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Mediated Action: A Unit of Analysis for Reviewing Hypertextual Reading and Writing Practices in Teacher Training¹

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Abstract

This exploratory qualitative study identifies and tests a unit of analysis in order to describe and interpret, in a holistic manner, the hypertextual academic reading and writing practices that take place on a teacher training programme in Chile. The practices are observed from an overall perspective and are characterised as a system made up of elements and dynamic, changeable interactions related to cognitive, sociocultural and multimodal variables.

Based on Burke's model (1969a), mediated action is taken as the basic unit through which the technology-supported academic literacy practices are reviewed. The model's components are act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. They allow the object to be observed, its constituent elements to be highlighted, and the dialogic interaction that mobilises the system to be underscored.

The research is organised as a case study that draws on the perceptions of a group of students taking part in the production of an academic report with hypertextual support. The significance of the study lies in the fact that it validates a model of analysis in which the object is shown from an integrating perspective, thus revealing aspects that should be taken into account in competency training for hypertextual academic literacy in teacher training programmes.

Keywords

hypertextual academic literacy, mediated action, teacher training

La acción mediada, una unidad de análisis para revisar las prácticas de lectura y escritura hipertextual en la formación de profesores

Resumen

El estudio de carácter cualitativo exploratorio identifica y prueba una unidad de análisis para describir e interpretar de manera holística las prácticas de lectura y escritura académica hipertextual, que tienen lugar en un programa de formación de profesores en Chile. Las prácticas son observadas desde una perspectiva global y se caracterizan como un sistema compuesto de elementos e interacciones dinámicas y cambiantes, relacionadas con variables cognitivas, socioculturales y multimodales.

La unidad básica a través de la cual se revisan las prácticas de alfabetización académica con apoyo tecnológico es la acción mediada, tomada del modelo de Burke (1969a). Los componentes del modelo: acto, escena, agente, agencia y propósito, permiten observar el objeto, poner en relieve sus elementos constituyentes y, al mismo tiempo, la interacción dialógica que moviliza el sistema.

La investigación se organiza como un estudio de casos que recoge las percepciones de un grupo de sujetos que ha participado en la elaboración de un informe académico con apoyo hipertextual. La relevancia del estudio radica en validar un modelo de análisis que devela el objeto desde una perspectiva integradora y descubre aspectos que deberán ser asumidos en la formación de competencias de alfabetización académica hipertextual en programas de formación docente.

Palabras clave

alfabetización académica hipertextual, acción mediada, formación docente

Introduction: in search of a unit of analysis

The hypertextual academic literacy process discussed in this article encompasses the reading and writing practices that take place on teacher training programmes. These practices are, in addition, related to the content of a variety of disciplines covered by the curriculum. The study comes under Project No 1110909 of FONDECYT (Chilean National Fund for Scientific and Technological Development).

Hypertextuality is a phenomenon facilitated by today's technological convergence, where symbolic languages are subsumed under digital language. This allows various texts in a range of formats to be articulated and combined by nodal links, thus fomenting non-sequential reading. This process is called 'navigation' (Figueroa et al., 2009).

Technological environments have changed the way people now read and write, and have even had an impact on the development of reading and writing skills. The environment is often wrongly thought of "as something to be acted upon, not something to be interacted with" (Resnick, 1994). By highlighting interaction between the environment and behaviour, we are able to recognise how the sociocultural context and technology form sociotechnical systems that need to be observed as a whole. As an illustration of these networks from the field of neuroscience, Hutchins (1995) points out that "In commercial aviation, for example, the successful completion of a flight is produced by a system that typically includes two or more pilots interacting with each other and with a suite of technological devices." The metaphor of a flight is transferrable to the scenario of a group of future teachers preparing an academic report as a compulsory component of an academic subject, where the task involves technology-supported reading and writing. In previous studies, we maintained that, in this task, the subjects made use of two mediators: written language as a primary mediator, and technology – with the advances afforded by it to written language – as a second mediator.

A model of analysis for mediated action

Given the above, we searched for a unit that would allow the above-mentioned scenario of students to be analysed. We selected Kenneth Burke (1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1972, 1984), who, through his contributions to the fields of literature, anthropology, psychology and social criticism, proposed a methodology that provides a functional framework for describing, understanding and interpreting the phenomenon in hand.

The starting point for Burke's model is to take human action as a basic phenomenon of analysis. The notion of 'action' linked to the notion of 'motive' is especially noteworthy, insofar as the basic concern is what is at stake when one describes what people do and why they do it (Burke, 1969a). The proposal places emphasis on the fact that human action can only be understood properly by invoking multiple perspectives and an examination of the dialectic tensions existing between them.

Burke uses five elements as the main generative principles of his methodology: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. The act is what happened in thoughts and events; the scene is the backdrop

to the act or, in other words, the situation and the context in which the act occurred; the agent is the person or kind of person that performed the act; agency refers to the instruments used by the agent; and, finally, the purpose is what motivated the act. So, any complete description of the motives of an act will give some kind of answer to these five questions: What happened (act)?; Where and when did it happen (scene)?; Who did it (agent)?; How did he/she/it do it (agency)?; and Why did he/she/it do it (purpose)? (Burke, 1969a).

Methodological proposal

Within the preliminary framework, we shall review the hypertextual reading and writing practices of students on a teacher training programme, taking mediated action as a unit of analysis, which, in human beings, is characterised by the use of instruments, the most important of which is language (Wertsch, 1993).

In this work, we maintain the hypothesis that there is a significant change in the field of academic literacy when it is mediated by technology, and that these new processes need to be reviewed from a holistic perspective.

The elements of Burke's pentad, as described above, will be used to examine the object of study. From this perspective, we shall gain insight into the system and the interaction of its components, and identify the influences and tensions that characterise it in the construction of hypertextual dialectics, an occurrence that, within the context of a teacher training programme, encompasses and radically conditions learning.

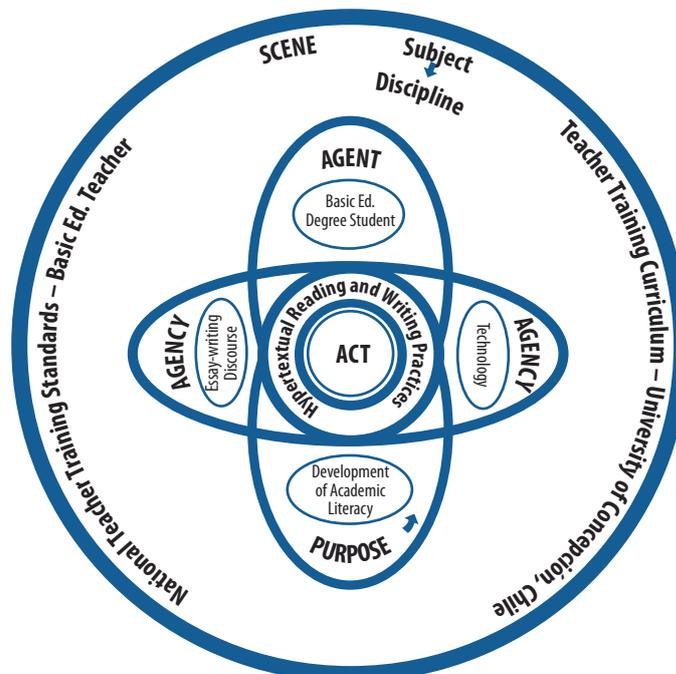


Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the construction of hypertextual dialectics based on Burke's model.

Method and sample

The study is based on data collected in April 2011. The sample included 32 students on the third year of the Pedagogy in Basic Education course in the Faculty of Education at the University of Concepción, Chile. The group took part in a seminar-workshop, the aim of which was to pool and share information about the students' training experiences in relation to hypertextual academic literacy.

In the first stage of the seminar, the students were asked to give individual, written answers to a questionnaire containing six open questions on the topic.

Several examples of the sample subjects' answers to the questions were then taken. These answers were representative of two basic trends identified in the group. First, a sub-group of students with a mastery of technology, who made the most of it in their reading and writing practices. And second, a sub-group of students with a beginner's level of digital literacy.

The answers selected to illustrate this are analysed on the premise that "language is a cultural tool and speech is a form of mediated action" (Wertsch, 1999). Therefore, the assertions made about the mediated action are also applicable to discourse. The analysis structure takes account of five categories, which are representative of the model that we are seeking to illustrate.

Category 1: Act and discursive modality as a mediator

The first item on the questionnaire asked students to recall and recount an episode in which they had produced an academic report using technology as a support. It was made clear that the account had to contain the name of the academic subject that gave rise to the academic report, as well as its purpose, the time it took to produce, the modality employed to develop it and a detailed explanation of the steps involved in the task.

Each item sought to situate the students in an act, with its respective scenic contextualisation. Even though the terms 'recall' and 'recount' were intentionally used, a significant number of the students answered by giving a list of statements that had not been organised into a coherent account. So, the initial contextualisation that sought to situate them in a scene was only achieved for some subjects. Let's take a look at an example:

Subject 3 / Question 1

- a) *Introduction to chemistry.*
- b) *The topic was the water cycle.*
- c) *To learn about the water cycle and give a presentation in front of the class because this subject wasn't going to be graded as a pass by the teacher. Instead, it was going to be assessed in the final exam.*
- d) *We took about two hours a day over three days.*
- e) *The work was done as a group.*

Subject 3's statements provide information about the academic subject, the topic and the purpose of the task, but there is very little information about how it was performed. The answer does

not take account of the requested discursive modality, so the amount of information given is limited. It does not give an account of the act in question as a unit. Instead, the characteristics of the act have to be inferred from a fragmented description. Wertsch (1999) writes that “some theorists have tended to stress the constraints that mediational means impose, whereas others have emphasized the affordances they provide”, and this example is illustrative of that. The subject does not ‘narrate’ the episode, but instead lists the actions and elements, and resolves the required task in a simplified manner.

Unlike Subject 3, Subject 18 represents a case on the opposite end of the scale:

Subject 18 / Question 1

While I was doing the first year of my degree in Quality and Equity in Education, the lecturer asked us to write an essay on the Ley General de Educación [General Law of Education], at that time being promulgated as a Bill, which was later passed. She asked us to base the essay on the document that included all the articles and everything else that the new Law contemplated. We had to read them and personally appraise them; we also had to search the Internet for public figures’ opinions on the same issue.

The idea behind the work was to learn to write an essay, to quote other people and to give an opinion on a topic that would directly affect us as future teachers. We were given two weeks to produce the essay and make it available in digital format. The essay was an individual piece of work.

The above account identifies the act – producing an essay – and the purpose for the agent – learning to write a type of text and informing oneself about a professional topic to form an opinion on it. The scene is significant for the student, who recalls it two years later. The mediational agencies are the essay-writing genre and the technology used, not only to search for and select information, but also to formally produce the text in question.

Subject 18’s answer complies with the required discursive modality. This is particularly important in the sense that a discursive genre is a typical form of statement and, as such, it includes a typical kind of expression inherent to it. According to Bakhtin (1986), the genre corresponds to “typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the meanings of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances.”

As a discursive modality, the act of narrating encompasses agents situated within a specific space and time, while immersed in a sequenced progression of actions. In Subject 18’s case, all the traits are recognisable, and that is why we consider it to be a text that complies with the required genre. There is, therefore, a significant difference between Subject 18 and Subject 3, in that Subject 3 does not appropriate the required genre; he/she does not draw together the typical circumstances of the modality and, consequently, does not manage to communicate what is required.

Category 2: Dialectics between agent and instrument

This category focuses on agents and cultural tools as mediators of action, to establish how the subjects use such mediators. From the perspective of language, Subject 18’s essay is properly characterised.

Subject 18 / Question 1

The idea behind the work was to learn to write an essay [...].

To write it, a word processor was important. From the selected literature I read, I noted and saved the most relevant quotes. Then I did a bullet-point list of the ideas I wanted to emphasise as well as my own. I had also saved the outline of the essay, which I referred back to. I used a model that marked out the basic parts and also where to formulate the hypothesis and then put my arguments.

The student describes the steps that led him/her to produce the required text. In the reading stage, the subject accesses a topic-related model document, applies a process of critical reading and then performs a search for expert opinions. In the writing stage, the subject considers the opinions that he/she selected and then goes on to formulate his/her stance in writing. In both stages, the student recognises and values technological mediation.

The mediational agencies participating in the scene (the essay-writing discourse and technology) are mobilised in the task set by the academic subject lecturer, a situation that reinforces the premise that mediational means or cultural tools are inherently situated in an institutional and historical dimension (Wertsch, 1999). In this case, the institutional dimension is the teacher training context of a university, at a specific historical moment, which, furthermore, has a conditioning factor – the national regulatory framework.

Two key questions arise from the above analysis. Both have to do with the learning situation generated by the lecturer. So firstly, in Subject 18's case, is it a proposal that complies with institutional training policies, or is it a personal initiative? And secondly, in Subject 3's case, how should the institution deal with the shortcomings in his/her use of mediational tools?

Category 3: Scene, the backdrop to the act

The act generating the mediated action has a backdrop that we have called the 'scene', which is circumscribed at various levels. In this respect, (Burke, 1969a) points out that "one has a great variety of circumferences to select as characterizations of a given agent's scene. For a man is not only in the situation peculiar to his era or to his particular place in that era (even if we could agree on the traits that characterize his era)." In our study, we situate ourselves in the circumference of the teacher training curriculum of a Chilean faculty. From that circumference (or circle), we can also access a smaller, more specific circle – the act defined by a faculty lecturer – and a larger, less specific circle – regional or national teacher training educational actions.

The interaction between the circles or levels that circumscribe the scene is conditioned by relationships of institutional power generated between agents and instruments. If we return to Subject 18's scene, we are able to identify the agent recounting the act and, at the same time, to observe the presence of an agent that mobilises and conditions, namely the teacher whose request generates the task. The mediational tools in this case (discursive and technological) are associated with the academic authority (Wertsch, 1999). At the same time, these are conditioned by the power mobilised by the agents in the various external circles that circumscribe the scene at a higher level; agents who condition the institutional and national education policies. We then see how the

tension between the agent and the mediational means forms part of a system characterised by the relationships between several elements in the scene, and between these elements and the circles circumscribing them.

Category 4: Purpose of the act

The next element of mediated action is purpose:

"Implicit in the concepts of act and agent there is the concept of purpose. It is likewise implicit in agency, since tools and methods are for a purpose – and one of the great reasons for the appeal of pragmatism today, when the materialist-behaviorist reduction of scene has eliminated purpose, may reside in the fact that it retains ingredients of purpose in the very Grammatical function that is often taken as substitute for it. (It is a substitute; but we are suggesting that part of its capacity for such work resides in the implicit retention of what it is often said explicitly to reject.)" (Burke, 1969a)

Let's observe the traits of purpose in the answer to Question 2 of the questionnaire, which asked for a description of how the task was carried out:

Subject 18 / Question 2

The first thing I searched for was the proposed Ley General de Educación [General Law of Education], and found an outline or short report of the Bill's characteristics on the Internet, which was open for anyone to view. After reading it and forming an opinion on it, I searched for some political public figures' opinions on it, which, as far as I could see, either supported or rejected the promulgation of the Bill.

In Google, I searched for critical opinions on the Bill [...]. As it happened, I took those of senator Alejandro Navarro, in PDF format, who tended to reject and oppose the Bill. I took them because they aligned with the opinion I'd formed after reading about it. I produced the report in Word, writing and re-writing in a way that computers allow us to do. I began with a short review of the existing Law, and soon after started to introduce my critical opinion on the topic. To reinforce my analysis, I quoted the senator, commented on several articles in particular, and concluded by saying what I hoped the senate and parliament would do about the Bill.

Subject 3 / Question 2

First of all, we searched for information in chemistry books on the topic and, after selecting the information to use, in Google we searched for images and supplementary information. We structured the report in line with the format that the lecturer had given us, placing emphasis on the utility of water and the importance of the topic. We wrote the report in Word using Arial 12 font with 1.5 line spacing and justified text.

As we can see, Subject 18 goes on to solve the task, which translates into the purpose of the act, and to use a Web tool to search for a model document, which the agent reads critically. With a developing opinion, he/she approaches the second part of the search, which consists in selecting the opinions of public figures, that is to say, of authorised experts holding opinions for and against

the topic in question. The student used Google as the search engine and PDF and Word formats for the documents.

The focus of Subject 3's purpose is the search for scientific information about the water cycle, which does not return any opinions. In contrast, Subject 18's purpose concerns a debatable topic (debate on the education Bill, which has since been enacted), on which he/she is asked to produce a discussion-type text. This type of text is more complex in its intentions because of its nature; it requires the student to search for professional information about a controversial topic, to develop a critical stance on the topic and, finally, to present it in an essay.

Subject 3's purposes condition a different search, since the focus is placed on searching for information; he/she takes recourse to a traditional source (books) and only uses the technological tool to supplement information and add images. From this perspective, the aim of the task is much simpler, both discursively and cognitively, because it does not include the development of critical thinking, not explicitly at least. For Subject 3, it is an exploratory hypertextual reading, whereas for Subject 18, it is a constructive hypertextual reading.

Future teachers will undoubtedly have to contend with the two tasks illustrated by the cases of Subjects 3 and 18. While this study was unable to establish whether these purposes conform to measures taken collegiately by some of the lecturers involved or whether there is an awareness of the levels of learning they promote, such aspects will need to be elucidated in teacher training programmes: Do they review the sociocognitive processes involved and the contribution that these make to the dimensions defined in the profile of the professionals they target? From the viewpoint of teacher training curricula, how is the need to consider these aspects taken on board in Chile and in other Latin-American regions?

Category 5: Appropriation of cultural tools

Another aspect revealed by the analysis is related to resistance to the use of mediational tools. In the cases analysed, there are differences in the perceptions of the two subjects when asked about the assessment they would make of the tool.

Subject 3 / Question 6

In fact, I'm really not that good at using Internet tools [...]. With this year's subject, Information Technology in the Classroom, I've discovered some very useful elements for working with children in the classroom. But even so, I don't think I'm a fan of the Internet and its tools. No doubt they make work easier; I do the tasks that the lecturer tells us to do, but I only do so to comply.

According to Bakhtin (1981), "[...] not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, [...] many words stubbornly resist, [...]" This resistance in terms of mediated action is what could be called 'friction'. According to Wertsch (1999), "friction is the rule rather than the exception." The agents gradually appropriate cultural tools. Moreover, as illustrated by Subject 3's answers, some relevant forms of mediated action are characterised by a mastery of cultural-tool use, but not by cultural-tool appropriation. In such cases, this means that the agent is able to use a cultural

tool, although he/she does so with a feeling of conflict or resistance. When this conflict or resistance gains enough strength, the agent can completely refuse to use the cultural tool that he/she considers as not belonging to him/her, a situation that occurs in a significant number of pedagogy students who, as digital immigrants, feel that their proficiency in technological competencies is far from what it should be.

A different appropriation can be seen in the answer given by the other subject:

Subject 18 / Question 6

Today, the Internet fulfils many purposes and makes it easy to search for information [...]. It's a kind of mass medium [...]. For many students, especially in higher education, it's very useful because universities and institutes have websites and lecturer-student interaction platforms. Personally, I use Google, YouTube, Facebook and the university's website a lot [...]. I use them to do research, search for information and communicate with my fellow students, both for work and other things.

The difference between the two students' use and assessment of the technological tool is substantial and characteristic of the extremes of the two trends found in the sample. Subject 3 has a limited symbolic representation; he/she is not at all familiar with the different semiological languages that such practices require. In other words, his/her technology literacy is very low. Making progress towards covering the needs of this student is an inevitable challenge. As such, the case demands a didactic design that, through cultural and pedagogical re-architecture, reviews the meanings and methodologies of sociocognitive work to enable him/her to gain mastery of the practices in question, with the level of proficiency achieved by Subject 18.

Discussion

The above analysis explains the relationship between agents and mediational means in hypertextual reading and writing practices in the context of teacher training. The objectives that drive practices are diverse and have lesser or greater degrees of complexity; while some are made explicit by the person setting the task, others are implicit and unprogrammed. These situations allow us to assert that it is not possible to conceptualise the mediated action as an undifferentiated whole, but rather as a system characterised by the dynamic tension between several elements that we define in terms of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. On the basis of the examples reviewed, we reassert the need to study the various combinations that arise from the systemic interaction in Burke's model, which we consider effective in terms of revealing the dialectics of the phenomenon being studied.

We reassert our initial hypothesis, maintaining that, when reading and writing academically using technology as a support, there is change requiring an in-depth review. This cultural tool transforms the action because, by being included in the behavioural process, it alters the flow and structure of psychocultural functions and determines the structure of a new instrumental act that modifies the process of natural adaptation to the context and establishes the form of labour operations (Vygotsky, 1981).

When posing the generic question of what happens when students are confronted with using a computer to carry out tasks on the training curriculum, we maintain that the introduction of a new mediational means creates mutability in the system that triggers changes in the components, in both the agent and the mediated action in general. In fact, a completely new mediated action arises in some cases (Wertsch, 1999), which, by the way, needs to be characterised and understood from the viewpoint of pedagogical training, if indeed we intend to develop the communication competencies that teachers need to have in today's world.

In the act studied, it is important to consider the relationships of power that arise between the agents involved. Without wishing to generalise, we know that there are many cases like that of Subject 3, in which the imposition of learning does not necessarily achieve the desired effect. This is why we consider that, in academic designs that seek to develop hypertextual literacy, it is necessary to work on the basis of an internally persuasive discourse, which is not built on a hierarchical differentiation between the interlocutors: situating ourselves symmetrically rather than in a position of acceptance or rejection of someone else's word; it is a matter of involving the student in the dialogue, bearing in mind that "the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981).

The above analysis describes and takes account of common situations that regularly occur in a variety of education contexts. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have driven changes in, and the evolution of, reading and writing practices. These new narratives constitute the symbolic scaffolding that allows rich representations to be built on the foundations of digital language. We have analysed five categories of an act of hypertextual reading and writing, each of which seeks, from a pedagogical dimension, to illustrate the reflections that should be made by teacher trainers.

Today, virtual environments define reading and writing practices, with such practices being understood not as a set of clearly distinguishable axioms, but as the uncertainty and vagueness resulting from the fact that the principle of it does not have any conscious rules, but rather practical principles, themselves opaque, subject to variation according to the logic of the situation (Bourdieu, 1991). Hence, we shall agree that this competency of hypertextual literacy practices requires further studies with cognitive and sociocultural approaches that allow a proper appraisal of how multimodal tools are involved in human action.

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