



Students as pinners: A multimodal analysis of a course activity involving curation on a social networking site

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 August 2016

Received in revised form 16 December 2016

Accepted 10 January 2017

Available online 12 January 2017

Keywords:

Collaborative learning

Learning communities

Participatory culture

Multimodality

ABSTRACT

This study examined how *Pinterest*, a multimodal social networking site, was used as a tool in a graduate course to allow students to explore interesting language use in everyday life for a class assignment. The findings indicated that pinners' collection on the *Pinterest* board celebrated various uses of language and multimodal signifiers as different examples of language use. Thus, pins revealed pinners' interpretation of what made particular instances of language use "psycholinguistic examples." The affordances of the *Pinterest* board as a public site allowed pinners to engage in on-going communication with their fellow pinners and the greater Internet public. Both images and accompanying messages revealed pinners' intentions to express their thoughts about noteworthy language use and to invite their audience to pay attention to what they had shared. The *Pinterest* activity as digital curation created a participatory culture that encouraged students' collaboration and informal learning.

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1. Introduction

With the prominent presence of various social networking sites (SNSs) in everyday practices and the ever-increasing number of users participating in these spaces, educators have considered ways to incorporate these practices in instruction not only to take advantage of students' facility with technology but also to improve their critical skills and strategies when engaging in SNSs (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015). Keeping pace with the ever more creative uses of semiotic tools in online spaces has challenged theorists and educators to understand what it means to be literate in the 21st century. Characterized with multimodality, and interactivity, SNSs such as Facebook, MySpace, and blogs can facilitate authentic communication as part of class assignments as they apply and extend what they learn from class (Arnold & Paulus, 2010; Delello, McWhorter, & Camp, 2015; White & Hungerford-Kresser, 2014). Furthermore, SNSs can facilitate informal learning within and beyond classroom. As each SNS has its unique affordances and constraints that can mediate interactions among participants, a more particularized look at various uses of SNSs in a classroom context is needed to increase educators' and researchers' understanding of how digital technologies can facilitate students' experimentation with what they learn as they participate in a class-designated SNS.

Through our access to a course that used *Pinterest* as an integral means of fulfilling course goals, we examined how such a social network tool enabled students, *pinners* as we call them, to remix, recontextualize, and interconnect multimodal texts while creating affinity spaces with class members and the greater internet public. Research has suggested that the uses of *Pinterest* could facilitate learning both in formal and informal education settings through visual resources and effective communication (Pearce & Learmonth, 2013). Given the increasing use of social networking sites for pedagogical use and the need to explore and understand better how students can benefit from the appropriation of their social venues for pedagogical purposes, examining how *Pinterest* can mediate students' learning and interactions on a *Pinterest* board may contribute to the discussion of educational uses of SNSs. As a small contribution to this expanding challenge, we undertook to explore how graduate students repurposed the multimodal site to illustrate and enhance their appreciation of the ways language works and to navigate, negotiate, and contemplate the concepts addressed in the course. Therefore, we had two research questions: (a) How did students make use of a multimodal public forum as a class activity that engaged them in exploring language use in everyday contexts?; and (b) How did the multimodal and public nature of the *Pinterest* board mediate students' participation in the class assignment?

1.1. Literacy practices on SNSs

Conceptually, this study is situated in the research on new literacies, an area of literacy research that is concerned with how digital

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technologies and social practices reciprocally impact, change, and create individuals' ways of using literacy (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Castek, & Henry, 2013). From this perspective, everyday literacies in online contexts help organize and archive our personal lives and allow us to communicate with others as we make sense and participate in social practices (Barton, 2012a). Social practices mediated by digital technology allow for the (re)contextualization of texts, collaboration among participants, and inter(con)textual links among texts. With new digital technologies, new practices have developed for interaction and communicating (Leu et al., 2013; New London Group, 1996). Although reading and writing continue to have communicative functions in online spaces, the affordances of online spaces contribute to possibilities for communication using multimodal resources (e.g., images, sounds, music, symbols) and media (e.g., writing, video clips, speech) (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Participating in SNSs involves composing activities with various modes such as posting a still or moving image, writing a Facebook or blog entry, pinning on a *Pinterest* board, leaving a responding comment, or simply clicking response buttons (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Social networking sites (SNSs) have also become integral platforms for everyday literacies, influencing the ways reading and writing are used (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Tagging, making comments, and posting digital images with comments added are some of these new SNS literacies. Although clicking buttons for "like," "dislike," "follow," or "pin it" may not require traditional writing practices, such actions use written texts or symbols as communication tools as individuals take up the new writing practices of the online world (Merchant, 2009). Thus, new forms of writing practices emerge reflecting the affordances of each SNS as individuals express, communicate, and create through multimodal composing and publishing rather than simply consuming what is available.

For example, Barton (2012a) and Barton and Lee (2012) examined how multilingual users engaged in writing practices on *Flickr.com* as they documented their lives with photos and comments in interaction with others. The focal SNS allowed participants to modify traditional writing practices as they created titles and comments for their photos and responded to others' photos by using their linguistic and multimodal repertoire (Barton & Lee, 2012). Furthermore, participation on social networking sites facilitated informal learning as revealed in participants' comments (Wodzicki, Schwammlein, & Moskaliuk, 2012). Writing was not simply a means for communicating, but also for reflecting and projecting their learning trajectories.

By the nature of sharing and participating, literacy practices on SNSs contribute to an expanding participatory culture as participation in SNSs "shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009, p. xiii). A participatory culture is characterized by distributed cognition, accessibility for creation and participation, and informal learning and support, creating democratic ways of collaborating among participants to share and celebrate multiplicity and heterogeneity of ideas as individuals execute their knowledge and expertise in creative ways. Thus, literacy becomes a tool for collaboration, creativity, social change, and networking in the sociocultural world (Black, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In that it promotes celebratory, democratic ways of expressing ideas even as it resists accepted mainstream norms, a participatory culture is connected to Bakhtin's (1984) concept of the *carnavalesque* that is characterized with disruption of authoritative discourses and multiplicity of expression and interpretation. Because the need to be an adept cultural being in a participatory culture will only increase, and because we saw that there were still very few systematic studies of practices in such new cultures, we were encouraged to examine how a participatory culture was created through a class assignment that asked students to post examples of a central course construct in the public space of a *Pinterest* board.

1.2. Mediation of SNSs in classroom activities

SNSs as digital tools have affordances and constraints that mediate students' learning in different ways. How the integration of SNSs for educational purposes influenced students' learning experiences has been examined in several studies with the goal of identifying how such sites create participatory literacy practices.

Characterized as encouraging informal communication and learning, SNSs have been shown to provide opportunities for authentic communication and learning with multimodal resources. For example, the uses of *Ning* in online education courses promoted higher levels of student interactions and contributed to a sense of community as students experienced authentic participation in activities on *Ning* (Arnold & Paulus, 2010; Brady, Holcomb, & Smith, 2010; Hung & Yuen, 2010). Furthermore, Pearce and Learmonth (2013) stated that the integration of *Pinterest* in an anthropology class encouraged student learning within and beyond the classroom as students shared resources not only with their classmates but also with family, friends, and acquaintances outside the class. Likewise, White and Hungerford-Kresser (2014) reported that preservice teachers shared their interpretation of and reflection on a novel by creating a page about a character and journaling on Facebook.

In sum, the integration of SNSs in classroom practices has been shown to foster authentic collaboration not only for learning course-related content but also for informal learning through interactions with classmates and resources shared. The unique functions of each SNS allowed different opportunities for participants to transfer skills and strategies. Furthermore, new online tools reflect and encourage new literacy practices that allow users to participate in social networks and to combine multimodal resources with writing. *Pinterest* as one such site seemed worthwhile as the focus of a study. Building on previous work on the adoption of SNSs in classroom activities, this study examined students' multimodal artifacts on the *Pinterest* board to understand how affordances of *Pinterest* facilitated students' exploration of language uses in relation to course concepts.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and setting

The context of this study was a graduate level course focusing on psycholinguistics offered by an educational psychology professor in a large university located in the U.S. southwest. The class consisted of the instructor (Donna; all names are pseudonyms) and 12 graduate students (11 women and one man; one international student) from various disciplines such as educational psychology, linguistics, music education, and literacy studies.

For one class project, an analytic paper of how language is used, students were asked to collect *psycholinguistic examples* throughout the semester by noticing examples of language use in their social and cultural world. Donna had used this same activity previously, asking students to collect their examples in personal notebooks. Thus, students in the past had not been able to see each other's examples except for the one or two examples shared publicly at the start of each class session. Inspired by Barton's work (2012b; see also 2013) on how individuals made use of *Flickr* to share photographs with the Internet public in the "365 Project," Donna decided to use a similar public venue to engage her students in sharing images and their ideas in relation to her psycholinguistic course.

After careful consideration, Donna chose *Pinterest* as it allowed multimodal images rather than written messages to be central to each post. She set up a board, entitled *Psycholinguistics Spring 2013* (as we write, the board is still available), to allow her students to share their collected examples more fully with one another. For the project, the syllabus mentioned that they should aim to note at least one example per day in order to collect enough examples for their final report on language use, but that students were encouraged to post at least four pins per week to the *Pinterest* board with contextualizing information, graphics,

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