



## Pre-Service Teachers on the Use of New Media Literacies in K-12 Schools in The United States

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### 1. Introduction

Literacy education and the new media literacies are at the forefront of pedagogy in our 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. McLaughlin (2010), Leu and Kinzer (2000) acknowledge the importance of teaching new media literacies in literacy courses in higher education to prepare teachers to support the literacy learning of students in K-12 schools in the United States who will live and interact in a complex literate society in a global economy. According to Henderson and Scheffler (2003) new media literacies and their importance in addressing a changing paradigm for teaching and learning in today's U.S. schools cannot be longer ignored due to the different ways in which learners in K-12 schools in the United States read and access content knowledge by relying more and more on new media as pedagogical tools.

Sanders and Albers (2010) point out in their work on multimodality and new literacies that teachers in K-12 schools are exploring new ways in which literacies are embedded in new semiotic modes and how the teaching and learning of the new generation of students is dramatically changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Literacy, in the new media age, is not longer confined "to communication through reading and writing of traditional printed text." (Sanders and Albers, 2010, p.1) This means that content knowledge in the different content areas is created, inscribed, sent, and received via different semiotic modes embedded in new technologies. Students, as new literate persons in a complex society, must be able to access literacy content via new media and new ways in which knowledge is inscribed in society (Albers, 2007a).

This study investigated how pre-service teachers in an upper level course in literacy in the content areas in a Liberal Arts University perceived and analyzed the use of new media literacies in K-12 schools in the United States. The investigator used response journals as a method to capture the self-reflective processes of the pre-service teachers in the course to analyze the pre-service teachers' positionality on new media literacies and their pedagogical significance in K-12 schools in the United States. The investigator asked the pre-service teachers in the literacy in the content areas course to critically analyze the issue of teaching with new media literacies versus the more traditional approach based on the use of textbook in the classroom. As it will be discussed later in the paper, the pre-service teachers in the study critically evaluate the advantages and setbacks of teaching literacy in the content areas with new technology. A co-existence between the traditional approaches versus the emerging multimodal approach constituted the central theme of the reflective processes in the response journals produced by the pre-service teachers in the literacy in the content areas upper level course.

### 2 Relevant literature

To situate the context of the study in the relevant literature of new media literacies studies, the review of relevant scholarship will focus on recent development on multimodality and social semiotics in particular. The importance of such literature is due to the changing nature of literacy and texts in the educational landscape and how educators are receiving the innovations in the field of literacy across the content areas (Albers, 2006a). A social semiotics perspective inscribed in a multimodal pedagogy will illuminate the landscape of pedagogy at the crossroads between the traditional view of literacy and the new developments in K-12 schools.

Social semiotics is a theory that explores the nature and functions of signs and the processes that underlie the formation of meaning in language and other system of signification in social and cultural contexts (Hodge and Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). New media literacies studies are part of this revolution in meaning making since they are part of a shifting notion of text that is changing the way



students in K-12 schools are acquiring and using knowledge in different sociocultural contexts. As Gee (2005) claims literacy is part of broader discourse processes that do not use a single mode of representation and meaning but relies upon multimodal representations where signs from different domains (written, visual, sound and the like) merge to form new genres of texts for producing and communicating knowledge in society.

Halliday (1985) contends that literacy is never inscribed in a single mode and that texts are produced and used for meaning and communication according to the needs of the individual and the context in which meaning and communication take place. Halliday (1985) also points out that texts are hybrid formation of signs that can be analyzed to become aware of and understand how meaning is formed, inscribed, and communicated in different contexts via different genres of texts. New media literacies is always found at the crossroads of multiple sign systems that carry meaning for the individuals who recognize them as part of significant modes of communication in a social collective (Kress and Jewitt, 2003).

Research done with pre-service teachers on the use of multimodal texts within a social semiotics tradition found that teachers are willing to infuse their teaching with different modes when developing content area instruction (Rowse and Pahl, 2007). Teachers who are transitioning to new literacies are critically analyzing the place of the new in relation to the more traditional aspects of literacy. Studies in the use of new media literacies in the classroom suggest that teachers are willing to incorporate new forms of literacy instruction in the content areas but still see the traditional approach to literacy as important to give students a balanced approach to literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Harste, 2003; Kist, 2005; Miller, 2007).

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 The context of the study**

The study took place in a Liberal Arts college in the Northeast of the United States in the course of two semesters in an upper level course in Literacy in the Content Areas. The nature of the course was to explore literacy across the curriculum by addressing the use of new media literacies compared to more traditional approaches to literacies in the content areas. The instructor designed the course as a seminar where students (N=25 for each semester) had the opportunity to analyze the content of the readings via a reflective practice approach. The pre-service teachers had to write five reflective papers where they had to engage with the issue of teaching literacy in the content areas within the new media literacies paradigm versus the more traditional approach to literacy instruction. The instructor collected the papers and gave written feedback to the pre-service teachers in the literacy in the content areas course to enhance the conversation and delve into the complexities of the changing landscape of literacy instruction in K-12 in the United States of America.

### **4 Findings**

The findings suggest that pre-service literacy teachers in the literacy in the content areas course saw a co-existence between the teaching of literacy across the curriculum with new media literacies and the use of more traditional approaches in literacy instruction. Two major themes emerged from the analysis of the reflective papers written by the pre-service teachers in the course of two semesters: (a) literacy as a third space for learning; (b) literacy as bridge to learning in traditional contexts. The former theme presents literacy as rapidly shifting from paper to pixels (Hull and Katz, 2006) where pre-service teaching digital natives prefer words and other semiotic modes inscribed in digital/virtual environments to engage the new generation of students in learning that is more attuned to their learning styles and personality types. The latter, instead, saw pre-service teachers debating where to find a balance between the new and the traditional approach to literacy due to the importance of exposing students to different processes of reading and writing in the curriculum.

The study reports a co-existence between the two approaches in the pre-service teachers in the study and suggests that the participants in the study critically analyzed the issues by trying to understand the pros and cons of teaching literacy with the new media and the more traditional one. In turn, even though new media literacies and multimodal approaches to the teaching of literacy are gaining momentum and



importance in K-12 schools in the United States, the pre-service teachers in the study questioned the shifting paradigm of teaching literacy across the curriculum altogether without taking into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of the new paradigm shift in literacy instruction in K-12 schools in the United States of America.

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