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A Space for Play: Crossing Boundaries and Learning Online

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Prelude

It is May 2006. I am in Manhattan, New York City, walking out of La-Delice Bakery on 3rd Avenue. I am carefully carrying a box of cupcakes, about to embark on a project, The Great Escape. It had all begun about a year earlier when someone (C-Monster, 2004) posted images of garish looking cupcakes to a photo-sharing website (Flickr.com). The cakes were huge cone-shapes, encased in lurid fondant icing, depicting faces with wide gaping mouths. The photographs attracted comments from many people; one suggested that the 'sugardudes' ... 'needed rescuing' (TroisTetes, 2005). Some commenters left links to images of similar cakes and others expressed how much they liked or disliked these 'creatures'. One person left an anecdote about how she always ate a frog cupcake on her birthday, and that these sugardude images had really brightened her day.

An eclectic, international mix of people thus exchanged biographical details, developing a cross-cultural joke; the focus on these ostensibly superficial and trivial novelty items drew people together across cultural and geographical divides. The 'in-joke' quickly developed among disparately placed individuals, and a social history developed among participants who then progressed their online connectivity, looking at each others' wider (non-sugardude) photo-collections. I read many comments on the sugardude images (also looking at many more on Flickr) and gradually learnt about the people who played with the idea of the sugardudes. A holiday in New York eventually led to a meeting with C-Monster and other online contacts; when the 'prisoner sugardudes' escape from the bakery would be executed and photographically recorded. After buying around a dozen cakes we took many photographs of the confectionery in a staged bakery escape, albeit with one casualty run-over by a yellow cab. Using cardboard cut-outs and cocktail sticks, we fashioned a 'statue of liberty' as well as little placards for the 'dudes' to 'carry'. The result was several series of images

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arranged in online digital slideshows including a 'meta-series' of us taking the photographs. Figure 2.1 shows an example of an image from one series.

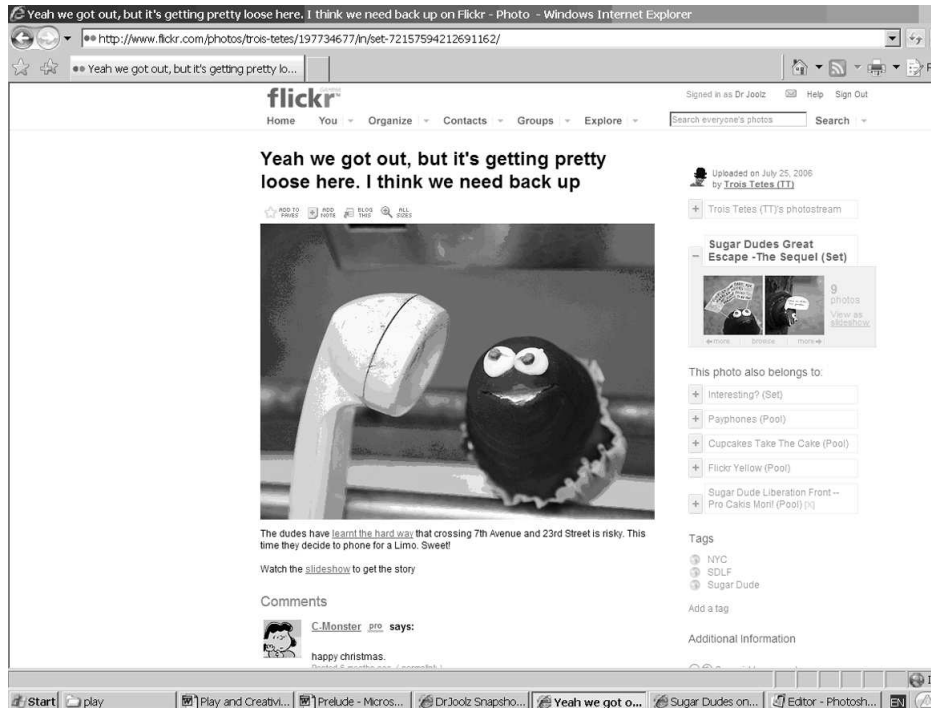


Figure 2.1 Sugar dude on the 'phone (TroisTetes, 2006)

This incident illustrates a number of points; while all of us were involved in an activity that could undoubtedly be described as 'play', it was also one which could not have taken place without having acquired a range of complex social and literacy skills beforehand. Despite the absurdity of the activity, our play necessitated us drawing on, sharing and, arguably, developing aspects of our social and literacy skills. These included: organized teamwork; planning and preparation skills; understanding narrative structure; photographic techniques such as close-ups and establishing shots; and linguistic expertise to design titles, captions and tags to help tell the stories illustrated in the images. We had a strong sense that we wanted to draw in an audience who would enjoy the joke; wanting to make others laugh influenced the shots and the language we later used online. Our slideshows attracted many online comments, so the play moved continually across online and offline boundaries. Later, in Sweden, Ruminatrix took the play further and created her own story from cakes and home-made props (Ruminatrix, 2006). Thus, although she had not been in New York, Ruminatrix participated in parallel play elsewhere, extending the joke and demonstrating a cross-cultural inclusivity.

From the beginning, where we first saw C-Monster's images online, the fun depended on our ability to make connections with others through words and

images. It is undoubtedly the case that without digital technology – our cameras and computers – we would neither have met, nor involved ourselves in this play. We would not have been able to create slideshows and we would not have been able to annotate our images in the way we did; certainly we would not have been able to present ourselves in such a way that we could discern common values and want to meet each other.

It is becoming increasingly clear that online social networking has become embedded in many people's offline lives across the world; while it is clear that many people learn the necessary skills to participate without tuition, there are implications for teachers in all this. I briefly indicate these implications here. First, I believe that social networking sites motivate learning. Secondly, the motivation to learn is partly triggered by the facility to collaborate and socialize with others. I believe that current classroom practices which focus mainly on individualized learning need to learn from what I and others (Gee, 2004; Williamson and Facer, 2004) have noted about online learning collaboration: that each individual can achieve more by interacting with others. Thirdly, I believe that social networking sites, with their structured formats and clear templates, are ideally suited to classroom learning, where students can look closely at the ways in which the written mode can interact with the visual and impact on meaning-making. Fourthly, with digital texts becoming increasingly multimodal, we now need to broaden our notion of what it means to be literate and include image production and analysis as part of normal procedure in the literacy classroom. Finally, with concerns being expressed about the dangers of online relationships (Byron, 2008), teachers have a role to play in introducing learners to critical reading skills.

This chapter is about digital text-making, online networking, play and learning. I show some of the ways in which people use a photo-sharing website (Flickr.com) not only to pursue leisure activities and to socialize, but as a space where they can collaborate and learn about digital text production and consumption, and about each other, the world and their place within it. I also suggest ways official education policy and practice might learn from such online social networking spaces as Flickr, not just in terms of students' literacy practices, but also in terms of looking beyond individual achievement and thinking about how to value collaborative group effort and achievement. In the next section I outline some of the theoretical frameworks I draw upon in thinking about play, new literacies and learning.

New literacies and literacy as a social practice

Literacy is not just about decoding marks on a page; it is also about performing social acts of meaning, where meanings and practices vary according to context (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1997). This definition is well illustrated by Web 2.0 spaces where individuals collaborate and socialize via online texts. Working from a functional linguistic theory of discourse (Halliday, 1985), the-

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orists have described how the form a text takes is influenced by its social purpose and cultural context. Texts are therefore seen as being produced in response to, and out of, particular social situations, with text conceptualized as a social product and text-making as a social process. To put it at its most simple, effective communication depends upon choosing the right words (or other mode), to perform a particular task; different conventions are used to produce different text types, which perform different social tasks. Further, in terms of online networking, it is important to communicate in ways which 'fit' with different 'affinity spaces' (Gee, 2004): understanding the linguistic conventions, the ways in which one can present oneself and the features of the networking 'template' or site structure.

With a greater emphasis on context and literacy in practice, we can extend the notion of textuality. Further, in exploring meanings, we can take into account not just the written word, but also images, layout, font, sound, gesture, movement and so on. Acknowledging this broadened concept of textuality, literacy academics refer to multimodal texts (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; 2001; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001) as well as 'digital literacies' (Davies, 2006a; Lankshear and Knobel, 2008). Technology has introduced new types of text, such as hypertext, and helped us to integrate a range of modes more easily, with multimodal online text production (for example, blogs, personal websites and social networking sites like MySpace.com) being taken up by thousands daily. Cashmore (2006), for example, cites MySpace as now having over 100 million accounts and Bebo as having 27 million, both of which are social networking sites mainly patronized by teenagers who use these online spaces to instant message, keep blogs, upload photographs, exchange music files, and much more. Lewis and Fabos, (2005) document how many young people feel they have been 'born into' technological practices, where their social lives are closely bound within their text production and consumption, and Carrington (2005, p. 13) writes of the 'new textual landscapes' into which 'children are being naturalised'.

New Literacies and old: domains of practice

Jewitt (2005) describes the enhanced role of images, particularly in screen-based texts where the visual is not just embellishment but plays a central semiotic role. Drawing on classroom research, she argues learners require guidance in reading multimodal texts and that we need to 'redefine the work of the reader' (Jewitt, 2005, p. 329). It has also been insistently argued that children's out-of-school practices need to be valued and developed in school, with Gee (2004), for example, vehement that 'children are having more and more learning experiences out of school that are more important for their futures than is much of the learning they do in school' (p. 5). In-school and out-of-school practices are clearly not mutually exclusive, and the work of Williams (2004), for example, shows how multi-ethnic children incorporate school discourses into their play, while Dowdall (2006) illustrates how a ten year old boy's home and school texts

often blend, assimilating schooled and non-schooled practices. Yet the out-of-school literacy experiences described by many researchers (Beavis and Charles, 2005; Davies, 2006a; Gee, 2004; Merchant, 2004) take place through activities where participants' intentions are social, rather than academic. This is a key point to which I return.

Many new technologies provide routes to playful activities, that is, to recreational, experimental and informal pursuits. Assessment, learning aims and objectives set by non-participatory agents (for example, by government curricula or exam boards) are resoundingly absent, although counter-intuitively, clear aims and goals *are* frequently part of online play. The texts produced are often very rich, creative and even subversive. Online text making is an activity that can disrupt and interrogate traditional ways of doing things, such as using 'txt' message spellings and 'emoticons'; mixed fonts and cases; the creation and counter-intuitive valuing of very blurred or very boring images; videos of unusual topics; and sites with 'resistant' or irreverent messages (Davies, 2004; 2006a). They are spaces where critical literacy practices arise through creative play, and where 'preferred readings' are often undermined. Online practices are often exploratory, improvised, and bound up with people's social and cultural lives, seen by some as inappropriate for classroom settings (Lambirth, 2005). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) have pointed out that 'Learners' funds of knowledge very often have no place in the classroom and cannot have – since this would jeopardise professional expertise and challenge sectional interests that are served by schools (p. 4).

Limitations of schooled conceptions of literacy both in the UK and elsewhere, as predominantly skills led and paper based, need to be expanded to systematically and consistently include digital texts, since these increasingly dominate in the wider sphere beyond classrooms, constituting the fabric of many people's social lives. As Honan (2008) finds, even where policy is more condoning of digital texts, barriers persist and prevent teachers using them habitually. The emphasis on a paper-based curriculum (policy *and* practice) means that dynamic, multilayered texts figure only marginally, and where technology is used, it is often applied in ways out of sync with out-of-school practices (Davies, 2006b). In talking of young people's out-of-school practices, Woolsey (2004) has argued that:

these kids select from the range of technology options as an artist might from a palette, mixing and matching to accomplish their own goals; they don't focus on the technologies, but instead on the activities they want to engage and the goals that they might have set for themselves. They don't necessarily use the technologies in the ways they were intended, but instead tinker with them to accomplish things that please them. And they don't care much about the technologies in a technical or analytic sense, instead becoming immersed in the social environments that these technologies engender. (p. 1)

Further, it is often assumed that young learners *instinctively* know how to negotiate and read such text (Willett, in this volume). And it is true that many

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young people are very skilled; the blog of an eleven year old girl, Dylan (Verdi, 2005), whose video-blogging (vlogging) communicates effectively and widely, is a much cited case. The source of Dylan's expertise is clear; her father (Verdi, 2006) has guided and supported Dylan's work, but Dylan's friend (cited in Dylan's blog) has done less well and managed only one posting (Bria, 2005). Indeed, while the statistics for numbers of blogs are now astronomical at 35.3 million (Technorati, 2006), the cyberworld is littered with many blogs that have one or two posts and which are never sustained. Indeed, if we can talk about a 'digital divide', it resides *within*, as well as *across*, generations – a fact that those involved in education need to be wary of. While there are many young people involved in complex and sophisticated practices, there are many who are uninvolved, or who have problems in access and usage, and still others who could be offered further challenges to extend or reflect upon their experiences. Further, to think in terms of a single 'divide' is probably over simplistic, implying there are definite 'insiders' and 'outsiders', or as Prensky (2001) would have it 'digital natives and immigrants'. The picture is much more complex than this, and in this respect Byron (2008) draws out more subtle types of user.

The kinds of mediascape which digitally active young people inhabit out-of-school requires them to engage with multimodal texts, yet literacy classrooms tend to maintain a last-century emphasis on language. As Bober and Livingstone (2004) argue: 'children are in many ways confident of their new online skills ... these should not be overestimated, for children are also aware of many ways in which they are confused, uncertain, or lacking in skills, thus resulting perhaps in a relatively narrow or problematically risky online experience' (p. 50). So, to pick up the point I made above, it is incumbent upon teachers and policy-makers to help structure the learning that many are participating in out-of-school literacy practices, so that we can value this out-of-school learning, provide further challenges and ensure universal access to these learning opportunities.

Informal, collaborative, playful learning

While much important learning is happening outside the classroom, because it is built around social activities its aims remain social, and the learning informal, unplanned and stochastic. It is undoubtedly the informal, undirected, experimental dimension of this learning that makes it so compelling for many, and I am convinced by arguments (Gee, 2004; Morgan and Kennewell, 2005; Vygotsky, 1976) that playfulness can lead to productive outcomes in terms of learning and development. Huzinga (1949) has said that play is central to human culture, while Gee (2003) has argued that you have to break or customize the rules for learning to take place. Carter's (2004) work looking at creative language also reflects on how linguistic creativity is often borne out of experimental, playful banter; something which Crystal endorses in his description of the ludic (Crystal, 1998). All communication is multimodal (Norris,

2004), so it is not surprising that play in one mode often triggers play in others; thus play with images, for example, often provokes playful, creative language.

While playfulness engenders learning, as Bober and Livingstone (2004) argue, play that occurs in some informal online activities may be narrowly focused, unchallenging and repetitive. Crucially, even for youngsters with technological access, their activities may be constrained by social goals as well as limitation in terms of their technology skills, or in their ability to see the possibilities available to them in different online spaces. For example, most young people's digital text-making tends to be directed to a specific, narrow social audience, such as within the friendship groups of those with whom they are already acquainted (Bortree, 2005; Boyd, 2006; Dowdall, 2006). Their 'diet' may therefore be restricted and repetitive, and they may simply need guidance, as indeed most do, when starting out in a new literacy domain. This is where schools can intervene, providing new challenges and direction, making learning less random, helping everyone to access digital texts, and to become self-aware, critical readers and producers of new literacies.

Methodology

As I indicated in the opening of this chapter, I am a regular participant on Flickr and my observations derive strongly from my own experiences and understandings. Further, I have talked informally with groups of other so-called 'Flickrites' from London, Sheffield, Bristol and York in the UK, as well as with a group from New York. I have used email to carry out questionnaires and have used a blog (Phlickrblog.com) to ask others about their views and activities on Flickr. I have worked with teachers in schools on projects where Flickr has been used to develop critical literacy skills.

Lankshear and Knobel (2006) have drawn attention to the need for 'insider research': research focusing on those involved in new media *by* those who are also immersed in them. My involvement in Flickr allows me an insider perspective, but I have also been able to compare my experiences with others. In addition, I have looked closely across the site and used a multimodal approach (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996; 2001; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001) to consider the site 'as text', and to think about its affordances and constraints. I take into account words, images, textual layout, hyperlinks and other features in order to explore meanings. I reflect on how words and images are used by Flickr members in increasingly innovative ways, and how these practices reflect and facilitate the learning that is taking place online.

In this chapter I think about Flickr as a potential model for multimodal digital text-making, and learning through semi-structured activities. The examples I use instantiate learning opportunities which could be replicated in more formal educational situations. They are chosen to illustrate the potential of Flickr to

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develop visual awareness, multimodal text production and consumption, and social and Internet research skills. I argue that all these areas are part of literacy within subject English or as a cross-curricular strand, accepting the view that literacy is both social and multimodal.

The Flickr website: organization of people and content

Flickr is a highly structured space, and members, as well as volunteer and salaried moderators, monitor activities on the site. It is free to join but there is more functionality, unlimited uploading and no visible ad-space for those who pay a nominal yearly charge. Members must be 13 years or over.

Flickr provides all members with an online space where they can manage their own 'photostream'; uploaded images are shown in chronological order and the template includes writing spaces for titles, descriptions and 'tags'. Tags are words or phrases that may define or label aspects of the image; they may be indexical, helping Flickr's search facility to locate the image. They may help the Flickrite catalogue their own images, through terms such as 'holiday', 'wedding', 'flowers' and so on. For example, anyone can search the Flickr tags and view others' 'holiday', 'wedding' or 'flower' images. Such a search provides much data for cross-cultural comparison of weddings and holidays for example. This is a highly valuable resource for teachers of all subjects and can provide much discussion material. Flickr members frequently subvert the nature of tags: for example, instead of giving one-word descriptors, they might write long phrases, obtuse remarks or quips. Titles can endorse or transform meanings of images of course, directing the gaze to particular features, or being suggestive of stories. An interesting exercise for a class is to provide titles for images and to see how meanings can change through this process. Descriptions can of course add more detail to the title, or can even undermine the meanings given.

Photographs can be arranged into sets on an individual's stream, and these sets can be grouped into broader 'collections'. These affordances promote thinking beyond individual photographs, extending the notion of text to narratives between images, and relationships across them, as well as providing a new way of looking at the world beyond. For example, for a set called 'literacy', photographers will gradually broaden their notion of what literacy entails. Looking at a series of images called 'literacy', provides a polysemic narrative about literacy and can promote discussion.

Members can initiate dialogue by commenting on and adding tags to others' images. 'Digital notes' can be superimposed on others' photographs, perhaps highlighting specific features, or suggesting how they may be cropped to achieve different effects. In school, teachers can invest in the fact that pupils already know each other and inhabit the same educational spaces, so that discussions might develop about representations of commonly known spaces, for

example. Projects might include, like ones I have been involved in, students taking photographs of their school and their locality. In so doing, they learned about how the same spaces could be presented negatively or positively by using a range of angles, different lighting, or even varying from black and white to colour. Adding particular titles and verbal descriptions enhanced these effects. Pupils commented on each other's work, asked questions and learned how photographs do not simply represent reality, but that different approaches reflect different meanings.

Communal groups

Any Flickr member can set up public groups to which anyone can contribute. Groups appear in a communal space, accessible via a number of on-site routes through hyperlinks. Images contributed by many photographers can be collected and viewed together in any kind of group. The instigator of a group, or 'admin', gives the group a title and provides a description or rubric of what is required for participation. Admins can remove 'unsuitable' images or even block particular members from participating. Reasons for blocking may include a history of being unfriendly or contributing 'inappropriate' or 'offensive' pictures; control is thus managed by members as well as by outside moderators if necessary. Many Flickr members collaborate most intensively in groups, since they not only pool their images in such spaces, but also open discussions about those images, the circumstances under which they were taken and how they fit (or not) the group's definitions. Interactivity is usually enthusiastic and lively, and jokes often develop. Some groups are specifically about teaching new skills and provide workshops on digital image manipulation, for example. Groups may comprise collections of images that feature specific colours, shapes, or perspectives, such as:

- 'The Red makes it';
- 'Beautiful Green';
- 'Squared circle';
- 'Looking down'; and
- 'Shooting up'.

Participation here raises visual awareness, and viewing these images together provides texts that show visual coherence. Some groups contain pictures which follow a particular tradition, for example,

- 'Martin Parr we ♥ U';
- 'Boring Postcards';
- 'Photograph like painting';
- 'Diane Arbus'; and
- 'Name that Film'.

Here, members demonstrate their understanding of a particular genre or style

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and build on previous knowledge. Viewing these images collectively enhances such knowledge and provides a particular perspective on many aspects of our world. Other groups focus on finding particular patterns such as repeated designs or marks, interesting prints or textures, reflections or symmetrical designs, and so on. Many groups use the Internet as a kind of virtual gallery for street art, or 'graffiti', with groups like:

- 'Walls Speak to us';
- 'Girls on Walls';
- 'Visual Resistance';
- 'Stencils';
- 'Banksy'; and
- 'Wet shame graffiti'.

Such groups provide a new context for showing street art, bringing it a new lease of life in a new exhibition space and allowing it to be seen as part of a socio-political movement rather than vandalism. Such groups, for example, provide potential discussion material, perhaps about social issues and politics, or maybe around images of street art and debating whether it is a democratic art form or urban crime.

There are groups that draw on games whose roots reach back to other traditions; groups such as:

- 'Visual Bingo';
- 'Snap'; and
- 'Picture Dominoes'.

Such groups develop and require teamwork, collaboration and close observation skills for participation. Other groups have an interest in narrative, for example the '5 picture story' group requires individuals to upload five images which tell a story; 'photo dominoes' requires members to contribute an image which relates in some way to the previous one, thematically or content-wise; 'domestic spaces – human spaces' requires images of items in domestic spaces that leave a clue of what has happened before, and so on.

Some group admins monitor members' contributions to their group pools of images very closely, even removing those that do not fit the rubric they have set out. Members are therefore required to choose their shots carefully, and will sometimes go to great lengths, giving elaborate linguistic descriptions with their shots, to justify the inclusion of their images in the group pool. In terms of learning, participants start to understand how the framing of a particular image may give it a slightly different nuance; how perhaps the manipulation of colour (maybe through lighting, type of film, or even through the use of software such as Photoshop) can affect the meaning of an image.

Some groups are immensely successful, having many members, thousands of

images and lively discussion threads. Other groups have sparse numbers of images. It is clear that there are things to be learned about the set-up and maintenance of groups. Groups are an excellent way of structuring activities and, while allowing a whole range of creative responses, provide rules for participation and learning.

Teachers can set up groups for pupils so that they can contribute images. They can be involved in thinking about titling images, tagging them, offering pithy descriptions and commenting on others' photographs. Such activities allow students to write within templates and to think carefully about their use of language to highlight particular aspects of the visual text. English teachers might want to ask classes to take images that illustrate metaphors of their own making, or they may ask pupils to take images that illustrate aspects of a poem or play. Drama teachers might ask pupils to take images that represent moments in a play. Some uses of Flickr allow pupils to think in detail about the relationship between the visual and the linguistic. Across the curriculum there will be other kinds of use, such as images of the locality used in geography. For photography classes, the possibilities for encouraging peer review of each others' work is immense.

Safety issues

The default setting is that images are visible to anyone who belongs to Flickr. However, one can alter this default and make images available only for specific audiences; in school terms this may mean restricted access to pupils in a class and possibly their parents. Under each image there is space for the 'owner' to write a description and then a further (potentially endless) space for comments to be left. Commenters must be members of Flickr, and it is impossible to leave anonymous remarks. Owners of a photostream can delete comments from photos and can block particular people from being able to see or comment on their images. Witnessing pupils using Flickr in the classroom allowed me to see how pupils quickly learned that comments left on images need to be carefully written, that tact and diplomacy needs to be learned, and that witty remarks are highly valued and skilled ways of using language. In terms of teaching pupils about skills for social networking online, it was invaluable for pupils to immediately see how their remarks were being received. Because pupils were in the classroom while they wrote online, they could immediately see each other's reactions to their remarks and this was of benefit. As Brooks (2005) explains:

The thing I like about getting images from Flickr is the students can see that there are real people behind the images, not some generic, faceless website. Real people, like them, have created the pictures, shared them with everyone else, and usually only asked to be credited. There are all kinds of lessons to be taught in those actions.

This is a powerful notion since learners can see that they have something to

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offer others; there are learners and teachers, but these roles are not formally designated and vary as activities change.

Conclusions

As Gee (2004) has argued, traditional schooling is based on individual isolated activities that are individually assessed. Collaborative learning has a great deal to offer in terms of learning but also in terms of its relevance to the ways in which people tend to operate in out-of-school domains.

On Flickr, the creation of content (images and written text), and sharing it online through social interaction, brings social constructivist explanations for learning to the fore (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger 1998), since individuals bring their own ideas and contributions, and can then interact over these. Interactions frequently bring new perspectives to interpretation or development of the content. The shared endeavour of image-making means that because individuals are all in the same position of wanting to create powerful texts, power is distributed and comments tend to be constructive, supportive and enthusiastic.

I have previously argued that, on Flickr, the nature of the learning is concerned with multimodal literacy development as well as developing social and cultural awareness (Davies, 2006a). I have also argued that the learning that takes place on Flickr is informal 'social learning' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998); the learning takes place through the execution of particular activities that are collaboratively developed and have aims and objectives other than learning. I have described how Flickr fosters ways of learning, 'where individuals ... reconsider the way they see themselves and their social worlds. ... where new sets of social practices and codes of conduct evolve over time, allowing individuals to re-examine some of their experiences whilst acquiring new ones' (Davies, 2006a, p. 218). In this chapter I have shown the potential for play and learning on Flickr, and described how it provides structures for individual and group participation which can be safely adopted in school.

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Key points

1. Digital texts are frequently multimodal and thus readers need to be aware of how images can represent 'reality' in different ways. Teachers need to help learners become critical readers of multimodal texts.
2. Online spaces are set up in ways that facilitate interactivity over text-making. The structures used by many online spaces can also be utilized in classrooms to channel interactivity in particular ways and to structure learning.
3. Teachers can build on young people's existing interests in social uses of technology and take them further in their learning.

In your classroom

1. Encourage students to invent titles for images selected by the teacher from Flickr. Discussion on how titles and tags can change the meanings of images. Students can take photographs and share these either via a photo-sharing site like Flickr, or through other digital means. Students can similarly suggest alternative titles and descriptive paragraphs which alter the way the images are read.
2. Students take digital images of the locality and experiment with angle, colour, lighting and crops to alter the way the images present the environment. Discussion about the use of images as documenting reality and how they can present a range of meanings, especially when accompanied by text.
3. Students contribute to groups of images set up in relation to a project. The images are used as a bank of resources which reflect different aspects of a project, and which show different ways of exploring an issue.

Further reading

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