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Popular culture texts: Thinking outside the book and onto the screen

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Abstract

As current generations of students are entering the classroom having had years of "screen time," it is imperative to rethink and remake traditional teaching practices. The present paper thus aims to explore multimedia publishing and the possibilities it has to offer foreign language learners in the consumption and production of popular culture texts. As multimodal types of literary texts, podcasting, video publishing and live streaming prove pivotal in enabling students become engaged in *global* communication.

Keywords: multimedia publishing; podcasting; video publishing; live streaming; multimodal/multimedial skills.

Resumen

Debido a que las generaciones actuales de estudiantes llegan a la clase habiendo tenido años de "tiempo frente a la pantalla", es imprescindible repensar y reconfigurar las prácticas de enseñanza tradicionales. El siguiente trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar los sistemas de edición multimedia y las posibilidades que la misma tiene para ofrecer a los estudiantes de idioma extranjero en el consumo y producción de textos de cultura popular. Considerados como tipos multimodales de textos literarios, los fenómenos del "podcasting", de la edición de vídeo y del "streaming" en vivo demuestran jugar un rol primordial en tanto permiten a los estudiantes formar parte de la comunicación global.

Palabras clave: edición multimedia; podcasting; edición de video; streaming en vivo; habilidades multimodales/multimediales.

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DEFINED AS *DIGITAL NATIVES* by author Marc Prensky (2001), the current generation of students has been born into a highly technological world where they are all "native speakers" of the language of computers, video games, digital devices and Web platforms. These new media have indeed come to offer students endless possibilities to engage in interaction with others beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom. Indeed, the Internet is not only a place to access information, but also a place that challenges us with a myriad of platforms for social interaction and collaboration (Johnson, 2005). With the proliferation of mobile devices such as smartphones, MP3 players and tablets, popular culture nowadays is rich with engagement in online social media, especially among teenagers and young adults. As a result, production of popular culture texts has grown so rapidly in recent years up to the point of becoming almost ubiquitous in everyday life. Popular culture texts constructed, linked and disseminated through online, digital technologies within informal contexts play a powerful role in *what* students choose to read and write, but most importantly, in *how* they read and write.

In light of the aforesaid, we are in the midst of an inevitable shift in both teaching and learning practices, which indeed creates a strong argument for acknowledging this new digital/media literacy skill within the formal setting of the classroom. Put more bluntly, twenty-first century learning needs new spaces—both physical and virtual—that actually connect the school, college or university with the global community of the Web. This, in turn, not only requires students to interact with multimodal texts, thereby developing multimedia and multiliteracy skills; but it also demands educators to acknowledge their pivotal role in empowering learners to analyse and reflect upon the impact of images, sound and text.

Having said this, the present work thus sets out to explore multimedia publishing and the potentials it has to offer foreign language learners in the consumption and production of popular culture texts. As the ability to download, create and share multimodal literary texts continues to expand, podcasting, video publishing and live streaming can be great motivators for students to engage in meaningful, global communication. Yet, before proceeding any further, it is first imperative to define these three technological tools in detail.

Reinventing the Textbook: Podcasting, Video Publishing and Live Streaming

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* defines the term podcast as "a digital recording of a radio broadcast or similar program, made available on the Internet for downloading to a personal audio player." Born in late 2004, the term podcast resulted from the combination of iPod and broadcast, and can refer to both the content and the method of delivery (Islam, 2007, p. 5). Podcasting is, therefore, a way of creating and distributing audio content in the form of Web radio. Podcasts are typically saved in MP3 format,

so they can be downloaded to any MP3 audio system, such as iPods, MP3 players, smartphones or computers, and then played and replayed on demand.

As Richardson explains in his book (2010),

> Many podcasts are presented by normal, everyday people just talking about things that interest them–with a bit of music mixed in. Others are more serious and focused in content, offering up the latest interesting news on a particular topic, interviews with interesting people, or recording of interesting keynotes and presentations (p. 112)

All that is required to start listening to podcasts is to download iTunes form the Apple site to your computer or the iPP Podcast Player App to your smartphone. Both types of software are available for free and will run on any computer and a diversity of mobile devices. Moreover, podcasting allows listeners to subscribe to those programs that they find most interesting, and automatically receive the latest episodes. Following Islam (2007), "[w]ith podcasts, the listener is in control… If people subscribe to a particular training podcast series and then decide that they no longer want to take classes on that subject, they can unsubscribe and the program will stop coming" (p. 6).

At present, there is a plethora of podcasts to choose from. Museums make podcasts to be used as audio guides to exhibitions. Radio shows are available as podcasts. Universities offer podcasts on academic topics and teachers or conference presenters create podcasts for those who are unable to attend a class, workshop or lecture. Within the field of foreign language learning, podcasts can be used to listen to real texts by native speakers or to have students create their own radio shows. The motivating factor, above all, is that the content of podcasts is not limited to a school or community audience. On the contrary, podcasts are meant to be broadcast online, thereby reaching wider audiences and engaging individuals in authentic global communication. One good example of podcasting for foreign language teaching would be the *English Teacher John Show* where John Koons, an American English teacher form Philadelphia, broadcasts stories and language lessons from Matsumoto, Japan. Transcripts for his podcasts are also available on his blog, as well as videos, pictures and other media resources.

To sum up, simply by recording digital audio with a computer, MP3 player or smartphone and then publishing the recording online, teachers can have students share what they create with others on the World Wide Web. This can easily be done by using an open-source program like Audacity, which is a free audio-editing program to record, edit and, if necessary, translate recordings into MP3 files. In this way, students can publish interviews, create audio shows on a given theme or even recite poetry and upload their work to the Web server at their school. Yet, if the school has no server

of its own, a good alternative would be to upload the recording to archive.org, which provides free storage for videos, audio files, photos and text, and then link the URL that is assigned to the file to a blog, website or wikispace.

Apart from all this, and in case some teachers may be rather hesitant about having students create audio recordings or about using the new technology themselves to record and upload audio files to the Web, already made podcasts can be used for developing students' listening and critical thinking skills, while exposing them to authentic texts other than those pedagogically controlled texts they encounter in textbooks. Indeed, podcasting allows students to access an array of podcasts on a great many different topics and even comment on them. Hence, the possibilities podcasting has to offer foreign language learners at all levels are only limited by one's own imagination.

In a similar vein, video publishing, also known as movie making, is "digital storytelling in its most complex form" (Richardson, 2010, p. 121). Students can create their own multimodal texts by making use of images and sound. All that is required to create a video is a digital camera, smartphone or laptop, and a video-editing program like Windows MovieMaker or iMovie for Apple computers. Both programs come with useful tutorials and there are always loads of YouTube videos online based on the subject. As a matter of fact, YouTube itself offers the possibility to record video from one's own computer onto their server and, moving a step further, YouTube's offspring, TeacherTube.com, is exclusively dedicated to student/teacher-produced videos.

The potential of video publishing is therefore limitless. From a foreign language teaching standpoint, teachers could have students read and perform stories or poetry they write or further ask them to create digital stories by simply using pictures and then recording audio voiceovers onto the images. One example of the latter is a digital story I created myself, which I have entitled *Embodiment*. Yet, if appropriateness may be an issue for some teachers who are doubtful about having students create image videos, a good alternative would be to have them produce text videos based on a given story or passage, such as the *V for Vendetta* video on kinetic typography in which V introduces himself to Eevy, in a long rambling string of alliteration.

Finally, the third technological tool to be explored in this work is that of live-streaming video to the Web. By means of this technology, school plays, end-of-year concerts or senior student presentations can be broadcast to relatives far and wide. Moreover, teacher professional development seminars, conference workshops and presentations can be made available to everyone for free and without the hassle of having to travel long distances. All that is required to put this into practice is a stable Internet connection, a computer with a microphone, a video camera and a free account at an online video-streaming site like Ustream.tv. This site does not only allow users to stream video easily, but also provides the possibility to archive shows for later viewing,

and even offers a chat room for viewers to interact while watching. One example of a past lecture that has been archived is that of an educator talking about how he launched at College a real life version of the game Quidditch from the Harry Potter books. As Richardson (2010) explains, "[a] lot of presenters (myself included) stream many of their presentations and take advantage of the chat feature that Ustream provides. The 'backchannel' conversation can be a great way of interacting with the online audience and broadening the scope of the dialogue" (p. 128).

From an educational perspective, creating and sharing multimodal texts implies that "[t]he potentials are huge, and the pitfalls challenging. But publishing to an audience can be a great motivator for students. Podcasting, videocasting, screencasting, and now live-streaming TV are all great ways to get student content online" (Richardson, 2010, p. 129). Creativity with digital media provides opportunities for self-expression and the making of new content to be shared with authentic, wider audiences. As Kadjer (2010) states, Web 2.0, also referred to as the Read/Write Web, offers learning environments and practices that

> *do* make possible opportunities for creating; for communicating in multiple modalities; for sharing and publishing our work for an engaged, invested audience; and for interacting and collaborating, even globally. The new literacy practices open up some new territory in the English classroom, while amplifying things that we'd previously known and embraced (p. 35).

In addition, given that the almost ubiquitous presence of smartphones and free online interactive networks have begun to blur many of the cultural definitions of communication that we have lived under for generations (Kadjer, 2010, p. 112), the overall meaning of literacy is unavoidably becoming resignified as a result. Nowadays, in a media-saturated world, it is no longer enough for students to simply learn how to read and write. Current generations of students need to develop the ability to sort through, analyze, decode, create and communicate information through different media. We, as educators, are thus responsible for teaching media literacy skills to our students. In Baker's words (2012), "[m]edia literacy is not a separate course; instead, it is a lens through which we see and understand our media-saturated world. It is also a teaching strategy that should be incorporated into every course" (p. 6). Moreover, "[m]edia literacy encourages us to consider the world of our students–their media, their popular culture–as the hook to get their attention and get them engaged, while also meeting essential teaching standards" (Baker, 2012, p. 4).

Crossing the Digital Divide, Pushing Educational Boundaries

Most educators would agree that effective pedagogy must involve the use of authentic material for learning. Surprisingly enough, today's students are more active consumers and producers of this type of material than we can possibly and actually imagine. According to Baker (2012),

> Among young people ages 8-18, the average amount time spent with all media (TV, music, computers, videogames, print, and movies) is 7 hours and 38 minutes per day; however, "today's youth pack a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes worth of media content into those daily 7 ½ hours" (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010, p.2). This figure actually shocked researchers for the Kaiser Family Foundation when they announced the latest data in January 2012. They had expected time spent viewing TV, for example, to be displaced by new media. It was not. (p. 27)

This quotation has two-fold implications: students are not only enthralled by media, but they are also multitasking with all its technological and digital forms. Students nowadays come to the classroom being multiply literate already. Indeed, it can further be claimed that current generation of students are creating a variety of genres in their everyday life, ranging from pages on social networking sites to videos and audio files. Thus, as educators, we should take advantage of this fact by tapping into this new digital media: "[w]hen we recognize the media and popular culture of our students and incorporate it into instruction, we demonstrate that we value their media and its connections with learning. One of the things all educators need to acknowledge is that media are also texts" (Baker, 2012, p. 27). Once this is acknowledged, we will then be ready to move out of the book and onto the screen.

Nevertheless, as Kadjer (2003) explains,

> Integrating technology into the classroom absolutely requires change in the role of the English teacher. Not only do we need to work to facilitate student learning, but we need to work to develop both our digital literacies and those of our students…
>
> Becoming tech-savvy does not require knowing the logistics behind establishing a network or how to repair hardware… becoming a tech-savvy teacher doesn't mean you have to become a "techie." You don't have to abandon your beloved, tattered copy of Webster's dictionary for the newest online edition available through a handheld PC. Becoming tech-savvy simply means that you will lead students to become digitally literate within

the context of your curriculum. (p. 10-11)

As teachers, we make choices. We choose the texts we want our students to explore. We choose the exercises we want them to work on or produce. We choose what we believe are the most efficient materials and learning tools for our students. Podcasting, video publishing and live streaming are simply some of the countless teaching tools available, to be chosen only when thought appropriate, motivating and enriching. Unfortunately, some educators perpetuate traditional teaching practices and modes of literacy, thereby creating a divide between students' meaningful, real-life learning and that which is delivered in the classroom. Twenty-first century learning requires new spaces—both physical and virtual—that indeed connect the school, college or university with the global community, and support creative and productive learning beyond the classroom. Evolving pedagogies demand evolving curriculum design that integrates technology and the teaching of twenty-first century skills into our everyday educational practice.

Conclusion

We live in a digital age in which the learning tools and the literacies that these require are constantly and continuously changing. As Mahiri (2006) argues in his article, "[t]raditional conceptions of print-based literacy do not apprehend the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices in people's lives enabled by new technologies that both magnify and simplify access to and creation of multimodal texts" (p. 61). Both digital and media literacies as a whole prove better at describing the skills and practices our students now require to be successful readers and writers outside the classroom. In other words, for today's students to be fully literate, they need to be able to make meaning out of different texts, text forms and communication modes, as well as to be able to communicate through those modes (Kajder, 2010, p. 9). The increasing participatory culture we are nowadays immersed in demands teachers to teach these new literacies and to create classroom spaces that will go beyond the boundaries of the walls and embrace multiple modes and media.

In McLuhan's words (1960), "[w]ithout an understanding of media grammars, we cannot hope to achieve a contemporary awareness of the world in which we live" (p. xii). Digital and media technologies shape the ways we think, the ways we interact and the ways we understand. Yet, the mere integration of these technologies into the learning environment is not enough. Digital and media—or information and communication—technologies can only enhance teaching and learning if based upon suitable pedagogical approaches that incorporate multimodal texts in ways that are creative, dynamic and meaningful to further extend literacy.

On a concluding note, as Wesch (2008) once said, "[t]here is literally something

in the air, and it is nothing less than the digital artifacts of over one billion people and computers networked together collectively producing over 2,000 gigabytes of new information per second." In this light, the discussion so far has actually been meant as a starter, prompting educators to carry ideas forward, examine their teaching practice, and think critically about the pedagogical implications of implementing new tools and digital/media skills into the classroom to create popular culture texts to be shared with the global community of the Web. Within the framework of multimedia/multiliteracy pedagogy, educators can help broaden students' opportunities to express themselves, as well as their linguistic and creative talents. It is thus crucial that the concept of literacy be expanded to include visual, audio, interactive and digital media for, as Richardson (2010) states, these skills

> support the important, overarching goal of developing students who can flourish in the networked personal spaces they will inhabit the rest of their lives. If we fail to graduate students who are not able to create, sustain, and participate in these networks in safe, ethical, and effective ways, we've done them a disservice. (p. 149)

The ultimate aim of the ideas captured here is, therefore, two-fold: to highlight the importance of continually asking ourselves, as educators, what it actually means to be truly literate and educated in the twenty-first century; and to raise awareness of how enlightening–however challenging–change can be in both your students' and your own learning life.

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