Embodying (Re-)Reading: the Material and Social Engagements of Nostalgic Leisure Reading Practices

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This paper utilises the theory of practices to describe and explain some of the features of the phenomenon of leisure reading within the context of a re-reading case study. It finds that leisure reading is an embodied practice that occurs within a complex network of material and social engagements.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes the theory of practices to describe and explain some of the features of leisure reading. Broadly speaking, practice theory defines the social as “a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki 2005, 12). Such practices always involve “the active integration of materials, meanings and forms of competence” (Shove and Pantzar 2005, 45). The continually ongoing nature of this “active integration” means that practices are inherently capable of producing change within themselves. However, new and disruptive technologies can also catalyze significant change. This is particularly the case where those technologies come to be seen as vital to the competent and successful performance of the practice, or as enhancing the practice in some way (Warde 2005). This is an important point in the context of leisure reading, given the rapid technological developments that have significantly changed the production and consumption of books—the primary material artifact of reading practices—since the dawn of the 21st century.

Since the publication of the first mass-market ebook in 2000, digital technologies have continued to revolutionize the practice of reading, and ebooks now account for between 10% and 27% of revenue for each of the ‘Big Five’ English-language publishers (Wischmabart 2014, 13). This suggests that reading as a practice is undergoing a process of “remediation”, whereby the mediating artifacts of a practice are transformed as a result of changes in the object (“motive, purpose or focus of engagement”) of the practice (Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, and Yanow 2009, 1318). This observation raises two important questions. First, how do digital technologies enhance reading practices, such that ebooks and e-readers have become so successful? Second, how is the object of reading changing, such that its remediation becomes possible and even desirable?

To illuminate these questions, this paper utilizes a research context that maximizes the salience of changes to the mediating material artifact: re-reading. Participants (N=13) for this exploratory study were recruited within the context of their engagement in reading practices. Given the nature of these contexts (for example, book clubs), a focus group or small group interview setting was used for data collection. The in-depth interviews took place before and after participants re-read a book of their choice in either their original print copy, an alternative print copy, or an electronic copy on their preferred e-reading platform, thus providing the opportunity to tease apart differences in objects and experiences on the basis of the materiality of the mediating artifact. The first interview for each group focused on participants’ book choices, responsibilities, and expectations for the study, as well as their general attitudes towards reading and re-reading; the second focused on the re-reading experience and its outcomes. Interview data was audio-recorded and then transcribed by the researchers, resulting in approximately 150 pages of text. This text was then analyzed using a hermeneutical framework (Thompson 1997). The findings reveal that competences to do with the embodied and social context of reading—including how to choose and handle mediating material artifacts, how to utilize available geographic and temporal contexts, and how to engage in shared reading practices with both readers and not-yet-readers—enable readers to express and enact the meanings embedded in their shared knowledge of the practice.

These meanings are primarily understood through metaphors of consumption, relation and travel, each of which highlights particular understandings about the performance and object of reading. The consumptive metaphor reflects the understanding of reading as an embodied experience, and also suggests the two primary objects of re-reading: novelty and comfort, which implicitly or explicitly reference contemporary food discourses. The relative metaphor ties into the frequent personification of books (whether as material objects or imaginal ones), including books taking on relationship roles that range from the romantic to the platonic. This discursive trend reflects the understanding of reading as a socially situated activity in a wide range of contexts. Finally, the travel metaphor expresses the common understanding of reading as an “escape” from the everyday, as well as a “journey” of “self-exploration”. Travel also takes on a literal role in reading practices, whereby reading takes place in a range of embodied contexts—sometimes in the home, but also frequently on the go. Furthermore, the embodied context of a reading experience seems to entail specific reading practices, including the use of appropriate mediating artifacts (for example, either a paper book or an ebook, a tablet or an e-reader). In turn, the chosen mediating artifact results in particular embodied interactions between the reader and the artifact—for example, interactions occurring in the hand (such as holding the book or device) or on the eye (such as the lighting of a device’s screen).

As such, there seems to be a link between the object of reading and the embodied context of reading, in terms of both space and time, which in turn affects the embodied interactions through which the practice of reading is enacted. From this, we can deduce that being able to make decisions about the appropriate embodied context and enhancing mediating artifact for a particular reading object is a key form of competence for the performance of leisure reading, including nostalgic reading. Similarly, knowing how to handle the artifact within that embodied context is also important, for example how to hold a book comfortably while in bed or how to choose a book that can be carried easily on public transport. Other competences include the process of reading itself, of course, but also knowing and following the unspoken rules of etiquette for lending, borrowing and sharing books, as well as how to initiate others—including children and reluctant readers—into the practice.

While these materials, meanings and forms of competence have emerged within the context of a study on re-reading, many of them are also applicable to leisure reading more broadly. As such, many of them deserve more in-depth investigation. A future, fuller analysis of these findings in the context of contemporary discourses of reading would be a significant project with considerable theoretical and managerial implications.

REFERENCES