Playing Star Wars under the (Teacher’s) Radar:

Detecting Kindergartners’ Action Texts and Embodied Literacies

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Abstract:

In this paper, I look closely at the talk, action, artifacts, and discourses that a group of kindergarten boys wielded as they created paper tubes and characterized them as “light sabers” or “electric eels” in moment-to-moment shifts that fluctuated with the teacher’s proximity. As an action text with an embodied literacy, this example shows how children deftly managed the multiple meanings of a play prop in the dual contexts of peer culture and school culture. Playing with pretend weapons ran counter to the discourses of caring community, peaceful conflict resolution, and developmentally appropriate practice in the school culture while making light sabers and playing Star Wars themes and martial arts demonstrated their belonging within a boys-only group valued in the peer culture. It also suggests that integrating peer culture and popular media into school culture has potential for restoring play to the literacy curriculum.
In this paper, I look closely at the talk, action, artifacts, and discourses that a group of kindergarten boys wielded as they created paper tubes and characterized them as “light sabers” or “electric eels” in moment-to-moment shifts that fluctuated with the teacher’s proximity. Many early childhood teachers may recognize this example (as I did). Young children often play “under the radar”, claiming “It’s just a stick” or “a car” or “design” or anything else in order to turn a pretend weapon such as a Tinker Toy sword or a gun made of Legos into something innocuous and acceptable within the classroom. I share this example to show how play functions as an embodied literacy and creates action texts such as those that the boys used to pivot the meanings of their child-made paper toys. Action text describes the meanings movements take on when children play as they act out a shared narrative sometimes using talk to clarify the pretend meaning of a prop but often also using actions and gestures to pretend alternative meanings for everyday objects. In other words, their swooshing sword fights relied on moves and actions with paper tubes that conveyed a covert meaning shared among the boys. Their uses of paper tubes could be read and reread by others who understood the media connections to Star Wars films.

There are many challenges in interpreting young children’s action texts in early childhood classrooms. The meanings conveyed through young children’s playing and making may depend upon gesturing or handling materials but not much talking; for example, a reach that indicates a request, the snipping that cuts around a drawing and turns it into a paper figure, and the bouncing of a scrap of paper across a table top that turns a drawn figure into an animated doll. We need to see and understand children’s play in ways that capture the depth of meaning in their pretending and designing and that notice unspoken social meanings as well as unwritten literacies. In this chapter, I take an action- and material-oriented view of literacy to see the complexity and purpose in children’s play and the literate and social meanings in their action texts.

**Theorizing Meanings in Children’s Play and Design**

The shared meanings that children produce through their play and that they make durable through their design are mediated, motivated, and situated by the surrounding practices, materials, and contexts. Meanings are mediated, or made accessible, through the social practices that operate as literacies within the classroom cultures (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991; Rogoff, 1995, Scollon, 2001). When children come together in play, they negotiate the possible meanings for their physical actions and material props until they agree on who is playing whom and what their characters will do and say. These agreed-upon meanings are motivated by the available materials and their sensory properties and sociocultural uses that make up the multimodal resources in a classroom or play space (Kress, 1997, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Scollon, 2001). These aggregates of meanings and materials are situated in power relations and prevailing discourses in global flows that circulate in the classroom (e.g., teacher/student power relations in educational discourses such as developmentally appropriate practice) and outside school (e.g., hero/princess relationships in gender discourses in popular media) (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007; Medina & Wohlwend, in press; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Discourses are socially expected patterns of “using language, other symbolic expressions, and ‘artifacts,’ of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member” in a global community (Gee, 1996, p. 131). Power relations in educational discourses
make some materials and meanings unavailable in classrooms by making it possible to say that popular media play themes are developmentally inappropriate, that children should be writing and not playing in school, or that pretend weapons should not be allowed in schools.

Analyzing Play as Embodied Literacy Practice

Over time, a classroom community develops a nexus of practice, a set of expected social practices that structure classroom interaction (Scollon, 2001). A nexus of practice signals membership within a community of practice so that members who act in particular ways automatically recognize each other as insiders and members of the same group. People can elicit automatic cooperation through shared participation in backgrounded practices. We can easily recognize the backgrounded practices in a nexus by looking for the routines that everyone “just knows how to do” that keep the status quo in place (Vander Zanden & Wohlwend, 2011). For example in this classroom, children independently and automatically carried out the routines for writing workshop routines (e.g., getting writing folders, papers, and art tools, working individually on projects, occasionally conferring with friends at the same table, sometimes asking each other for help). Children’s understanding of certain media characters or film actions were also valued as backgrounded insider knowledge, enabling players to perform the moves that they “just know” how to combine and use certain practices with toys such as slow-motion fencing moves with Star Wars light sabers. For example, a tap of one’s marker on a friend’s marker could turn these writing tools into pretend light sabers, instantly recognized as an implicit invitation to engage in a Star Wars duel.

Light Sabers or Electric Eels?

In this kindergarten classroom, knowledge of Star Wars signaled insider status within an affinity group (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995) of six boys who played and created paper toys together during writing workshop. The classroom was located in a suburban neighborhood in the Midwestern United States; there were 21 children: 12 boys, 9 girls; ages 5 to 6. Like the majority of children in the class, the boys in the Star Wars play group were White. In this classroom, children were encouraged to play and design during writing workshop, as their teacher recognized meaning potential in drawing, constructing, and enactment as well as print, so children made books, but also folded paper airplanes, created paper sack puppets, or played with stuffed animals to inspire stories. The following excerpt follows the play and design literacies of three boys, two are members of the boys-only affinity group.

Jeff, Tyler, and Martin are making “electric eels” that look remarkably like their child-designed Star Wars light sabers produced in class a few weeks ago (Figure 1.). Each boy rolls a piece of white paper diagonally, from one corner to the opposite corner which results in a tube of paper with a point on both ends. Tyler has difficulty rolling his paper diagonally, and starts over several times. Without talking, Martin rolls a tube of paper and hands it to Tyler for taping, but when Tyler places it on the table, the paper unrolls. Jeff and Martin tape the edges of their and color zig-zag lines lines along the length of the tubes (Figure 2, note: the live action photos have been digitally altered to mask children’s identities).
Together and silently, Jeff and Martin then swim their electric eels across the classroom and past the teacher, swooping the paper tubes in large oscillating waves (Figure 3). In the center of the room, Denny is practicing slow-motion martial arts moves similar to those of a Star Wars Jedi knight. When the two boys approach, he slowly swipes each “eel” and the boys spin the tubes upright and begin fencing (Figure 4) as Denny continues his solitary Jedi practice (Figure 5). When the lights flicker to signal clean-up, Jeff and Martin move to a secluded corner of the classroom and continue to fence with the once-eels-now-sabers until it is time to line up for lunch.

Figure 1. Electric Eels (two tubes in center) and Light Saber “Weapons”
Figure 2. Making Electric Eels

Figure 3. Play Action Pivot from Electric Eels to Light Sabers: Fencing
In these few minutes of classroom activity, the boys 1) designed to turn a piece of paper into an artifact that could be used as a prop and 2) played to animate their paper tubes as electric eels but then light sabers, in the process turning themselves into pretend Jedi knights in Star Wars popular media. To do all this, they engaged in a great deal of semiotic work. The boys used pretense to assign a new imaginary meaning to a paper artifact, substituting the meaning “electric eel” for its original meaning “paper tube” or perhaps “craft project”. Play detaches the conventional meaning of objects and transforms their meaning through pivots (Vygotsky, 1935/1978), expanding the universe of possibilities for meanings and uses of ordinary classroom objects. These play pivots also transform
the everyday surrounding by substituting a pretend context so that in this case, the classroom was transformed into an imagined underwater scene.

The potential uses of a paper tube are suggested in part by its materials. For example, the narrow, cylindrical shape of the tubes resemble the shape of light sabers or eels, making both meanings equally credible. Children strategically choose materials that best fit their intended design, in other words, children design to get things done so their designs and play texts are motivated not only by the properties of available materials but also by children’s intended meanings. “The relation between form and meaning is a motivated one, and this motivation arises out of the young maker’s interest [purpose, cultural situation]” (Kress, 1997, p. 142). The children’s use of color in their designs foregrounded the meaning “Electric Eel” as each paper tube had two black dots for eye and a red-tipped-corner for a tongue as well as long squiggly lines along the length of the tube to represent electricity (Figure 1). These wordless designs directly link to children’s developing literacies as they make decisions about meaning and audience as they draw to represent their ideas.

However, it is through play that children foreground particular potential meanings of artifacts while backgrounding others by adding physical play actions, talk, and sound effects, that make one meaning more relevant. We tend to look for some print on a page when we consider children’s literacy products and to discount and overlook the action texts that children play. When the boys enacted eels, they quietly held the tubes horizontally and maneuvered individually, walking side-by-side, sometimes tumbling the tubes in slow circling motions or undulating waves. When they enacted light sabers, they turned toward each other, tilted the tubes diagonally or vertically, and voiced the shoom, shoom, shoom, of humming light sabers as they engaged each other in momentary fencing moves. In a digital world where webpages routinely include YouTube links on every imaginable topic, actions clearly speak louder than words. In this dynamic textual landscape (Carrington, 2005), children’s played texts take on new significance as a way of understanding and producing live action texts, and at the very least as embodied storytelling that develops skills for potential videos and podcasts.

Classroom Cultures and Dueling Discourses

The excerpt also shows how children deftly managed the multiple meanings of a prop in the dual contexts of peer culture and school culture in this kindergarten. On one hand, making or using pretend weapons ran counter to the discourses of caring community, peaceful conflict resolution, and developmentally appropriate practice in the school culture, the set of official rules, routines, and ways of interacting valued by the teacher and administration. To increase engagement with writing workshop, the teacher encouraged children to play and create props related to their interests. However she discouraged mock violence and weapons. On the other hand, making light sabers and playing Star Wars themes and martial arts demonstrated belonging within a boys-only group valued in the peer culture—the set of friendship groups, social rankings, and prized materials that develop among children (Corsaro, 1985). Discourses of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) that circulate in science fiction media and fandom support a love of technology and competition over original ideas and production (Blaise, 2005). Boys in this group regularly taught
each other to create paper toys and compared their products to determine who was the best designer. Similarly, the “electric eel” ploy (making the light saber acceptable to the teacher by adding a few features to the design and renaming it) was an insider tactic that spread among the boys, with no apparent connection to a curricular theme or play interest. In this way, the light sabers became badges that signaled the boys’ design prowess and their co-membership and that also functioned as entry vehicles (Fernie, Kantor, & Whaley, 1995) for play. Tyler, who was not a member of the boys’ regular play group, was not able to join in their light saber/electric eel play because he was not able to easily produce a paper tube. When he was finally able to tape the tube securely, the other boys had moved on after several minutes of shared pretend fencing in the center of the room.

School culture and peer culture were not wholly separate but existed in overlapping, nested relationships within the classroom (Figure 6). These overlaps made it possible (and also necessary) for children to slide in and out of play identities and to morph the meanings of their played action texts from a swimming eel to a fighting Jedi and back again with a flick of the wrist that repositioned a paper tube.

![Diagram showing overlapping circles labeled Star Wars science fiction media & gender discourses, boys-only play group, peer culture, school culture, caring community & developmentally appropriate discourse.]

Figure 6. Classroom Cultures and Discourses

**War and Peace**

Such nested and overlapping relationships are not unique to schools. Multiple modes and discourses are present in any context and the prevailing discourses in that context influence which
meanings get foregrounded (Wohlwend, 2011). It happens that in this classroom, the boys found a way to play their way around a school discourse of peace in the official space of the classroom that discouraged the pretend aggression in Star Wars play. However, a closer look shows the considerable creativity, energy, and determination that children demonstrated to import their favorite popular media despite teacher sanctions. There is literacy potential in making curricular space for play, including rough-and-tumble play with light sabers. Teachers who are knowledgeable about peer culture can integrate children’s interests and friendships into the curriculum and social life of their classrooms (Fernie, Kantor, & Madrid, in press), making sometimes problematic media themes and cultural stereotypes available for teacher mediation instead of lurking beneath our notice and beyond our reach. Importantly, integrating children’s peer culture and play interests with school culture and curriculum moves play beyond its “something nice to do if there’s time” and end-of-the-day status; rather, recognizing the literacy resources and learning potential within child cultures and popular media moves play to the center of the literacy block (Marsh, 2010). Viewed from this perspective, play becomes a literacy tool that produces action texts and a key way that children learn to make meaning that is central to emerging technologies and digital literacies in the 21st century.

References


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