

Creating multimodal texts in language education – an emerging practice at the boundary

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Abstract: In this paper the emerging practice of making multimodal texts within language education is explored, in order to illuminate a boundary in which students negotiate what to include in a digital story produced in an educational setting. The making of multimodal texts originates in contexts outside of education and, accordingly, influences from these practices are incorporated into the activity system of making texts in language education. Through excerpts from interactions between students and their teacher, what is considered to belong, or not belong, in a school context, is illuminated as the negotiations between actors establish what are considered appropriate and meaningful actions. The digital stories created by the students within the activity system of schooling become a hybrid as influences from intersecting activity systems are incorporated into the multimodal texts they create.

Keywords: Multimodal text, boundary, emerging practice, activity theory

Introduction

To write and express oneself through language is an important part of language education. By using digital technology, it is possible today to create multimodal texts where pupils are able to use different modes, such as images, speech and music, to express themselves, which potentially provides for new practices of reading, producing and disseminating texts [8, p29]. Bergman [2] and Olin-Scheller [12] studies concern language education in Swedish schools, and both show that the connection is weak between texts that students consume and produce outside of school and the ones they encounter in school. Creating multimodal texts in language education could be a way of bridging the gap between the different worlds in which students seem to live, and may enable the students to make use of abilities connected to the use of technologies in out-of-school practices.

Using computers outside of school is common to most teenagers in Sweden [11], so it is likely that the pupils are accustomed to using technologies as mediating artifacts in their spare time. Technologies, as mediating tools, impact the way in which learning is mediated as well as the potential practices available for those who use them. Since one-to-one-solutions, where students have individual laptop computers, are becoming increasingly common in schools in Sweden, it is of interest to study emerging practices related to these technologies. As institutionalised habits play a significant role in how a certain technology is used, an important empirical question within educational research, is how individuals are acting with technology in educational settings.

When creating a multimodal story, the students are working with tools related to contexts outside of schooling, which may accommodate the interaction of habits and

abilities connected to practices both inside and outside of the school environment. Considering that many youngsters, especially boysⁱ, watch film clips on sites such as YouTube, it is probable that the students are used to watching, and maybe also producing, home-made short films on the Internet. When the object of an activity in a school context is a multimodal text, more commonly encountered in practices outside of school, this object can be seen as a boundary object which inhabits intersecting contexts.

In the following paper the interaction between two Swedish upper-secondary students, while they make a multimodal text in the shape of a digital story, is analysed to explore how the students create their multimodal story by relating to several references from out-of-school practices. The question raised concerns the reasons as to why some references are incorporated in the multimodal text while others are brought up in the interaction but left out in the digital story they create.

1. Theoretical Framework

Activity theory is used in the analysis as a theoretical framework, applying the activity system, as described by Engeström [5], to the context of schooling in general and to the activity of creating multimodal texts in particular. In what Engeström calls the third generation of activity theory [5, p56], the basic model of activity depicted as a triangle where subject, object, rules, community and division of labour interact in various ways, has been expanded to include at least two interacting activity systems (Figure 1). When several activity systems are involved, the object becomes potentially shared and can then be seen as a boundary object. According to Star & Griesmer [14], a boundary object has different meanings in different social worlds, but because the structure of the object is common enough it is recognized and may hence be a key factor in developing coherence between intersecting social worlds.

Engeström et al [6] sees the transportation of ideas, concepts and instruments from different domains as boundary crossing. Crossing boundaries involves stepping into unfamiliar domains which, in turn, requires the formation of new conceptual resources. Boundary crossing calls for a horizontal expertise where movement across boundaries is necessary. When learning is considered to be a vertical movement where the expert teaches the novice, such horizontal movements are largely ignored.

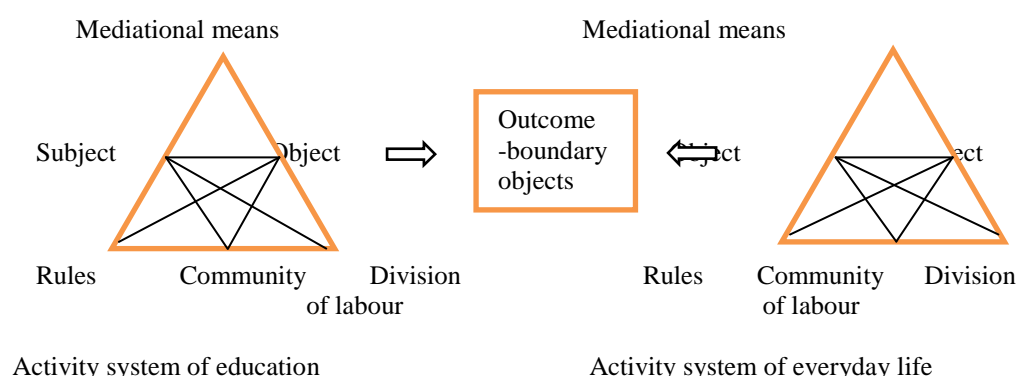


Figure 1. Interacting activity systems and outcomes as boundary objects

Since creating multimodal texts in language education is an emerging practice, it is still not embedded in its own rules and expectations of how it should or could be done. As such it may be compared to what Engeström & Sannino [7, p.2] calls expansive learning, where the learners are “involved in constructing and implementing a radically new, wider and more

complex object and concept of their activity”. When the students create their multimodal text they partake in a new form of activity in the language classroom, where they simultaneously create and learn what this activity entails. As the outcome of the activity is, to some extent, unknown to everyone there are no experts in such learning processes.

In a review of the literature on boundary crossing and boundary objects, Akkerman & Bakker [1, p.141] concludes that descriptions of boundaries and of people and objects at the boundary show signs of ambiguity as in-between and belonging to both one world and another. This means that boundaries connect as well as divide the activity systems involved. People at the boundary act as bridges between the related worlds, but simultaneously also represent the division between them. Akkerman & Bakker [1] contend that it is because of their ambiguous nature that boundaries have become a phenomenon which is investigated in relation to education.

“Both the enactment of multivoicedness (both-and) and the unspecified quality (neither-nor) of boundaries create a need for dialogue, in which meanings have to be negotiated and from which something new may emerge.” [1, p.142]

In the literature about boundary crossing and boundary objects, Akkerman & Bakker [1] discern four learning mechanisms one of them being transformation. Transformation involves confrontation and continuous work which leads to profound changes in practice where an in-between practice, or boundary practice, may be created. They see hybridisation, where “ingredients from different contexts are combined into something new and unfamiliar” [1, p.148] as one of the processes involved in transformation. When practices cross boundaries and engage in a creative process, a hybrid emerges.

Depicting activity systems as neat triangles may contribute to a sense that activity systems are stable and harmonious, but instead, Engeström [4, p.72] states that they are characterised by contradictions. It is through tracing troubles and innovations in an activity system that development can be understood. When a component in the activity system acquires a new quality due to influences from intersecting activity systems, secondary contradictions arise between that component and others in the system [4]. The use of computers and other ways of expression than the typographical word, when creating texts in a school setting, means that the mediational means, as well as the object of the activity, acquires new qualities. This in turn leads to secondary contradictions within the activity system of education.

Though the two triangles in the figure are the same size and it looks as though their influence on the outcome is equal, this is not the case when studying the creation of a multimodal text in a school setting. The students are doing a school task and therefore the activity system of education dominates their activity. Although there is a possibility of the intersecting activity system influencing the dominant one, influences from intersecting activity systems will need to be adjusted to the dominant activity system of education. The activity systems in focus here are, of course, part of, and influenced by, other activity systems and also incorporated into the overarching system, which they in turn have to relate and adjust to. It is, however, what is negotiated in a classroom which is in focus here and how certain aspects of a multimodal text are negotiated by students. In a language classroom there are established literacy practices such as reading and writing typographical texts. When making a multimodal text the object of the activity is expanded and incorporates several ways of meaning-making. Drawing on practices both inside and outside of the classroom enables an alteration of the literacy object as well as the practice, which may be expanded but also constrained, as the emerging practice has to relate to the established literacy practice in a language classroom.

2. Method

The study was conducted in an upper-secondary school in southern Sweden in a class where the students had individual laptops. The students were video-recorded when they made their multimodal text. Two cameras were used where one focused on the students and the other on the computer screen. This was done in order to capture the students' movements as well as their talk and what they did on the computer during the interaction.

Interaction analysis was used when analysing the recordings and when choosing which excerpt to present for further analysis. Jordan & Henderson [9] describe interaction analysis as "an interdisciplinary method for the empirical investigation of the interaction of human beings with each other and with objects in their environment" [9, p.39]. The goal of interaction analysis is to identify regularities in how the participants make use of the resources available to them in that particular situation. It aims to ground the analysis in the empirical material, thereby avoiding ungrounded speculations of what people may think.

Studying the interactions in a classroom is important in order to illuminate what is negotiated and how the local practice through negotiations are made relevant in relation to the task of making a multimodal text. The analysis of excerpts from interactions is, in this study, used to show what is being negotiated as well as what aspects in the negotiations that are made relevant in this particular setting. Linell [10] writes about double dialogicality which means that a situation is in dialogue both with the immediate participants in that interaction but also with the context within which it is set. What is negotiated in a particular situation may thus serve as an example not only of that situated practice, but also of the plausible negotiations within that particular sociocultural praxis.

The analysis is based on interactions between two students which I will here call Isak and Jonas. They are both native speakers of Swedish. They were given an assignment in their course in Swedish at upper-secondary school to alter an existing scene in a book or create a new scene. The assignment was connected to the reading of a book, "Låt den rätte komma in" ("Let the right one in"). Isak and Jonas decide to re-make a scene where a character is attacked by a vampire in a forest.

3. Empirical Findings

In an educational context there are established literacy practices where students write texts with pen and paper or create the text in a word processing program on the computer. When creating a multimodal text in the shape of a digital story, however, both the object of the activity and the mediating artifacts have been altered so that the literacy practices involved as well as the literacy object which the students are expected to create is different from the established literacy practice. While the students also use other mediating artifacts, the computer is vital in the production of the multimodal text. The alteration of mediational means as well as the outcome of the activity could be seen to create a new activity and an emerging literacy practice.

When a new or emerging practice is introduced, the rules and divisions of labour will have to be negotiated in order for the participants to establish what is, and is not applicable in the new practice. The students are hence negotiating what making a multimodal text in school means and they seek clarification as to which rules apply, but they also seek approval once they have started creating their text, to make sure that what they have done is what is expected of them.

In the following section I will present excerpts from the interaction between students where they negotiate what to include in their story. By analysing the interaction between the students and how references to practices not directly related to the school practice, are

talked about among peers and with the teacher, I will explore how the students negotiate references at the boundary. As objects at the boundary shows signs of ambiguity they need to be negotiated in order to decide whether they belong to both worlds or not. Through negotiations the students decide which references to include in the object of their activity, the digital story. Some references are, however, left out in their digital story and hence appear to be considered as not belonging to the educational literacy practice.

3.1 *Choosing the music*

During the first lesson Jonas in particular is preoccupied with deciding which music to use in their digital story. Even though they have not yet decided which scene to create or re-create he considers finding the right music most important.

Excerpt 1, lesson 1ⁱⁱ

Isak But we have to choose a scene first

Jonas Are you kidding the music is important (.) we only need the music

Jonas here clearly states that what is most important to him is finding appropriate music. By saying that “*we only need music*”, he also questions or chooses to ignore the teacher’s instruction which was to make a film consisting of their voiceover, images and, if they want, also music.

Whilst searching for the music Jonas has in mind, both students suggest using the soundtrack from different contemporary movies but do not come to an agreement to use any of the suggestions made. When Jonas finds the music he has been looking for they quickly agree to use it.

Excerpt 2, lesson 1

Jonas It’s this one

Isak That’s good that’s good that’s really good (.) that’s awesome (.) and then boom comes the vampire (2) that was really good (.) yeah but imagine sitting in the tree

Jonas I hope you have heard it before ((continues to listen to the music))

Isak It’s perfect (.) and then boom

Isak immediately starts associating the music to what is going to happen in their story when he illustrates the emerging of the vampire with the word “boom” twice. He also enacts their story using his voice and movements, mainly with his hands. Here he uses his movements and the word “boom” to mark where something will happen in the story and how this will coincide with the music.

The music, *Requiem for a dream* [13], which Jonas has been looking for and which they end up using as the soundtrack to their digital story was originally made as a soundtrack to a movie but has featured in trailers for several well-known movies. It has also been used in video games, TV shows and adverts. The students are likely to have heard this piece of music in various circumstances since it has featured repeatedly in popular culture. This explains Jonas remark to Isak that he hopes he has heard it before, but by making the remark Jonas also appears to be in doubt as to whether Isak is familiar with the music or not. If Isak is not familiar with the music this would indicate that he is not familiar with the popular culture in which it has occurred.

3.2 *Using a YouTube clip as soundtrack*

In this interaction Isak and Jonas are referring to a film clip on YouTube which according to Wikipedia is the most viewed YouTube video which is not a professional music video,

Charlie bit my finger [3]. They are contemplating using the boy in the video and what he says as a soundtrack to a certain part of their story.

Excerpt 3, lesson 1

Jonas Can't we have that one

Isak Should we have that one but it will sound really lame ((laughter)) a vampire aw she bit me man ((they listen to the YouTube video)) yeah that one you could have ((continues to listen to the video where the boy talks and screams)) that would work anyway but you have to cut out Charlie then ((the boy screams again)) yeah that and then when he screams (1) that had been really cool (2) when she jumps down if you imagine when she lands ((shows with his hands)) and then the scream she screams

Jonas Shit it will be so lame ((laughs))

Just before this conversation they have watched the video clip they are referring to and in a humorous manner talked about using it. When Jonas opens up the interaction he also replays the video clip and, as Isak starts talking about how they could use it, he is laughing. As Isak goes on talking Jonas stops laughing and turns toward Isak. Although the conversation still involves a lot of laughter, Isak's consideration of how to use the video-clip seem to make the suggestion more realistic to Jonas. Even though Jonas earlier has been keen to use the video clip in their film, when Isak now is considering it more seriously he seem to question using it. At the end of the excerpt they both start laughing and then Jonas has some problems with the computer and they do not seriously talk about the video clip again. The sound is not used in their final digital story.

When speaking about and listening to the video clip other students in the classroom are heard to pick-up and imitate the sounds. Other students, hence, indicate that this video clip is something which they are familiar with and can associate to. When discussing whether to use the video clip or not the students do not involve the teacher in their interaction.

3.3 Bloopers

When the students are putting together the different modes in their movie, they start to talk about including what they refer to as bloopers, in the film. Bloopers are short sequences of film where mistakes are made. These scenes are usually deleted but are in some movies shown with the closing credits.

It is not entirely clear in their interaction what the students mean when they talk about bloopers. As they have not been filming they do not have any deleted scenes to add. They do however have the recordings of their voices when they created the voiceover to their digital story and it seems to be parts of these audio files which they intend to use as bloopers. Isak did the talking and he had some problems pronouncing a certain word and ended up overemphasising the last letter which was a T ("medvetslöst").

The students speak extensively about making and including bloopers but they run out of time and therefore say that they will have to leave the idea of using bloopers. However, by adding a big red >T< to their film at the point where Isak overemphasises the letter T, they include their own kind of blooper.

Though both students seem to be pleased with including the >T<, Isak says that they will get into trouble for adding it. He wants it to be green, instead of red, so that it won't be as noticeable, but Jonas does not agree with him. They later explain why they have drawn a red >T< to the teacher and it does not cause any trouble. Although showing their version of a blooper to the teacher they do not actually mention bloopers in their interaction with her. They do, however, mention their intention of adding bloopers to their classmates several times and they also discuss with the students sitting closest to them what the >T< that they add should look like.

4. Conclusion

Since the outcome of the assignment to make a multimodal text is a short film, it is not surprising that the students in their interaction relate their work to popular culture in general and movies in particular. In choosing which music to use they contemplate several alternatives, all of which are soundtracks to contemporary movies. Their final choice is a piece of music which, although originally a soundtrack to a movie, has figured repeatedly in TV as well as in video games. The multimodal text can thus be seen to enable the students to connect different social worlds as they incorporate experiences from movies, TV and video games in the making of their school assignment.

Adding bloopers to their digital story also relates to movies, where bloopers are sometimes added, particularly during closing credits. The discussion of whether to include bloopers, reveal an uncertainty of whether the inclusion of bloopers will be accepted in a school context or not. The fact that they do not mention bloopers to their teacher but talk about it with their classmates, together with their hesitation of adding bloopers to their digital story, suggests an uncertainty as to whether the use of bloopers belongs to an educational setting, or not. In the end Isak and Jonas make their own version of a blooper which they include in their multimodal text. When they show their complete film to the teacher they also explain the meaning of the blooper. A YouTube video is another feature which the students contemplate using in their digital story but which they do not use. The YouTube video is thus not considered to belong in a school setting, but bloopers are seen as belonging to both worlds.

When negotiating what to include in the multimodal text the students elucidate a boundary where some references are included in the text and, hence, are considered to belong to both worlds, while others are excluded and thus considered as not belonging to a school context. The negotiations concerning these influences show signs of the ambiguity related to the boundary where the uncertainty of whether references are both-and or neither-nor gives rise to negotiations. The students perceive some experiences from other social worlds as intersecting with the educational setting and hence they can be referred to in this setting. However, other references they refer to when interacting with each other and their peers but they are neither referred to when interacting with the teacher, nor included in the digital story which they create. Through their actions the students illuminate a boundary between what is possible to include in a multimodal text in an educational context and what is not. In so doing, the students are acting as bridges between worlds but they simultaneously represent the division between these related worlds.

By connecting what they do in the classroom to activities outside of school the students cross boundaries of different domains and use ideas and experiences from one activity system in another. The outcome of their activity, the digital story, is a hybrid as it contains elements from different contexts and a boundary object as it both bridges and divides the activity systems. The literacy object they are assigned to create contains ways of meaning-making which is not usually part of literacy practices in language education. As the literacy object is a school task it primarily relates to established literacy practices in language education and thus influences from other practices are incorporated or rejected based on the students conceptions of what a text created in a classroom may contain. By including some references the literacy object is expanded, but it is also constrained as some references are left out. The development of the multimodal text is characterised by tensions between, and negotiations about, what to include in the multimodal text and what to reject. These tensions elucidate the students' awareness of boundaries between different literacy practices. The multimodal text, on a general level, acts as a boundary object bridging the

different social worlds in which it is recognisable. As the multimodal text which the students create during their lessons in Swedish incorporates influences from different contexts it also becomes a hybrid which is new and unfamiliar in settings both in and outside of the classroom.

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ⁱ In a survey done by Medierådet [11] 75% of the youngsters between 12-16 years of age stated that they watched film clips on You Tube or similar sites while they were on the Internet. According to the study done by Medierådet (2008) 76% of the boys and 64% of the girls, in the age group 9-16 years, watch film clips on sites such as You Tube when on the Internet.

ⁱⁱ The following annotation conventions are adapted from G. Jefferson, *Transcription Notation*, in J. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds), *Structures of Social Interaction*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

(# of seconds) A number in parentheses indicates the time, in seconds, of a pause in speech.

(.) A brief pause, less than one second.

::: Indicates prolongation of a sound.

((italic text)) Annotation of non-verbal activity.

xx xxx xx Speech which is unclear or in doubt in the transcript.