

Book Review: **Hamilton, M; Heydon, R; Hibbert, K and Stooke, R (eds), 2015 *Negotiating Spaces for Literacy Learning: Multimodality and Governmentality*. London: Bloomsbury** 260pp ISBN 978-1-4725-8745-9

This collection of research is a timely contribution to what we might call a 'maturation' phase of enquiry into technology, learning and literacy. In this phase we move beyond reductive opposition between emancipatory '2.0' ideas and rejectionist discourse to observe the complex interplay between democratizing, neo-liberal and regulatory agencies around literacies in multimodal fields. As the back cover states, these research enquiries are concerned with "the intersection of technologies of literacies, education and self". Throughout the work shared in its pages, the book embraces critical multimodality – "an engagement with multimodality that is vigilant about how it is or isn't produced and in turn what it produces" (p241). This enables the collection to escape the trap of what David Buckingham has called a 'multimodal fetishism' and instead to focus on the extent to which working across modalities can create spaces for diversity of voice and representation *in* learning.

The range and scope is international, spanning the UK, Sweden, Canada and Australia, and the editors are well known in literacy education and research. The chapters also work across sectors. Educational, work-based, informal and out of school contexts are all covered and a broad age range of children, students and others participate in the various projects described. Across the chapters, the methodological work converges aspects of actor network theory with situated and social literacies with sociolinguistics and critical childhood studies. The conceptual framework puts Kress and Foucault at work to exemplify the relationship between the potential of multimodality to expand repertoires to "help literacy do more" (p239) and the constraining of such potential by new technological forms of governance. Most importantly, across the collection this dialogue and these tensions are played out with empirical substance and methodological conviction, starting out, for example, from the pithy truism that, in times of technological affordance, "because we can, we mostly find that we do" (Kalantzis and Cope, p19) to an analysis of literacy regimes using Halliday's semiotic metafunctions, transliteration and participation (from Jenkins) to understand agentive design as a transitive verb.

Every chapter conveys the frustration felt by the literacy educator wrestling with this conundrum. To delve in to some examples from a broader range, Roz Stooke writes of 're-educating the educator's gaze' in Ontario, her work resonating with John Potter's recent research into 'curation' as a literacy practice (though this contribution, along with the broader notion of the 'third space', is curiously absent from these works). As we so often find, the space for children's voices in co-producing pedagogic documentation in multimodal forms is impeded by curricular and assessment framing. Flewitt and Roberts-Holmes provide a fascinating account of the multimodal design, but absolute exclusion of diversity and complexity, in the UK Department for Education's Phonics Screenings Check. Meanwhile, Lisa Bjorklund Boistrup's research into multimodality in Mathematics classrooms should be essential reading for those, like this reviewer, who can be guilty of 'othering' such disciplines from a position of fear and ignorance. Working with and across four key pedagogic discourses – "Do It Quick, Do it Right" to "Reasoning Takes Time" - the author presents the semiotic practice of the subject domain of Maths education as a 'dialogue pedagogy'. Kathryn Hibbert's work with a 'cloud curriculum', again from Canada, suggests such a domain as an escape from the pervading 'cult of efficiency' (Stein, 2001) to a space where "the teacher and learner engaged in multimodal learning are making increasingly sophisticated sets of decisions about their work, increasing the autonomy of

both in the process” (p157). Richard Andrews takes on perhaps the most researched area in the collection – the notion of ‘digital literacies’ in higher education. He argues, convincingly, for the Foucaultian idea of power being exercised through institutionalized technologies of practice (my attribution, Andrews is actually one of the few authors not to work with Foucault, instead using framing, from Barthes and Derrida) as a theoretical approach to the difference made to power relations in Universities by digitization. In particular, Andrews focuses on the submission of work, most simply at the level of the ‘different kind of reading’ required to deal with an electronic thesis. This is the least ‘joined up’ element of the argument in my view. Much more far-reaching is Andrews’ hope that the ‘multimodal clamouring at the gates’ might lead to the technologically afforded “closer access to the sometimes visceral nature of first hand experience and possibility” (p198) but on the evidence presented the move away in the academy from the marginalizing of ‘other modes’ to express academic capital looks set to be a long revolution.

Comment [1]:

The contribution which seems to most poignantly set up the continuum at stake here, between at the one end a fully realized ‘participatory culture’ for learning and at the other the foreclosing of open participation at the hands of a neoliberal commodification of learning as competence, skill and hyper-regulatory compliance, is (perhaps surprisingly at first, but I think actually profoundly fittingly) the least immediately dependent on digital technology. This is Mary Hamilton’s account of a user-run community education project. “The Pecket Way” describes a collective generated from an adult education class but organically developed by students as an alternative to education perceived as offering little space for democracy. The questions the participating students were able to articulate in the community space speak to the themes cutting across this collection. They were to do with *how literacies and curricular are produced across domains; whose interests they serve; how some forms of expression are more acceptable than others; how learners and educators are positioned within literacies; and how things might be different* (see p203). Hamilton uses socio-material theory to view pedagogical rationales and multiple forms of expression in the context of the material conditions of governmentality – again, in keeping with all the chapters, this is a researched account with a conceptual and methodological frame. But most interestingly, as so often when one delves beneath surface appearances, technology here is mainly an archival means or a conduit to broader constructivist and democratic questions about how learning is designed and on whose terms. The web resource for the project contains evidence of much more ‘old school’ physical text-practices – journey sticks, wall hangings, food and drink, written accounts (‘Not Written off’) and the building itself – multimodality in its rich hybridity but not determined or simply ‘afforded’ by technology. But – as always here – the sobering conclusion speaks to the contemporary condition of ‘fast education’, with a statement that can be reasonably presented here as typical of the dilemma at the heart of ‘Negotiating Spaces’: the ever-increasing difficulty, regrettably, of this negotiation. At the time and place of writing this review, as the English and Media curriculum in English schools is subjected to a set of reforms for ‘New Hard Times’, the work here is certainly familiar in the way it

“challenges an underlying assumption that learning can only be successful or take place in sanctioned, controlled spaces. The participatory nature of the internet has rendered this idea obsolete, and yet governing institutions persist in ignoring these changes rather than rethinking what teaching and learning is and can be.” (p216)

Julian McDougall

Professor in Media and Education
The Centre for Excellence in Media Practice
Bournemouth University