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Listening to 21st century literacies: Prehistory of writing in an academic discipline

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ABSTRACT

Prehistories of collaborative composition are vital to 21st century literacies research and instruction. The processes by which writing and other 21st century literacies become *necessary* to students continues to be neglected, however, so that while 21st century literacies are easily observed outside school, the significance and feasibility of 21st century literacies as formal educational goals remain unproven. By examining communicative choices in a problem-oriented curriculum in a university-based human geography class, this study chronicles the prehistory of writing to relate participants' argument-based interactions with their composition choices. Analysis of interactional patterns in transcripts, observational notes, and written products reveals an important link between 21st century literacies and student talk: Students used disciplinary concepts to give shape to ill-defined problems, which led to tasks requiring many elements of 21st century literacies; the use of 21st century literacies to solve problems, in turn, mediated qualitative changes in subsequent problem posing, tasks, and use of 21st century literacies.

Problem

Young people's written composition is increasingly visible, both through out-of-school engagement in 21st century literacy practices (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013) and through changes in the ways researchers conceptualize writing (Kinloch, 2009; Romero & Walker, 2010). Reconceptualizing literacies in adolescents' lives in a way that can benefit schools involves expansion of what writing research sees and hears, from successful performance on assignments (Alvermann, Hinchmann, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2008; Boggs & Alvermann, 2012) to unfolding participation in an increasingly *written* world (Yancey, 2011). The expansion denotes a quantitative increase in writing outlets and genres to be considered, but attention to qualitative changes requires examination of how people are living and working in relation to literacy—specifically how people are using what is available, how their use is changing what they do, and how changing tool-mediated action is changing their world. Mobile phone messaging exemplifies how social tasks may be transformed when multiple literacies and literacy practices are incorporated, and the social tasks into which literacy is incorporated are changing everywhere. An important question has been how to conceptualize writing research around literacies that are *unfolding* in terms of their effect on work and thinking.

This research builds upon the neo-Vygotskian tradition of contextualized, intentional literacy instruction in traditional and nontraditional school environments that has helped conceptualize and support school-based literacy education

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- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts;
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

Fig. 1. 21st century literacies are "cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups," which include the practices listed.

(Wertsch, 1991). It develops the tradition by examining the prehistory of writing, interpersonal exchanges and development of shared purposes through which literacy practices became necessary complements to other social tasks. By showing how these interactions elicit desirable literacy practices, the study described here considers whether a vibrant conception of prewriting might validate and protect endangered elements of 21st century literacies.

Three years after the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE, 2008, revised 2013) released a "Position Statement on 21st Century Literacies" (see Fig. 1), a major study of the state of writing in US secondary schools found quantitative increases across content areas, but not in terms of "the varied tasks that make up the larger domain of writing" (Applebee & Langer, 2011, p. 24).

Their conclusion was that teachers, not students, are more likely to be doing "all the composing" as they design well-defined tasks for students, who largely "fill in missing information" (p. 25), even when composing in response to lengthy writing assignments. Such findings jeopardize the future of 21st century literacies as a way of thinking about literacy development, for the practices that make up 21st century literacies prize student agency and ill-defined problems (NCTE, 2013), notably in their definition of literacies as developing cultural practices among members of particular groups and in their assertion of the importance of *posing* problems and *designing* information for a variety of purposes and particular audiences. There is real risk that forces in schools restricting the range of social purposes writing serves will desiccate 21st century literacies as they are incorporated into literacy development (cf. Au, 2011).

Prewriting and prehistory of writing

Beginning in the early 1970s "prewriting" gained status in writing instruction as an important phase in an idealized process of writing, though it did not translate well into the school context. Trying to infuse the norms of "real writing" into schools with its uncertainty, searching, and discovery, Murray (1972) said, "Prewriting is everything that takes place before the first draft. ... About 85% of the writer's time" (p. 12). Unfortunately, structural elements of schooling such as the division of the school day into discrete subject areas and blocks of 45–90 min in length make Murray's proportions impossible. Revision, demanding far less of the writers time by comparison, according to Murray, has suffered a similar fate (Witte, 2013). Numerous factors in school settings lead to foreclosure on the space in which students choose whether, how, what, and to whom to write, but perhaps most importantly is the foreclosure itself: In the "snapshot of writing instruction" (Applebee & Langer, 2011) teachers and tests are unwittingly *doing the prewriting for students*. Numerous factors in schools favor carefully staged assigned writing projects, but foreclosure of the preparatory (and recursive) phase of the writing process may make it very difficult or impossible for schools to become partners in the project of fostering 21st century literacies among all students. Prehistory may help with prewriting.

There is a long history of inadvertently or intentionally ignoring important learning taking place in preparatory phases of some focal event, before participants appear to have done or produced anything. The history consists of calling attention to these important developmental phases and the learning that takes place in them. Vygotsky (1987) believed the most interesting parts of psychological experiments on children often occurred as experimenters taught children how to participate. Aristotle (350/1981) argued that political entities would safeguard their form of government by having educational systems mimic it. Hillocks (1986), Applebee and Langer (2011), Au (2011), and many others have argued, from a variety of angles, that high-stakes testing engenders a hidden preliminary phase that displaces good teaching. The concept prehistory assumes that any record, whether of student writing or stone tools, presupposes crucial formative factors recorded in modes other than writing. That is, just as understanding the use of tools before the era of recorded history requires examining samples of ice, soil, wood, and stone, so understanding students' composition requires sampling precursors to the written record of their writing, such as problem-oriented social interactions, moving backward in time.

Prehistory begins with instances of some phenomenon, in this case 21st century literacies and writing (see Fig. 2, for example; full text in Fig. 4), and works backward to the point in the past where no further salient linkages may be plausibly asserted. Along the way somewhere should be evidence that the range of possibilities for writing was examined and reduced, and mental and inter-mental (Wertsch, 1991) drafts were produced. Contemporary writers, with the advent of the Internet