

BOOK REVIEW

Assignments as Controversies: Digital Literacy and Writing in Classroom Practice

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Assignments as controversies tells a multifaceted story about academic assignments and how they are completed in the classroom. It looks at the complex task of assignment writing from a perspective of the different practices the task entails and the actors that enact them. Acknowledging the social aspect of literacy, informed by Literacy Studies theory, the author explores the impact of ‘the social’ on meaning making, the disconnect between personal and curricular literacies and ponders how the practices of assignment writing should contribute to the improvement of assignments as assessment tools.

The author begins by presenting the theoretical constructs that ground his research to help situate the reader in the context of digital literacies. Approaching his research questions from the lens of socio-materiality theory, which posits that “all practices emerge from entanglements between people and things” (p. 30) he puts forward the Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a set of approaches and techniques to guide his observations as he explores the impact of digital literacies in the assignment writing activity, especially as institutionally mandated literacies may not necessarily correlate with the actual practices of students.

The theoretical frameworks introduced by the author to frame his research espouse that there are many aspects to literacies, and that one cannot look at literacies and individualised events in time and space. Looking at literacies not only as a set of individualised skills but rather as a series of relationships between actors, the author investigates assignment writing and the use of digital literacies to gain insight into how student work gets done with the support of technology in the classroom, exploring to which degree technology enables or constrains the task.

The study adopted a phased ethnographic approach carried out at three different colleges in the north of England involving one student at each site in a specific program of study. It included three phases of data collection: direct observations with a focus on ethnographic observations of institutional culture and classroom activities; tracing and video recording of student behaviour during class time; and student interviews which included the drawing of a Venn diagram to map each student’s practices of digital literacy, the tools they chose to use for personal and work-related tasks and the intersections between them.

The book is organised in three parts. In Part I the author focuses on the background of the study and the theoretical approaches that frame it, as summarised above.



In Part II, the author recounts the assignment writing part of each classroom observation. He begins by providing background information on the individual college, including information on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) policies and existing infrastructure. All colleges have Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). One college requires its use as part of an extensive ICT policy and another college forbids the use of mobile devices and social media for personal use. He then provides specific information about the program of study and the respective course that each student is working on. He describes the requirements for each assignment and the classroom setting in which it occurs. He presents the qualitative findings from his investigation as vignettes and interprets them for context.

In the account of the first assignment, previous assignment work done by the student becomes a crucial part of the process of assignment writing, supported by the students' digital literacy practices of data organisation and easy retrieval from an external drive. The author introduces the notion of collateral realities, realities that are constructed serendipitously, to show how the student unpacks all the different tasks contained within the task of assignment writing: from Web searches, to synthesizing information. He observes the tension between the student's normal digital practices of using mobile devices to look up information using a variety of tools, including chats on social media, and the institutionally sanctioned practice of not allowing the use of personal devices in the classroom. These tensions link vernacular literacies with vernacular practices and demonstrate that personal and course activities and the realities in which they exist, cannot be separated in student practice. The richness of outside college literacy practices plays a critical role in the success of the assignment writing task.

In the account of the second assignment, the author observes a variety of assemblage identities developing as the student creates a digital portfolio that includes blog entries, tweets and Web link curation. These identities are validated by the student's own set of digital practices and the tools they choose to use. An unclear delineation of personal/work activity is also present in this account of assignment writing, as the student links personal and college work activity through blogging and other social media tools. Jumping from one task to another to develop the portfolio is facilitated by technology, in spite of the student's having to negotiate technical challenges to get the task done.

In the account of the third assignment, the author observes how the student must jump through a few hoops to get the task done, such as having to access assignment instructions in multiple places, accessing the computer lab, logging in to the VLE to get the information needed to complete the assignment, installing plugins and submitting the assignment through the VLE. This student experience was purposely designed by the teacher as the course included a component about using ICT, more specifically, about using social media tools for education. The assignment design required the application of a set of digital practices that were not necessarily aligned with the student's vernacular digital practices, hindering the completion of the task. Further observations also indicated that the student had a clear delineation of social media tools that would be used for college work and for personal use. Although some aspects of the student's digital practices were incorporated in the assignment writing task in terms of knowing how to use some of the tool, the use of specific social media tools showed a clear separation between the personal and work realms.

Part III of the book includes three chapters that explore the concepts of task interconnectedness and contextualized digital practices, curation as a digital literacy practice and irruption.

In Chapter 6, the author uses *Matryushka dolls* to illustrate his observation of student practices during the assignment writing in Part II which showed that several actors are involved in resolving nested tasks that require contextualized literacy practices across a multitude of events as part of assignment writing. These observations supported the theoretical frameworks discussed in Part I that espoused that digital literacies cannot be understood in isolation, by what happens inside the classroom alone. Digital literacies emerge as practices that originate from different domains and are collectively mobilised into assembling the task at hand, as students jump through hoops, face resistance and overcome challenges.

Chapter 7 explores curation as a digital literacy practice and the perception of assessment events that include curation as a central component for assessment. By differentiating between content creation, content aggregation and content curation while using the classroom cases described in Part II of the book to theorise curation practices, the author concludes that curation is a digital literacy practice that impacts assignment writing because it requires higher levels of independence and self-regulation from students. It encourages self-directed and autonomous learning and fuels creativity and student engagement as they develop an enhanced sense of ownership of their work as they craft their assignments. Looking at assignment design, the author argues that curation could be incorporated as a value-added element to facilitate and foster learning.

Chapter 8 advances the concept of irruption, contrasting it with disruption. Much is talked about disruptive technologies and innovation in the field of educational technology, and although many disruptors such as new tools and equipment can be introduced into the classroom, it does not reflect disruption for the students who are prolific in the use of digital media, as these tools and equipment, such as mobile phones, social media apps, etc., are part of their daily lives. The concept of irruption emerges from the flow of practices into a different arena, such as education, which may have disallowed them in the past. It is about digital literacy practices which originated elsewhere, but were mobilised into different events in the classroom, such as assignment writing. The digital literacy practices that emerge through assignment writing may not be aligned with the expected practices that framed the design of an assignment. To better understand assignment writing and enhance assignment design for learning, it is important to harness the irruption of emerging digital literary practices.

In summary, this book proposes a novel approach to the study of digital literacies to better understand curricular activities, including assignment writing. It puts forward the notion that digital literacy is not an individualised act and that to better understand assignment writing it is important to consider all the actors, events and practices that interplay to enable its completion. The author underlines that studying learner practices and how they engage with digital media in curricular activities is fundamental to understand the efficacy of assignment design, technological investments and how new digital literacies emerge from the practices of students. Digital literacy practices are not a set of skills that can be applied in the same way across the board. The localised practices that emerge from students as they negotiate educational transactions should inform digital literacy frameworks and taxonomies to support educational design, as opposed to conventional notions of 'what works'.

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