Identity in Mediated Contexts of Transnationalism and Mobility

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Abstract

This chapter reviews research on the relation of literacy and identity in the context of transnational migration and changing linguistic and communicative landscapes with online connectivity. In particular, we focus on the ways that youth of migrant backgrounds use digital and online media to construct networks and affiliations with diverse cultural and language practices. The studies we review have provided lenses into how youth of migrant backgrounds draw from multiple linguistic and semiotic resources to represent themselves, how they navigate participation in diverse communities and networks that span national borders, and how diaspora youth blend their cultural heritage and affiliation with transnational youth culture in online participatory practices. The youths' digital practices indicate that they are orienting to different cultural discourses and practices coming from both local and translocal spaces, across their countries of origin and settlement, as these discourses and practices are accessed, remixed, and circulated on new media platforms. We propose that, at a broader level, these practices point to the ways in which people maneuver differentiated social spaces within and across countries, how people create their own (cultural and historically informed) pathways through them, and in the process reconstruct their understanding and relationships across these spaces. These processes of traversal and reconstruction of social spaces have important implications for further research and educational practice that seek to enhance people's mobility in a global world.

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Early Developments

Since the early 1990s, research on international migration has increasingly turned to the notion of *transnationalism* to understand the various kinds of cross-border connections that are created and sustained in the process of migration and how the identities of individuals and groups of people are negotiated within social worlds that span more than one place (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Vertovec 2009). These connections are multilayered, multisited, and are influenced by a complex ecology of labor and capital flow, circulation of ideas, cultural and material goods across the world, and increasing digitization of social life. Research in diaspora media studies has explored the adoption of various technologies, such as mobile phones, e-mail, text messaging, video chat, and Internet websites among migrants to engage in relationships of care and building cultural and political affiliations with family, friends, conationals, and others across distances (Miller and Slater 2000; Panagakos and Horst 2006). The "transnational turn" in anthropological and sociological research of migration has provided a "new analytic optic" (Caglar 2001, p. 607) for making visible how people constitute daily routines, activities, and institutional affiliations that simultaneously connect them to more than one society. These contexts of migration and mobility gave rise to the impetus to reassess our understanding of literacy and communicative practices, and how youth draw upon various linguistic and multimodal resources to (re)define their identities and relations to multiple localities and communities.

In educational research, scholars have argued that given the growing scope of cultural and linguistic diversity in public and private spheres of society, coupled with the changing communicative landscape, literacy pedagogy needs to move beyond formalized, standardized, and its largely monolingual and monocultural framework that currently is centered around the nation state (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Luke 2003). Scholars associated with the New London Group proposed the concept of multiliteracies to describe the literate abilities to navigate and negotiate diverse social practices and representational forms that are integral to our changing societies (New London Group 1996).The authors argued that mastery of contemporary multiliteracies demands continual adaptation to new emerging textual forms, comfort with hybridization and crossing cultural boundaries, and the ability to reenvision social futures. Importantly, along with others, they argued that linguistic and cultural

diversity is not a problem that needs to be standardized or normalized but should be seen as a cultural, civic, and economic resource in organizing literacy pedagogy. The article (New London Group 1996) proposes three constructs for scholars and educators researching literacies in the twenty-first century: (1) the construct of "productive diversity," which means seeing difference as a capitalizable resource, (2) "civic pluralism," which refers to the recognition of a broad range of affiliations, values, and perspectives beyond national borders or traditions, and (3) the idea of "multilayered lifeworlds" in which individuals participate and in the process develop complex, textured subjectivities.

In developing constructs of identity as an analytic lens for educational research, Gee (2000), who was coauthor of the New London Group article, contended that the contemporary global economy, popular culture, and youth sociality promote new contexts for constructing social identities that he termed affinity groups or affinity spaces. An affinity group identity is developed through networking, collaborating, and affiliating, sometimes across distances, around common interests, joint endeavors, and shared causes. The source of this identity is coparticipation in a set of distinctive practices – practices that are reflected in diverse kinds of youth engagement with media around hip-hop, anime, music, games, and fandoms. Gee (2000/2001) pointed out that affinity group identity can coexist with other forms of identity that come from institutional positions and cultural discourses. In this sense, Gee's formulation opens up an analytic space to think about how different kinds of social structures (from societal institutions, cultural heritage, and affinity group networks) may interact in practices of cross-border communication, and how people may draw from discourses from these different sources for representing and enacting identity.

Gee's notion of affinity space is echoed in the idea of "participatory culture" in the field of communication studies (Jenkins 2006), which refers to how everyday people and groups engage in networking, media use and production to pursue their interests and, in the process, shape the flow and circulation of media. The idea of participatory culture has spurred educational research to examine digital spaces as important sites for social connection, literacy practices, and cultural production.

These early developments provided some broad theoretical signposts for studying the relation of literacy and identity in response to changing demographics and migratory contexts, linguistic and communicative landscape, spatial affiliations, and online connectivity. In particular, research began to examine the ways that youth of migrant backgrounds use digital and online media to construct networks and affiliations to diverse cultural and language practices. The next section describes some major themes from this research that have begun to build a complex portrait of youths' transnational digital practices.

Major Contributions

Studies of youths' literacy and identity practices in transnational contexts have provided lenses into how these youth draw from multiple linguistic and semiotic resources to represent themselves, how they navigate participation in diverse communities and networks that span national borders, and how diaspora youth blend their cultural heritage and affiliation with transnational youth culture in online participatory practices.

A number of studies have focused on the online texts produced by immigrant youth and shown how young people use their personal profiles and self-produced narratives in online journals, instant messaging, and social networking sites to signify their identifications with multiple communities across borders (McGinnis et al. 2007; McLean 2010; Sánchez and Salazar 2012; Yi 2009). These signifying practices include written texts, images, and music used by youth to reference the national symbols and popular culture of their natal countries, and narrative texts that target different audiences and contain references to the youth's social relations and schooling experiences in their different homelands. For example, McGinnis et al. (2007) profiled how Julia (pseudonym), who migrated to the United States in her fifth-grade year, used a variety of modalities, such as Latin music, graphics of Colombian flags, and English and Spanish, to express her Colombian ethnic identification on Myspace (a social networking site). Her online gallery of friends reflected her affiliation with other Colombian youths from her high school and allowed her to maintain relationships with friends in Colombia. Additionally, Julia expressed her community involvement with immigrant rights by using the site to promote awareness and mobilize protests. The researchers' analysis of the multimodal and multilingual texts of the youths in their case study led them to assert that the online environment served as dynamic representational spaces for the youths to express multiple identities and multiple loyalties and to reflect on the different social and cultural contexts of their lives.

Besides serving as a narrative space to express one's multisite and multilayered affiliations, digital media are also platforms within which young people cultivate their relationships with different communities. Studies have explored the diverse online networks of youth and the nature of the communicative practices within these networks, particularly how social, linguistic, and semiotic resources are accessed and developed within these networks (Elias and Lemish 2009; Lam 2009; Lam and Rosario-Ramos 2009; Stewart 2014). In a study of the instant messaging practices of a 17-year-old girl who had migrated to the United States from China 2 years prior, Lam (2009) examined how the youth acquired and made choices among different varieties of Chinese and English to develop simultaneous networks across countries. The linguistic repertoire that the youth demonstrated in her online communication includes standard American English and hip-hop English that she used with an online network of Asian American youth, a combination of Cantonese, Mandarin, and English with her peers in the local immigrant community, and a blended form of Mandarin and Shanghainese that she used to interact with her peers and learn about events in her hometown of Shanghai. The researcher argued that such synchronic

movement across social networks represented the desire of the youth to develop the literate repertoire that would enable her to thrive in multiple cultural communities and mobilize social and semiotic resources within those communities. The study also shows how the youth's participation in these networks is oriented to diverse linguistic economies where particular language norms, cultural resources, and forms of creativity are circulated and take on symbolic and functional value.

In an ethnographic study with four high-school youth from Latin America who had been living in the United States for 9–20 months, Stewart (2014) demonstrated the diverse networks and forms of literacy practices that youth navigate across online and offline contexts. By interviewing and observing the youths' routine activities in different spaces, she noted how their social networking activities on Facebook connect them to friends and family back home and those in diaspora communities across Latin America and the United States, maintain their Latina/o identities through music and other forms of popular culture, and enable them to cultivate relationships through English with colleagues in their workplaces. Their online activities mediate their simultaneous participation in diverse sets of social relationships and institutional practices across geographic space.

These patterns of simultaneity of connection, navigation, and positioning in different cultural communities through online media are replicated and further illustrated in interview studies that draw on larger samples (Elias and Lemish 2009; Lam and Rosario-Ramos 2009). Elias and Lemish (2009) interviewed 70 immigrant youth from the former Soviet Union who had been living in Israel from between 6 months and 5 years, and found that the youths used the Internet to connect with their homeland and co-ethnics as well as to learn about the host society and to create friendships with local peers. The youths orient to online media and communicative platforms both as a source of information about the new society and a connection to Russian language, information, and cultural symbols of identity. These forms of continuity and simultaneous affiliations are actively cultivated and mobilized by the youth to navigate and circumvent the ruptures and social marginalization that they experience in relocation. Elias and Lemish (2009, p. 547) suggest that the youths' experiences are indicative of "a postmodern experience of diaspora in which homeland and identity have become fluid" and "new possibilities of identity formation and notions of belonging that emerge in this process today."

Other studies have shown how diaspora youth creatively signify their cultural heritage and affiliation with transnational youth culture in online participatory practices (Black 2008, 2009; Domingo 2012, 2014). In her study of youth of Filipino heritage in London who are members of a hip-hop production group that has transnational membership and affiliations, Domingo (2012, p. 178) proposes the notion of linguistic layering to describe the "design and circulation of multimodal texts as rhetorical resources for managing linguistic variety and cultural affiliation across discourse communities." The youth call themselves the "Pinoys" and network with youth of Filipino heritage across Europe, Asia, and North America to engage in various forms of digital hip-hop production. Their hip-hop music involves hybrid lyrical and beat-making, visual and textual displays that draw from symbols and references of diverse discourse communities of Filipino, British, hip-hop, and youth

pop culture. These multimodal ensembles and layering of culturally informed expressions are produced and circulated in the wider online communities to express their multiple affiliations and articulate social commentaries on their heritage and sense of global belonging. By circulating and discussing their projects across online platforms including Facebook, YouTube, and SoundClick (an online music-based social networking community), the youth are not only creating messages about their linguistic and artistic identities but also shaping digital and technological platforms through their collaborative authorship across space.

Black's (2008, 2009) study of multilingual and diaspora youths' participation in anime fan fiction community also shows opportunities for language development that draws from diverse media genres, cultural knowledge, and linguistic skills. For example, Black documented how youth of Chinese and Filipino descent who were studying English as a second language were able to draw on their knowledge of Asian cultures and languages to construct English texts with multilingual elements, express pride as Asian-origin writers, and attain expert status in the transnational anime fan fiction community. These youth, who were located in different countries, also collaboratively reviewed and supported each other's development as writers within the networking spaces of Fanfiction.net. The study shows how the transborder flows of cultural, symbolic, and ideological material in this online community influence the identities the youth enact through their fan texts, the global connection they develop, and the shaping and dissemination of their own media products.

These research studies on the digital literacy practices of youths of migrant backgrounds show the multiple and complex influences that contribute to the literate repertoires of these young people. The diverse influences are visible in the use of multiple languages and hybrid linguistic codes; media genres and multimodal expressions; as well as the content and cultural references that are represented through the diverse semiotic forms in the youths' digital texts. Indeed, the youths' digital texts indicate that they are orienting to different cultural discourses and practices coming from both local and translocal contexts, across their countries of origin and settlement, as these discourses and practices are accessed, remixed, and circulated in new media platforms.

What we also see from these cases is the creation of social and knowledge networks across countries. The creation of these networks via digital platforms allows the youth to connect to diverse cultural communities, access symbolic and social resources, cultivate simultaneous affiliations, and reconstitute their sense of belonging across geographical spaces. The reconstruction of social space in literacy and learning requires further exploration, particularly as we conceptualize forms of learning that relate to the transnational experiences and communicative repertoires of migrant learners. In the following section we discuss some empirical and theoretical work that move in this direction.

Work in Progress

A group of scholars supported by the MacArthur foundation in the United States have been developing "Connected Learning: An Agenda for Research and Design" (Ito et al. 2013). The report and related work argue for design and research of learning environments that are interest-driven, peer-supported, and oriented towards economic, educational, and political opportunity. By leveraging digital media technologies, the educational designs under the connected learning framework look to: "(1) offer engaging formats for interactivity and self-expression, (2) lower barriers to access for knowledge and information, (3) provide social supports for learning through social media and online affinity groups, and (4) link a broader and more diverse range of culture, knowledge, and expertise to educational opportunity" (ibid, p. 6). Examples of connected learning include Quest Schools, a network of public schools that incorporate approaches from game design and game-based learning to reimagine school curriculum, culture, and pedagogy. Other environments are teen library spaces where youth explore their various interests and receive mentorship from adults and peers on diverse forms of creative and multimedia production. The aim is to harness different forms of support structures across online and offline spaces and across institutional boundaries to promote more equitable and personalized learning for young people.

The Connected Learning framework is an educational movement seeking to reimagine social spaces for learning and to support young people's personal interests and passions to craft meaningful learning and career trajectories. It also has the expressed aim to relate to a broad range of knowledge and cultural communities with which students affiliate. However, in order to do so, we need more understanding and incorporation of the diverse profiles of cultural affiliations and resources for learning mobilized by young people. The different kinds of social and knowledge networks developed and valued by youth of diverse cultural backgrounds need to be considered to truly promote more equitable learning.

To capture variation in forms of connectivity and learning practices, de Haan et al. (2014) offer the notion of "networked configurations for learning" to describe the particular online and offline connections that people form as related to their social, cultural, and geographical history of mobility. Using social network interviews, the researchers studied the online and offline networks of 79 youth from Native Dutch, Moroccan-Dutch, and Turkish-Dutch backgrounds in the Netherlands. They found that the second-generation youth of Moroccan and Turkish descent show both local and transnational online connectivity, whereas Dutch youth of European descent have online networks that are distributed more nationally (within the Netherlands). For native Dutch youth, the Internet allows them to pursue individual hobbies and learning interests with close friends and in online communities. For Turkish-Dutch youth, their online networks are spread out across family and friendship networks in the Netherlands and Turkey, including access to media resources of Turkish origin, which provide them with particular cultural models and values. Moroccan-Dutch youth maintain transnational relationships with family across countries but also seek out online networking opportunities with other second-generation youth of

Moroccan descent around common interests and concerns (e.g., on issues of gender, religion, and politics) as they negotiate diverse norms and values in a multiethnic society.

This study shows that, among youth of migrant backgrounds, their online practices and learning are informed by cultural and ethnic affiliations, transnational and diaspora social networks, and the need and process for navigating multiple cultural values and ideologies as ethnic minorities in the society. These social and structural relations contribute to the priorities that the youth demonstrate in their online practices. Hence, in order not to risk normativizing particular digital practices as more conducive to learning, we need to understand the culturally configured practices of youth from diverse backgrounds, the historical context of their formation, and the potential they hold for expanding literacy and learning opportunities for young people.

Also as an effort to reimagine social spaces for learning, Lam and Warriner (2012) propose that we consider issues of scale in understanding the ways in which migrant learners relate to language and literacy norms and practices that are prevalent within different geographical spaces, locally and translocally, and that have functional purpose for them. The concept of scale is developed in social geography to analyze how geographical spaces, and the social practices associated with these spaces, are socially differentiated as well as contested and reconfigured through human activity and institutional practices (Herod 2011; MacKinnon 2010). Scale is a way of conceptualizing how power in society is exercised through the making and remaking, through the production and transgression, of boundaries among different places and sites of social practice. Such spatial boundary making and contestation are carried out through both discursive/representational and material processes. For example, the relations between English and Spanish in the United States, and the legitimacy of each in different spaces (school, home, the workplace), are the object of discursive struggle through society-wide debate and representation of the value of these languages as well as the material processes of political mobilization, institutional regulation, and legislation. The process of spatial differentiation produces language norms and social practices that are prevalent in different geographical scopes within and across nations. Recent work in sociolinguistics of globalization and migration has drawn upon this geographical concept to describe how people's uses of language and literacy are scaled – that is, how they are indexed to or respond to values, discourses, and practices at various geographical scopes and institutional spaces (e.g., Blommaert 2010; Collins et al. 2009).

Our discussion of youths' transnational media activities in the previous section illustrate how they orient to different cultural discourses and practices coming from both local and translocal contexts, even as these discourses and practices are juxtaposed and engaged in parallel or sometimes blended and remixed in their literacy practices. For some youth, their simultaneous interactions with diverse communities allow them to shift across scales as a means of expanding their identities and developing linguistic, information, and social resources with diverse communities. Other youth, for example, the Moroccan Dutch youth described in deHann et al. (2014), develop through their online practices a new kind of "scale" for

the youth to express their common concerns and experiences, and to reference and contest the language and cultural ideologies coming from their home and host societies. In other words, these youth are constructing a new geographical scale of practice that articulates relations to cultural ideologies at other scales. While these informal digital practices of the youth may not penetrate into their schooling experience, they hold functional purpose and social value for the youth and may serve to counteract the more limiting positions for immigrant learners in the traditionally monolingual and nationalist milieu of schooling.

Problems and Difficulties

We obviously can benefit from more research to help us better understand the digital practices and culturally configured networks of immigrant youth as well as other youth who develop transnational relationships through their online, interest-based engagements. We also need to understand how different social and demographic variables affect levels and types of engagement, including capturing forms of variation within ethnic groups. More comparative studies within and across migrant communities would allow us to consider the social and structural conditions that give rise to particular forms of transnational literacy practices. These conditions may include geographical distance and economic and political relations between the countries of origin and settlement, historical patterns of migration, the structural positioning of migrants in the country of residence, and intersections with transnational youth culture and media infrastructure across the different homelands.

The particular issue we want to point out and offer some suggestions for focus on how the different lenses for investigating literacy and identity among immigrant youths' digital practices can be synergized for future research and rethinking educational opportunities for young people. The studies we have discussed adopt different lenses for understanding immigrant youths' digital practices. These lenses include seeing the online practices as forms of representation of identity that draw from diverse sources of cultural and ideological materials; as particular types of social networks that connect people and artifacts across spaces; as affiliating and navigating through these networks in specific cultural and linguistic economies; and as creative adaptation of technological infrastructure to promote the preceding processes. At a broader level, these lenses point to the ways in which people maneuver differentiated social spaces within and across countries, how people create their own (cultural and historically informed) pathways through them, and in the process reconstruct their understanding and relationships across these spaces. We believe these processes of traversal and reconstruction of social spaces have important implications for further research and educational practice that seek to enhance people's mobility in a global world. In the next section, we offer the concept of scale as a perspective to bring together the different lenses on literacy and identity in mediated contexts for future research.

Future Directions

The concept of scale allows us to examine how people's language practices and affiliations span different geographical distances, and how through their practices and activities they also reconstruct relationships between these spaces. Here we propose three interrelated dimensions of scale for future research focusing on youth media practices, identity, and learning. Firstly, how do young people navigate differentiated social spaces and position themselves in diverse communities and economies across geographical distances? Secondly, how do they develop ways of knowing and representing the relationships between these different spaces? Thirdly, how do networking technologies or other material practices contribute to reconstructing spaces and creating new social spaces? In asking these questions, we are interested in how young people both relate to and reorganize their understanding of and participation in diverse social environments in society for their own learning and identity development.

In regard to the first question, scale allows us to attend to the differentiated spaces and norms and practices in these spaces that people navigate through their online (and offline) activities. We have seen that digital media allow youth who have access to them to construct relationships with people and communities that span various geographical distances and engage in diverse language practices. It is important to understand how these language practices contribute to a larger communicative and knowledge repertoire that the youth may leverage to position themselves in our interconnected economies and societies. To do so, it is necessary to both study the configurations of the digital networks that young people develop as well as situate these networks within the social and linguistic practices prevalent in a particular geographic community and economy. This may require a combination of methods to map out the spread of networking activities of young people (e.g., through survey, social network analysis, or interviewing) and ethnographic and historical study of the communities with which youth are engaging through their activities.

For example, deHann and her colleagues (2014) show through social network interviews that Turkish Dutch youth develop a distinct pattern of ethnically based family and friendship networks that span across the Netherlands and Turkey. Lam's (2009) ethnographic study of the online networks of one Chinese youth in the United States shows that the youth was navigating quite specific local language norms in her Chinese immigrant neighborhood in comparison to her language practices with people in her hometown of Shanghai. Studying how youth participate in transnational networks may complexify our understanding of ethnicity and the diverse linguistic, symbolic, and ideological sources that contribute to the construction of Turkishness or Chineseness or other forms of identity. It may also allow us to see how these sources of identity and social practices are mobilized by the youth in their educational, career, cultural, and personal endeavors.

As people move across different geographic communities, they also construct ideas and ways of knowing and representing the relationships between the different spaces (Jones 1998; Moore 2008). This representational aspect of constructing spatial relations is seen in Domingo's (2012, 2014) study of Filipino youth in Britain who

participate in transnational hip-hop production as the youth draw from symbols and references of diverse cultural and geographic communities. Their rhetorical movements across spaces are manifested, for example, in the footage of their music videos that connects sites in Manila and London, including scenes of poverty and people in the Philippines protesting on the streets. The visual assemblage is coordinated with the youths' lyrics and bodily expressions to express a uniquely Filipino hip-hop social commentary. As Domingo (2014, p. 16) stated regarding the youths' literacy practice: "Their digitally enabled text making is an ongoing process that involves continued reshaping of multimodal ensembles across spaces." The youths' narratives that interweave events and practices across geographic communities create knowledge of the interrelationships of cultures and societies as well as new pathways for the youth as hip-hop artists. Such narratives for re-presenting the relationships between diverse social spaces may be particularly promoted and supported in collective practices that serve an artistic, educational, professional, or political purpose. However, they may just as well be present in the everyday narratives that young people construct as they navigate cultural norms and practices and grapple with information and perspectives from diverse societies. Further research can explore how youth develop ideas and narratives that variously affect their pathways and mobility across societies and different institutional domains of society.

Lastly, we need to understand the role of networking technologies and other material infrastructures in contributing to creating spaces of social contact and cultural flows across geographic locations. Countries that have widespread online infrastructure and home-grown media companies with a Web presence can readily reach out to its diaspora populations with their media products and platforms. Individuals and groups may also adapt these media infrastructures for their own localized communication or networking with conationals in other migration countries. Immigrant communities that have strong civic and community groups may promote online platforms for young people to participate and communicate around their common concerns and interests. These structural conditions are important to consider in understanding the geographical scale of people's social connections, the types of networked and mobile media that facilitate these social connections, and the flows of information and material products and language practices in these networks.

While we do not want to lose sight of continuing disparity in people's access to technology both within and across societies, it is also important to attend to how people actively shape technological media for social purposes both individually and collectively. This happens for undocumented youth living in precarious financial and political circumstances who develop their resilience and define their own identities as transnational Latina/os (Stewart 2014) as well as for hip-hop artists who mobilize multiple media platforms to collaborate in creative production and to reach a transnational audience (Domingo 2014). Understanding how youth affiliate within and across territorial boundaries can help us reimagine forms of learning and belonging that serve to support their social, economic, and political engagements in our contemporary world.

Cross-References

▶ Multilingualism and Multimodality in Language Use and Literacies in Digital Environments
▶ Language, Ideology and Critical Digital Literacy
▶ Language and Identity on Facebook

Related Articles in the Encyclopedia of Language and Education

Kevin Leader and Cynthia Lewis: Literacy and Internet Technologies. In Volume: Literacies and Language Education
Brian Street: New Literacies, New Times: Developments in Literacy Studies. In Volume: Literacies and Language Education

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