Young authors online: Exploring the meaning making process through positionings in place and space

By Grace Pigozzi

Adjunct Professor, Dominican University, River Forest, IL USA
gpigoz2@gmail.com

Abstract

Identity studies in education are germane to interpreting how adolescent writers perceive their lives, culture, and, in literacy, their schooling and educational goals. Positioning theory analysis helps reveal both tacit and explicit patterns of meaning making as authors collaborate and craft creative writing artifacts shared as blog posts. In this study of interactions around digital writing amongst young authors aged 12 to 16 years, participants self-selected writing topics and genres from non-dominant culture through a connected learning design. Transformation of power structures occurred along storylines as writers positioned themselves and others while taking on new tasks. This study looks at conversation around writing short stories in terms of people, their modes of embodiment, the online writing context, and compares the establishment of rights and duties located in the physical space where participants gathered to those established on the Internet blog space.

Key words

Adolescent Writing, Identity, Online Writing, Literacy, Positioning Theory.

Purpose of the Study

In education, equity focuses on outcomes and results. This notion is rooted in the recognition that because children have different needs and come from different circumstances, we cannot treat them all the same (Noguera, 2009). By studying identity, educators can come to know children equitably as both writers and as individuals, ensuring a more balanced approach to the teaching of all children.

As a construct, identity involves the formation and the awareness of self. Self-awareness is an aspect of the development of mind, which progresses in the course of interaction in a social context. During interaction, interlocutors internalize perceptions and practices, among them literate practices. In this sense, literacy and identity are linked (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Mead & Mind, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978).

Teachers and parents continually position young people on the basis of their perceived identities. Blogging, an out-of-school literacy, affords youth an opportunity
to position and re-position themselves as they explore identity through writing. Identity is constructed; it is also dynamic, flowing as the result of interactions among individuals, and those individuals make or refute claims based upon their positioning with or in contrast to others (Mishler, 1999; Sarup, 1998).

This connective case study presents a group of adolescent writers, brought together by an interest in learning how to use a blog space while they attentively integrated distinct attributes of home, popular culture, technology, and education through a connected learning approach. Instead of drawing exclusively on the norms and interests of dominant culture, I sought to support the group as facilitator while participants pursued their own topical interests for creative writing online. In the process, writers constructed new, individual values and learning capacities elicited from their own diverse cultures and communities (Ito et al., 2013) while they simultaneously learned the online format of blogging.

The purpose of this study is to closely appraise the online writing of adolescents using positioning theory analysis, and asks: How do adolescents position themselves in creative writing in a connected space? When social positioning varies within and across writings, what details does this provide about the identity trajectories of adolescents?

**Theoretical Framework**

Positioning theory, based on the principle that participants involved in a social episode, collaborative writing, for example, may or may not have equal access to rights and duties needed to perform specific types of meaningful actions at a particular time, and with those people available. Positions are related both to the storylines revealed in various writing events, and to the acts that belie the meanings of the intentional actions of the participants (Harré, 2012).

This study examines the evolving relationships among writers as they create and critique one another’s blog posts. Positioning theory, as viewed through a sociocultural lens is used to discern what blog writing suggests about the identities of adolescents, particularly in the interactions between writers (Davies & Harré, 1990, 2007; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009). Positioning and identity are examined with textual examples from adolescent writers in a secure blog site where a hybrid language (Bhabha, 1990) evolves, blending academic style and tone with Internet vernacular in a dialogic manner.

**Methods**

This report compares interviews, field notes and artifacts of six participants from the blogging project. Four young authors were comfortable using a laptop and navigating the Internet, while two had less experience working in online formats. Participants ranged in age from 12 to 16 years, and attended school in a midwestern urban area of the US. Blogging sessions lasted two hours each and spanned ten weeks.

This study uses interactive and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to build local and cultural theories; some data is comprised of artifacts and written
interactions generated online (Greenhow, 2011; Hine, 2000). While students gathered in the same room, the literacy clinic of an urban university, they also interacted online, and shared stories, poems, and essays in that space. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained in January, 2015.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

Idea units (McVee, Baldassarre Hopkins, & Bailey, 2011), also known as positioning acts—in which writers challenged, made claims to, opted for specific duties, or thrust them upon others—became individual units of analysis, applied to all forms of data. As participants structured their texts, positioning acts shifted. As verbal and written conversations ensued, positions logically adjusted while interlocutors communicated. Individual positioning acts were indexed. Artifact positioning analysis was later triangulated with data from interviews and field notes, systematically gathered from observations (Baumann & Bason, 2011; Greenhow, 2011; Stake, 1995). Data analysis included open-ended coding of patterns, events, actions, etc. of this data (Charmaz, 2003).

**Results/Conclusions**

Bloggers gathered in the space, motivated by a common sense of purpose, with intent to share their stories. To analyze interactions, I first had to determine the parameters of place and space, bound not just by the blog space and its entry points, e.g. logging in, but also by the physical place of the literacy center in which face-to-face discussions occurred. In essence, the positionings, often overlapping place and space, were represented by interactions: the fluid connections made between writers. They portrayed themselves in one of three ways, as self, or writer; writer with other writers; and writer creating other, i.e., developing characters or claims.

Despite having created and published writings that provide a locutionary context for interactions, illocutionary forces at times propelled perlocutionary acts. Often with unintended effects of inspiration or persuasion, perlocutionary acts frequently opened a space for new learning to occur, whether in understanding new literal meanings, or the mastery of an online task such as embedding an image (Austin & Urmson, 1962). Composing creative and informational writings provided multiple opportunities for static positioning as participants depicted issues related to recent news events. Participants’ use of intertextual positioning uniquely served to as a means to create new twists on old clichés that provided insight about the writer’s location in culture and thought.

Positioning analysis revealed a deep, rich synthesis of voice and characterization that revealed differing and often empowering aspects of each writers’ identity as they positioned themselves in relation to others as writers who demanded, for example, an end to local violence and advocacy of social justice, or paid tribute to Emily Dickinson and Langston Hughes in poetry, by adopting their structures or themes. The study of adolescent writing through positioning theory analysis offers teachers and learners alike vivid perspective into how literate identities are negotiated and reshaped as learning occurs in online spaces.
References


