

New Literacies and Popular Cultural Practices of University Students in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Students nowadays tend to become more demanding in terms of the inputs from teachers in a classroom. As up-to-date educators, we should endeavour to put ourselves into our students' shoes by exploring the world they are living in and keep reviewing how we can make good use of their popular cultural practices to motivate their interest and boost their confidence in learning English language as a second language. To have a better understanding on my students' viewpoints and practices on new literacies and popular culture, I first conducted a questionnaire survey with students from a private university then collected their viewpoints in an informal interview session with a couple of them. To gain a more objective data on students' practices on using electronic devices during the lessons, a class observation is held.

With reference to the existing literatures in theories, my study would like to address the following research questions:

- (a) What are the popular cultural practices of these learners?*
- (b) How are these popular cultural practices mediated?*
- (c) What and how do these learners learn from engaging in these popular cultural practices?*

I first critically review the literature on new literacies then record the popular cultural practices of my students in the Web 2.0 world. The world is undergoing rapid changes so having more new developments in information literacy or the emergence of the Web 3.0 world in the near future are foreseeable. There is a need to encourage both our current and younger generation to be well-equipped with the global challenges ahead.

1. Introduction

Students nowadays tend to become more demanding in terms of the inputs from teachers in a classroom. As up-to-date educators, we should endeavour to put ourselves into our students' shoes by exploring the world they are living in.

To have a better understanding on my students' viewpoints and practices on new literacies and popular culture, my data sources are both quantitative and qualitative. I first conducted a questionnaire survey on 18 February 2011 with a group of forty-one students from a private university then collected their viewpoints in an informal interview session with a couple of them. To gain a more objective data on students' practices on using electronic devices during the lessons, a class observation is held throughout the semester.

With reference to the existing literatures in theories, my study would like to address the following research questions:

- (a) What are the popular cultural practices of these learners?
- (b) How are these popular cultural practices mediated?

(c) What and how do these learners learn from engaging in these popular cultural practices?

After defining some concepts that can help explain the literacy practices of generation of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, I will then describe and discuss findings in the sections 2 and 3.

2. Literature Review

This section aims at examining various concepts on literacy.

2.1 Literacies

Literacy, generally speaking, refers to the ability to read and write traditionally. Definitions of literacy have been changing over time. A literate person is one who has the appropriate level of competences in reading, writing and arithmetics so that s/he can function effectively in his or her own community [7].

2.2 Information Literacy

The term "multiliteracies" has been introduced [12] for the "burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies" (p. 60). The scope of multiliteracies can be narrowed down to digital literacy and information literacy.

The transformation from textbooks to diversified learning resources is a drastic change in the field of Education. The delivery of teaching and learning materials is no longer conducted through face-to-face interactions at classrooms only but also through online platforms such as Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle). Through this kind of Course Management System (CMS), educators like me can effectively create online learning sites to replace the traditional culture of over-reliance on textbooks as the main teaching and learning resources. Flexible use of learning resources can enhance students' interests and achieve the goal of real lifelong learning. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) [11] becomes a phenomenon in the cyber world. Facebook is one of the notable examples of the Internet-based social network and is the third-largest nation reached 500m members in July 2010 [18].

[13] points out the distinction between Web 1.0 in 1990s and Web 2.0 which is the second generation of the World Wide Web nowadays. As [10] mentions, the former is 'industrial' by nature and provides 'products', 'artifacts' or 'commodities' to Internet users while the latter is 'post-industrial', more interactive and more related to 'services' (p.17) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of the examples of Web 1.0 or Web 2.0 Internet applications and approaches (Copied from [9] and [13])

Web 1.0	Web 2.0
Personal websites	Blogging
Britannica Online	Wikipedia
Netscape	Google
Content management systems	Wikis
Publishing	Participation
MSN Space	Facebook

As can be seen from the above table, our students nowadays tend to become digital generation since can get information simply at their finger tips in a digital world. The Web 2.0 applications are more interactive than the simple steps of uploading and downloading. Users cannot only get information rather quickly but can also share information with fellow users. Compared with Britannica Online, Wikipedia is more dynamic since everyone can contribute to this authorship. All sorts of Apple products like iPhone and iPad and the other Android mobile phones are regarded as the icons of trend. 'WhatsApp' which is free of charge is one of the typical examples in the revolution of applications.

2.3 New Literacy Studies

New Literacy Studies is a movement on the reading and writing change from a focus on individuals to interaction and social and cultural practices [1], [5], [8], [14], [15]. These practices can happen in the historical, political and economic world. New Literacies are quite diversified since they combine letters, symbols, colours, sounds and graphics and can be shown online, messaging, SMS, phones and computers.

The theory of 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS) open a new page in the definition of 'literacies' [3], [6]; [17]: literacy does not only refer to the progression of technical skills, but is also closely related to the cultural contexts or domains which means one language or a variety is more appropriate than another in some specific contexts [4]. [2], [3] point out that literacy is more than just the acquisition of skills and it is always embedded in a particular cultural context. Language and literacy are not abstract systems but social and cultural practices, which are shaped by the people involved and by their relationship to each other.

2.4 Literacy practices

Literacy practices can be classified into two main types and vary in terms: the first type is the literacy practices at school, which are academic literacy practices [16], dominant or mainstream literacies [1], and another type is literacy practices at home and community settings.

[9] state that literacy practices on social media platforms are different from traditional literacy practices in being more 'participatory' and less 'published', more 'collaborative' and less 'individuated', and more 'distributed' and less 'author-centric' (p.9). In the electronic world, students can be more actively involved in reading and writing activities through sharing their own stories in blogs and can acquire the abilities of reading and writing.

2.5 Popular cultural practices

The definition on popular cultural practices is an atmosphere, platform or space which attracts the attention of people who would be keen on immersing themselves into it.

3. Findings on the popular cultural practices of my students

Students nowadays are digital natives who are widely exposed to information literacy and can enjoy easy access to Internet.

3.1 Background of my subjects

There are forty-one respondents who are from various disciplines, namely, Journalism, Chinese, Business Administration, Computer Studies, but share the common interest in enhancing their knowledge in Linguistics. All of them take an Elective course 'Morphology' in 2011 at the Chu Hai College of Higher Education which is a private university in Hong Kong. Only two out of forty-one come from Mainland Chinese and the rest were born in Hong Kong.

In terms of their English proficiency level, all the local students passed in their Use of English at the Advanced Level Examination, which is the minimum admission requirement of a bachelor's degree. Most students can speak English confidently though they have notable grammatical mistakes in writing.

3.2 General Findings on my subjects' popular cultural practices:

Over 40% of them spend more than 10 hours per week on Internet-related activities such as visiting websites, blogs and online discussion forums. The above-mentioned activities, not surprisingly, become the most popular activity among my Morphology students. 26 out of 41 respondents are addicted to Facebook since they accessed this platform almost every day last month while the second most popular Internet tool is emails. Two of my students who come from Mainland China also become Facebook fans gradually since Facebook becomes part of our classroom or even Hong Kong culture.

As for communication with family and friends, nearly one-third of these university students spend one to five hours on chatting with family and friends both face-to-face and on phone, SMS or MSN Messenger. SMS is as important as Facebook for my students. Over 60% of them send and receive SMS almost every day.

Regarding entertainment, unlike secondary and primary students, a majority of university students just spend less than an hour in playing videogames and listening to radio. Half of the respondents spend one to five hours per week in watching TV and movies (including VCDs, DVDs, on mobile phone or computer), listening to English songs, reading leisure books, comics or magazines, which are common activities for both male and female. Using electronic media devices outside school, not including doing homework becomes a phenomenon among students aged from 19-24 now since 41% of these respondents spend 30-50 hours per week on using these devices. In spite of their frequent Internet-related activities, writing blogs, uploading videos to YouTube and posting microblog entries are the least favourite activities for university students. Almost two-thirds of respondents have never done any of the above activities.

One of the encouraging facts on English language learning is how these students immerse themselves into English quite often. Nearly 90% of students reported that they had recently read English comics, books or magazines, listened to English songs, visited websites in English and used English in electronic mails, online messengers or SMS one month before.

3.3 Interesting observation from my data

Students generally prefer incorporating websites, comics and video games into our teaching and learning materials since these are something they are more familiar with and something they can expose to everyday. Websites stay on top of the list when compared with other options.

70% of respondents agree that using popular culture can help them learn English. From their viewpoints, using popular culture cannot only draw their attention but can also improve their learning effectiveness. They admit that they have low attention span so are eager to become occupied with tasks which are related to popular culture.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I first critically review the current research on Web 2.0 and new literacies then record the popular cultural practices of my students in the Web 2.0 world. The world is undergoing rapid changes so having more new developments in information literacy or the emergence of the Web 3.0 world in the near future are foreseeable. There is a need to encourage both our current and younger generation to be well-equipped with the global challenges ahead.

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