

New Literacy Memberships: Implications for 21st Century Literate Identities

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the impact of memberships held within new literacy practices on young adolescents' literate identities. The experiences of young adolescents were examined to better understand how these experiences and their perceptions impact the development of their literate identities in multiple contexts. As such, this study sought to explore the following research question: How were the literate identities of sixth-grade adolescents shaped by the memberships they held within new literacy practices? This paper was part of a larger body of work that explored adolescent participation in new literacy practices and the impact on their literate identities. This study illustrated that the sociocultural underpinnings of New Literacies were directly tied to the meanings that young adolescents developed from the various practices in which they interacted. Exploring the connections between the various digital communities of practices in which young adolescents traversed offered great insights about possible implications that these communities may have had upon their literate identity formation. Understanding adolescents' literate identities and the communities of practice in which they navigate is a crucial element in helping them build a repertoire of skills and attitudes necessary for positive engagement within our increasingly global societies. As educators, we can use this knowledge to better understand our students, specifically how the literacy practices in which they participate directly impact their overall identity perception. These understandings should guide our future teaching practices.

Keywords: literate identities; new literacy practices; adolescent literacy; new literacies

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Introduction

Our understandings of what it means to be a literate individual have advanced much since the turn of the 21st century. Lankshear and Knobel (2013) point out that at the end of the twentieth century *new literacies* was a term used to describe primarily reading and writing texts, which were mediated by the use of digital technologies. However, it appears that although the ways in which literacies are used have changed, it is not so much that there are new types of literacy practices, but rather it seems that this time period has served as a hallmark for the evolution of literacy practices. New literacies today encompass understandings that are more complex, focusing on ways in which meaning-making practices have evolved based on diverse technological platforms (Knobel & Lankshear, 2014).

The ways in which people use literacy today have transformed based on the practice(s) they are utilizing, for example, when “chatting” with a friend on a social media platform such as Instagram discussions can take place across different spaces and times with different levels of “friends” participating. Literacy, as a construct, has shifted towards a more socio-cultural notion of literacy where various literacy networks “dynamically interact” with each other in daily practice (Gee, 2000). However, networks can be a disputed term, as understandings can vary. Gee (2004) holds that “networks harness the power of unfamiliarity”, which during time periods of rapid growth and development is not only important and useful, but rather crucial to linking and connecting people and organizations (p. 99). Conversely, Wenger (1998) is opposed to the idea of networks, because merely participating in an event would not constitute membership and membership is critical to the idea of the community of practice. What remains undisputed is the idea that literacy has definitive social elements. Viewing literacy as a social practice has become a central tenet in evolving visions of literacy (Barton, 2007; Jewitt & Kress 2003; Kress, 2003; Mills, 2010; Street, 2005a). Literacy can no longer be thought of simply in terms of the “skills” one possesses, but rather as context-specific social practices that fluctuate in different environments (Street, 2009). Barton (2007) offers that understanding the means in which literacy is situated in the social contexts of reading and writing is vital to understanding new insights regarding literacy. Kucer (2005) states that “the desire of the language user to explore, discover, construct, and share meaning” has become paramount to the act of literacy (p.5). In this way, literacy facilitates meaning making.

According to results from the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 37% of fourth grade students and 36% of 8th grade students scored in the *at or above proficient* reading category. Scores do represent only a slight improvement since 1992, the earliest reported test date: 2017 saw scores 5 points higher amongst 4th graders and 7 points higher amongst 8th graders; however, there was only a modest 1-point improvement amongst 8th grade scores in 2017 from 2015, and no significant improvement during that same period amongst 4th grade scores. The educational community is well aware that young children who have limited early literacy skills represent a great challenge today (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998). In fact, countless reading initiatives, programs, and legislation (i.e.: early intervention programs such as Head Start, programs such as Reading First, and legislative acts such as No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards) have been created in order to facilitate and measure the effectiveness of teaching reading. Likewise, there has been an

increased focus on adolescent literacy development, yet, studies into engagement and motivation have nonetheless failed to yield a concrete answer that can serve to bridge the gap between where our students are functioning and where we would like them to be.

Even with the great emphasis placed upon improving and remediating literacy skills in recent years, it seems that scores are not improving as much as we would expect. This fact indicates there may be a discrepancy between the types of literacy practices emphasized in our school practices and those which serve to increase students' ability to read and write well in the 21st century. It becomes necessary to examine student literacy practices so teachers can become aware of the different types of literacy practices in which students are participating (Jewett, 2011). Torgenson et al. (2007) defined the period of adolescent literacy development as beginning as early as 4th grade and extending through 12th grade. Thus, investigation into the new literacy practices of young adolescents in digital contexts may serve to highlight areas that could be of benefit to both younger elementary students and older adolescents. Further, this information will help uncover how the literate identities of sixth-grade adolescents may be shaped by the memberships they hold in the various new literacy practices in which they participate. Understanding adolescents' literate identities and the communities of practice in which they navigate is an essential component in aiding them to construct a repertoire of skills and attitudes necessary for positive engagement within our increasingly global societies.

Methodology

Previous research demonstrated that students display multiple literate identities as they participate in different literacy practices (Beach & Ward, 2013a), although the effect of the participation in various new literacies practices on their multiple identities has not been previously explored. A phenomenological approach was used in this study as it aided in highlighting the participants' unique and subjective experiences (Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). One of the purposes of the current study was to explore the ways these young adolescent participants' literate identities were shaped by the memberships they held within the new literacy practices in which they participated. All descriptions and terminology used came directly from participants.

Participants and Setting.

The participants in this qualitative study were sixth grade students from the three participating elementary schools. Sixth graders were targeted in this study because previous studies have demonstrated that young adolescents in middle school often begin to experience decreases in motivation in regards to their literacy learning (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). All of the participants in the study were students who reported an interest in technology in some regard. While interest in technology was not a requirement of the study, it turned out those participants that volunteered naturally tended to be interested in participating due to this type of interest.

This study took place at three different parochial schools in the southwest region of the United States. All of the schools were co-ed and served students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. In all of the schools, the sixth grade was

considered to be part of the middle school, but was not located at a different campus. In the state where the research took place there was a wide variance as to whether the sixth grade fell in a middle school/junior high environment or still within the confines of the elementary school. Parochial schools were selected so that the sixth grade could be investigated without being directly tied to either an elementary or middle/junior high school setting, allowing for a more holistic view of this age group to emerge.

Data Sources.

The data sources that were used in this study were designed to provide more information about participating students, in general and also in regards to the types of technological tools they utilized. There were three main sources of information used in this study. The Student Demographic Information form supplied basic background information on each participant and the Student Technology Survey provided an outlook into the new literacy practices that students participated in. These two forms were given to the students simultaneously. Finally, the Student Activity and Demonstration asked students to discuss and demonstrate the new literacy practices they used in order to elicit in-depth information on the new literacy practices they employed (such as online and offline computer practices), both in terms of the adeptness at which they participated in those practices and in terms of how they viewed themselves as literate individuals when they participated in said practices.

Participants also listed which specific programs or applications they used and identified the two digital practices at which they felt they were most competent and the digital practice in which they did not feel as confident. High competence digital practices included gaming, exploring websites, word processing, YouTube, Instagram, blogging, and Skype as well as texting on a phone. Low competence practices included working with graphics, Excel, blogging, emailing and instant messaging, gaming, and typing and word processing.

In the individual interview and activity session, the students discussed and demonstrated their highlighted practices, enacting their literate identities in the different digital contexts and practices. During the demonstrations, they were encouraged to describe in detail each portion of their activity demonstration. Using this narration allowed a fuller exploration of the lived experience of these young adolescents as they relayed not only what they were doing but also their personal perceptions of their digital literacy practices. The students were encouraged to demonstrate any of the practices they listed on the survey that stood out to them or that they wanted to demonstrate. Sessions lasted about 60 minutes and were recorded using iShowU Pro®, yielding real-time screen capture as well as video and audio recordings, both of which were analyzed. The researcher did the interviews and kept field notes to document any other cues that might not have been captured by the program, such as facial gestures or body language.

Analysis. An inductive analysis approach was used in order to search for patterns or themes in the data collected (e.g.: field notes and transcriptions). First, significant statements were selected from small groups of transcriptions in order to horizontalize the data. As patterns began to emerge, a codebook was generated which became the core of my analysis and helped elucidate relationships and linkages amongst the data.

This process continued with small groups of transcriptions from various schools until all transcriptions were coded and then repeated the process again. This process aided the researcher in making sure that all possible codes were explored and were clearly described. Any new codes that emerged were added to the codebook, which ensuring that the codebook was representative of all emerging themes and non-repetitive. Summary charts were created for each participant and organized by corresponding school in order to pare down the information and better horizontalize the data. Once the summaries were finished, resulting patterns were identified in order to address the overarching research questions.

Findings

A key finding from this research on literate identities was that adolescent competence perceptions and membership perceptions have a direct impact upon their literate identities within the various new literacy practices in which they engage. Other key findings about new literacies that emerged were that new literacy practices are interconnected and that adolescents traverse within both affinity spaces and communities of practice.

Literate Identities. This study sought to explore the ways in which adolescents' literate identities were shaped by the new literacy practices and new literacy skills that they participated in and demonstrated. Student discussion and demonstrations revealed these adolescents exhibited both intrinsic and extrinsic competence which occurred on a continuum, varying roles of membership within the practices in which they engaged, and that literate identities are multiple and vary between contexts.

Competence connections. Some important findings regarding competence emerged as a result of this research. The ways in which adolescents discussed and described how they perceived their ability to do something well or efficiently, and further exhibited positive self-perceptions regarding their proficiency indicated they had two types of competence perceptions: intrinsic competence and extrinsic competence. This extended previous research which alluded to the fact that competence was not a singular construct, but likely had elements of both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions (Beach & Ward, 2013; see also Young & Beach, 1997; Collins & Beach, 2012). Specifically, the way that Beach and Ward (2013) operationalized literate identity put direct emphasis on both internal perceptions (as reflected through the young adolescents' feelings regarding their 'literate attributes') and their external perception (as reflected in the adolescents' perception regarding their competency in a given context). In the present study, specific evidence was found to support these previous assertions. Further, in the present study, the adolescents' perceptions regarding both their intrinsic and extrinsic competence were especially pronounced. One major difference with the design of the present study in regard to previous studies (Beach & Ward, 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012; Young & Beach, 1997) was that in this study, adolescent digital literacy activities were both discussed and demonstrated, which yielded a rich description of the types of digital literacy practices in which adolescents engaged. Additionally, the adolescents had the ability to demonstrate a variety of digital literacy practices, most of which were not classroom based. These findings have extended the knowledge regarding competence in non-classroom based literacy events. The addition of the demonstrations allowed the adolescents to replicate literate activities which made the conversation more layered and likely increased the

depth of student answers and offered a deeper understanding regarding adolescent competence within the contexts they were demonstrating.

Also, the present study occurred in a one-on-one setting in contrast to some of the other studies (Beach & Ward, 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012). Thus, students may have been more inclined to freely explore their individual competence perceptions with the researcher. These augmented understandings regarding the impact of both intrinsic and extrinsic perceptions in relation to the literate identities of the adolescents in this study help us have a more multifaceted understanding regarding competence, especially within digital environments. It is clearly evident that we must support and examine both how adolescents perceive their competence in regards to extrinsic performance measures and how that perception was internalized, resulting in intrinsic estimations, because the relationships are what defines their literate identities. Encouraging student reflection and encouraging them to think metacognitively about their feelings regarding their perceived competence may be a key in this regard. This connection between literate identity and metacognition has not been researched previously, but it may be connected to the positive impact the teacher/student relationship has upon increasing students' literate identities that both Akey (2007) and Skerett (2012) discussed in their studies.

The present findings support previous assertions (Beach et al., 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012) that competence varies within different contexts and seemingly occurs on a continuum. In this study, the adolescents indicated their perceptions fluctuated from high to low, or somewhere in between, indicating that competence did indeed occur on a continuum. Further, in this study, several student responses indicated they had continued goals for improvement in regards to their proficiency within the new literacy practices in which they engaged. The presence of these continual goals indicated that for these adolescents, improvement was an active and ongoing process. Collins and Beach (2012) found the variations in adolescent competence levels evidenced in their study reinforced their belief that literate identities transform as students progressed through school. These findings indicated their understandings of the transitional nature of competence. This study bolsters the idea of a competence continuum which is often in a state of active development. The fact that the competence perceptions of the adolescents in my study fluctuated on a continuum also implied that the literate identities of the adolescents were not only fluid, but malleable as well, because at its core, literate identity is about perceived competence. If an adolescent perceived his or her competence was low in a particular practice, the literate identity within that context was negative. However, many of the adolescents actively sought to improve or change, often offering specific skills that they wanted to improve. They also often said they were "still learning" about a new practice and they desired more exposure and subsequently more time to practice and hone their skills. These types of statements demonstrate not only the active nature of their literate identities in relation to their perceived competence, but also indicate they were aware of these perceptions and actively trying to improve their skills. This finding also supports previous assertions that adolescent perceptions about their competence within a given community of practice or affinity space can change (Akey, 2007; Beach & Ward, 2013).

Membership implications. The relationship between literate identity and feelings of membership, or belongingness were themselves manifested in the discussions the

researcher had with adolescents in this study. Part of a literate identity, being either positive or negative or somewhere on the continuum, is dependent upon the feelings of membership adolescents had within the affinity space or community of practice in which they participated. This notion of membership, in connection to the belongingness that one has within a particular community of practice, was discussed by Beach and Ward (2013). In that study, membership emerged as a significant construct related to how adolescents viewed themselves as literate individuals (Beach & Ward, 2013). Membership was also highly valued in the present study, and it emerged that there were different membership roles the adolescents held within the practices in which they participated. The present study found evidence of membership within digital contexts had five roles: novice, intermediate, insider, outsider, and peripheral. These roles were directly tied to their overall perceptions regarding the practice in which they were participating. The varying degrees of membership within the contexts of the communities of practice in which they participated became important to their personal perceptions of membership, because they were viewed as defining features of their literate identities. It was these memberships that became integral to the development and evolution of the adolescents' literate identities as new literacy platforms and new literacy practices manifested, often necessitating the need for new membership within a new community of practice. Further, membership was discussed in terms of having a fluid range, which was active and changed depending on how their roles changed. Thus, the practice and consequently, the membership roles these adolescents had were likely always in a state of change. Previous research (Beach & Ward, 2013) demonstrated how young adolescents' understandings about their membership within a class or school setting can impact their literate identities, yet we have not clearly understood this connection as it occurred in digital contexts.

Beach and Ward (2013) held that literate identities of the young adolescents in their study were impacted by the “willingness, ability, and choice to participate in the literacy community of practice at school” (p. 250). The roles the adolescents in the present study held also directly influenced their willingness to participate in digital communities of practice, and thus had direct implications on their membership perceptions within digital contexts. Conversely, some adolescents specifically chose to not participate and act as a peripheral member, lurking on the edges of the practice. Choosing not to participate was often tied to value perceptions they made related to the given community of practice. Similar to the Beach and Ward (2013) findings within school-based communities of practice, adolescents in the present study exhibited similar dispositions in regards to participation within digital contexts. This finding is significant because it bolstered the theory that membership was important and directly related to the literate identities that adolescents hold within a variety of literacy contexts.

Multiplicity and contextual nature. The current study found evidence to support the previous assertions that literate identities are multiple and vary between contexts (Beach & Ward, 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012). However, this study focused upon practices that occur outside the context of school, thus extending our understanding of literate identities in multiple contexts. Many studies have examined the ways in which children and adolescents' literate identities were manifested within school contexts (Beach et al., 2013; Beach & Ward, 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012; Young, 1996; Young & Beach, 1997), yet no studies examined the ways in which literate

identities, as defined by Beach and Ward (2013), may vary within other contexts. The present study gave adolescents the ability to discuss a wide variety of practices within multiple settings, which emerged to be dependent not only upon the context and community of practice, but also related to the affinity spaces they traversed within digital contexts. The findings in this research serve to further increase our understandings of how context impacts literate identities in digital contexts. Understanding how adolescents perceive their literate identities in digital contexts is necessary to obtaining a more multidimensional understanding regarding their literate identities. Beach and Ward (2013) theorize that “Children’s flexibility in understanding the different communities and being able to be boundary crossers (Wenger, 1998), activating the literate identity that fits in the particular context, is key to their engaged participation in those different literacy communities of practice” (p. 251).

By understanding the multi-dimensional nature of adolescents’ literate identities, and further, the relationship that exists between the multiple contexts in which they traverse and the impact that said contexts have upon their literate identities, we serve to help increase their ‘engaged participation’ in different digital communities of practice and digital affinity spaces in which they participate. We know that adolescents possess multiple literate identities in multiple contexts, so the key to understanding their literate identities may likely be connected to the ways in which they cross boundaries between one practice and another. Wenger (1998) holds that boundaries can be crossed “when participants are able to recognize an experience of meaning in each other and to develop enough of a shared sense of competence to do some mutual learning” (p. 140). This shared sense of competence exemplifies the social nature of literacy and the way in which meaning making is ever present in the literacy contexts in which we traverse. As adolescents communicated and collaborated in digital contexts, their competence perceptions impacted not only their overall feelings of competence, but further, served to impact the other members in their communities of practice with whom they interacted.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how the literate identity formation of sixth grade adolescents were shaped by the memberships they held within various new literacy practices. New literacy practices were shown to be interconnected, likely due to the fact that the adolescents manipulated the practices in order to better facilitate asynchronous and synchronous communication. Further, adolescents revealed they navigated both in affinity spaces and within communities of practice, which seemed to be linked to perceptions regarding the given new literacy practice.

Literate identities were found to be impacted by both competence perceptions and membership perceptions within digital contexts. The importance of both intrinsic competence perceptions and extrinsic competence perceptions within digital contexts was found to be significant amongst the adolescents that participated in the study. Further, competence was demonstrated to not only vary, but seemingly occurred on a continuum which was often in an active state of development. Membership was also found to be active and five different roles of membership emerged from the adolescent demonstration and discussions. The present study bolstered previous

findings that literate identities are multiple and vary between contexts (Beach & Ward, 2013; Collins & Beach, 2012).

This study found that the new literacy skills and new literacy practices of adolescents were not only interconnected, but also impacted the literate identities of the adolescent participants. Continual discussion of adolescents' new literacy practices and skills is imperative in order to stay connected to the types of new literacy practices in which they engage. The study was not without limitations, chief among them was the accessibility of the technological tools and platforms. Further exploration into the digital new literacy practices of adolescents is necessary in order to continue to develop a clear understanding of the new literacy skills and new literacy practices they have. These understandings are necessary to examine how literate identities form within digital contexts.

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