The Affordances of Blogs and Digital Video

NEW POTENTIALS FOR EXPLORING TOPICS AND REPRESENTING MEANING

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Using more than one digital medium can offer students different lenses for understanding their subject matter and representing their learning, adding layers and dimensions to inquiry and literacy projects.

With the changing landscape of teaching and learning opportunities created by the increasing prominence of digital technologies, literacy scholars and educators have begun to explore how to creatively incorporate digital media and technologies into literacy learning opportunities for students (Beach, 2012; Vasudevan, 2010). This has prompted inquiry into the specific uses of apps (Castek & Beach, 2013), digital video (Mills, 2011; Ranker & Mills, 2014), social networking sites (Beach & Doerr-Stevens, 2011), touch pad technologies (Simpson & Walsh, 2014; Simpson, Walsh, & Rowsell, 2013), and blogs (Beach, Anson, Kastman Breuch, & Swiss, 2009). Each medium, mode, or technology brings with it distinct possibilities for exploring subject matter and learning literacies. However, no one digital tool is completely adequate on its own for a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. Each offers a particular lens or angle, yet also comes with limitations, making it important for literacy teachers to know and understand how to use the potentials of each digital tool for specific learning purposes—as well as how to combine multiple media and modes in order to provide students with a way to comprehensively explore subject matter and inquiry topics (Ranker, 2010).

Scholars of multimodality and media have used the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979; Kress, 2003; Norman, 1988; Van Leeuwen, 2005) to draw attention to the distinct possibilities and limitations for making and representing meaning that media, modes (such as the visual, audio, spatial, written, or spoken modes), and technologies offer (Graves, 2007; Hutchby, 2001; Majchrzak, Feraj, Kane, & Azad, 2013). Kress (2003) defines an affordance in the context of discussing multimodality as follows:

What can a specific mode do? What are its limitations and potentials? What are the affordances of a mode? The materiality of a mode, for instance the material of sound in speech or in music, or graphic matter and light in image, or of the motion of parts of the body in gesture, holds specific potentials for representation, and at the same time brings certain limitations. (p. 45)
The concept of an affordance is useful for exploring the specific uses and limitations of various digital media, software, and the modes that comprise them. This concept highlights how each medium or technology, such as the Internet or digital video, provides users with distinct ways of reading, writing, and using various combinations of modes. Majchrzak et al. (2013) explored this idea in a way that refers specifically to media and technologies, noting that “the concept of an affordance refers to the action potential that can be taken given a technology” (p. 39).

Literacy researchers have begun to develop this area of focus, exploring the various uses of digital media in educational and pedagogical settings. For example, Burn (2009) identified how digital video (produced using digital composing or editing software) offers students representational and meaning-making possibilities such as “iteration (the ability to endlessly revise)” and “feedback (the real-time display of the developing work)” (p. 17), amongst other features. Scholars have also explored touch-pad technologies, finding that the touch-affordances of the iPads provided students with opportunities for complex, multimodal, and multidirectional reading pathways (Simpson & Walsh, 2014; Simpson, Walsh, & Rowsell, 2013). Castek and Beach (2013) conducted research into the specific potentials and uses of apps within the context of multimedia projects, identifying collaboration, multimodality, and shared productivity as distinct characteristics for teachers to consider. And Santoy (2013) examined the blogging practices of women who explored their Chicana identity using blogs, noting specific features the blogs, such as those associated with naming the blog, and how the naming of a blog affects search results and the ability to attract readers. These studies have begun the important work of chronicling how various digital tools offer users new ways to make and communicate meanings. However, because media, modes, and technologies produce numerous possible uses that are distinct to each digital tool, more work is needed to comprehensively understand their potentials, limitations, and uses in literacy and inquiry pedagogy and learning. In addition, a deeper understanding of the concept of affordances can aid teachers in conceptualizing and planning projects involving multiple media.

As a way of exploring this area of focus, I will present examples of the research and literacy processes of Jakob and Derek (pseudonyms, as are all proper names in this article), two ninth-grade students in an urban, public high school class in the United States. They were part of a class project in which pairs of students researched topics of their own choosing, including the following: ethanol, heart attacks, chocolate, shoes, and invented languages, amongst others. Jakob and Derek conducted research into the topic of fast food. They developed this project over five months by generating questions, reading print books and articles, reading online, maintaining a blog, and developing a short documentary video, all focused on the topic of fast food.

In this article, I will present and describe Jakob and Derek’s uses of blogs and digital video by highlighting the affordances of these media. I use this focus to ask how each digital media aspect of the project (video and blogging) provided the students with both the means and limitations for exploring the topic of fast food. Knowledge of these specific affordances can equip teachers for informed planning of opportunities for students, providing a “better understanding of new digital environments and the design of ‘value added’ literacy opportunities” (O’Brien & Voss, 2011, p. 75).

Background on the Video and Blog Project

Mr. Davies, the teacher in the classroom that I feature in this article, is an experienced and highly engaged teacher who taught mostly sections of English. He also taught a section of an alternative class for academically advanced students (the class that the focal students in this article were in). This class was set up as an opportunity for students to engage in non-traditional, open-ended projects and to learn in self-directed ways. Mr. Davies set up the project with clear parameters and expectations from the start, but focused on the students’ independent exploration of their topics. Mr. Davies used a project-based approach, conferencing with students as they worked independently and in pairs with the various media to explore their subject matter. Jakob and Derek thus learned about the affordances of the digital media by discovering and exploring them through the process of composing texts over an extended time.

Earlier in the year, before I had joined the class, the students had explored several different possible topics, and had begun to investigate their topics by reading books. When it came time to begin the digital phases of the project, Mr. Davies set up the assignment using the handout seen in Figure 1.
features the outline of the assignment, the expectations for the blog, and the rubric that the class created together with Mr. Davies. Mr. Davies also set up the requirements for the video aspect of the project, including the following: a clear point of view and purpose; an organized exploration of subtopics; visual, audio, and text tracks; and a clear sense of audience. These directions allowed for the students to explore their blogs and videos in an open-ended way, yet with the parameters and expectations clearly in mind from the start. The students thus mostly discovered the affordances of the media through their independent explorations of and uses of the digital media, though Mr. Davies’s guidelines (featured in Figure 1) were central in guiding the students along their way.

In this article, I focus specifically on Jakob and Derek since they were the most engaged in the digital media aspects of the project. In addition, a close-up look at the work of one pair of students works well for describing the particularities of the affordances of blogs and digital video. Jakob and Derek were ninth-grade students and friends with one another. Both students had read blogs online, but had not ever created their own. Using the digital video composing software was new for both of the students, but they enjoyed the technical aspects of figuring out how to use the program, which they did largely on their own. Jakob and Derek had seen the film, Fast Food Nation (McLaren, Thomas, & Linklater, 2006), which contributed to their interest in the topic of fast food. The students had an ambiguous relationship with their subject matter. For example, they talked about loving fast food, while also questioning it in light of their learning. There was a fast food restaurant down the street from the school that the students went to at lunch, and they criticized the fast food company for targeting the high school students for profits. Jakob and Derek were also curious about their classmates’ perceptions of fast food and how they sorted through this ambiguity.

The class worked on the project once or twice each week during the course of five months. I visited the class as a participant and researcher on those days. While there, I assisted with the project...
and gathered several forms of qualitative data (video/ audio recordings of the students working on their videos and blogs, field notes, and recorded discussions with the students about their work), using qualitative research methods (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Using this data, I developed a qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) of Jakob and Derek’s use of the media affordances of blogs and digital video. My research questions were the following: What is afforded by each digital medium (blog and digital video)? How do these affordances affect the students’ exploration of the topic of fast food? The students worked on the project in the school’s computer lab, which had older PCs and an Internet connection available. In a very low cost operation, I ordered older software that would work with the older computers. The idea behind the project was to let the students explore their focal topic through two newly added media: blogs and digital video. We also scheduled a movie showing at the end of the school year, so that the students could show their movies to the rest of the class.

Written Social Interaction and Textual Linkage as Distinct Affordances of Jakob and Derek’s Blog Development and Uses

During a period of three months, Jakob and Derek maintained a blog on the topic of fast food. They posted approximately twice each week, responded to others’ blogs, and often responded to others in the class who had read the entry and left a comment on their blog. The blog was a medium for the students to communicate what they were learning about their topic to Mr. Davies and the class, and to give others in the class a chance to become familiar with their topic and to respond to these findings. In addition to reporting on what they learned through their reading, they wrote about their own opinions and analyses, often with an eye for prompting responses from others in the class. By narrating their research findings to their audience, they explored several topics in depth, including the following: defining fast food, racial representations in fast food advertising, advertising techniques, the role of technology in fast food, the idea of a fast food tax, and the role of kids in fast food. They also explored several aspects of advertising, such as how products are pictured and described, as compared with their own experiences with the products. Another blog entry discussed the advertising approach of appealing to children by using mascots and other promotional items.

The blog, as a medium, offered the students a way to explore their content in depth, and through the linguistic mode. The blog emphasized the use of writing, but, as I will explore in the next section, the video aspect of the project emphasized the visual mode (photos and video) and oral narration. Through the blog, Jakob and Derek synthesized what they were reading in various articles and webpages that they were finding as a result of their research. While working on the blog, they often had another window with the Internet browser open also, simultaneously reading and writing about their topic. Figure 2 represents their blog entry on visual advertising techniques used in fast food. As seen in Figure 2, the posting also includes a link, “ads vs. reality,” that connects the reader up to a webpage that shows pictures of fast food products in ads, juxtaposed with fast food photos taken of actual fast food from the restaurants. The prevalence of links to other websites revealed another important affordance of the blog: the ability to create hyperlinks, or linkages between the blog and other Internet sites.

Since the students were reading and responding to one another’s blogs, they had an actual audience for their writing. As they progressed through the project and interacted with others in the class through their blog, they became increasingly aware of this. For example, in their last entry, in which Mr. Davies had asked them to reflect on the experience of keeping a blog, Jakob wrote:

You just kind of put your thoughts out there and try to make it sound likeable. Before this, I thought that blogging was something where just about anybody could say just about anything they wanted. I think that this is still true, but nobody will listen to your blog if you have no credibility.
Below is an example of how the blog offered Jakob and Derek the opportunity for written social interaction with others in the class. For example, in an entry entitled, “The Way the Media Portrays Fast Food,” Jakob and Derek discussed how fast food companies advertise through movies and television programs, and the effectiveness and economics behind such advertising. In the following blog entry, they discussed advertising for the Burger King Whopper in the movie, Iron Man (Arad, Feige, & Favreau, 2008):

There he is. Tony Stark opens the wrapper of the delicious Burger King Whopper. “When I was watching Iron Man eat that Whopper, I was so hungry for a Whopper,” said a man after watching Iron Man. I, on the other hand, was thinking how much Burger King paid the producers of Iron Man to have their Whopper shown in the movie. Thousands? No, Millions? Probably. Fast food restaurants must spend so much money advertising in hit movies like Iron Man. But other than movies, fast food giants (Mickey D’s, Burger King, Carl’s Jr., Arby’s, etc.) spend millions of dollars to have their commercials shown on television.

Andrea and Emily, whose screen name for their blog was “GiggLeGris,” responded with the comment featured in Figure 3. This affordance of the blogs, what could be described as interactivity between audience and author, allowed the students to inform one another’s work in an unfolding way. Students sometimes suggested other possible research directions, or posted disagreements that caused the author to think about the topic in a new way. For example, Jakob and Derek (their screen name on the blog was “fasfood4life”) wrote the two entries in Figure 4 in response to another student’s (Alex’s) blog about ethanol. Jakob and Derek disagreed with Alex’s wholehearted support for ethanol as an alternative fuel, and often challenged his postings both online and face-to-face in class during informal discussions, which took on the form of an ongoing debate. In the top comment, Jakob and Derek questioned the truth of the newspaper articles that Alex was linking to and discussing on his blog in support of ethanol. In the bottom comment, posted a few days later, Jakob and Derek once again challenged Alex’s enthusiasm for ethanol and asserted that “diesel fuel is still the best way of transportation for now.” The tone of this debate reflected their social interaction in “offline” contexts: friendly, yet jokingly antagonistic. This example shows how the students’ offline social relationships sometimes came through in the blogs. For example, in another of their responses to Alex’s ethanol blog, Jakob and Derek wrote: “What proof do you have that oil companies are influencing journalists? Your argument is full of holes, and you have no credibility.”

The blogs afforded the students new ways to engage in their subject matter on the Internet and with their peers. However, by definition, these affordances also came with constraints, as O’Brien & Voss (2011) have noted:

Although positive notions of affordances are often accurate, other more negative states and outcomes can also be afforded: Social networking may afford increasing isolation from...
face-to-face interactions and the accompanying richness of oral discourse; the juxtaposition of striking images and video with print text may afford a distraction from processing the print.
(p. 75)

The blog afforded Jakob and Derek new potentials for making meaning, but it also came with constraints. Though the blog was well suited to written social interaction and online textual linkages, it was not as well suited to other important purposes. For example, one way of looking at the limitations of blogs is to compare the affordances of blogs with those of lengthy, academic essays that incorporate large amounts of formalized, conceptually-dense language. In Jakob and Derek’s case, the students’ blog posts tended to be shorter, catchier, more informal, and more oriented toward persuasion, direct communication, and opinion than a traditional academic essay written on the topic (this is not to say that academic essays cannot be written in alternative forms). This can be seen, for example, in the persuasive and even argumentative language Jakob and Derek used in their exchange with Alex. The short length of the blog posts, and the informal and persuasive language that the students used, ensured that their classmates were more likely to read them and to respond. As another example, blog interaction does not afford the same type of immediacy and presence that face-to-face conversation does. For example, blog interactions do not afford the instantaneous and spontaneous responses that come with multimodal readings of others’ body language and voice tone during face-to-face conversations. The concept of an affordance thus prompts the pedagogical reminder that no medium is complete in and of itself, and each has a complement in another mode, medium, or technology that will provide a more comprehensive set of opportunities for students to understand their subject matter and to learn new literacies.

Montage as a Particular Affordance of Jakob and Derek’s Uses of Digital Video as a Means to Explore Fast Food

As a second component of the research project, Jakob and Derek explored fast food by producing a short digital documentary video (composed of still images and their own audio narration). Figure 5 is a screenshot of their documentary-style video about fast food. It shows the basic interface of Video Studio, the video-editing program that they used. The small rectangles in the upper right-hand corner of the screen represent a “clipboard,” where video or audio clips can be imported and later incorporated into the movie. The images along the bottom of the screen are images that the students had already imported and put into a chronology that comprises the video. The central image in the center of the screen is a larger, highlighted version of one clips that has been put into the timeline across the bottom of the screen. This larger rectangle focuses in on the selected clip that the students were currently working on (in this case, a graph representing an aspect of their study on fast food).

Jakob and Derek used images found on the Internet to create the visual track of their video. Often, these were images associated with articles that they were reading on various webpages as part of their research. In addition, they imported background music into the video, and recorded a narrative audio track to accompany their images. The images included the following: cartoons of characters eating fast food, graphs, representational maps of the world that indicate the countries with the most consumers of fast food, images of toys and other fast food experiences that they remembered from childhood, and images from fast food advertisements. Through digital video composing, Derek and Jakob were able to explore ideas about fast food by using the visual mode.

Specifically, montage (Eisenstein, 1949) rose to the surface as a particular affordance of digital video. Montage refers to the editing or placement of images into a particular sequence, and the cumulative
message they produce—"a series of images—like cuts in a film" (Bentley, 2006, p. 90). For example, at one point in the video, they juxtapose a series of three images arranged into a montage sequence, and superimpose text over one of the images to increase the cumulative effect. First, they show an image of cows in a barn under harness and shabby looking conditions. Next, they present a Taco Bell advertisement, and then a McDonald’s advertisement featuring the word “beef.” Using the text feature of the program, Jakob and Derek superimposed the following comment over the McDonald’s advertisement: “Beef: It’s any part of a cow. Big Mac…40 years later.” This line came from a discussion with Alex, who had suggested that the quality of the beef at fast food restaurants is lacking, and that he’d heard that it could be any physical part of a cow and called “meat,” suggesting that as a reason for why the food is cheaper. This montage sequence and juxtaposition of text offers up the possibility of interpreting their message as a critique of the ethics of how fast food companies obtain their beef (cruel treatment of animals), as well as a critique of the quality of the beef used in fast food. Figure 6 is a representation of this three-image montage sequence. The images are represented as moving across the top of Figure 6, with the arrows showing the chronology of images as the students arranged them in the video. The linked box below the third image depicts the text that the students superimposed over the image of the McDonald’s advertisement.

Similarly, at another point in the video, the students visually communicate the idea that the U.S. leads the world in fast food consumption. They do this through the visual juxtaposition of three images, and the juxtaposition of image and text (which they superimposed over the images using a particular function in the video editing program). They do this by first presenting a cartoon image of a frazzled consumer mindlessly gorging himself with fast food while sitting at a computer. Over the image, they superimposed the following message: “A disturbing image.” As this image is displayed, Derek narrates the following: “This is a typical American consuming too much...
fast food.” The next image is a map of the world that has been distorted so that the countries are sized in proportion to their actual populations. Over this image the students have superimposed the text, “population,” in order to identify this map as illustrating relative populations. (On this map, the U.S. appears small in relation to India and China, for example, since its population is much smaller.) The next image is a map of the world, with the countries sized proportionally to their fast-food consumption. On this map, the U.S. is by far the largest country. Over this image, they superimposed the message, “fast food nation,” in partial reference to the movie of the same name, which both of them had seen and discussed while working on the project. The effect of this montage-style, visual presentation can be interpreted as a critique of the dominant role that the U.S. plays in fast food consumption. This montage sequence of three images, illustrated chronologically across the top of the figure, is depicted in Figure 7. The text that is superimposed over each image in this montage sequence is positioned below each image and linked with a line to illustrate the connection between the image and the superimposed text.

The affordances of digital video brought not only possibilities for representing meaning, but also constraints. One of the limitations of the digital video had to do with its abbreviated length. Because the video editing process is slow, the students, by necessity, ended up creating video shorts, which is quite typical of student video projects (Jakob and Derek’s video was 1 minute and 50 seconds in length). The time constraints of the video limited the students’ ability to go into as much informational detail about the points presented than they might have been able to explore through other modes or media that afford more time or space, such as an extended informational essay.

The affordances of the images in Jakob and Derek’s video brought other constraints. For example, Kress (2003) points out that, while the visual mode affords a quick way to convey spatial layout and objects, spoken and written language more readily afford chronological narration of a topic. Kress (2003) notes that “the logic of speech—and by extension of writing—is that of time and sequence, and the logic of image is that of space, and of simultaneity” (p. 152). So the images in Jakob and Derek’s video afforded
the ability to quickly portray spaces and layouts, and to use these portrayed spaces to illustrate a critique of fast food production. The interior of a barn, with the cows harshly confined, can be instantly portrayed with an image, rather than needing to be described using language. The quick movement of the video onto the next image (Taco Bell advertisement) does afford, for example, a way to instantly make the connection between animal treatment and fast food products, but it does not afford time to narrate a chronology or history of how and why fast food companies have relied on questionable practices.

Students who engage in projects such as this—as well as adolescents and adults outside of classroom settings—have increasingly come to use images, video, and other types of source material that is readily available on the Internet, appropriating and transforming this material as they compose. As a result, some scholars have explored how source material found on the Internet is repurposed and transformed to create new multimodal texts in a process that is referred to as *remix* (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; Lessig, 2004). Jakob and Derek’s digital video represents a form of remix since the students drew upon source material from the Internet, transforming, rearranging, and repurposing the images by inserting text, music, and narration over them. Some literacy educators have drawn attention to the importance of introducing students to the concepts of copyright and fair use by engaging in critical discussions with them about remix and transformation of source material drawn from the Internet (Burnwell, 2013). This was not a priority for Mr. Davies, though, since the students’ video was not published or publicly displayed in any way, but was rather kept within the class as a representation of and communication of the students’ learning. The images that Jakob and Derek drew upon from the Internet were treated more as a means to an end, as one of the possible conduits or modes available for exploring their topic.

**Conclusion**

The blog and the digital video provided Jakob and Derek with media affordances that allowed them to explore their topic through new lenses. Specifically, the blog afforded the students a way to explore their topic socially, through writing, and in response to and in interaction with Internet-based reading. It also afforded in-depth exploration of fast food through the written mode, a way to create links between their writing and other webpages, and a way to respond to one another about their work through the written mode. Digital video afforded opportunities for the students to work significantly in the visual mode, and a visual means to communicate complex ideas through the use of montage.

When conceptualizing the affordances of projects that involve multiple media, it is important to remember that affordances are shaped by their social contexts (Graves, 2007; Majchrzak, et al., 2013). In Jakob and Derek’s case, their ongoing decisions and social interaction shaped the realization of the affordances that they discovered. In other words, media do not just offer students monolithic affordances that determine what they will and will not be able to do with them; Students and teachers also have a strong role in shaping the actual uses of these affordances. Different students, in different classrooms under different circumstances, will create new ways to realize the affordances of these digital tools. Derek and Jakob realized the affordances of these media according to the overall direction of the project, as well as their ongoing negotiation about what to do with the media. This point reflects Graves’ aim to articulate “a firmer midpoint between accounts that look to the inherent qualities of communications technology and those that emphasize its social construction” (p. 332). Depending upon how blogs and digital video are integrated into the curriculum, their potential could be unrealized, or expanded much further than what I have described here. In other words, digital media provide new tools, but without individuals’ creative uses of these tools, their potential will remain untapped.

Teachers can use knowledge about media affordances as they consider how uses of multiple media might be useful in their own classrooms. As Webb and Cox (2004) noted, teachers can use “knowledge of specific affordances and how these relate to their subject-based teaching objectives as well as the knowledge they have always needed to plan for their students’ learning” (p. 235). For example, making multiple media available for students to explore their subject matter from different angles provides ways for students to engage with their topics on multiple levels as they engage in extended, multifaceted research (Ranker, 2010). By providing multiple modes, media, and technologies through which students can explore their topics, a more
comprehensive—and perhaps more engaging—understanding of the research process and of the subject matter can emerge.

References


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