

## BOOK REVIEW

### Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising Third Space Literacies

By John Potter and Julian McDougall

Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

205 pp./\$99.99 (hb), \$79.99 (e-book)

### Worried About the Wrong Things: Youth, Risk, and Opportunity in the Digital World

By Jacqueline Ryan Vickery

MIT Press, 2017

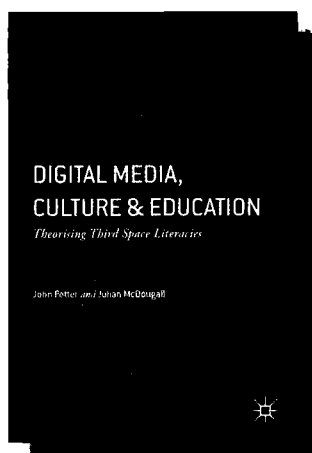
360 pp./\$35.00 (sb), \$24.00 (e-book)

### Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy

By Renee Hobbs

Wiley-Blackwell, 2017

285 pp./\$89.95 (hb), \$34.95 (sb)



To read about critical digital literacy in the context of K-12 and undergraduate education in the United States and Great Britain in 2017 is to engage in an act that is profoundly disappointing, disheartening, and discouraging. This is not to say that current discussions lack compelling ideas, sophisticated solutions, or ethical considerations that deserve careful pondering. Nor is it to suggest that this realm of academic research and curriculum development has declined or dwindled.

Quite the contrary. The discipline is home to rigorous, provocative, and dedicated work by scholars who have steadily produced both sound and radical ideas about how best to educate young people for a digital world, with varied and abundant research studies as support. Further, the last decade has seen the evolution of a global perspective, careful attention to both formal and informal learning, and an awareness of generational differences that boasts a greater acuity than ever. So why the weary sense of despair?

Perhaps David Buckingham put it best in his book *Beyond Technology: Children's Learning in the Age of Digital Culture*, which includes a chapter titled "Waiting for the Revolution." He was referring to the revolution in digital literacy and its acceptance within the curriculum for students of all ages. Sadly, that sentence was published in 2007. Here we are, in 2017, *another* decade on, and we're still "waiting for the revolution."

Luckily, the writers of three new books on digital literacy refuse to cede the future of young people and their right to an education that integrates media literacy to the onslaught of challenges preventing imaginative pedagogical reform in this area. Together, authors John Potter, Julian McDougall, Jacqueline Ryan

Vickery, and Renee Hobbs offer a spectrum of perspectives, practices, and research that demonstrate the remarkable vitality and breadth of activity in the field.

In *Digital Media, Culture and Education: Theorising Third Space Literacies*, Potter and McDougall, both longtime scholars of media education in the UK, explicitly acknowledge the longer history of media literacy initiatives by stating that their mandate is to "contribute to the 'maturation' phase of enquiry into technology, learning and literacy" (3). With this statement, the authors acknowledge a period of turmoil and a "reductive opposition between emancipatory '2.0' ideas and rejectionist discourse" that attended the arrival of a series of powerful social media tools starting in 2004, and along with them, a flurry of hype about integrating these tools into learning.

To make their argument and contribute to the evolving discussion of what constitutes digital literacy, the authors develop several key terms, such as *dynamic literacy*, *curation*, *porous expertise*, and *third space literacies*. Curation, for example, is a term plucked from everyday practice and reimagined as a key activity in the construction of contemporary subjectivity. It is, in the authors' words, a "meta-level activity that subsumes collecting, cataloguing, arranging and assembling for exhibition" (67). When we post images and highlight affiliations on social media, they explain, we are claiming that we belong. The authors write, "In this sense, curation is a new form of cultural production that is pitched partway between making and sharing, creating temporary collections for specific purposes, and then dismantling them again" (80). Potter and McDougall devote time to curation as it constitutes a new literacy, one that should not only be recognized but supported pedagogically.

The term "third space literacies" adapts Homi K. Bhabha's 1994 development of the notion of a third space in relation to identity and language. Potter and McDougall write, "For those of us concerned with media education practice as a site for negotiated pedagogy, the central challenge is, and always has been, in defining and operationalising its relationship to this *third space*" (42, italics in the original). Elaborating on their desire to construct a sociomaterial analysis attentive to the ways in which young people engage in various media-based practices in their daily lives, the authors use the concept of third space literacies to designate an in-between space and time that acknowledges the messy realities of everyday life. "To sum up we are arguing here that school systems which do not work in some way with the lives of their learners in the context of their lived experience cannot, arguably, be said to be fully agentic in their approach, rather they are curriculum-centred and institution-facing" (59). The authors deftly insist that rather than strive for hopelessly outmoded notions of "direct instruction," we need to allow room for agency and action, for hybridity and messiness, for formal and informal learning spaces and learning that emerges and evolves across a matrix of experiences.

While *Digital Media, Culture and Education* includes a few unnecessary repetitions and some discontinuity in the formation of the argument across chapters, the book makes a valuable

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contribution through the elaboration of new ways to consider the zone of overlap between quotidian activities and learning practices for learners, and it offers specific language to name them.

Vickery, a faculty member at the University of North Texas, similarly insists that we examine the realities of media experiences of students, both in school and beyond, in her book *Worried About the Wrong Things: Youth, Risk, and Opportunity in the Digital World*. Vickery's argument

is that the anxiety experienced by adults in relation to young people and technology—fretting about access to porn; concern about their vulnerability to predators; fears over student distraction—prevents us from creating schools that are productive settings for learning with and about media. Instead, we create firewalls and dramatically limit research practices under the guise of "protection." In short, we focus on helping students avoid risk rather than helping them manage it. The results of this approach and its ensuing material effects, however, are not just ethically questionable and pedagogically unsound. Using a case study of a low-income high school in Texas, Vickery carefully demonstrates through ethnographic research how this approach is also deleterious to the most vulnerable populations of young people who lack easy access to media resources.

Overall, *Worried About the Wrong Things* offers an insightful overview of the debates related to media and young people over the past fifteen years or so. Vickery begins by highlighting the moral panics that attend not just the rise of social media, but earlier moments of cultural change as well. Citing Stanley Cohen's 1972 book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, Vickery highlights how our fretting is grossly out of proportion to reality.

Vickery also ticks through the various attempts to legally regulate youth and their online engagement, from the 1998 Child Online Protection Act, to the 2006 Deleting Online Predators Act and the 2007 Protecting Children in the 21st Century Act. She examines sexting and cyberbullying, and while she acknowledges that many of the activities of young people online can be vexing for their parents, our response should not be panic and risk avoidance, since these neither keep our kids safe nor equip them adequately for their world. She suggests an alternative approach that recognizes "our responsibility as a society to help young people identify and assess risk" (81).

Despite the outrageous inequities she demonstrates through policies framed by risk, Vickery never adopts a tone of moral superiority or condemnation; she remains enviably even-handed, moving with alacrity to make each point. For anyone interested in a searing perspective on the pitfalls of our current approach to the uses of media resources in the high school classroom, this book provides a clear, historically grounded, and eminently readable

chronicle, with clearly articulated guidance and advice on how best to shift our approach moving forward.

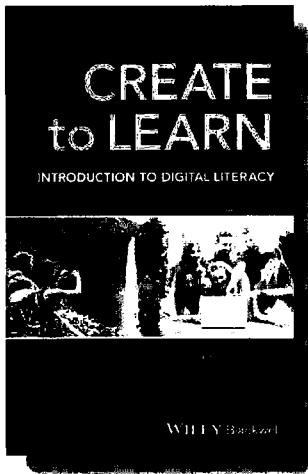
"You've grown up using the Internet," writes Hobbs near the beginning of her new book, *Create to Learn: Introduction to Digital Literacy*, announcing that students are her main audience (3). With that in mind, she writes in a direct, cogent, non-nonsense manner, often using simple assertions. "People learn best when they create," she states, for example, establishing the book's thesis (3). "When we create media, we internalize knowledge deeply—we own it," she adds, offering the book's justification (7). She also defines digital literacy, for many years a hotly contested term, as "the constellation of knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary for thriving in a technology-saturated culture" (6). She continues:

As information, entertainment, and persuasion are now shared digitally and personal, social and professional relationships are developed through interaction with social media as well as mass media and popular culture, people of all ages need the ability to access, analyze, create, reflect, and take action using a wide variety of digital tools, forms of expression, and communication strategies. (6, emphasis in the original)

Hobbs, who is a faculty member at the University of Rhode Island, where she is also the founder and director of the Media Education Lab, and author of several previous books about media literacy, divides *Create to Learn* into two sections: the first is modestly titled "Developing a Communication Strategy" and the second is "Nine Media Forms Help You Create to Learn." The first section deftly integrates theory and practice, and explains concepts such as rhetoric, representation, intellectual freedom, political and civic engagement, and more, without getting buried in the nuances of twentieth-century critical thought. While key thinkers are introduced, Hobbs offers a very practical set of critical ideas, and all of the information is presented within the context of creating media. Hobbs includes sections on conducting research effectively and developing a practice of critical reading, suggesting that "if we are trapped in a world of illusions, we are not likely to make good decisions about our personal and collective futures" (59). She also shows students how to identify the use of power and persuasion, how to spot bias and selective omissions, and how to contextualize practices such as remix and appropriation within a larger ethical framework.

While Hobbs moves steadily through ideas and practices in the book at a pace well-suited to students, she also occasionally allows us to see her own experience. The opening of Chapter 5, "Creating Ideas," is particularly poignant. Hobbs writes, "When I was a freshman in college, a book changed my life. It was a slender little book, as I recall. The book freaked me out because it was like no book I had ever read before" (69). She is referring to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and she explains that from Berger, she learned "that authors can violate the codes and conventions regarding how things are 'supposed' to be created" (70, emphasis in the original). This launches an incisive discussion advocating "creative nonconformity."

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This theoretical grounding and its clear presentation are thrilling. However, Hobbs simultaneously integrates eminently practical media-making information in the book as well, including a step-by-step guide for how to structure a "scope of work" document, for example. Further, the second section of the book specifically addresses how to use nine forms of digital media production: blogs and websites, digital audio and podcasting, images, infographics and data visualization, vlogs and

screencasts, video production, animation, remix production, and social media. *Create to Learn* is the book that instructors of digital literacy have been waiting for. With luck, its impact will trickle upward, from students to faculty, possibly affecting pedagogical practices generally and maybe even administrative thinking more broadly.

### Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary

By Pooja Rangan

Duke University Press, 2017

264 pp./\$94.95 (hb), \$25.95 (sb)



What does endangered life do for documentary? The question reverses assumptions concerning the work of participatory documentary, and it is posed in numerous innovative ways in this vital new text by Pooja Rangan, building a theoretical structure for the reader to scale and survey the urgent philosophical concerns of documentary media today. As Rangan demonstrates, the often unconsidered participatory gesture pervasive in humanitarian media—gifting a camera to a work's subject—can participate in

inventing the disenfranchised humanity the project claims to redeem. In various diverse examples throughout *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary*, documentary forms are found to work to regulate what counts as human not in spite of, but because of, their humanitarian uses.

Introducing "immediations" as a neologism theorizing tropes of participatory documentary that intervene to empower dehumanized subjects, Rangan foregrounds operations whereby disenfranchised subjects represent themselves in a mode characterized by

After the results of the 2016 presidential election and widespread head-scratching related to the paucity of critical thinking skills nationally, alongside evidence of the power of social media and algorithms to produce obfuscation and lies, it is clear that critical digital media literacy is essential. If our academic leaders lack the vision to enable its integration, books such as the three surveyed here continue to provide the tools for faculty and students to move forward anyway. They show clearly that we must do the ethically imperative work of reimagining teaching and learning to attend critically to the role of media in the lives of our students, and we must do so despite pernicious funding cuts, risk-mongering, and institutional roadblocks. If the current American powers that be have their way, yet another decade will go by without these essential changes.

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emergency. Producing a sense of spatial and temporal immediacy central to the urgency and directness of the genre promoted by Scottish documentary producer John Grierson, these tropes are premised upon dissolving mediation to evidence attributes of humanity in place of its perceived absence, potentially revealing the ideological work that goes into defining it.

This text follows in the path of other important books and essays on documentary and discriminatory paradigms of representation by Fatimah Tobing Rony and Trinh T. Minh-ha. Here Rangan elaborates forms of othering developed to work not through exclusion but supposed inclusion, participation, and empowerment. *Immediations* shows the lie in a blind embrace of reflexivity, and overturns basic assumptions around technological advancement and the ability for subjects to represent themselves.

Throughout the four chapters, Rangan addresses diverse clusters of media formed around humanity's boundary conditions: childhood, refugeehood, disability, animality. In doing so, she introduces further theorizations of immediation that should prove useful for ongoing engagement by scholars, including the formulations of "pseudoparticipatory documentary," "liveness," and "having a voice." For Rangan, the humanitarian impulse elicits two sides of a misguided problematic: representing the humanity of suffering others, and inviting them to do so themselves. These are defined respectively as the "dominant" and "resistant" voices of documentary, and found to be ubiquitous across humanitarian media. She also, however, defines the possibility of a third, *autistic* voice, offering various potential forms of "mimetic surrender."

In spite of the problematic implications and applications she outlines, rather than dismissing the proposition of surrendering the camera, Rangan nevertheless embraces this act's radical

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