The Routledge International Handbook of Learning with Technology in Early Childhood

Natalia Kucirkova, Jennifer Rowsell, Garry Falloon

This is the stuff that identities are made of

Publication details
Rachel Heydon, Xiaoxiao Du
Published online on: 12 Feb 2019

How to cite: Rachel Heydon, Xiaoxiao Du. 12 Feb 2019, This is the stuff that identities are made of from: The Routledge International Handbook of Learning with Technology in Early Childhood Routledge
Accessed on: 22 Nov 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143
On: 22 Nov 2023
Access details: subscription number
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK
16

THIS IS THE STUFF THAT IDENTITIES ARE MADE OF

Children learning with grandparents and other elders

Rachel Heydon and Xiaoxiao Du

A narrative framing of literacy

My (Rachel’s) grandfather moved into a retirement home around his 95th year, and the first time my seven-year-old son, Oliver, and I went to visit him there, I entered with a lump in my chest. Papa Gene was a creature of habit whom I had always known to have a perfectly orchestrated environment – the kitchen table with his favorite chair, just-right-light, and erasable pens (perfect for crosswords). His knees had gone, the ability to arrange his milieu to support his daily living as a nonagenarian had not, and I didn’t know how papa was going to react to being in a new “home” empty of his stuff. I also didn’t know how to be with papa in such a place. When Oliver and I used to return to papa in the family home, we would just go about our business – work on puzzles, prepare food—and interact through these quotidian practices. In the retirement home, I reckoned we’d have to connect in new ways and worried that our communication could shift from authentic to artificial, and with this, our relationships too.

On that first day at the retirement home, Oliver, papa, and I sat in a common area saying the things that families say in these situations, How was your drive? How was breakfast? and with each trite query that lump in my chest grew. My son, at a loss for what to do next, pulled out his iPad, asked if there was Wi-Fi, and it was then that I remembered the transferability of knowledge generated from research, including what I had learned from my ethnographically informed case studies of intergenerational literacy: digital tools can be placed resources – situationally purposeful and capable of mediating communication and relationship. So, I asked Oliver if he would like to see the house where papa and I lived decades ago, the corollary being asking papa if he would like to see our old street in Detroit, Michigan. Oliver loaded Google Maps. Papa gave him the house address, and away we went exploring the old haunts. The digital images gave way to stories of the past and tri-generations came together.

We begin with papa’s story because it has something to say about literacy practices, intergenerational relationships, and the production and mediation of all of this in and through not just people, but artifacts and tools, what we call literacy constituents. Recognizing these constituents announces the necessity of multi-dimensional ethnographic methods and foregrounds the data we later share. Next, we relay literature on these topics scaffolded by papa’s story.
Heydon and Du

Framing literacy

Specific literatures concerning literacy provide us an onto-epistemology (what we know literacy to be and how we come to know literacy) which inform our study designs. New research generates ever-more robust conceptualizations of literacy, but presently, most significant amongst these literatures are those that teach, like papa’s story, how literacy is

- a situated, socio-cultural practice instantiated in relationships;
- multimodal;
- intergenerationally acquired; and
- connected to artifacts and literacy tools.

**Literacies and the socio-cultural**

People’s literacy practices are purposeful (e.g., to connect with others across distance) and produce effects (e.g., solidify relationships). The value of literacy is contingent on the kinds of “actions and reflections” that it can support “over others” (Arthur, 2012, p. xiii). Values are relevant as literacies are social practices, meaning, “Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text . . . in the interaction between people” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3). Literacy practices are “observable activities and tasks” (Barton & Hamilton, 2010, p. 8), but they also involve what is not so easily apprehended, such as social and interpersonal relationships and emotions/affect (e.g., Hicks, 2013). Literacy constituents also affect and are affected by the domains in which they are situated. Domains are “structured, patterned contexts within which literacy is used and learned”, and the “activities within these domains are not accidental or randomly varying: there are particular configurations of literacy practices and there are regular ways in which people act in many literacy events in particular contexts” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 11). Literacy practices associated with the domain of Oliver’s school are different than those in papa’s retirement home.

Given the social nature of literacies, identity is tied to literacy practices and vital to literacy research (Moje et al., 2009). Identity has been diversely conceptualized, but we have found Pahl and Rowsell’s (2005) understanding to be useful; identity is “a way of describing a sense of self that is in practice” (p. 155), such as literacy practice which is social and material.

**Literacies and the material**

People practice literacies using materials, and the literature abounds with conceptualizations of what Kress (1997) called the stuff of literacy. We have found multimodal literacy, artifactual literacy, and the notion of placed resources as interrelated and helpful to our research.

**Multimodal literacy**

Ethnographic researchers of communication, like Ruth Finnegan, have long attended to literacy’s multimodal nature. In 1967, Finnegan detailed how the Limba people of northern Sierra Leone combined oral storytelling, song, and dance to perform meaning with each other, exemplifying how literacy practices can involve transactions across the roles that people hold in the meaning-making process (e.g., audience, performer). Meanings are generated from the interpollation between persons (Finnegan, 2015) connected to domains, using the stuff they have at their disposal. In papa’s story, in Michigan, he, Oliver, and I (Rachel) drew on an iPad, Wi-Fi, app,
The stuff that identities are made of

and our voices to communicate multimodally, just as Finnegan’s (1967) participants in Africa accessed local materials for their meaning making (e.g., bodies, voice). The stuff of literacies is tied to what is available, what has been/can be done with this stuff vis-à-vis the socio-cultural and historical situation, what this stuff affords (i.e., allows), and what its constrains (i.e., what it can’t accomplish) (Jewitt & Kress, 2003).

**Artifactual literacies**

Multimodal literacy provides an umbrella for conceptualizing the stuff of literacy, and under this umbrella Pahl and Rowsell’s (2010) artifactual literacies conceptualizes the role of artifacts in people’s everyday lives. Artifacts are physically distinct entities that are “created, found, carried, put on display, hidden, evoked in language or worn”, and are contextually “valued” (p. 2). Artifacts, like papa’s old house, are “infused with meanings” and “tell stories, hold memories, and evoke identities connected with their existence” (Bartlett & Vasudevan, as cited in Pahl & Rowsell, 2010, p. vii). Artifacts can travel and have been found to link students’ home and school (Pahl & Rowsell, 2010); however, artifacts can be connectors for more than students. In papa’s story, his house was digitized, enabling it to move across the domains of the domestic to the retirement home and cross geographic boundaries (e.g., suburban and metro Detroit). In movements like these, the literature has identified how artifacts are implicated in relationship and identity formation, and how thinking artifactualy can support researchers to unite the multimodal and social aspects of literacies and create a vehicle for gathering related data from participants (e.g., Gichuru, 2013).

**Placed resources**

Literacy tools (which can include artifacts) can be placed resources (Prinsloo, 2005). Prinsloo’s research into literacy and computers in minority and majority worlds teaches that the value, uses, and affordances of media (like iPads) are situational. Literacies cannot “exist outside the context which gave rise to them” as there is “no abstract invariant which remains ‘the same’ from one context to another” (p. 90): a tool (or text) in one place does not necessarily mean the same in another. The house that papa, Oliver, and I explored on the iPad in the retirement home would not have been functionally the same if viewed by a surveyor in a government office.

The above has implications for the literacy practices that people and domains value. Prinsloo (2005) argued that “situated, distinctive types of meanings” that are created from texts, “are shared by groups of people who sustain them as part of their collective social practices” (p. 90). Specific modes and media are thus “only contextually functional, rather than inherently functional”, and “the signs of communication (spoken, written, visual, gestural, artefactual) are . . . always signs of social value in contexts of inequality” (p. 90). Blommaert’s (2002) notion of indexicality enters here, with Prinsloo (2005) reminding that resources that are functional in one particular place [can] become dysfunctional as soon as they are moved into other places. This process of flows creates difference in value, for the resources are being reallocated different functions. The indexical links between signs and modes of communication on the one hand, and social value scales allowing, e.g. identity construction, status attribution and so forth – these indexical links are severed and new ones are projected onto the signs and practices.

(p. 96)
Through indexicality, the social in literacy as a social practice includes people’s “social position (age, gender, economic class) and the related dispositions that [they] carry as embodied history and practices, together with other members of” their “affiliation groups” (p. 90).

**Literacy across generations**

People acquire and practice literacies across generational lines. The focus of the literacy literature concerning skipped generations has been on children learning from grandparents (e.g., Gregory, et al., 2004). Much of this research is indebted to Rogoff’s (1990) idea of guided participation, where children acquire literacies as they engage with caregivers within shared literacy events. Grandparents have been cited as such caregivers (Kelly, 2004), and there is documentation of children practicing literacy in more than one language, thanks to them. Accentuating multilingual reading, for example, Gregory (2008) found grandparents as “mediators of literacies” (p. vii) and how, working across generational and linguistic lines, children acquired “membership of different culture, language and literacy groups in different contexts or domains of their lives” (p. 25). This research involved families that had recently migrated to London, UK, and the specificity of the people with whom Gregory was working is important, given what the literature says about intergenerational interaction.

Research into intergenerational contact has found that interaction between skipped generations is variable (Bangerter & Waldron, 2014). Differences in frequency and quality of contact are correlated with factors such as culture and ethnicity (Fuller-Thomson, et al., 2014), socio-economic status, and immigration status (e.g., Milan et al., 2015). For example, in retirement communities in the United States, Holladay and Seipke (2007) found limited interaction between grandparents and grandchildren. Papa’s story alone hints that maintaining relationships in a retirement environment can be difficult. Still, increased intergenerational contact has been recorded in situations like grandparent-headed households in England and Australia where kinship care is mandated over foster care (Bell & Romano, 2015), and multigenerational households in places where there are housing shortages, like Nunavut, Canada (Milan et al., 2015).

Nascent research has been investigating the benefits of intergenerational interactions to adults, destabilizing the idea that children are the only learners in these relationships. Many of these studies have considered intergenerational interactions outside of family, such as in intergenerational learning programs. Findings include that these programs can

- expand people’s literacy options across the lifespan (Heydon, 2013);
- help participants forge relationships through literacy practices (Heydon et al., 2018); and
- create opportunities for participants to see themselves as competent communicators (Heydon, 2007).

**Ethnography and literacy**

Ethnography can support the conceptualization of literacy just identified. Ethnography originated in Western anthropology, entered the field of sociology in the twentieth century, and has gained traction in myriad disciplines (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). There is no single definition of ethnography, though most commonly it involves “the intensive and continuous study of a setting or a small group over . . . time . . . to gain detailed insights of the participant setting or group”, and an “in-depth analysis of everyday practices of given groups in naturalistic settings” (Mukherji & Albon, 2010, p. 71, italics ours). Italicized are terms that resonate with classic works of literacy-focused ethnographies (e.g., Dyson, 1996; Street, 1995) and render ethnography commensurate with the view of literacy we shared.
The stuff that identities are made of

Ethnographic methods allow a close-up view of socially and culturally informed phenomena (like literacy) and their constituents. Schensul and LeCompte (2016) encapsulated the methods thusly: “ethnography’s principal database is amassed [during] human interaction: direct observation, face-to-face interviewing and elicitation, audiovisual recording, and mapping the networks, times, and places in which human interactions occur” (p. xxii). Participant observation, interviews, and the collection of artifacts and texts are also foundational methods of data collection (e.g., Mills & Morton, 2013). Ethnographic data are sometimes erroneously considered to be solely qualitative, but all forms of data can make up a data set; for instance, if an ethnographic study to understand iPad use was conducted in papa’s retirement home, researchers might time people’s usage yielding numerate data. A variety of methods have also been developed to deal with virtual social spaces (e.g., Kozinets, 2010).

No matter its methods, researchers must come to terms with ethnography’s colonial history which has (at best) essentialized phenomena (Heath & Street, 2008). Iterations of ethnography have emerged to recuperate it from its colonial past. The critical ethnography movement, for example, evolved out of a dissatisfaction with classic ethnography. In classic ethnography, researchers enter a foreign field to learn about the other (Jamal, 2005) and never question “language and interpretation, the knowledge/power nexus, and the sovereign ‘logocentric’ discourses of modern scientific rationality” (McLaren, 2006, p. 77), three of the most prominent concerns raised about ethnography. In contrast, the commonplaces of critical ethnography promote research that seeks to ameliorate inequities and “acknowledge and discuss the limits of its own claims” (Jamal, 2005, p. 234). Yet there is a caution: all ethnographic studies “tend to shift the balance of power in favor of those who initiate such studies” (p. 232).

For decades, feminist poststructuralists like Wolf (1992) have wrestled with power differentials and representation in ethnography, attempting to devise theoretical and rhetorical strategies to recover the methodology’s affordances. Lather (2010) too has toiled in this vein while arguing that ethnography is not the only methodology needing de-colonizing work. She forwarded that knowledge production and questions of epistemology (hence research) are always questions that involve power; there are no methods or theories that can magically extricate researchers from these complexities. Lather (2017) has advocated for vigilant reflexivity from project inception through dissemination, including researchers accounting for how they are implicated in knowledge production. This reflexivity is accompanied by a shift in positioning from researchers learning about, to learning from (Todd, 2003) or with (Heydon, 2007) participants, and the relinquishing of researchers being able to know absolutely (Lather, 2007).

In what Lather (2013) called the “afterward”, the period following the crisis of representation in research, we eschew pigeon-holing ethnography to talk about ethnographically informed approaches, where researchers (re)invent theories and methods to grapple with power and knowledge and suit the needs and complexities of the phenomena-at-hand. We now illustrate our attempts at such approaches, providing traces of data that connect to the themes of this chapter.

Illustration 1: children learning with grandparents

In this case study using ethnographic methods, we drew upon the conceptions of literacy discussed earlier, and sought to understand intergenerational meaning-making across domains and languages. We asked,

- How might conceptions of literacy and literacy learning differ across cultures, languages, and generations?
- How might culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children negotiate these conceptions in their literacy practices and identity options?
Participants were seven first-grade Chinese children and their families living in Ontario, Canada. Data were collected in the children’s homes, schools, and community settings over eight months. Data collection included participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and documentation of literacy artifacts, practices, and events. Interpretational analysis was employed to “find constructs, themes, and patterns . . . to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied” (Gall et al., 2007, p. 466) (i.e., the children’s literacy practices). Narrative constructions of data were part of the analysis strategy, given that such compositions can help researchers and readers “see how knowledge is constructed in the everyday world” (Riessman, 2008, pp. 13–14). Narratives can further relate the complexity of data while unfolding its intricacies (Hicks, 2002).

For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on how six-year-old Brian negotiated his literacy practices and identity options to maintain a relationship with his grandfather. We narrativize two events where evidence of Brian’s grandfather’s influence figures prominently: a debrief of a trip to China and a video-call during a subsequent home visit. The narrative reveals how Brian played with the identity of good (Chinese) grandson in the face of poor identity options from the (Canadian) school, to maintain a relationship with his grandfather.

**Brian and his grandfather**

Brian was an only-child, born in Canada to Chinese parents. His father was a doctoral student in science at a Canadian university and his mother worked part-time in an administrative role. Brian was identified by the school as an English as a Second Language student who needed extra support to meet reading requirements; in contrast, his parents characterized Brian as a curious child who liked to read a variety of books.

During the school’s winter break, Brian and his parents traveled to China to visit Brian’s grandparents. Before leaving, Brian excitedly told me (Xiaoxiao) “I haven’t been back for years. Finally, I get to go back and see my relatives”.

Brian’s mother signaled the importance of school for the family, saying in Mandarin “Yes, we have not gone back for years. As he is still in Grade 1, we like to take him to visit my family members. When he is in Grade 3, he will be busy with school, and it will be difficult to find time to go back”.

When home visits for the study resumed following the trip, Brian’s mother conveyed some cultural differences concerning school expectations, how they affected Brian’s relationship with his family, and suggested how Brian was processing these differences. For instance, after talking about the good time they had visiting with family, Brian’s mother lowered her voice and said in Mandarin, “When I was back, I realized again Canada is different from China”-I asked in Mandarin about the differences and Brian’s mother explained (in Mandarin):

> When we had the family dinner together, [Brian] was so happy to see his cousins. But when he asked them to play together, they said they did not have time and had more important things to do. They left the dinner early as they had to go for their tutoring sessions. He was confused why they had homework and extracurricular classes. He also did not know how to answer questions from his uncles and aunts: How did you do at school? Did you get good marks? Did you earn a good place in exams? I had to explain to my family, saying that we do not really have those exams nor rank students based on exam results. In China, both parents and children feel huge pressure in education. They need to enter top schools by getting good marks in exams and they also need to perform well in extracurricular activities. Since there are so many children learning to
The stuff that identities are made of

play piano and violin, his cousins learned to play erhu, the traditional Chinese music instrument. Luckily, Canada is a better place with less pressure.

Brian overheard and supplied, “I do not think they really want to learn erhu while I guess they had to”. And he added (in Mandarin), “My grandfather and uncles told me that only those who study well can have a successful life in the future”.

Brian’s mother smiled and said (in Mandarin), “I know you will work hard”. Brian silently looked up at his mother and slowly nodded his head.

Xiaoxiao, slightly shifting gears posed (in Mandarin), “Did you have fun at your grandparents’?”

Brian grinned and said (in Mandarin), “Grandma cooked a lot of delicious food for me. (switched to English) Grandpa liked to talk about study and read to me. (switched to Mandarin) He gave me a red envelope with money telling me to buy some books and study well”.

Xiaoxiao probed (in Mandarin), “What... books did you buy?”

Brian responded (in English), “I told my grandpa, I will buy some English books in Canada”.

Brian’s mother added (in English), “He will be happy if you can do well with your school reading”. Then, shifting to Mandarin, Brian’s mother shared that Brian’s grandparents were retired professors from a top university in Beijing, and they emphasized education. Brian received money from his grandparents with the message for Brian to try his best to do well at school, and they would be proud of him.

When Brian’s mother left the room, Brian shared that he did not plan to buy books with his grandfather’s money. He had only said this so that he could keep the money and signal that he is “a good boy”. Brian shared that he enjoyed listening to his grandfather’s Chinese stories, but he did not enjoy his grandfather’s lectures on “deep” ancient Chinese literature nor the “big” talk his grandfather gave him about performing well at school.

Brian said he was a “a good boy” who displayed this by always showing respect to adults, especially his grandfather. He stressed that in China, “I listened carefully to grandpa’s talk even though I did not really understand all the names he said in that thick book. Grandpa was a good teacher and I needed to be a good student”. Brian confessed that he did not tell his grandparents that the school found him to be underachieving in reading, as he did not want to disappoint.

I asked Brian why he thought he was not good at reading at school as his parents said he liked to read, and the study identified him going to the library regularly. Brian answered that he had received a low score in the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 2001) at school, and thus his teachers only allowed him to select lower leveled books to read. He added that he liked to borrow books from the public library for home as he could choose what he wanted.

Following Brian over time and across domains allowed for data that spoke of Brian’s literacy practices as diverse. Some literacy events were opportunities for Brian to construct/present himself as a capable communicator, who could use multiple languages and modes to express his ideas with different people in different places. One such example is an event where Brian played on the online reading program, Raz-kids (Learning A-Z, 2017).

During a home visit, Brian was at his father’s computer. His mother related that the school ESL teacher recommended Brian work on Raz-kids to improve his reading. The school claimed that this program would improve Brian’s vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Raz-kids was structured through modules leveled according to reading difficulty. Modules offered opportunities to listen to a story, read a story, and complete a reading comprehension quiz to move on. It incentivized completion of the modules by providing users with tokens to trade for items for a digital room. Brian shared that he had designed a space room where he was a captain (see Figure 16.1), but he needed to complete more quizzes to win the items he wanted: “If you answer questions correctly, you will get more stars and more stars mean more
points and stuff”. Brian wanted to demonstrate the program. Fluidly, he clicked on the browser, opened Baidu (a Chinese search engine), typed what he was looking for, maneuvered through the Chinese and English search results to locate the Raz-kids login page, and entered his username and password.

I said, “Wow”, then in Mandarin, “You remember all of this”. Brian replied (in Mandarin), “I have played this game quite often, so I . . . remembered this information”. Brian pointed to the letter K on the screen and said (in English) “See, I am at level K right now and soon I will move up to level L”.

The data suggested that Brian listened to some of the stories, but read none. He preferred to directly take the quizzes, which the program allowed, and given the multiple-choice format of the quizzes, Brian could score sufficiently high to collect his tokens, the fruits of which he showed-off.

While he was on Raz-kids, Brian’s grandfather sent an invitation for a video-call to Brian’s mother’s smartphone. Brian’s grandfather routinely called at the same time every week. When Brian received the call, he ran to show his grandfather his space room, holding the phone to the computer screen. He also told his grandfather (in Mandarin) that he got all the quiz questions right and received “many stars” as his “reading rewards”. He clarified that he was working on reading, not playing video games. Brian’s grandfather said he would call back later so as not to interrupt Brian’s learning.

Illustration 2: children learning with elders

This study drew on the same conceptions of literacy to investigate digital tools in an intergenerational art class. The study asked,

- How did digital tools function as placed resources?
- And how did they mediate (or not) relationships, identity options, and literacy learning opportunities?

We provide a narrative example of two literacy events constructed from the data that suggest how the research team (led by Rachel) could respond to these queries, because our ethnographic approach allowed us to track the situated literacy practices of the participants and the stuff involved. The study was an exploratory case study using ethnographic tools with the case being the attempt to integrate digital media into an intergenerational art program.

Participants were eight elders and seven children (ages three to six) who were part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the United States. The congregation’s Education Director described that a prime goal for the program was to “build[d] relationships” between the children, elders, and “their families”. The classes ran once a week for six, 1.5-hour sessions, culminating in an art show. The class was headed by an experienced intergenerational art teacher who had been working with the researchers to integrate digital media into her classes.

Ethnographic data were collected for the duration of the program. Data sources included the teacher’s lesson plans and written and audio recorded reflections of the classes, participants’ digital portfolios, photos of observations and program artifacts, field notes, audio and video recordings of participants during the program, informal conversations with participants during text-making, and semi-structured interviews with elders, children’s caregivers, and the Education Director.

Data analysis was inductive and guided by the research questions (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). The units of analysis were bounded by the class’s literacy events. Themes were identified through a juxtaposition of data sources (e.g., images of participant-generated texts next to transcriptions
of field observations) and areas of resonance and dissonance were noted (Pahl, 2007). Member checks were conducted with key participants. Data were triangulated by drawing on multiple data sources and comparing them against the literature, and checking findings amongst members of the research team. We share a sample of findings using a narrative devised from a diversity of study data.

**Mia and Dejon**

It’s the second half of the third art class. Four-year-old Mia is at a table with adult participant Dejon beside her. As per the day’s lesson on charcoal as a medium, value as a concept, and underwater as a theme, Mia has just completed a drawing of a mermaid. She is working with Dejon to take a photo of it to put in her portfolio. The program invites participants to keep a digital portfolio to document any aspect of art class in whatever mode they want. The portfolios are made on the Book Creator app (Red Jumper, 2014) and saved on iPads under each participant’s name. The app allows participants to create e-pages where they can insert multimodal data (e.g., photographs, video, print) and organize pages through color, font, framing, and the like (Heydon et al., 2017). Dejon has just helped Mia take a photo of her drawing. Mia wanted to shoot the artwork from above, so Dejon helped her stand on a chair. Now he’s helping her down and asks of the photo she’s taken, “Are you going to use this one or retake?”

Mia, whose mother told us she has an “Android tablet at home” and is thus able to focus on the task rather than the tools, indicates “Use” and presses the button on the screen to do so.

“No, you want to put a name on it?” Dejon inquires. Mia nods. “How do we put a name on it?” Dejon wonders.

“Ah, I don’t know”, Mia answers, though she is looking at the screen and ready to make an exploratory attempt. Dejon, who is holding the iPad, taps the screen where Mia has just pointed.

![Figure 16.1 Brian's Space Room](image-url)
“Add text”, Dejon reads the menu that’s popped up, and Mia gently swipes Dejon’s hand away to press herself.

Mia is wondering about what letters she needs. “This one?” she asks Dejon. She looks at the keyboard and stretches out the sounds in the word she wants: “AIR-EE-UL”. Mia enunciates the word again, looking at Dejon, and in a staccato, says emphatically, “Ariel”, making eye contact with Dejon. Dejon does not understand that Mia is saying the name of the Disney mermaid she talked about with a member of the research team when she was making her drawing, and he listens to discern what she’s saying. He holds the iPad between him and Mia, and Mia voices the sounds in the name again, directing Dejon with her body language to type. In exaggerated tones, Mia declares, “AIR” and points to the keyboard. Thinking Mia is saying the letter “L”, Dejon taps “L”, and Mia moves to the next sound, “EE”; Dejon types “E”; “UL” says Mia, to which Dejon types an “L”. Though the letters spell LEO, not Ariel, Mia is satisfied seeing that there is a letter for each phoneme. While she was stretching the word, “AIR-EE-UL”, Mia moved her pointer finger in the air to each phoneme. When Dejon was finished typing, she announced “Ariel” and waved her finger in an arc, as though blending the sounds. Now, Mia moves her body in front of the iPad, looks at the screen contentedly, and says “Ariel” again.

Dejon wonders of the freshly typed LEO. “Now where do you want it?” Mia drags the word down and over to position it on the page. “Wow, that’s nice”, encourages Dejon. Mia proffers the iPad to Dejon, the two of them with their eyes trained on the image. Dejon says, “Now . . .”.

Mia leans in close, “Name. I want my name, name, name”. The duo touches the iPad at the same time.

Dejon reminds, “Your name is on there”, as Mia had written her name earlier in pencil on the original drawing.

With Dejon close, Mia pulls up the keyboard again, and says, “I want to write my name”. Mia wants a digital name too.

Dejon utters, “M-I-A”, pointing to the letters. Mia types. “M-I-A, Mia, OK”, finishes Dejon. Mia and Dejon touch the screen one at a time to drag the name under LEO (see Figure 16.2).

Later, at the art show, the iPads are out for portfolio viewing. Original artwork is also on the walls. Mia loads her portfolio. She stands in front of the iPad; her mother is close behind her looking down. Mia’s hands are on the iPad. She’s in control, interacting with the device so that she can proudly show her mother her Leo/Ariel/Mia text.

Our ethnographic data also allows us to tell of other (parts of the) story/stories, uncovering motivations for practices. Through the data over time, we learned that Dejon participated in art class for reasons that were meaningful to him but hard to articulate. He was there to make art and to do so with the children. In the class just showcased, for example, Dejon worked with Mia, but he also made his own artwork which he documented in his portfolio (see Figure 16.3).

A published poet, when we asked Dejon about how he felt when he made art, he said it gave him a “feeling of accomplishment . . . when I create something I like”. When we asked him how he felt when he was in intergenerational art class, he said,

“I’ve matured in that . . . vein; my first day here I went home kind of feeling like . . . it just didn’t matter and I would come and . . . draw stuff . . . and then somewhere in the second week working with Sam [a child participant] I started seeing more clearly that there was something important going on here and I wasn’t sure what, but I wanted to be a part of that, so that’s why I came back.

Dejon intoned that he noticed something important about art class, and it was connected to making art with a child.
Later, when we asked Dejon if there was someone or something that had influenced his art, we were given some more hints about what was important to him in the program:

...everything hinges around my grandpa... I'm very clear about my... time with my grandpa. He was very tactile. I have a story of him coming up and waking me up and I have eight brothers and sisters and he woke me up... that's important to me. He... brought me downstairs and got me dressed... gave me a bowl and a spoon and he took a bowl and a spoon and I carried the sugar and he carried the milk and we went out into the middle of the forest and... he had created this area that he liked to go sit... that was... surrounded with blueberries and we would sit... and just reach out... and pull... [blueberries]. These blueberries were... almost black and they had... dew that had formed all over them and they were cold... and he had me just pick them... put them in my bowl and then we would sit there and we would sprinkle sugar on them and eat them and it's just the whole scene of the tall trees, and the early morning and I could see the light coming from the sun coming up... It was probably the keystroke in my life that one morning, and I think it allowed me to sit and be with colours, and
shapes, and tastes, and touches and that sort of a thing . . . shortly after that he died. He was eighty-six when I was five.

At a similar age to the children in class, Dejon experienced the “keystroke” of his life, an intergenerational experience that he relayed with attention to the senses and created a lesson in noticing.

The lesson of noticing is one that Dejon wanted to share with the children in class – we saw this with Mia, as Dejon paid close consideration to what she wanted to make and what she needed to make it with – hands and heads close together over the iPad. We asked Dejon, “What do you like about making art with the children?”

“I . . . like to study myself and that gives me a real opportunity to see [the children’s] needs to be paid attention to and then see my needs to be paid attention to”.

Dejon defined these needs as “the need to be paid attention to . . . for someone to say, ‘That’s nice, that’s good’”. He expressed that the need to have attention in relation to one’s meaning making is not something that goes away:

I often don’t even consider that [being paid attention to] important for me anymore. I’m seventy-five [but] . . . That’s not true, the needs are there and I can sense them,
especially when I’m working with children and I can see that I can dominate them and
coop their work so quickly and so easily and I wouldn’t want someone doing that to
me . . . so then I . . . back off and support their work . . . that story of my grandpa . . .
that still rules my life.

Dejon suggested that with the children, as seen with Mia, he tried to be respectful of their
agency and support them as they wanted to be supported – something he still values.
And just as Mia undertook her portfolio seriously and showed it to others, so too did Dejon
take art seriously. He told us about writing a book and the sacrifices he made to do so: “I worked
so hard and I put everything I am into it. I was ready to starve to death if I had to, to get my
book out ’cause I wanted someone else to see that I can express myself”. Dejon wanted this for
the others in art class, “I wanted to do that for someone else”.

And he surely did it for Mia. A young four-year-old, we recorded the teacher initially say-
ing Mia might be a bit young to “get much out of” art class. However, the teacher changed her
mind when she viewed Mia’s Ariel.

**Ethnographic lessons**

We wrote this chapter with the prime aims to convey the complex, situated, material, relational,
and intergenerational nature of literacies and to demonstrate how ethnographic approaches to
research correspond with such a framing. Rachel’s story of communicating with her grandfa-
ther set the tone for our conceptualization of literacy and provided a scaffold for a discussion of
relevant literature. We then illustrated the apt fit between conceptualization and investigation of
literacy through storied traces of research. In being in the home and school with Brian, follow-
ing his practices, and talking with him and those close to him, we discovered in the first study
how a child forged literacy identities within/against options created from myriad actors, notably
his grandfather. Being embedded in art class, cataloguing modes, media, and related practices,
and closely attending to what was being made, how, and why, study two found how people at
opposite ends of life support each other to make meaning. These illustrations are only suggestive
of the myriad methods and findings from these studies, but positioned in this chapter, they offer
an entrée for thinking about the necessity of commensurability within researchers’ literacy onto-
epistemology – what they mean by literacy and how they come to know literacy.

The stories of Brian, his grandfather, Mia, and Dejon speak to the affordances of ethno-
graphic approaches, including the learning opportunities they create for researchers. As illus-
trated through the data, we were able to learn, for example, of the intergenerational quality of
literacies, whether generations are physically together (like Mia and Dejon), digitally connected
(like Brian and his grandfather), or evoked by memory (like Dejon and his grandfather).

The data in Brian’s illustration provided us a view of a CLD child negotiating competing
messages about literacies from across domains (e.g., his teacher and grandfather). Apparent in
the example are the divergent conceptions of literacy and literacy resources that emanated from
specific domains, cultures, languages, and generations. We found, for instance, that the school
defined literacy achievement as the ability to score well on a test of reading English leveled
texts or an online quiz of reading comprehension, whereas Brian’s grandfather’s idea of literacy
required knowledge of classic Sino-literature.

Brian’s illustration also conveys how a CLD child negotiated these conceptions and
molded his literacy practices. We see, for instance, Brian’s ingenuity in navigating modes and
resources (e.g., print books, digital animation in an online environment), languages and scripts
(e.g., English and Mandarin Chinese as recorded in code switching during home visits and his use of multilingual websites), and foiling the school system that called him inadequate (e.g., winning stars without reading). We witnessed, through ethnographic means, how Brian moved within his available identity options as an agile communicator who understood what was expected of him, and blended these expectations to suit his purposes and maintain relationships (e.g., good grandson).

Likewise, the ethnographic data in our second illustration makes visible the literacy constituents of intergenerational art class, and how they functioned in concert to mediate relationships (e.g., between Mia and Dejon, Mia and her mother), literacy learning (e.g., Mia and Dejon both negotiating each other, print literacies, digital media, and traditional media like charcoal to design and execute texts), and identity options (e.g., Mia as a competent communicator, Dejon as an artist and ally to children). The study design also provided knowledge of the tools of art class and their use as placed resources; charcoal, iPads, and other media helped Mia carry out her motivations, and within the context of her intentions, these tools served as a mediator in the development of her relationship with Dejon. Co-construction of the portfolio page with the iPad required each person to draw on his/her strengths; for example, Mia had the title for the drawing, Dejon the letter knowledge, rendering each a necessary part of the whole. Plus, the nature of the resources demanded physical proximity (e.g., heads close and fingers touching), mirroring/mediating the developing relationship.

We additionally learned how Dejon’s relationship with his grandfather, facilitated by materially rich practices (think blueberry picking in the forest), informed his view of children (persons who wish to enact their agency), literacy practices (writing books/poems), view of literacy (sensory-rich), and informed his identity options (e.g., someone who helps without taking over). All these beliefs/values/attitudes affected how Dejon interacted with Mia, which fed their shared literacy practices and products.

As the illustrations show, literacies are constituted by people, domains, materials, and other human and non-human entities. Our conceptualization of literacy, born from the literature shared at the start of this chapter, creates requirements for literacy research. We conclude this chapter with a list of these requirements:

- Understanding literacy as social practice requires research designs capable of apprehending the situated nature of literacies, how they are practiced, by whom, why, where, and with what implications.
- Thinking multimodally about literacy demands that research identify the stuff of people’s communication to understand how it helps to in/form significations and with what affordances and constraints.
- Researchers must be alert to artifacts, what they are and what they are communicating and connecting.
- The above leads to questions about literacy and placed resources, including people’s social positioning and affiliation groups, and calls for researchers to notice when practices cross or mingle groups.
- And literacy research must recognize that literacy acquisition, practices, and effects in skipped generations is important. This recognition calls for studies that account for how intergenerational relationships are situated and socially culturally and economically sensitive.

We hope to have shown how these requirements were fulfilled in our ethnographic methods, resulting in rich data and situated understandings of intergenerational literacies.
Notes

1 “All participating children’s parents had been born and raised in mainland China and had chosen to visit, study, or live in Canada. All the children could understand, read, and speak Mandarin Chinese, as well as write simplified Chinese characters” (Du, et al., 2016, p. 52).

2 All Mandarin has been translated by the second author and checked by a third party.

References

Heydon, R., McKee, L. and Daly, B. (2017) An exploratory case study of integrating digital media as placed resources in an intergenerational art class. Language and Education 31 (4), 351–373.