



Title of Project:

Multimodal Digital Storytelling and Transnational Communication: Fostering Inclusive Design Spaces for Emergent Plurilingual Youth

Researcher:

Rui Li
University of Wisconsin-Madison
lirui.uw@gmail.com



Rui Li

Research Supervisor:

Prof. Margaret Hawkins
University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Digital Technology in Language Education

Final Report

Motivation for the Research

With the rise of modern technology, sites of knowledge have shifted from page to screen, offering hybrid spaces for 21st century learning across borders, modalities, semiotic resources, time and space (Jewitt, 2006; Kress, 2000, 2010; Zhao & Frank, 2003) However, few empirical studies have been conducted from a critical lens to investigate how digitally mediated social interactions shape learning (for youth) that embraces multiple modes of meaning making with concerns of (in)equity, privilege, power and social relations (Hawkins, 2018). Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978), this study, through the lens of multimodality from a social semiotic approach (Archer, 2014; Kress, 2000), explores how emergent plurilingual youth living in under-resourced communities claim their multilingual and multimodal human rights to represent themselves and communicate with their global peers in digitally mediated spaces.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions (RQs) for this study are the following:

1. How do emergent plurilingual youth make meanings multimodally and transnationally through digital communication with global others?
 - a. What counts as children's repertoires and evidence of learning in the 21st century.
2. How can we understand youth's language, literacy, and identity development through a lens of multimodality in a global and digital context?
 - a. What kinds of understandings of self and other can be (re)built and (re)constructed through transmodal and transnational representations and communications?

3. What kinds of adult facilitation can be provided to support youth's creative and critical roles in these engagements for socially and culturally just relations in the digital and global age?
 - a. What spaces can be created for researchers and practitioners to co-create such multimodal design spaces for youth?

Research Methodology

I conducted research on an out-of-school project that digitally links immigrant youth in a Midwestern U.S. site with youth living in under-resourced communities who are learning English, in Uganda, Mexico and China. Youth created digital stories of their lives and communities and posted them to the project website; youth in other sites watched and responded with questions and comments. This is a qualitative case study using an ethnographic approach. I was a participant observer in project meetings and activities in the U.S. site and also conducted a site visit to the Ugandan site. In addition to the observations of site meetings and activities, I considered the online data from exchanges between the four sites. The aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of how emergent plurilingual youth made meanings multimodally and transnationally, and how they negotiated their translocal and transnational identities through a lens of multimodality. Aligned with an ethnographic approach, which uses multiple data sources, data sources for this study were comprised of the following: field notes and videotapes of site meetings; interviews with youth and adult facilitators in multiple sites; youth-produced videos, photographs, reflective drawings; and chats from the project website produced by the participants.

This study extended discourse analysis from monomodal towards a social semiotic multi/transmodal discourse analysis to study meaning making, representation, and communication across linguistic and non-linguistic modalities, cultural models, people, semiotic resources, media, place, time, and space. This study employed a social semiotic approach to a critical multimodal analysis (Archer, 2014; Kress, 2010; Norris, 2012) using methods and tools of coding (Saldaña, 2013) to provide a two-way analysis, which not only focused on the presenter of the multimodal designs but also the linked participants (i.e., the audiences) in situated social settings (Norris, 2006, p. 417). In order to understand how the presentations of cultural worlds, which were digitally portrayed, have been perceived differently and how they reshaped learning, identities, and relations across the three sites, I analyzed the multimodal productions in transglobal interactions on the website. To gain understandings of how meanings were constructed locally, I analyzed the ethnographic data generated from the U.S. site, drawn from real world contexts, taking into account both participant (emic) and researcher (etic) perspectives (Flewitt, 2011). Data analysis was not only focused on the fluid and creative act of modal assemblage selected by the youth to make meanings but also on how language and other modes interacted across one other, how they were responded to and by whom, who took ownership and who had authority over and within which modes and who did not, and what kind of social relations could be reconstructed across time and space (Archer, 2014; Hawkins, 2010; Perry 2012).

Summary of Findings

Findings show that digitally mediated multimodal and transnational engagement could foster inclusive design spaces for emergent plurilingual youth, and teacher facilitators could co-shape their representation, communication, and learning as agents of social change (Ball, 2009),



attending to power relations, privilege and access. This study offers a heuristic approach for multimodal learning and facilitating with increasingly diverse learner populations and complex learning contexts.

Implications

This study of transnational communication among emergent plurilingual youth has moved beyond the traditional monomodal approach towards one that features multimodality in learning and facilitation, thereby interweaving multisensory modes of meaning making across language, image, sounds, gestures, body movement, time, and space. It highlights learners' agency, interests, and prior knowledge for developing cultural and communicative competence. By linking multimodal analyses with broader social contexts, this study offered critical insights into multimodal repertoires—integrated semiotic resources—for representation, facilitation and relations in 21st century education, which are key in attending to power relations, privilege, and access.

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