

(Re)conceptualizing I/identity: An Introduction

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In the past fifteen years, there has been a shift in the way researchers have conceptualized identity, moving from the “identity-as-thing” to an understanding of “identity-in-practice” (Leander, 2002, 198–199). This is not necessarily a new concept, as earlier researchers recognized sociocultural influences on perception (Bartlett, 1932/1995; Vygotsky, 1978) and on the performative nature of identity (Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). New Literacy Studies theorists (Barton, 1994, 2001; Gee, 1996, 2000; Street 1995, 1999) began to examine identity-in-practice in relation to literacy. In addition, ethnographic accounts (Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1997; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) began to document ways that literacies and identities were interconnected. There was an epistemological shift, underscoring the individual and community practices that help to shape one’s identity. Literacies included all activities inside and outside school, highlighting the relationship between people’s literacy practices and their situated actions, behaviors, beliefs, and values, or their Discourses (Gee, 1999, 2008, 2011).

As a result of this movement, researchers began to identify students’ practices outside of school, with special attention to identity artifacts (Leander, 2002) that materialize identity-in-practice and, often, reveal their “funds of knowledge” (Cavazos-Kotte, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, &

Gonzalez, 1992; Rowsell, 2006; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007), or “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). An artifact is tied to one’s literacies and identity construction because “an artifact ... reflects, through its materiality, the previous identities of the meaning maker” (Rowsell & Pahl, 2007, p. 388). In viewing texts as artifacts, we can understand ways that meaning-making is tied to one’s experiences, one’s personal connection to texts, and one’s sense of self (Brozo & Young, 2001; Hull, 2003; Hynds, 1997; Kooy, 2003; Moje, 2000), which may clarify why one constructs and/or solidifies an identity in socially and culturally situated acts.

Complicating the discussion of identity-in-practice are the lexical, grammatical, and spatial changes that have accompanied technological advancements, such as the Internet, email, and instant messaging. Technology provides virtual spaces for experimentation with language, as well as with identity, and there is a purposeful manipulation and projection (Gee, 2007a) of virtual identities, as “individuals seek stages—performing spaces—from which they can perform for the widest/largest possible audiences” (Lankshear, 2003, 180). Through avatars, or digital, three-dimensional graphical personae, people can become members of a virtual community by congregating with other graphical personae, be they in the form of animals, aliens, or humans, thereby creating “new personalities and new relationships, a world which only exists on the net” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 109). Venues such as video games, social networking sites, chat rooms, emails, and instant messages enable students to extend their social network and establish and perform specific identities (Merchant, 2001). Just as with the creation of an avatar or a game character, the possibility for users to assume alternate identities when engaging in discussions online enables them to experiment with language, voice, and personae (Lewis & Fabos, 2000).

This yearbook, *Rethinking Identity and Literacy Education in the 21st Century*, places identity and education at the forefront of the discussion to underscore the ways identity work influences the acquisition, maintenance, and formation of literacy practices. Given the understanding of identity-in-practice and the various, changing, multimodal texts students engage with inside and outside school, this volume includes areas of research—new literacies, multiliteracies, multimodality, digital literacies, critical literacy, and cultural studies—that explore identity mediation across media. With chapters by new and established scholars, the collection considers wide-ranging issues dealing with identity in the 21st century. Whether identity mediation is in the foreground or background of each chapter, there is a rich tapestry of perspectives within the volume held together, for us, by the concept of what we define as the “big I” and

“little i” I/identity issue. In the following theoretical framing, we introduce I/identity and discuss the chapters as they align with key theoretical strands in the volume, rather than presenting the chapters in the sequence in which they appear in the volume. Though unconventional, this approach not only calls attention to the interrelated and complicated nature of identity and literacy in the 21st century, but also suggests that the discussion of identity and literacy should not be relegated strictly to the discrete bounds that the Table of Contents presents. Therefore, we dedicate this introductory chapter to the examination of threaded theoretical strands and the relationship among the chapters’ concepts, which will help the reader progress through the volume and remain aware of the interconnectedness of identity and literacy across media and contexts.

I/IDENTITY

Building on James Paul Gee’s (1999, 2008, 2011) helpful distinction between “big D” and “little d” discourses, we look to refine the understanding of identity mediation in broad and specific ways. Gee (2011) differentiates between “Discourses with a capital D” (p. 151), which account for socioculturally situated ways of being, and the linguistic understanding of discourses as forms of communication. Like Gee’s “big D” Discourses, “big I” Identity represents “ways of acting, interacting, feeling, believing, valuing together with other people and with various sorts of characteristic objects, symbols, tools, and technologies—to recognize yourself and others as meaning and meaningful in certain ways” (Gee, 1999, p. 7). In this way, Identity extends from the concept of Discourses, and it refines the understanding of identity-in-practice (Leander, 2002) by accounting for the agentive nature both of making meaning and of the practices associated with each person’s individual ways of being. Identity, therefore, is idiosyncratic, specific to individuals and the modes and practices that they choose for signaling subjectivities. However, to strictly discuss identity in relation to situated meaning-making would ignore the cognitive and developmental aspects of identity, which have their roots in the works of the constructivists, Piaget and Vygotsky, who believed that experience and environment mediated understanding and perception.

Although Piaget and Vygotsky present different understandings of cognitive development, their theories suggest that meaning and identity are mediated by perception. Schema theory (Anderson, 1984/2004; Bartlett, 1932/1995; Müller, Carpendale, & Smith, 2009) highlights how cognitive frameworks are socially and culturally situated and previous experiences shape perception. The concept of schema accounts for ways that “all

human actions are intentional such that an agent has some awareness or consciousness of an action through its goal” (Müller et al., 2009, p. 33). In this way, experience and perception guide one’s purpose and direction. Further, Bartlett (1932/1995) notes social influence on perception when he explains how “social bias ... does immediately settle what the individual will observe in his environment, and what he will connect from his past life with this direct response” (p. 255). In other words, one’s “funds of knowledge” (Cavazos-Kotte, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Rowsell, 2006; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007) contribute to one’s understanding of self and of texts.

Akin to the discussion of schema and funds of knowledge is a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), which recognizes that people internalize experiences, and there is a cultural “reconstruction” of signs and psychological operations that allows for socially and culturally situated signs to become re-contextualized or associated with new environments and experiences (p. 57). “Little i” identity represents one’s psychological, emotional, and physiological development, which is directly related to one’s funds of knowledge and is ever-evolving with the individual’s encounters and actions.

The main difference between Identity and identity is that the former is rooted in practices and overt forms of meaning-making and the latter is embedded in the development of one’s sense of self. Though we discuss I/identity separately here for explication purposes, an understanding of I/identity assumes a combination of cognitive changes that we share and subjective changes that make us distinct. For instance, in Chapter 9, Abrams calls attention to two video gamers’ actions to discuss the important relationship between virtual and real behavior. The Discourses of these students—their actions, their beliefs and values, their ways of making meaning—not only reveal their knowledge of gaming rules and language, but also help to define their position in that specific gaming environment. Their actions are agentive, and the students’ positioning distinguishes who they are as gamers at that point in time in their real and virtual contexts. The discussion of their idiosyncratic behavior and meaning-making practices calls attention to the students’ Identities. But the students’ actions do not exist in isolation; the students behave in ways related to their schema for being gamers and their underlying sense of self, which stems from previous socioculturally situated experiences. Here is where identity, or an embedded sense of self that inherently fuels and/or shapes one’s behavior, comes into play. These students define themselves as gamers, and their gaming identity is derived from ever-developing and situated internal understandings. These students’

behavior and meaning-making practices signal ways in which their gaming I/identity is formed and maintained.

I/IDENTITY AND LITERACY

In the broad ambit of “new” studies in literacy education, I/identity features prominently, playing a key role in the kinds of texts and practices that younger and older generations use and understand (Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Ivanic, 1998; Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Norton, 2000). On one side of the debate is a movement looking at new identity practices in the digital age (Gee, 2004, 2007a; Kress, 2003). On the other side of the debate is a focus on the roles of culture, race, religion, and socio-economic status as informing identity mediation in given situations and contexts (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gutierrez, 2006). This volume navigates and sometimes even merges both sides of the debate, as the chapters re-conceptualize literacy and I/identity. The authors all recognize the ideological character of literacy development, viewing literacy as intimately tied to culture, social practices, and issues of power. Beneath this perspective lies a belief that just as Identities, or meaning-making practices that situate ways of being, cannot be reified into a single entity, so, too, literacy cannot be universalized or robbed of its diversity; instead, *literacies* should be seen as social practices engaged in by individuals in different situations.

Given their symbiotic relationship, literacy and I/identity are coupled throughout the chapters, as meaning-making practices represent the kinds of thinking, valuing, acting, and interacting that Gee (2008) talks about in his theorizing of social languages. In this collection, Bronwyn T. Williams unravels the role of popular culture in forging I/identity for youth today. Interestingly, Williams analyzes how I/identity mediation has shifted over generations from simply putting up pictures in a locker or buying a t-shirt to signal ruling passions and interests, to creating and distributing texts that use popular culture to situate one’s beliefs and sense of self. In his chapter, Williams combines textual analysis with interview data from first-year university students to illustrate how their understandings and appreciation of popular culture shape the ways in which I/identities are constructed. Exploring such notions as embodied experience in online spaces, Williams shows the diverse repertoire of skills and texts that individuals draw upon to mediate on- and offline I/identities. Finally, he examines social networking and participatory structures as active I/identity formation work. Williams offers a collage of identity performance that contributes to the mission of the collection as a whole

in peeling away key layers of I/identities being forged in new times.

In a quite different way, Jewitt, Bezemer, and Kress balance the performance of identity within a more traditional, schooling model: the practice of annotation in the English classroom. Urging us to assume the challenge to reconcile traditional literacy practices with newer, multimodal epistemologies, Jewitt, Bezemer, and Kress analyze how annotation shifts with a 21st century mindset. Annotation privileges the perspective of the annotator and, as such, is an ideal way of mediating differences between monomodality and multimodality. How does the age-old practice of summarizing and annotating texts look different when using multiple modes? Jewitt, Bezemer, and Kress tackle the topic through a series of case studies that account for such diverse modes as image, typography, and layout. The chapter bridges what feel like incommensurate personal and pedagogic spaces by identifying the agentive, multimodal potential of annotation in pedagogic spaces. Their work and that of Williams powerfully combine literacy with identity mediation, supporting the overarching claim that literacy calls upon different dispositions from students.

I/IDENTITY AND MULTIMODALITY

Literacy also has changed to allow for greater identity investment through the incorporation of modes, in addition to the written word. Literacy relies on multiple modes of expression and representation, and I/identity work happens when people creatively and meaningfully improvise. Sedimenting parts of self, perhaps even understanding parts of self, happens when individuals make meaning with texts (Kress, 1997). Kress recognized that a meaning maker's motivation increases when the use of multiple modes is possible and actually preferred. At times, an image best serves a text's underlying meaning, whereas at other times, sound and animation say precisely what a text producer wants to say. Motivation in communication relies on this degree of choice and freedom of expression.

In Kate Pahl's chapter, she describes the potential of modes to depict salient aspects of identity. Pahl analyzes digital stories that families produced together, children filming their parents about valued artifacts, and how modal choice affords more I/identity investment for family members. Pahl adopts a participatory method of data collection by asking participants to do the research with her. The research is also multimodal because Pahl analyzes participant families' choices and interests for multimodal compositions during the production process. Families involved in Pahl's research create digital stories about objects that they value and

how these objects signal salient aspects of self. Pahl analyzes how a family collectively composes a multimodal text. In her words, “by focusing on the moment at which the meaning maker decides the ‘best fit’ for the representation, modal choice is then linked in with identity.” Crafting digital stories together provides the families with a place and time to create their own narratives. Authoring digital stories represents a careful process of identity presentation, and Pahl’s deft analysis of multimodal composition shows the embedding of identity into the text.

Kalantzis and Cope, similarly, reflect on writing in a multimodal age. Transforming the language and logic that we apply to writing, Kalantzis and Cope orient the reader to what thinking multimodally entails: experiencing, conceptualizing, analyzing, and applying designs in very different ways that should (and need) to inform writing pedagogy. Kalantzis and Cope come the closest to offering readers a tangible pedagogy for writing in new times that relies on the logic of multimodality. They speak of changes in I/identity as mirroring changes in our cultures and our persons, which should be the basis for literacy policy and pedagogy.

I/IDENTITY AND DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

Digital environments complicate the discussion of I/identity because of the creation of and connection to virtual personae and spaces. Prensky’s (2001, 2006) identification of digital natives and digital immigrants calls attention to the emotional chasm and power structure inherent in the difference between being reared in a digital world and entering it as an adult. As digital immigrant Norton-Meir (2005) notes, “We must realize that our students think and process information differently than we do” (p. 430), and rethinking identity and literacy education involves the discussion of student and educator practices and I/identity development in, or stemming from, digital environments.

Communication has become imbued with digital practices, such as short message service (SMS) texting and emailing. The use of video games and the creation of networking spaces, such as Facebook or MySpace, have offered new dimensions for students to build upon their knowledge of the digital space(s), their awareness of audience, and their membership (Moje, 2000) in specific Discourse communities (Gee, 2007b, 2008; Xu, 2008). Given that the “composing process brings the writers’ repertoire of knowledge and strategies into play” (Hillocks, 1995, p. 87), electronic communication, the creation of virtual spaces and characters, and the experimentation inherent in digital environments (Lewis & Fabos, 2000) help to mediate I/identity. Not only do online practices situate one’s Identity, or contextual ways of being and doing, but also

these practices reveal aspects of one's identity and previous experiences, which are tied to the confidence and competence developed as a result of virtual encounters. Such a sense of self is directly linked to motivation (Baker, 2003; Nicholls, 1984; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), and self-efficacy is an important component of one's personal interests, the assumption of goals, and behavioral enactments in both real and digital environments.

Kristen Hawley Turner's discussion of *digitalk*, "a new literacy of the digital generation," provides a window into the ways texting language can enable adolescents to situate themselves within a particular Discourse community. In Chapter 11, Turner calls attention to the ways digitalk incorporates the experimentation with language and meaning-making practices that develop and position students' texting Identity, while also helping students feel a connection to peers and a sense of belonging. This sense of self, coupled with the students' knowledge of the electronic discourse specific to a texting community, helps distinguish the role of digitalk in the development of students' identities.

Whereas Turner's discussion of digitalk enables us to conceptualize ways that students I/identities and literacy practices materialize from the evolving discourses in specific digital environments, Casey's chapter focuses on the pedagogical use of digital tools and ways pre-service teachers develop their professional I/identities in a virtual environment. Heather Casey argues that educators "negotiate" I/identities through the enactment of specific practices and the assumption of specific roles. As pre-service educators participate in online communities, they develop a situated Identity for those practices (e.g., a blogging Identity), as well as confront, grapple with, and cultivate their sense of self as professionals in real and virtual environments. In this way, Casey's chapter reveals the fluid nature of identity construction, and it underscores how I/identities and practices are shifting and evolving.

Further, given the connection one may feel in relation to a virtual persona or environment, there is a projection of self onto the character (Gee, 2007a, 2007b), with the individual feeling personally responsible for the virtual character. Williams's (2009) discussion of popular culture informing I/identity construction, and Abrams's argument that gamers' I/identities are related and extended through both a projection of and an association with the virtual identity, also suggest that there is a dynamic interaction between the digital environment and the individual, with virtual practices situating one in virtual and real spaces (Abrams, 2010; Gee, 2007a, 2007b; Williams, 2009). I/identities can be constructed, "sedimented" (Rowell & Pahl, 2007), and/or manipulated in digital environments, resulting in the evolution and/or negotiation of real and virtual practices and self-conceptions.

I/IDENTITY AND NEW MEDIA

In contemporary culture, new media is everywhere. We cannot walk down the street, go through our mail, surf the Internet, or even take a train without encountering either new media or popular culture. Consider for a moment how identities would be forged if new media and popular culture did not exist. This is a hard question to answer with any degree of precision, because forms of communication inundate us with pop culture and new media technologies. There is, however, a thread connecting literacy development and new media, which we can begin to recognize as we come to grips with different practices associated with new media use, as we understand the blending of media as remix, and as we analyze the impact of popular culture texts on students. As Bronwyn T. Williams contends in Chapter 8:

The more we understand about how students read popular culture texts and how and why they sample and compose with them, the more we will understand how they connect their embodied lives with virtual performances.

There is a large repository of research on adolescent literacy and new media (Abrams, 2009; Alvermann, 2007, 2010; Black, 2008; Buckingham, 2002; Davies, 2006; Sheridan & Rowsell, 2010; Thomas, 2007; Williams, 2009). Certainly, authors in the collection take into account new media's tremendous role in forging I/identities. Some contributors within the volume focus on specific technologies such as video games, whereas other contributors deal quite centrally with new media and its role in I/identity mediation.

In Chapter 4, Donna E. Alvermann shifts a 20th century vision of literacy education to a 21st century vision by exploring multimodal text production and what that means for school literacy. Alvermann asks the important question: How can we move on with our conceptions of identity (particularly literate identities) with multimodality as our starting point? She looks at social networking and how social connectedness affords a greater sense of belonging. Looking across new media from video games to cell phones to iPods, Alvermann analyzes how new media and digital technologies are sites for negotiating literate I/identities. Alvermann considers what changes need to occur "if schools of teacher education are to support prospective and practicing teachers who are interested in moving beyond possible comfort zones to explore with youth 21st century multimodal texts." In so doing, Alvermann calls attention to the barriers that hinder educators' effective integration and use

of students' literacies and I/identities to support meaningful learning, and she offers a thoughtful consideration of the reasons why these barriers exist and ways to overcome them.

Focusing on video gaming, Sandra Schamroth Abrams invites us into the intertextual and media-filled worlds of two young men, Jeremy and Kyle. Abrams offers this collection a nuanced and rich picture of what exactly happens when youth extend their virtual practices and I/identities into real spaces and real I/identities. From the theoretical platform of Gee's (2007a) projective identity, Abrams enables us to appreciate the connection between gamers' online and offline behavior. Abrams examines "what happens when gamers enact, in reality, an identity inspired and or/directed by virtual designs," and she considers how the "association between the gamers and the virtual characters modify I/identity development and/or performance." In so doing, Abrams focuses on how virtual connections translate into real actions, as a result of what she calls an "associative I/identity," a term that draws attention to the agency and meaning-making in the relationship between I/identity construction on and off the screen. Through new multimodal technology, players fulfill the vision of utopian meaning that Kress (1997) described in *Before Writing*, as transformational work that helps players pull on their identities, their interests, and their desires, to channel them into a virtual persona. But, as Abrams's chapter suggests, there is an intersection between the projective identity (Gee, 2007a) in the virtual world and the performed identity (Goffman, 1959) in reality, and this point of convergence reveals the association between real and virtual actions and highlights gamers' comprehension, application, and critical understanding of texts. Abrams's chapter provides an alternative perspective on identity by looking at how meaning-makers' virtual roles initiated informed understandings of text, constructions of I/identities, and contributions to community practices.

I/IDENTITY, RACE, AND CULTURE

The concept of I/identity as a site of struggle plays out in some chapters in the volume. Issues such as social class and identity formation, and the roles of race and culture in the performance of identity, are nested within core arguments tied to the subject having human agency. Structured by relations of power, subjectivity is produced in a variety of social sites. Subjectivity is not passive, but it is an active way of inciting performance and mediation. There are social constructions that we exist within, such as a Caribbean youth or a working-class British citizen or a Muslim American, and these I/identities inform how we choose to read,

write, understand, speak of, and listen to texts. Chapters in this volume helpfully attend to this aspect of identity in the 21st century.

In Cheryl A. McLean's chapter, she argues for a perspective on 21st century I/identities that considers learning as a social process that actively engages diverse perspectives and experiences. McLean offers the concept of cultural dialogues with home and host environments, as a way of negotiating cultural models and senses of self. Individuals who migrate from one home (e.g., Jamaica) to a host country (e.g., the United States) negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting, practices and worldviews. For migrant youth, they experience a placelessness that compels them to engage in multiple ways of being. McLean's chapter looks at the tensions that exist for so many youth around issues of race, social class, and culture, providing a language and framework for thinking about these issues in the 21st century.

Further, in Chapter 3, Lalitha Vasudevan examines what she calls "digital geographies," tracing adolescents' multimodal literacy practices to reveal the layered relationship among text, self, and practices. Through the discussion of students' connectivity to and use of various digital texts, Vasudevan calls attention to the constellation of literacy practices (Steinkuehler, 2007) that inform students' meaning-making and situate their I/identity construction. Moreover, the discussion of digital geographies underscores Vasudevan's concept that digital modalities and media are not just didactic tools and resources, but are interconnected spaces saturated with histories, ideas, and situated practices. I/identities evolve as people traverse and inhabit these multimodal spaces. As Vasudevan's examples suggest, culture and I/identity are co-constructed according to accepted practices within those spaces; whether it be through the encouragement of a friend who commends a song choice, or the layering of photographs and stories, or the use of digital tools, there is a convergence of digital and real practices and cultures.

I/IDENTITY AND PRODUCTION

Confronting identity issues in the 21st century demands reexamining ironclad literacy practices, such as writing a five-paragraph essay, in a new light. As discussed earlier, the proliferation of multimodal texts in homes, workplaces, communities, and schools has brought about dramatic changes in the ways in which we compose and produce text. In fact, writing in the traditional sense almost feels like an anachronism. Despite this proliferation, there remain few studies that describe the process of producing 21st century texts. The goal of such a volume as this one, with scholars around the globe at various stages in their scholarship, is to trace

identity issues as they relate to literacy education. Redefining writing and composition is part of the challenge, and several authors take on production as a modern heuristic for meaning-making.

In Kalantzis and Cope's chapter, they move from the early days and the allure of print to the present day, with our fixation on design and remix. Kalantzis and Cope tell the story of multimodality and a production heuristic by documenting the evolution of text and how we think and make modern texts. They discuss "the revolution of the production of meaning" as reliant on design notions such as synaesthesia and navigational paths, and they provide a language for describing and thinking about the logic of new texts in new times. In their discussion of production, design, layout, and formatting, Kalantzis and Cope are ahead of their time in what they are proposing for contemporary literate dispositions.

Jennifer Rowsell presents production through the gaze of actual new media and digital technologies producers. Unveiling some of the mystery behind marketplace production, Rowsell (and her co-researcher Mary P. Sheridan) presents a longitudinal study of 30 producers of a variety of media to show a link between what producers say about consumer logic and what consumers take up in their own meaning-making. Producer perspectives inform the commentary about layers of the production process as a possible blueprint for literacy pedagogy and a more modern epistemology for literate dispositions in pedagogic spaces.

CONCEPTUALIZING THIS VOLUME

This collection presents multidisciplinary approaches to mediating I/identity in the 21st century. Looking across the chapters, technologies saturate literate activities, and this collection is unique in that it calls attention to some of the issues of I/identity and practice that otherwise seem to have been conventionalized. The chapters each disrupt notions of "little i" and "big I" identity, offering reflective conceptualizations of I/identity and the examination of second-nature activities and enactments that become part of our I/identities. The contributions to this volume underscore the role of reflection and the need for teachers and students to develop a more thoughtful, meta-understanding of situated, intertextual meaning-making and identity mediation across 21st century texts.

This introductory discussion recognizes the threaded, multifaceted understanding of I/identity across the chapters, and the sequence of the works throughout the volume represents the conflation of I/identity issues in light of 21st century literacies. More specifically, the headings

that separate the chapters in the table of contents—Multimodalities and I/identity, Space and Story, and Digital Mediation of I/identity—call attention to cross-disciplinary practices and environments that impact meaning-making in our digitally imbued world. As a result, this volume can be conceptualized as a progression of thought that moves from the page to screen and within and outside the classroom walls, underscoring how I/identity issues are prolific and pervasive across cultures and contexts.

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