

Investigating home and school computer-mediated communication practices in low socio-economic communities

AARE Sydney 2000: 4-7 December

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Overview of the study

The study is examining home and school computer-mediated communication (CMC) practices in low socio-economic communities. Using qualitative methods, the study aims to enhance understanding of emerging communication practices associated with the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The research has already begun and will extend over a period of one year. It is based on close and concentrated observation and interviews, operating with reflective and developing explanatory accounts. The focus is on four families and the schools the children attend. The researchers are examining the ways in which the four families use the new technologies to engage with formal and informal learning in home and school settings.

Significance of the study

The study aims to make a contribution to our understanding of emerging literacy / communication practices in home and school settings. The relationship between home and school literacy practices has been the focus of a number of important studies (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Barton & Hamilton 1998). All emphasise the centrality of the social contexts in which literacy practices occur. This body of work, widely known as the New Literacy Studies (NLS), directs attention to contexts of practice, to contrasts between home and school as sites of practice and to the relationship between home and school with respect to literacy learning. To date, there has been no research investigating home and school *computer-mediated* literacy / communication practices in *low socio-economic* communities. Without home access to the technologies guaranteed, such investigations have simply not been possible. The unique alliance between the ACTU, Virtual Communities, IBM and Primus (Robinson & Barker 1999), that offers computers and Internet access to families of low socio-economic standing, at very low prices, makes such research possible. The research

will enhance understanding of the connections between literacy / communication practices, the use of ICTs and disadvantage. It aims to move beyond current assessments that simply acknowledge that there is a growing divide between the information rich and the information poor. The study promises to open up a more sophisticated and useful account of how a number of critical elements are related and how different dimensions of disadvantage come into play in the contexts under investigation.

Specific outcomes will include:

- textured portraits of people learning through their engagement with new technologies in both formal and informal settings;
- guidelines for schools that identify the curriculum and pedagogical implications of teacher knowledge about students' home computer-mediated literacy and communication practices;
- suggestions for national, state and local literacy, technology and learning policy and resourcing reform.

Background to the study

Considerable theoretical and empirical work has examined the emergence of new computer-mediated communication (CMC) practices associated with the use of ICTs in school settings (Snyder 1997; Lankshear & Snyder 2000). In particular, this body of work recognises that reading and writing practices, conceived traditionally as print-based and logocentric, are only part of what people have to learn to be literate. Today, being literate is to do with understanding the complex ways in which the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of human communication are integrated into multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet and the World Wide Web. Further, this work recognises that access to the new communication system is not universal. Unlike television, CMC is not a general medium. It is the medium of communication for the most educated and affluent groups (Castells 1996).

By contrast, there has not been similar research attention given to CMC practices in home settings. The work of Downes (1999) on children's home computer use is a notable exception. Understanding the micro ways in which people deploy linguistic resources, especially how they link communicative practices from one setting with those of another has important implications for pedagogy and curriculum. The communicative competence - knowing when and how to use resources from different settings - affects abilities to operate in different domains (Freebody et al 1995). Street argues (1998) that it is the dynamic and micro accounts of 'ways with words' (Heath 1983) in which children engage that can explain the link between social factors and school success. Rather than ignoring either, it is necessary to explore the link between the two in terms of communicative practices. It is the dynamic relationship between CMC practices in formal and informal settings that the research has set out to address.

This study is informed by a social literacies position about the relationship between school achievement and home conditions: it links home background to specific linguistic and discursive practices (Heath 1983; Prinsloo & Breier 1996). These ways with words may be different at home and school. This difference is not necessarily a matter of better or worse, although most would recognise the power issues involved in access to standard linguistic conventions (Gee 1996). The study sets out to explain and to investigate what it is about the ways with words of home and school that makes a difference. Using a well developed methodology for investigating home and school literacy practices, with social class as a construct (Freebody et al 1995), the study is investigating home and school CMC practices in low socio-economic urban communities.

Integral to the study are the following understandings:

- the cultural and educational importance of ICTs;
- the centrality of the home in contributing to children's school-based educational outcomes as well as to post-school social, cultural and economic opportunities and achievements;
- the home as a secure, safe site in which people, both adults and children, can acquire new communication practices.

The study's aims

Building on these understandings, this study aims to contribute to the body of work known internationally as the New Literacy Studies (Street 1998). Specifically, it aims to:

- enhance understanding of the ways in which people from low socio-economic communities learn through their engagement with ICTs in formal and informal settings;
- provide teachers with understanding of the ways in which the students from these families use ICTs outside school so that they can build upon these practices in their approaches in the classroom.

Outline of the research plan

Drawing on the empirical and theoretical work of the two Chief Investigators, (Angus 1986, 1993, 1996; Lankshear & Snyder 2000; Snyder 1996, 1997), the study is employing a multimethod approach using primarily qualitative techniques. The families and schools have already been identified and the data collection processes have begun. With the help of two research assistants, the researchers are examining the ways in which the four families use ICTs to engage with learning in both formal and informal settings. We plan to visit the homes of participating families a minimum of four times to observe and interview members as they use ICTs. The researchers are also visiting the schools the students attend at least twice to observe the students in classes in which ICTs are being used and to interview their teachers about the use of ICTs in the curriculum. Three of the families have bought computers through the Virtual Communities program at reduced cost. One family, also ACTU members but from a higher socio-economic community that has had home computer and Internet access for 10 years, has been invited to participate for comparison purposes. The main research techniques are observation, interview and artefact collection.

The study is investigating the following research questions:

- What are the CMC practices evident in home and school settings?
- What are the relationships between home and school CMC practices?
- What are the typical patterns of interaction around CMC events in home and school settings? (An 'event' is an activity in which CMC practices have a role.)
- What are the communicative resources available in the home setting and how do these map onto the CMC practices available in schools?

The main research techniques are:

- Participant observation of families and classrooms - recording with fieldnotes, audiotapes;
- Interviews with members of families and with teachers (closed and open-ended questions for individual family members and various combinations there-of);
- Audiotaped interactions in home and school contexts: between family members and between students and teachers in classrooms;
- Collection of artefacts, volunteered to the research team by participants, such as electronic texts produced, email exchanges, school technology policy documents;
- Participants self-reporting through journals.

The research approach is essentially qualitative. The interviews will be transcribed. All of the data sources will be coded and analysed. Themes will be identified and conclusions drawn.

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