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Ulrike Jessner
Claire Kramsch

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Interactions, Images and Texts

A Reader in Multimodality

Edited by
Sigrid Norris and Carmen Daniela Maier

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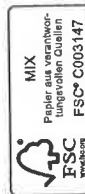
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Editors' introduction

27 Mediated discourse analysis, 'embodied learning' and emerging social and professional identities

Topic

The chapter is of particular interest to students and researchers interested in workplace practices and learning.

Key terms: Embodied learning, geography of discourse, nexus of practice.

Methodology

The chapter takes a mediated discourse approach, showing how the engagement in action also commits the learner to enter a certain nexus of practices with associated worldviews.

Thematic orientation

Generally, the chapter is situated in the area of learning workplace practices; and more narrowly, the chapter addresses the learning of being a car mechanic. In this sense, the author demonstrates that the actions that learners take also imbue them with a new kind of identity.

Related chapters

Chapters 6, 7, 8, 19, and 26.

Ingrid de Saint-Georges

Mediated discourse analysis, 'embodied learning' and emerging social and professional identities

Apprenticeship and embodied learning

From 2005 to 2010, together with colleagues¹, I became engaged in a study of apprenticeship learning in the field of car mechanics. We followed learners at school and work, gathering data through fieldnotes, video-recordings, our own sensory experiences, and formal and informal interviews. We were particularly interested in finding out what roles discourse and other modes (e.g. gestures, visuals, touch) played in learning new skills. We were also curious to investigate whether appropriating new skills and values influenced over time the development of new social and professional identities. In the sample analysis presented here, drawn from this larger project, I attempt to show how learning not only extends capabilities, but also often inextricably commits the learner to engage with certain worldviews and practices. I make the hypothesis that, once appropriated, these worldviews and practices often 'congeal' into habits (Norris 2004), and are difficult to see or to contest as they become part of the 'historical bodies' (Scollon & Scollon 2004) of the individuals.

Tracking workplace learning and emerging identities through mediated discourse analysis

Situations of vocational training are interesting to study because they are often moments when more experienced peers disclose and model views and practices that otherwise would be invisible to the newcomer. The practical challenge is to figure out how to study the construction/appropriation of these discourses and practices. In my case, I have found the framework of MDA particularly useful

1 This project was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (PP001-106603 & PP00P1-124650, L. Fillietaz (PI), B. Duc and myself (co-investigators).

(Scollon and Scollon 2004). MDA, contrary to most discourse analytical frameworks, takes actions and not discourse as its starting point. Only when the analyst has identified actions crucial for a specific set of actors does she start looking at which discourses or texts might figure in producing – or ‘mediating’ – these actions (Norris and Jones 2005). MDA analysts consider that broad social discourses of contemporary life circulate through any moment of action. Studying mediated actions is one way to work at disentangling ‘taken-for-granted’ discourses and ‘commonplace practices’ that would otherwise be invisible in the situation (Wohlwend 2013).

Methodologically, two propositions are made to recover these ‘taken-for-granted discourses’. The first is that these discourses and commonplace practices can be empirically studied by looking at four kinds of ‘entities’ that come together in the mediated action: the *mediational means* used to carry out the action, the sociohistorical institutions and discourses that constrain the action (*discourses in place*), the interactional organization that regulates the encounter in which the action takes place (*the interaction order*) and the individual histories and biographical trajectories of the actors involved in the action (*the historical body*). The second proposition is that the research should not be ‘obsessively narrowed to single moments, speech acts of events, or participants, but always strive to see ‘how these connect to other moments, acts, events, and participants which make up the full nexus’ (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 9). MDA thus encourages the researcher to determine the broad social, cultural and geographical histories of an action – its ‘lineage and pedigree’ (Blommaert 2010) – as well as its future trajectories (Scollon & Scollon 2004).

The focus of MDA on actions, histories, trajectories and genesis makes it a particularly interesting theory for studying ‘learning’, as both a process and a springboard for new possibilities of action, discourses and dispositions. MDA’s interest in the body and concrete, physical practice makes it also particularly adapted to the study of ‘apprentice style’ and ‘embodied kinds of learning’ where knowledge is often communicated through touch, gaze, and engagement of the whole body in action, rather than through words.

What is learned when one learns to diagnose a breakdown?

The starting point for MDA is to identify a mediated action and to explore what processes or ‘cycles’ interconnect within the space of that action. In this brief sample analysis, I focus on one very common practice at the heart of the work

of car mechanics: the action of diagnosing a breakdown. Fifteen years ago, such an action was a rather concrete, physical endeavor. The mechanic would try out some action and the way the car reacted to this action would prompt him to carry out other actions. Coming to a diagnosis required analysis of competing and sometimes contradictory information received through the senses as well as processes of induction and deduction. The introduction of electronics into the car industry has profoundly transformed this activity, requiring a new set of skills, in particular *computer literacy skills*. Indeed, the diagnosis now resembles ‘distributed cognition’. The mechanic now plugs a computerised device into the car. The software analyses various parameters and prompts the mechanic to take a number of steps until the problem is resolved (see Pict. 1 and 2)

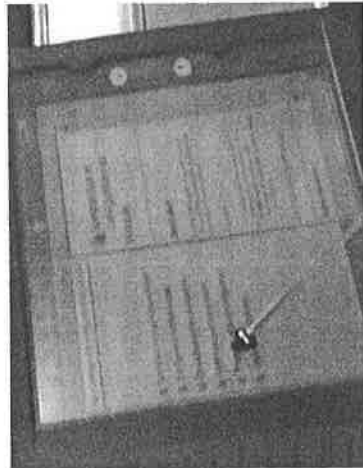
My interest is in this action as it occurs in the context of a medium-sized Jaguar repair shop in Geneva. The interaction order includes a mechanic (M) with almost 20 years experience with this brand of car, a young and confident apprentice (A) who had just started a one-month internship with the repair shop as part of his training, and myself, the researcher (R) filming the situation.

A mediated discourse analysis can look at this action of diagnosis from many perspectives (how it is mediated, participants’ motivations for acting, how the action signals expertise and professional identity, etc.). My focus will be to examine how, from the perspective of the learner, this routine task of diagnosis connects workers to larger more complex social and economic ‘geographies’ (Scollon 2013).

In apprenticeship, learners usually enter a nexus of practices ‘from the side’ (Pict. 3). Working under the tutelage of a more experienced worker, they spend substantial periods observing, imitating, and repeating actions (Marchand 2008). They ‘rely on the intercourse of visual, auditory and semiotic information’ (Marchand 2008: 249) to access professional practices. But this posture of side-to-side working is more often than not also an opportunity to learn the ‘social politics’ of the work (Merchand 2008: 252) as the apprentice listens to exchanges and negotiations between team members, with clients, etc. Such exchanges can become ‘prompts’ (Kress 2013) for the learner to understand what adequate participation in work consists of or what is valued in the context. In the course of the one hour that the diagnosis action roughly lasts, there is in fact exposure of the apprentice to many such aspects of the social politics of work. As the mechanic scrolls down the screen and performs a series of actions on the car, many discourses emerge, having to do, among other things, with ethnic socialization, the construction of masculinity, the commodity discourse of advertisement, care of the worker for his tools, and even the porn movie industry.



Pict. 1: Using the diagnosis device



Pict. 2: Interacting with the software



Pict. 3: Displaying readiness and involvement in learning

Figure 1: Diagnosing a breakdown

Here, I give one example of how 'from the side' the learner gets engaged with worldviews as part of his learning experience. Obviously a full mediated discourse analysis would require a much more complex argument.

In this example, M. is scrolling down the screen of the diagnosis device, using an old antenna to click on links (Pict. 2), and reading instructions. At one point he starts telling us (A and myself, at his side) about the place electronics has taken in the trade and the kind of re-training involved:

M: (1) So (on the whole/ we receive training despite the fact that I got my degree a very long time ago/ we get trained) (...) depending on the models the new engines coming out we get trained 3 times or four times two days)

[...]

(2) So it is super important to detail (to detail that) it's electronics- it forms an entire part of car mechanics/ it is not like before/ when you just needed to repair engines that's over (electronic really forms a part of car mechanics of today and of the future)

Here, speaking is not the instrument for carrying out the action. It does not serve either to teach the use of the diagnostic tool. Rather it intersects with the action of conducting the diagnostic process and serves to communicate knowledge about professional practice. It also signals to the apprentice certain features of a mechanic's identity. To unpack this action, it is interesting to uncover the connections between these practices and tapping on the screen and larger socioeconomic meanings and practices. One may best do this by retrieving the discourses that circulate in car repair shops about the use of such electronic devices.

In this respect we learned, from informal fieldwork interviews in various shops, firstly, that electronics has tended to make it more difficult for small car repair shops to be 'multibrand' or 'generalist'. Most car models now require specific diagnostic devices, with their associated software, and these are not compatible across brands. The cost of these machines is very high and the investment thus ties the shop more and more to specific car brands.

Secondly, electronics has also transformed the nature of car mechanics' work. Once mainly a manual activity, today it involves much more symbolic manipulation and computer literacy knowledge. For older generations of workers, the conversion is often difficult to manage and they find their expertise downgraded. For the youth entering the trade without much literacy or numeracy, the change is also creating hurdles, so much so, that in recent years, the education authorities chose to rethink certification and track organization, for example, by offering a certification as 'assistant in motor-vehicle maintenance' (2 years) on the low qualification side, as opposed to a 'mechatronics engineers' (4 years) certification with bridges to higher education.

Thirdly, as we see illustrated also in excerpt 1, learning to use these diagnostic tools often requires repeated re-training over a career as tools and engines evolve. Viewed as a part of a continuing education discourse, this has the advantage of opening up new perspectives in an evolving work environment. On the other hand, the cost of retraining falls on the shop owners, reinforcing their allegiance to a single brand.

This account shows the extent to which this new social practice of tapping on a screen connects the actions of the worker to a host of wider economic, political, social and educational practices. Learning to operate such a device and repeatedly using it over time obliges the worker to engage this nexus of practices which in turn seems to impact the car mechanic's identity. At least this is what the choice of words by M in (1) seem to suggest. By proposing that 'electronics forms an entire part of car mechanics', he seems to be saying that electronics is not just changing the trade, but changing the worker – possibly transforming him into a 'technoworker'. In manual trades, tools have always been inseparable from the worker. They shape his work and perceptions, as well as become shaped to his hands. In the same way, electronics seems here to be seen as becoming more and more one with the worker, the separation with his body becoming blurred.

Conclusion

With this brief sample analysis, I have tried to show that engaging in action commits the learner to enter a certain nexus of practices with associated world-views. I have also tried to show how a mediated discourse analysis, even done as briefly as in this case, opens a window that helps make visible these world-views and practices. For MDA, small actions such as touching a computer screen at a worksite are interesting to study because they are the point where individual biographies and much larger activity system come into contact and start to interact. Vocational education is a place where apprentices learn the multiple practices and discourses of their trade, and learn also to couple their action to a broader nexus of practices. Building on Scollon (2013), we could say that in that sense education is powerful because it connects the learner to a new class of actions. A mediated discourse analysis would probably also say education is powerful when it helps the learner be critical of the couplings and discourses circulating in the milieu he navigates so that s/he can then choose knowingly to ratify or contest them.

Further readings

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Project idea

Choose a learning situation that involves bodily engagement in some practice. Try to unpack the discourses that circulate through this learning situation. What kinds of texts are used in the situation, if any? What forms of talk are involved? Are there discourses that are hidden/submerged in the built environment, the layout of the physical space, the conventions that regulate the interaction? To what extent are the actions of the participants connecting them to larger socioeconomic meanings and practices (geographies of discourse)? How do you know? To what extent does engaging in the learning process commit the learner to engage with specific values and norms? What procedures did you use to unpack these 'taken-for-granted' norms and values?

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Editors' introduction

28 Comic books

Topic

The chapter addresses students and researchers who are interested in the analysis of comic books.

Key terms: Balloon, caption, comic book, motion line, multimodality.

Methodology

The chapter explores the main characteristics and roles of the visual elements in a comic book, focusing on their capacity to develop specific metaphors; and highlights the visual stylistic conventions that are drawn upon in order to convey sequential narrative and speech while also evoking emotional or sensory responses.

Thematic orientation

Generally, the chapter is situated in the study of texts and images and their relationships and, more specifically, this chapter is an example for the study of these issues in comic books.

Related chapters

Chapter 8, 9, and 29.