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Multiliteracies as Transdisciplinarity Curriculum Practice

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Background

This study builds on and contributes to work around Multiliteracies approaches to literacy education. Although multiliteracies has been well theorised in recent years, few studies have researched the practical aspects of developing a curriculum of multiliteracies where students engage in transformed practice through multimodal design. The data contributes to the field of literacy research in describing how students move beyond engaging in critique to the multimodal design of a variety of school and media texts. Employing Bourdieusian concepts of social capital and academic field, the struggles around learning to inhabit certain school discourses are explored.

Research Questions

Drawing on data from a 3-year study in an urban middle school in the United States, the study reconsiders both disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, arguing that neither is adequate when conceptualising curriculum. We argue that students need to be introduced to disciplinary practices and concepts before they can make interdisciplinary connections. We demonstrate that disciplines need to be re-examined as lenses for reading the world—different ways of knowing that are ideological in terms of their particular objects, meanings, and values—and resources that foster but also shape students' learning. We then developed the notion of pedagogical transdisciplinarity to provide an overarching framework of meaning for thematically related multiliteracies classroom practices (Davis, 1995; Kockelmans, 1979).

Methods

Through case study, this paper describes two teachers' curricular examples of transdisciplinarity within the multiliteracies framework. We chronicle how students were introduced to critical semiotics, which assisted them in learning across the several subject areas.

Our adoption of transdisciplinary emphasizes the importance of critical language skills and social semiotics. Students used multimodal and intertextual understandings of texts ideas from systemics to analyse, critique and then redesign texts thereby contesting/questioning their production and consumption (Fairclough, 1995b; Kress & vanLeeuwen, 2001; J. L. Lemke, 2004; Peim, 1993).

The design work took students from critiquing other texts to using that critique for the purpose of what the New London Group (1996) calls re-design. Pupil's re-design reflected the textual work they had been doing with visual techniques across the disciplines. Multiliteracies as a theoretical framework connects this concept of re-design to transformed practice or a "transfer in meaning making practice, which puts the transformed meaning (the Redesigned) to work in other contexts or cultural sites" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 35).

Frame

Transdisciplinarity theorises an overarching framework of meaning to the disciplines (Wineburg and Grossman, 2000; Davis, 1995; Petrie, 1992; Kockelmans, 1979). Epistemologically, transdisciplinarity's attraction has lain in the desire for the meaningful integration of knowledge and has been associated with general systems theory, and philosophical questions about the nature of understanding (Petrie, 1992; Klein (1994). While the substantive proportion of transdisciplinary

theorizing has been in tertiary education and research, transdisciplinarity in curriculum design is entering primary and secondary educational practice.

We consciously use Bourdieusian concepts of field, capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) to explore the struggles around learning disciplinary discourses. Intersections within the intellectual field and related disciplines are formed in conflicts over academic rigor, theoretical versus practical knowledge and research versus pedagogy, to name a few. Bourdieu notes that there is often an unacknowledged or misrecognized complicity in accepting the rules of the game in fields (Bourdieu, Chamboredon, & Passeron, 1991). Too often, students, being initiated into various texts and text practices, are constructed somatically in this presupposed acceptance.

We view pedagogical transdisciplinarity as respecting disciplinary commitments to different understandings about the kinds of knowledge that are most valued, what it means to know something, what subject positions are enacted in the pedagogical exchange, and what vision of social relations is privileged. Pedagogy is about subject formation. It is an intervention in the lives of subjects and in the spaces they inhabit. Curriculum and instruction access linguistic and literate markets which represent social spaces that regulate particular forms of capital (Luke, 1995, 2001). The intellectual field as a whole constructs particular dispositions and habitus. Students within each school subject face established structures of expectations and are positioned within various contexts of chance and possibility, shaping their interactions with teachers and texts (Albright, Walsh, & Purohit, 2007). Pedagogies that are only vaguely aware of how practitioners and students as subjects are incorporated, "enfleshed" in some discourse every time they speak and act. Discourse is disciplinary (Gee, 1990). Consequently, pedagogies vary in effectively helping students understand the discursive values and conventions of school subjects, their related disciplines and fields.

Research findings

The project's findings demonstrate how a transdisciplinary curriculum promotes students' learning through textual analysis, discussion, re-representation, and production of texts with particular awareness to language and disciplinary norms about knowledge production, authority and representation using discourse-analytic strategies taught across school subjects. This research concludes that, as 'artful actors within semiotic systems,' these students were able to meld disciplinary knowledge with the strategic employment of multimodal design (The New London Group, 2000), adapted to the particular discursive demands of a variety of academic tasks (Newman, 2003). "Developing an appropriate metalanguage to enable explicit discussion of these meaning-making resources by teachers and students" (Unsworth, 2006, p. 55), our multiliteracies pedagogy enabled these students to analyse, discuss, re-create and produce texts, using strategies taught across the school subjects.

The concept of pedagogical transdisciplinarity within the multiliteracies framework provides a means to teaching and constructing disciplinary knowledge in productive and principled ways. As the teachers worked with students, the cultural capital students acquired—skills and dispositions—and its recognition brought out the significance of linkages between habitus, capital, life trajectory, and field. Learning to design, understood as shifting students' habiti or academic dispositions, was not an easy process and contests ready ways of thinking about knowledge construction. Understanding the relationship of habiti to field is central to a transdisciplinary multiliteracies curriculum.