



DIGITAL LITERACY, COSMOPOLITANISM, AND THE SUBALTERN

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ABSTRACT: In recent times a body of scholarship has built up showing how new technologies are linked to the construction of hybrid and cosmopolitan youth identities through digital literacy practices. It is important therefore to consider the transformative potential of these practices in academic settings. Reviewing recent literature on digital literacy practices and hybridity, this paper argues for the need to pay greater attention to the ways in which the distribution of cultural capital exercises an influence on the relationship between school and 'out of school' literacies. Examples of examination processes in Brazil and Australia are presented to identify how educational inequalities are likely to be reproduced despite the inclusion in examinations of questions focusing on digital literacy. The paper contributes to our understanding of the relationship between vernacular cultural and linguistic formations and formal schooling.

KEYWORDS: New literacies, digital literacy, social inequality, migration, cosmopolitanism

LETRAMENTO DIGITAL, COSMOPOLITISMO E O SUBALTERNO

RESUMO: Nos últimos tempos, várias pesquisas têm mostrado como as novas tecnologias estão ligadas à construção de identidades juvenis híbridas e cosmopolitas, através de práticas de letramento digital. É importante, portanto, considerar o potencial transformador dessas práticas em meios acadêmicos. Apresentando uma revisão da literatura recente sobre as práticas de letramento digital e hibridismo, este trabalho defende a necessidade de se prestar maior atenção às formas pelas quais a distribuição de capital cultural exerce uma influência sobre a relação entre letramentos fora e dentro da escola e "fora da escola". Exemplos de sistemas de prova no Brasil e na Austrália são apresentados para identificar como as desigualdades educacionais são susceptíveis de ser reproduzidas, apesar da inclusão de exames de questões relativas a letramento digital. O trabalho contribui para a nossa compreensão da relação entre formações culturais e linguísticas vernáculas e escolaridade formal.

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: Novos letramentos, letramento digital, desigualdade social, migração, cosmopolitismo



Introduction

The past two decades have seen the rise of new literacy practices, and new conceptions of literacy (COIRO, 2008; COPE; KALANTZIS, 2009; DUFF, 2005; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011; MONTE MOR; MENEZES DE SOUZA, 2008). The field of New Literacy Studies which has emerged over this period bases at least part of its ‘newness’ on the attention that it gives to the emergence of new technologies as part of literacy (GEE, 2007; STREET, 2003). One of the features of this field is the identification of literacy practices as forming part of a complex social world and contributing to the construction of identities and cultures including multilingual cultures (BLOMMAERT; RAMPTON, 2012; MARTIN-JONES; JONES, 2001; NORTON; TOOHEY, 2011). In recent work emphasis has been placed on how the participation of young people in online networks can contribute to the formation of fluid, hybrid and complex identities which involve shifting between different modalities, registers, and languages (LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2008). The transformative power of participation in online communication has emerged as a key theme in NLS, often presented in a tone of optimism. The purpose of this paper is to interrogate some of the social dynamics which constrain such transformative power, particularly in relation to the experiences of what migrant and working-class youth with the institution of formal schooling.

While new literacy studies has moved the study of literacy outside of the classroom, it has not yet fully addressed how ‘out of school’ literacies are connected to school-based literacies – particularly pedagogy and evaluation (LUKE, 2004). Scholars have often advocated schools incorporating ‘out of school’ literacies, however the basis of this incorporation remains relatively unexplored and problematic. In particular, I argue, greater attention needs to be paid to earlier work theorising the operation of schooling in terms of cultural capital (BOURDIEU, 1977; BOURDIEU; CHAMPAGNE, 1992; BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1964, 1970; LUKE, 2004). The tradition of critical scholarship focusing on the institutional reproduction of social power through



schooling can usefully clarify the forms of agency and transformative potential embodied in digital literacy. I begin by reviewing the contribution of scholarship on cosmopolitanism fostered through digital literacy, focusing on the influential work of Eva Lam with young migrants in the USA (LAM, 2000, 2004, 2006). This work pays close attention to the development of youth identities which involve new kinds of cultural practice that go unrecognised by mainstream schooling. I then consider how such scholarship challenges, and is in turn challenged by, work in the earlier critical tradition of scholarship. I offer some examples of what might be called, following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ (SANTOS, 2007) in order to bring class analysis into the framework proposed by digital literacy scholars. Attempts by schools to adapt to cosmopolitan youth practices are also considered in relation to the function of examinations in the allocation of students to higher education and employment.

New literacies and cosmopolitanism

Eva Lam’s case studies of first generation migrant secondary school students’ use of e-mail/website construction in English, and multilingual texting have been influential in the field of literacy studies and are a useful example of the insights to be gained from online ethnography (LAM, 2000, 2004, 2006). Her analysis is based on code-switching and language play amongst teenage, bilingual migrants participating in online communities. In one example, she shows how a young migrant’s online interactions as he constructed a fan page for a Japanese pop star helped him gain confidence with the English language as he developed an online persona (LAM, 2000). She also suggests that online transnational communication between young people may contribute to economic and employment opportunities (LAM, 2009). Lam highlights over-reliance in previous understandings on minority-majority categories defined within a nation state – showing multiple allegiances across national boundaries in online communities. She suggests a



definition of culture based on multiple practices and identities, inviting exploration of ‘the porous boundaries between cultural practices as these practices travel with people and media channels across diverse communities and shifting social and spatial territories’ (LAM, 2006, p. 217) Lam portrays involvement of young people in fluid, digitally mediated communities as empowering, self-actualising, and an important form of literacy/language learning. She concludes that researchers need to take into account translocal forms of multilingualism mediated by networked technologies and an expanded view of the literate repertoire and cultural resources of migrant youth (LAM, 2009). Similarly, the implication of her work is that teachers need to take into account the complex identities and literacy practices of students. Lam’s approach and findings are echoed in much other work (COPE; KALANTZIS, 2009; GEE, 2007; HULL; SCHULTZ, 2001; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011).

Lam’s work is part of a wider trend in research away from a ‘deficit’ view of minority and working-class youth, and towards a celebration of vibrant and innovative youth subcultures (HULL; ZACHER; HIBBERT, 2009). The richness of out of school literacy practices generate great optimism in terms of the ability to harness them as resource for schooling (GONZÁLEZ; MOLL; AMANTI, 2013; MOLL, 1990). However, there is a part of this vision of a new ‘digital democracy’ which is blind to power inequalities (ANDREOTTI; PASHBY, 2013), including those mediated by language and the question of social class remains largely ignored (COLLINS, 1988). First, there is a failure to recognise that the kind of cosmopolitanism that is part of the online cultures of minority and working-class youth is not necessarily the kind of cosmopolitanism cultivated in middle-class families and which counts as capital in schools. As Weenink has noted in relation to the positioning of middle-class families, “cosmopolitan capital is a propensity to engage in globalising social arenas. Cosmopolitan capital comprises bodily and mental predispositions and competencies which help to engage confidently in such arenas” (WEENINK, 2008). The work of postcolonial scholars is particularly



relevant here. Boaventura de Sousa Santos draws a distinction between subaltern cosmopolitanism – a kind of resistance to hegemonic globalisation – and dominant cosmopolitanism (SANTOS, 2007). Whereas Lam sees business opportunities for young people engaged in online transnational contacts, Spivak identifies the permeability enabled by new global technological circuits as enabling exploitation rather than social mobility for the ‘new subaltern’ (SPIVAK, 2005). In her conception, the exclusion of the subaltern is now replaced with a kind of one-way, top-down permeability which maintains subordination (SPIVAK, 1988).

In addition to a lack of distinction between dominant and subordinate cosmopolitanism in the conceptualisation of digital literacy, the adoption of new technologies in classrooms has often been partial and superficial (BUZATO, 2010; ORLANDO, 2009), leaving power inequalities there intact. While there have been more sophisticated attempts to integrate online cultures into schooling (HULL; SCHULTZ, 2001; HULL; SCHULTZ, 2002; JØRGENSEN, 2003; LANKSHEAR; KNOBEL, 2011), the question is to what extent these disturb the dominant cultural logic of traditional examination systems. In this regard, Marc Lamont Hill’s study of the introduction of hip hop to a secondary school classroom in Black, working-class USA neighbourhood, and the destabilising of teacher authority which flowed from this, is most interesting. He writes “the inclusion of out-of-school literacies in a limited or superficial way could reinforce the falsely obvious distinctions made between unrecognized and recognized forms of capital, thereby reifying the in-school/out-of-school binary.” (HILL, 2008, p. 137). It is interesting that the expectation in his project was still that the class subject hip hop texts to “formal analysis”. This is in keeping with Janks’ argument for an explicit focus on language and power – acknowledging the linguistic practices of the periphery while granting access to socially powerful linguistic forms (JANKS, 2000).

The key question addressed here is what recognition subaltern cosmopolitan practices are afforded? What forms of capital do they reflect and



contribute to? And in which field are they intelligible as stakes? The ethnographic analysis of new literacies studies seeks to move beyond a competency-based approach, but does not fully identify how digital practices map into social relations of inclusion and exclusion – except to note that they are not mobilised at present at school. The policy prescription is therefore sometimes naïve in ignoring the investments in schooling of various social interests and various regimes of value that exercise gate-keeping roles.

Cultural capital and social class

While recent studies have been sensitive to new forms of identity construction and cultural practice, an older tradition of critical scholarship demonstrated a greater sensitivity to the ways in which language and culture are related to, and reproduce, social class (BERNSTEIN, 1973; 1996; BOURDIEU, 1973; 1977; BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1970; BOURDIEU; PASSERON; SAINT MARTIN, 1994; BOURDIEU; THOMPSON, 1991; LABOV, 2003). In particular, the concept of cultural capital has been proved to be valuable in capturing the dispositions and forms of linguistic expression which are granted greatest value and legitimacy in formal education as markers of competence and distinction. Cultural capital refers to those forms of expression and self-presentation that are rewarded in classrooms and examinations – as well as in other institutions and social settings.

For example, whereas Lam (2006) emphasises the international orientation of young migrants engaged in online literacy practices, this disposition may also have a classed dimension. Gassan Hage has noted social class distinctions in multiculturalism, associating cosmopolitanism with a white, middle class disposition towards cultural difference – asserting dominance by reducing it to aesthetic elements organised for consumption and the demonstration of distinction. He contrasts this with the nation-state orientation of working-class migrants (HAGE, 2003). Although emphasis in digital cosmopolitanism research is placed on the ability of young people to



occupy and access multiple locations virtually, some locations remain physically fixed and exclusive – particularly for those in subaltern positions. Institutional location, academic location, school sector location, neighbourhood location, all establish relationships of belonging and exclusion. NLS scholarship represented by Lam (date?) emphasises fluidity in social relations, but my own research with working-class migrant youth suggest that fixed group membership, whether ascribed or claimed, remains most salient (WINDLE, 2004; 2008; 2009a; WINDLE; MILLER, 2012). For many young people, local, familiar, filial investments remain the central reference points of their life. Furthermore, these reference points are defined in relation to other geographical and social spaces within the nation state. As Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst observe:

Global processes involve the ‘overlying’ of territorially based fields with fields which are less territorially organised. The friction, or disjuncture between these fields is of crucial importance. Those cultural fields that are still dependent on fixed spaces are likely to remain as significant as ever in generating cultural distinction (SAVAGE; BAGNALL; LONGHURST, 2005, p. 11).

The conception of the school in the older body of critical scholarship also differs from that of new literacy studies – which generally sees it through a more benign lens. School, as an institution, has as one of its main roles to sanctify what counts as linguistic competence; what forms of speech are allowable and legitimate; and what forms are disqualified as impoverished and deformed (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1964; 1970; BOURDIEU; THOMPSON, 1991). This certainly applies to minority background youth in subaltern positions. Teachers negatively judge their speech and writing as ‘incorrect’ and contaminated by other languages (WINDLE, 2009b). Many subaltern cosmopolitans reproduce in their schoolwork nonstandard forms that are disqualified in the context of formal writing tasks. Much student writing appear clumsy by ignoring modes of personal implication and distancing expected in written discourse. The distinction here hangs not



merely on competence, but on ‘the forms of subjectivity’ invested in discourse (Felouzis, 1994, p. 67).

In light of this work, the translation of the identities and skills involved in subaltern cosmopolitan cultures, including digital literacies, into the academic setting may be difficult. Indeed, some of the hybrid practices and communities involve young people investing in multiple forms of marginalised cultural identities. Divides may be reinforced through the extension of a stigma across groups through the adoption of low-status linguistic forms. This may also be observed in France, where the *banlieu* vernacular, influenced by Arabic, is the lowest status form of French. Also in Germany, where *gemischt sprechen* is adopted by both Turkish-background and non-Turkish-background youth as a self-affirming marker of urban working-class identity even as its wider social status is very low (JØRGENSEN, 2003).

The inclusion of digital literacy topics in school leaving examinations

The exclusion of subaltern cosmopolitanism and valorisation of elite cosmopolitanisms indeed can be found even in attempts to introduce digital literacy topics into formal examinations. In the two examples of digital literacy examination topics presented below, the knowledge called upon is of a kind most typically associated with middle-class cultural practices: the humanism of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 1964; 1970). The linguistic demands are similarly conservative, calling on students to bring an analytical gaze and narrow attention to form, and excluding all personal experiences or opinions (TEESE, 2000).

The first example comes from the 2009 Year 12 English examination taken by students in the final year of school in the Victorian state of Australia. Students were required to read a text (Figure 1) and write a response to the question “How is written and visual language used to attempt to persuade readers to share the point of view of the writer of *Keyed In*?”

The text appears to be a blog entry, having surface features of new technologies and social networks. But the content, style, genre, and reference points are more conventional. The cultural knowledge required to appreciate the argument is of how pearls are produced (for metaphor), key figures from the Renaissance and Enlightenment (Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin), Latin and the history of printing. For example the following sentence calls on both biology and Latin: “*Homo sapiens*, who succeeded *homo habilis*, might just become *homo supersapiens*” (VICTORIAN CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY, 2009b, p. 12).

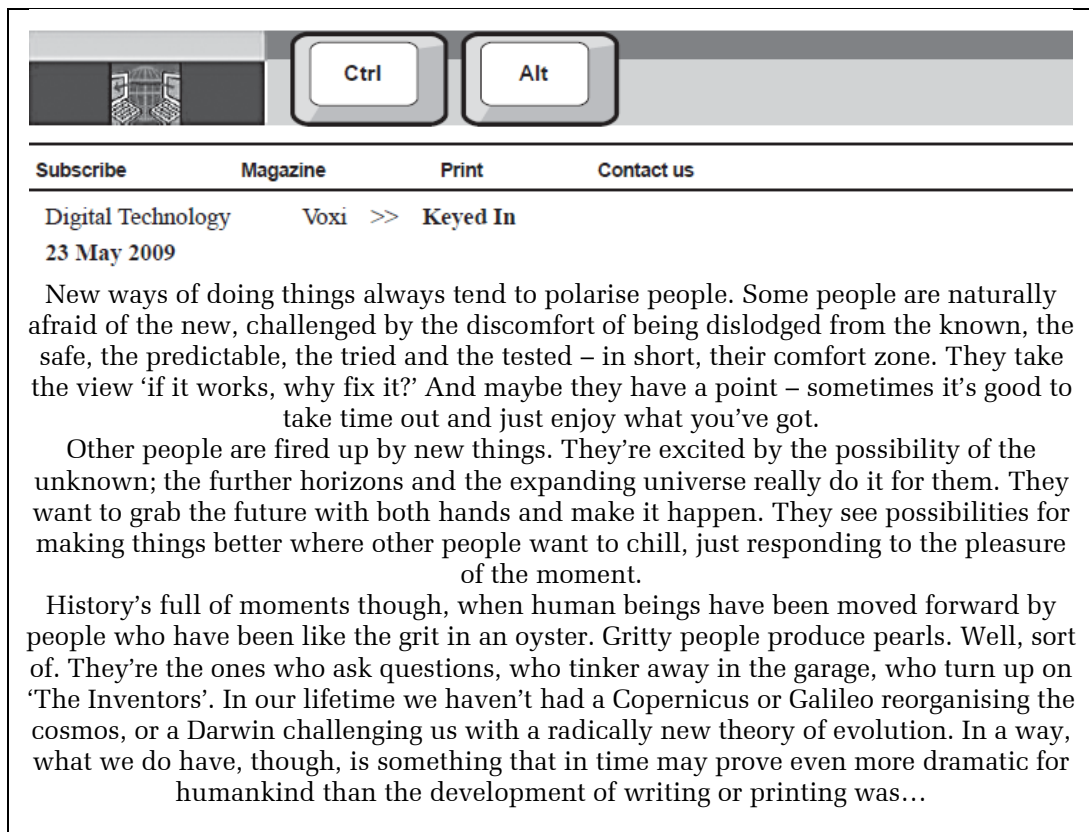


Figure 1: Extract of Year 12 Examination (Victorian curriculum and assessment authority, 2009b, p. 12)

The model essay reproduced in the examiner's report shows clearly the distanced relationship, mobilisation of cultural capital pertaining to Western history, and scholarly voice required for success:



There is a tonal shift from excessively energetic to a more informative tendency, while maintaining the same assertiveness. Voxi uses examples from the Renaissance, the most renowned period in history for the advancement of education, with Copernicus and Galileo who were renowned for ‘reorganising the cosmos’ and comparing their genius with the power of technology, appealing to the reader’s sense of admiration for the importance of great historical figures and linking it to a similar admiration for technology. (Victorian curriculum and assessment authority, 2009a, p. 8)

Clearly, what is required is not familiarity with or engagement with digital literacy, but ease with a certain set of cultural references and ability to distance oneself from the contents of the piece in order to analyse the role of rhetoric and register. The preoccupation with newness, benefits to humanity and shift from the printed word shines through in this task – over uses that young people might have for new technologies. In fact the examiners’ report asked teachers to “discourage personal stories that offer little depth to the piece of writing”.

The second example is from the 2012 Brazilian National Secondary School Examination (Figure 2, below). The question is designed to test whether students can recognize the characteristics of hypertextuality in an informative text (“reconhecer características de hipertextualidade em texto informativo” (INEP - Ministério da Educação, 2012a, p. 16).

This time the text is not taken from an online source, but an academic book written in the most formal Portuguese.

QUESTÃO 97

Com o texto eletrônico, enfim, parece estar ao alcance de nossos olhos e de nossas mãos um sonho muito antigo da humanidade, que se poderia resumir em duas palavras, universalidade e interatividade. As luzes, que pensavam que Gutenberg tinha propiciado aos homens uma promessa universal, cultivavam um modo de utopia. Elas imaginavam poder, a partir das práticas privadas de cada um, construir um espaço de intercâmbio crítico das ideias e opiniões. O sonho de Kant era que cada um fosse ao mesmo tempo leitor e autor, que emitisse juízos sobre as instituições de seu tempo, quaisquer que elas fossem e que, ao mesmo tempo, pudesse refletir sobre o juízo emitido pelos outros. Aquilo que outrora só era permitido pela comunicação manuscrita ou a circulação dos impressos encontra hoje um suporte poderoso com o texto eletrônico. CHARTIER, R. A aventura do livro: do leitor ao navegador. São Paulo: Imprensa Oficial do Estado de São Paulo; Unesp, 1998.

No trecho apresentado, o sociólogo Roger Chartier caracteriza o texto eletrônico como um poderoso suporte que coloca ao alcance da humanidade o antigo sonho de universalidade e interatividade, uma vez que cada um passa a ser,

nesse espaço de interação social, leitor e autor ao mesmo tempo. A universalidade e a interatividade que o texto eletrônico possibilita estão diretamente relacionadas à função social da internet de:

- (A) propiciar o livre e imediato acesso às informações e ao intercâmbio de julgamentos.
- (B) globalizar a rede de informações e democratizar o acesso aos saberes.
- (C) expandir as relações interpessoais e dar visibilidade aos interesses pessoais.
- (D) propiciar entretenimento e acesso a produtos e serviços.
- (E) expandir os canais de publicidade e o espaço mercadológico.

Figure 2: Extract from 2012 Brazilian National Secondary School Examination (INEP - Ministério da Educação, 2012b, p. 6)

Again, the key reference points are the European enlightenment and the notion of the progress of humanity. The key capacities tested are analytical, and engagement with online communities is unlikely to be of any relevance to the student attempting to select the correct answer (on the contrary since the distractors would be recognised by student who use the internet as also true and perhaps more interesting statements than the correct answer based strictly on the text).

These examination tasks bear little resemblance to the kinds of literacy practices students engage with online. The new technologies are reduced to a source of information (and judgement). Little thought is given to the kinds of expression that students engage in online. Indeed digital literacy is irrelevant to both tasks. Instead, they demand traditional cognitive and cultural knowledge embodied in a certain analytical and distanced relationship to written language. But even more original and innovative experiments, such as Lamont Hill's work with hip-hop, ultimately return to formal analysis of language as their key objective and defining feature, particularly at the moment of assessment (HILL, 2008).

The examples above show that inclusion of the online world as a topic, as raw material, is only accepted when the dominant cognitive style is displayed and when it is taken as an object for externalised discussion using the old consecrated forms. In short, you cannot be a fan in an examination - it is not an available or acceptable writing position – whether that be a j-pop fan or a fan of Hamlet. The experiences of Lam's case study subject with J-Pop fandom (LAM, 2000), for example, are unlikely to offer any guidance with these academic tasks, nor can they be readily incorporated into preparation for them. The distance between the stance of the young person online, in the classroom as a student engaging with the same material or discursive practice is radically different. A student who feels comfortable writing a fan page online may not feel so comfortable doing so in class for evaluation by a



teacher or even peers. Context is important for the meaning and value of the activity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that some research celebrating new forms of youth cosmopolitanism enabled by digital literacy needs to be supplemented by consideration of cultural capital and social class. Firstly, elite cosmopolitanism consecrated in formal education needs to be distinguished from subaltern cosmopolitanism, which finds little traction in schooling. Secondly, the ways in which digital literacy and youth cosmopolitanism is incorporated into schooling leaves intact the cultural and cognitive bias of the curriculum towards middle-class students (TEESE, 2000). Examination topics that deal with digital literacy in Australia and Brazil, and even innovative experiments such as hip-hop pedagogy in the USA, remain stuck in formal linguistic analysis and the humanism of the European enlightenment as their frame of reference.

Consideration of these constraints raises a number of questions. If digital literacy is a 'social field', what are the stakes? What are the conditions of conversion of capital? What are the boundaries or codes – can these be related to existing codes or used as keys? This paper suggests that there is a need for a more realistic appreciation of what online literacies and cosmopolitanism can bring to schooling: if they bring engagement, motivation, confidence – this is good – but are the underlying social structures producing dis-engagement, cooling out and alienation weakened? Should we not speak of a temporary displacement where the activity of school connects with online worlds only to revert to more conventional functions at moments of 'gate-keeping' (i.e. transitions, attainment, outcomes). In conclusion, there is a need for analysis which more sharply brings social power to the fore. We must consider how digital literacy and particular cosmopolitanisms (i.e. identification with multiple groups all of which are marginalised) can be disempowering as well as empowering.

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