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Next level grammar for a digital age: Teaching with social media and online tools for rhetorical understanding and critical creation. (2022)

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Article abstract

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Next level grammar for a digital age: Teaching with social media and online tools for rhetorical understanding and critical creation. (2022).

*Reviewed by **Kyu Yun Lim**, University of British Columbia, Canada*

Abstract

Next level grammar for a digital age by Darren Crovitz, Michelle D. Devereaux, and Clarice M. Morgan has made a valuable contribution to English Language Arts (ELA) education by delineating how grammar instruction can be situated within real-life contexts using digital technologies and media, as well as emphasizing the importance of critical digital literacy in ELA education. The book provides educators with a wide range of approaches to guide students in utilizing language in digital spaces and understanding rhetorical grammar to create digital content, aiming to raise learners to become more conscious digital readers and writers, and to grow up to be engaged citizens. With its concrete and practical lesson ideas, the book helps language teachers to prepare for teaching complex and challenging topics that emerge in digital realms and to guide students to incrementally develop their literacy skills. Individuals in language education will find valuable insights for engaging discussions on how language teaching can be updated to meet requirements of an increasingly digital media landscape.

Introduction

Current communication modalities are mediated through digital media and technology. It is valuable to consider how teachers can integrate digital language into language classrooms. *Next level grammar for a digital age* by Darren Crovitz, Michelle D. Devereaux, and Clarice M. Morgan has made an interesting contribution to the field of English Language Arts (ELA). They describe how grammar instruction can be situated within real-life contexts using digital technologies/media and identify the importance of critical digital literacy in language education. With the widespread use of digital language, defined by the shift in linguistic features within digital spaces, the authors raise the following questions for educators: How can they best support learners navigating the complexities and challenges that the growing prevalence of digital realms bring, and how can they purposefully use language with digital tools?

While grammar instruction in language education should aim at empowering learners "to become better readers, writers, thinkers, and communicators" (p. 26), traditional approaches to grammar instruction often isolate lessons from real-world contexts, dedicating entire sessions solely to repetitive

grammar practices. In teaching grammar, the authors' main objectives are twofold: first, to develop fluency in understanding the rhetoric of language use, and second, to foster critical digital literacy through grammar instruction, culminating in projects aimed at initiating social change and raising students to be more conscious digital readers and writers as well as engaged citizens. Therefore, Crovitz, Deveraux, and Morgan provide educators with a wide range of approaches to grammar instruction mediated by digital media and technologies. These approaches create a framework for guiding students in utilizing and accessing language in digital spaces and understanding rhetorical grammar to consume and create digital content.

The Landscape of Digital Language and The Necessity of Critical Digital Literacy

The authors begin the book by discussing how the advancement of digital technology and media has shaped and mediated our language use, and how the social contexts of digital language involve power and identity.

Today, youth employ various modes of expression in digital environments—blending emoticons, non-standard English forms, and hashtags into their texts. This linguistic playfulness and creativity in digital spaces contributes to effective communication and demonstrates their meta-knowledge of language. The authors advocate for embracing these digital linguistic idiosyncrasies within ELA classrooms, rejecting the dismissive "kids these days" (p. 4) mindset. They assert that integrating these digital linguistic practices will ultimately enhance adolescents' language skills and offer multimodal ways of delivering messages.

Despite these positive aspects of digital linguistic practices, the authors emphasize the necessity of critical digital literacy in navigating the digital landscapes. They define critical digital literacy as an inquiry into how language practices within digital spaces intricately intersect with power, culture, society, history, and identity. For instance, algorithm-driven design in social media fosters "silos of information" (p. 14) where individuals are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, potentially perpetuating misinformation and hindering democratic discourse. This underscores the importance of reading online content critically to facilitate informed decision-making and challenge entrenched power structures. Critical digital literacy also involves understanding how the use of language in digital spaces reflects our identities and social affiliations, raising concerns about authenticity. To combat these challenges, the authors advocate for teaching students to critically assess and produce digital texts, which requires teaching both critical digital literacy and rhetorical grammar.

Digitally Mediated Grammar Instruction

To offer examples about how to integrate grammatical instruction with critical digital practices, the authors present ten innovative classroom activities. These include creating one-minute animations illustrating how different sites, influencers, or companies use specific nouns to describe an issue trending online from different angles; describing their virtual reality experiences using adjectival phrases; crafting news reports solely using passive voice and recording podcasts to analyze the usage of passive voice in news reports; practicing the rhetorical use of colons and semicolons on platforms like

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X(Twitter), which demand brevity; and experimenting with TikTok videos by writing comma-splice sentences to describe remixed content.

One of the outstanding examples on teaching grammar concepts is using memes. Crafting memes necessitates understanding how linguistic patterns and humor work together to achieve rhetorical purposes. Consequently, utilizing memes can help students grasp how grammar operates in practical contexts. The authors' multifaceted approach, which intertwines grammatical concepts with digital tools and platforms, harnesses students' engagement in digital writing to enhance their understanding of grammar in real-world situations.

Nevertheless, the integration of social media and digital tools into classroom activities is also accompanied by a cautionary note. For example, the provision of free online services often implies "we ourselves are the product" (p. 67). Our performance in social media such as clicks, likes, or shares produce data, which is analyzed and sold to organizations for targeted advertising and other purposes. Thus, the authors highlight the dual nature of our reliance on digital devices, which simultaneously holds the potential for both socially repressive uses and innovative affordances.

Moving Toward a Deeper Exploration of Critical Digital Literacy in Language Education

The authors delve into the nexus between language, power, and truth, arguing that discussions on grammar should ultimately involve "a discussion of power: how it's gained or lost, how it's maintained, how people use it in various ways, who has access to it and who doesn't, whose version of events matter." (p. 87). They further highlight the contemporary Internet landscape as a ground for propagating disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories. In this account, the authors illustrate how syntactic strategies embedded in texts operate to deceive and provoke division and emphasize the importance of students cultivating a critical understanding of such tactics through focused grammatical analysis. For instance, their lesson ideas include dissecting language conventions of conspiracy theories and misinformation and analyzing the language moves of politicians.

Final chapters of the book are devoted to fostering counter narratives aimed at bringing about social change. They lead a profound discussion on linguistic and cultural appropriation in the digital world, contemplating the complexities and nuances of these issues. Showcased are various projects which employ language, rhetoric, and technology to drive social action and social change. This provides avenues to challenge dominant narratives and empower students to harness the transformative potential of digital realms. The examples involve a cyclical process guided by the National Writing Project (n.d.): identifying pertinent issues, understanding their underlying causes, brainstorming actionable solutions, implementing these actions, and reflecting upon their impact. They encompass a wide range of topics such as analyzing celebrities' social media usage to determine how they convey intentions, debunking misinformation, and designing multimodal campaigns to shift public perceptions. Included are initially structured tasks, driven by teachers, to more student-led initiatives, allowing students to identify and address social issues they recognize personally.

Throughout the book, the authors underline instances where digital artifacts can perpetuate linguistic or cultural appropriation. For instance, they discuss the phenomenon of "digital blackface", exemplified by exaggerated depiction of people of color in reaction GIFs (p. 74). The final chapter

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delves into the complexities of addressing linguistic and cultural appropriation within digital spaces, aiming to guide students in critically examining and evaluating whether certain practices reflect appreciation or appropriation. These discussions are integral to a broader exploration of identity, representation, and marginalized communities, constituting a challenging conversation. To cultivate critical analysis among students regarding digital artifacts like memes or remixed texts, the authors introduce the "Framework for Discussion" (p. 114). This framework, based on Tran (2016), can guide tough conversations and foster classroom discussions on these complex issues. The authors conclude that it is crucial for individuals to not only scrutinize the practices of others but also question their own practices to truly achieve social justice.

Conclusion

This book presents a wide range of pedagogical practices for English language arts teachers seeking to incorporate critical digital literacy into their classrooms. The most notable strength of this book lies in concrete and practical ideas that can be easily transferred to classrooms. Its exploration of recent, authentic societal issues, exemplified by events such as the murder of George Floyd, makes the learning experience more relevant for students. It also allows students to apply critical digital literacy to analyze, understand, and respond to real-life situations and helps teachers to prepare for teaching complex and challenging topics. Furthermore, the book integrates lesson plan ideas, spanning from individual grammatical concepts to comprehensive project-based approaches, to empower students to incrementally develop their digital reading and writing skills. While critical digital literacy practices have often been viewed separately from content instruction, this book effectively demonstrates their integration within language teaching. Additionally, it provides strategies for safeguarding students' online identities and privacy while leveraging social media as an educational tool by suggesting approaches like creating classroom Facebook pages or Instagram handles for student engagement.

One aspect that could enhance the book is the inclusion of the authors' insights from their real classroom experiences, given that the suggested classroom activities were implemented in secondary ELA classrooms. Incorporating details about students' reactions, conflicts arising from diverse viewpoints, and the challenges encountered while facilitating discussions would enrich the practical application of the provided lesson plan as well as equip educators with insights to navigate similar situations in their own classrooms. While the book predominantly addresses social issues within the context of the United States, adding global concerns would extend its relevance to a broader audience.
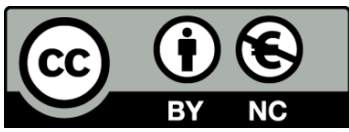
I highly recommend this book to individuals in language education, including researchers, preservice and inservice ELA teachers, teacher educators, as well as curriculum and textbook developers. Moreover, educators in the field of English as a Foreign Language or a Second Language will find valuable insights for engaging discussions on how language teaching can be situated within new and wider literacy practices.

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Author

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