in this context needs to do more than focus on the significance of texts within networks of humans. In this article we develop a model designed to support a relational approach to critical literacy, drawing on a sociomaterial perspective to consider how broader social-material networks help to generate meanings that may amplify, undermine or contradict the activities of individuals and groups. We end with questions that provide a starting point for broadening the scope of critical literacy in education to reflect on relations between people, texts and materials across time and spaces.

Revisiting critical literacy in the digital age

It is becoming increasingly apparent that digital communication is changing the ways in which social, civic, and political participation are achieved. Although by no means universal, access to desktop, laptop and handheld devices is central to this. Widespread use of these devices signals a clear shift in the ways in which individuals stay connected, in the ways ideas spread, and in the conduct of everyday life – how we do things, how we pay for things, how we organize travel, how we navigate our way from A to B, and so much more, too.

All this depends on a kind of digital fluency which, in keeping with the medium itself, is in a constant state of updating. Of course reading and writing are deeply implicated in these changes - they are themselves in flux now that written words can speak to us, voice recognition can write for us, and predictive text suggests plausible word choices. However, this evolving literacy cannot be separated from the devices that are used – devices that are, in a very literal sense in the hands of children from an early age (Burnett, Merchant, Walsh & Simpson, 2018).

As many have argued this suggests a need to re-think literacy teaching in school in terms of the materials used and the activities set, and even to question the very nature of what we are hoping to achieve with public education in the first place (Luke, Sefton-Green, Graham, Kellner & Ladwig, 2018). The larger shapes of an uncertain world of environmental crisis, financial instability, widespread migration, and political extremism press in on these concerns. Today's students need to be confident in navigating this uncertain world, as well as to play their part in shaping it.

In the critical literacy movement much energy has been directed at deconstructing texts, unmasking hidden assumptions, and interrogating bias and representation, and this has had a significant and important influence on the ways in which some elementary and high school teachers approach text (Janks, 2009; Vasquez & Felderman, 2013; Sanford, Rogers & Kendrick, 2014). But there is something about the ubiquitous and rapid production and consumption of digital content, particularly on social media and messaging apps, that eludes the grasp of this approach.

Part of this has to do with the emergent and ephemeral nature of these exchanges – they rarely become complete or completed texts. Typically they are informal, casually produced and semi-private in nature. But there is also something about the way technology hides its operations from view. This includes the codes that structure the apps, the data produced through the digital labour of subscribers (Paakari, Rautio & Valsmo, 2019), as well as the circuits, relays and infrastructure that enables something produced on one device screen to 'magically' appear on another.

Writing about a world marked by the promise of participation, the potential of cyberactivism and the creativity of user-generated content, yet still reeling from the rise of right-wing populism, resurgent nationalism and hate crime, Luke et al. (2018, p.251) offer a reappraisal of critical literacy in their assertion that 'the educational challenge raised by digital technology is not one of skill and technique or technology, but of participation and ethics.' We add to this by building on ideas about critical social media (Burnett & Merchant, 2011)

Bringing critical literacy to social media

Nearly a decade ago, we wrote an article for a special issue of *English Teaching, Practice and Critique* proposing a model for approaching critical literacy in the context of social media. In this we argued that critical literacy needed to reach beyond the analysis and production of texts to explore what people actually do on social media. We recognized that important work has provided generative frameworks for analysing texts and for using media production to explore alternative representations - and to intervene actively in social and political activity (Janks, 2010: Burn & Parker, 2010). However, there were still aspects of social media practice that seemed to escape such frameworks.

In proposing a model of critical literacy that accommodated the fluid, distributed nature of these practices, we advocated,

> … a shift in the locus of study in order to help us see new media *within broader social and broader textual networks*. Rather than using the text as the means through which to examine or act upon the social and economic context as in established critical literacy and media literacy practices, this shift in locus foregrounds the practices that are involved and the social networks in which they are embedded. (Burnett & Merchant, 2011, p. 50)

Our model (see Figure 1) brought together a focus on:

- *practices* - what people do when using social media
- *identities* - who people become through their social media activity
- *networks* – what connections they make with individuals and groups

< Fig 1 goes about here >

Importantly, these three dimensions of social media activity were not seen as distinct. Each being situated in relation to the others and to broader local, and translocal contexts. While much effort may go into identity curation (see Potter, 2012), individual curation itself does not determine identities. Identities will be partly framed by the networks to which individuals do or do not belong, by what others do online, and by what the design of the platform allows and encourages.

The model was designed to invite individuals and groups to review the meanings generated through *their own* social media activity and the significance of such activity in *their lives* - in how they were positioned, and the quality and extent of their social, political, and civic participation. It was also intended to support reflection on what else they might do through social media, and consider how they might cultivate identities, practices and networks that would be advantageous to them - socially, politically or economically, for example.

While the focus of that work was social media, we argue that this shift of focus could be helpful in thinking about a broader range of digital media practices. In many ways our model substantiated Janks' (2002) call for a more relational approach to critical literacy. For instance, Janks argued that meanings are not contained within texts but negotiated between readers and writers in situated contexts.

In this article we take this focus on relationality a step further, drawing on a sociomaterial perspective. This involves considering not just the significance of texts within networks of

humans, but the ways in which broader networks help to generate meanings that may amplify, undermine or contradict the activities of individuals and groups.

A sociomaterial perspective

A sociomaterial perspective underlines the ways in which technologies, bodies, movement and action combine with textual and cultural materials (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011). It emphasizes the ways in which these diverse forces come together or coincide, and necessitates moving our focus away from what is exclusively human. It is a perspective that has been fruitfully applied to wide range of educational topics, but it is particularly useful in understanding digital communication (Burnett & Merchant, 2018).

Take for example the ways in which a six year-old boy produces enactments of his favourite stories with action figures and then uploads them to a YouTube channel (see Merchant, forthcoming). His media production fails to attract more than a handful of views and his subscribers are all family members. But what's going on is far more complex than that. For a start he is taking his narrative material from TV screens and print texts. But then he is reworking them as visual narratives that involve his action figures.

This reworking involves complex adjustments of an iPad – which is often balanced on objects to hand in order to get the best angle. Figures are carefully moved around and captured in brief shots so that his efforts to position them are concealed. And then the final project is given a title and uploaded to YouTube in the hope that it will reach the imagined audience. Although playfully enacted this is a complex process, and it depends upon much more than the child himself. It involves the whole environment, the texts he reworks, the technology and lots more that operates 'behind the scenes'.

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The practices, identities, networks model – revised

So what might be the implications of including the non-human participants in such practices for our thinking about critical literacy? And how might we revisit our threefold model of practices, identities and networks with these ideas in mind?

The original model involved considering what we are (or might be) doing with literacy, and how we might use semiotic resources to the greatest effect, to position ourselves, our ideas and our creations in ways that are advantageous. Thinking about what we are doing - or might be doing - from a sociomaterial perspective however involves attending to other kinds of relations: from the physicality of digital devices (their interactivity and the 'screen-ness of screens', for example), through to the intended and unintended affordances of apps, and their connectivity within the extensive and fluid architecture of the web.

Operating across and between these layers involves engaging with a variety of objects (mobile devices, apps, the internet, and so on). These bring with them certain technical affordances - designed with particular aims in mind that may or may not be congruent with what a child wants to do - as well as the histories of use and evolving social and cultural practices (of playing, sharing and making YouTube videos, of family life, etc.). As these things come together, certain kinds of meanings become possible, and others sink from view.

Recognising all of this leads us to think beyond how people, texts and power are produced in relation, to consider how power is implicit within different kinds of *sociomaterial* arrangements. Just as we might consider how the production of text is ideologically positioned, so we can explore the ideological positioning of the devices we use and the digital

architectures we navigate. By focusing on networks of people, texts *and things*, a sociomaterial perspective extends our awareness of 'what we are doing' far beyond what is immediately apparent. It highlights the multiple ways in which meaning making is implicated in broader social, cultural, commercial and political activity, much of which we may be only dimly aware.

This perspective has implications of course for personal safety and security, but also has wider ethical implications related to our participation in the world around us. It holds together the traditional interests of critical literacy with wider concerns about the world in which we live. It acknowledges that our digital communication sits in relation to activity in other times and places, from the environmental and social costs of mineral extraction and global enterprise, through to the ways in which algorithms work with and around our search preferences to nudge us into certain ways of being and doing, patterns which in turn shape what others do and can be.

Two criticisms of critical pedagogy need to be acknowledged. Firstly, critique has often focused on children and young people's media pleasures, suggesting that they have in some sense been duped, and that what they thought was good is actually bad. This 'moralizing undertone' (Massumi, 2015, p.14) is simply not a helpful way of valuing their cultural resources and acknowledging popular culture. Secondly, by drawing on structural ideas about power relations, critique can actually work to hold these in place, or at best replace one ideology with another, supposedly 'better' one. An alternative perspective is to work directly with the idea of change. For instance, Massumi (2015) has argued that a relational perspective embraces the fact that there is always potential for things to work out differently.

Implications for practice

Bringing a sociomaterial perspective to our practices, identities and networks model extends arguments for a relational approach to critical literacy. It highlights that the doing is not just about what happens on screen, but involves interactions between multiple human and non-human participants, relations that matter for what happens moment to moment, as well as having far reaching implications in other times and places. Materials are not neutral but are nested in multiple, intermingling relations.

It is certainly a challenge to think through the classroom implications of widening the scope of critical literacy in this way, particularly if we want to avoid alienating learners. However, we do propose some questions that provide a starting point for broadening the scope of critical literacy to reflect on relations between people, texts and materials across time and spaces:

- **Who's making what, and with who and with what?**
- **What are the ethics of production? (What's made? Who and what else is implicated? Whose interests are served?)**
- **How do the different layers of making interface?**

Such questions, we suggest, provide important starting points for reflection as we work to redefine critical literacy for the digital age.

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PRACTICES

SOCIAL MEDIA

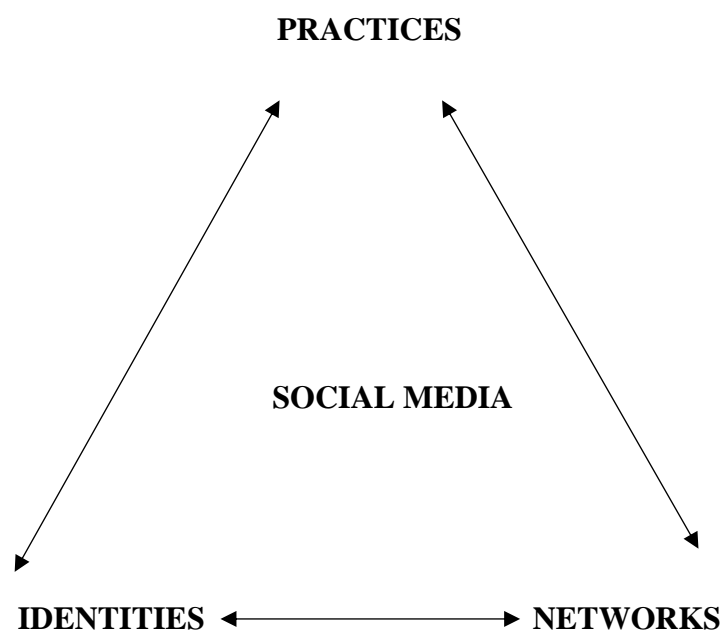**IDENTITIES** ←————————→ **NETWORKS**

Figure 1. Practice, networks and identity in social media: A model (from Burnett &

Merchant, 2011)