Multiple and Converging Literacies: A Review of *Learning the Virtual Life*, edited by Peter Trifonas.

Adam Heidebrink-Bruno <adam_dot_heidebrink_at_gmail_dot_com>, Independent scholar

Abstract

A review of *Learning the Virtual Life: Public Pedagogy in a Digital World* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2012), edited by Peter Trifonas. This review provides a detailed summary of the subjects explored in Trifonas's collection of articles on digital pedagogy and their implications on learning in an information society. Its aim is to provide researchers and interested parties with a clear account of each chapter's argument in itself and in relation to the other voices speaking on related subjects both within and beyond the collection reviewed here. While this review's primary goal is to remain objective, serving as a guide to busy scholars unfamiliar with Trifonas's text, it also argues for the value of this collection while remaining critical of its limitations as an anthology.

Literacy is becoming an increasingly contested term. Our ability to navigate or even define literacy in the 21st century is subject to a variety of influences, both digital and analog. In defining what digital literacy is, one subscribes to a set of socio-political and, often, epistemological truths. *Learning the Virtual Life: Public Pedagogy in a Digital World* introduces its readers to a diverse collection of perspectives regarding literacy in the digital age. [1]

As this text is comprised of a collection of essays, each chapter contends with the others for its message to permeate and strives to overcome the noise of the structure. While common themes emerge from the text as a whole, each chapter explores a unique perspective regarding virtual life. The digital culture is one of massive disorientation, with information delivered at frighteningly fast speeds. Trifonas recreates this atmosphere by sampling a diverse range of voices and philosophies from an international body of public pedagogues. To best provide the public with a feel for this text, I provide a survey of individual, chronological chapter summaries below and conclude with some general observations on the entire selection. As the reader will quickly realize, *Learning the Virtual Life* serves as a microcosm of the virtual life itself: dense with information and divergent perspectives, and thus resulting in a ubiquitous quality that's a little hard to disentangle. [2]

The first chapter of the book, written by Peta Mitchell, explores the tensions arising from a digital literacy emerging from a written, scriptural tradition of the academy. Due to this disparity, the author argues that "a relative lack of critical self-awareness in [sic] research and teaching practices" exists [Trifonas 2012, 2]. Mitchell situates his argument within the framework of Michel de Certeau's "scriptural economy," where written discourse is the wealth produced by the institution [de Certeau 1984]. Reinforced over time, the scriptural economy "contributed to the prestige of print publications," though many scholars appear to overlook how digital literacy may problematize this traditional notion of prestige [Trifonas 2012, 5]. While many scholars point out how emerging technologies, open access, and digital publication *could* displace the scriptural economy, none of these scholars "break the circuit of the scriptural economy" themselves [Trifonas 2012, 7]. However, Mitchell pushes beyond the scriptural/digital dichotomy to ask "what, then, might a critical approach to digital literacy in the University look like?" [Trifonas 2012, 9]. The new medium could inspire a critical reflection on the scriptural economy as a discursive formation rather than normative. Further, Mitchell observes, digital writing "disrupts the solitude and interiority of the essay . . . and foregrounds communities of writing through communal writing" [Trifonas 2012, 10]. While these evolving spatial politics are not essentially democratic or liberatory, they do hold the potential to expose and subvert traditional academic literacy; the key is to step back from the established [3]

economy and think critically.

In the second chapter, "New Epistemologies," the authors follow a Post-industrial strain of thought, expanding on Jean-François Lyotard's suggestion that knowledge has lost its "use value" in return for "exchange value." Like the previous chapter, Jenson and Castell agree that these new media conditions could disrupt the authority of the written form, and they explore this idea regarding representations of knowledge and the self in various digital environments. Pulling from pop culture and contemporary news examples, such as Tila Tequila's MySpace success and a personal account of the Virginia Tech shootings, the authors define a wholly post-modern conception of knowledge: knowing as "a kind of obsessive account keeping," or digital curation [Trifonas 2012, 19]. The digitally represented "self," however, is one of constant flux, managed not only personally, but interpersonally, through online networks, throwing previous notions of public/private boundaries into disarray. In contrast, Second Life offers a digital environment where one has significantly more autonomy in creating identity, unbound from the socioeconomic realities of the analog world. Jenson and Castell then turn their focus to Wikipedia, and the "legitimation crisis" it brings forward, where "the epistemic basis of its claims to knowledge is seen as unstable, unreliable . . . [and] radically 'open'" [Trifonas 2012, 24]. The legitimation game played and reinforced by the academy is deeply affected by such an epistemological shift. Readers and non-experts are called to the domain of the producers and experts, which calls, as the authors suggest, "for a corresponding shift in post-literate pedagogy" that views production "as a necessary and enduring condition of knowledge-transmission" [Trifonas 2012, 25]. Wikipedia operates in a radically democratized space, which not only expects, but also requires crowd participation to survive. Thus, Wikipedia remediates epistemic foundations: knowledge, like one's digital self, is in constant flux, suggesting a deeply constructivist perspective. Ultimately, the epistemology outlined here encourages a pedagogical shift from students as consumers to students as producers.

Next, Michael Hoechsmann reminds the often idealistic early-adaptor readers that "the majority of young people spend their online time creating and sharing identity texts in highly constrained, commercial environments" [Trifonas 2012, 32]. In contrast to the first two essays, this chapter takes a decidedly less optimistic view of the digital landscape, suggesting that the primary online activity of today's youth is entertainment-centered, involving "Consciousness, Communication, Community, and Consumption" — in short, behaviors that youth have been performing for a long time, regardless of technology [Trifonas 2012, 32]. Using Richard Lanham's text *Economics of Attention* [Lanham 2006], Hoechsmann takes a closer look at the cultural production of the youth population. He views the relationship between adults and youth as a "vicious cycle," where the adults misinterpret youth intentions and youths sense indifference and inattention from the adults [Trifonas 2012, 33]. Participatory digital spaces, such as Facebook, act as a stage where users must perform their identity in order to exist. These same spaces serve as communication platforms and communities where youth hang out, develop networks, and strengthen and coordinate offline relations. Yet the sites on which youth engage are not neutral environments; they are "virtually unregulated domains run by private enterprise," led by commercial intentions [Trifonas 2012, 40]. The author concludes that "despite the rhetoric of change" surrounding new media practices, much remains the same.

Richard Kahn follows with the challenge of reconstructing the term *technoliteracies* from a highly contested domain of competing definitions, aiming for an understanding that is "at once oppositional, radically democratic, and committed to sustainability" [Trifonas 2012, 45]. In accordance with John Dewey [Dewey 1916], Kahn recognizes technology as inherently political and historical, though he doesn't share Dewey's techno-optimism, noting the various sorts of oppression that could arise from emerging technologies. For this discussion, Kahn turns to Ivan Illich (Illich 1973), who emphasizes that the tools of technology hold within them the rules and codes of the designer, as unequal as they might be. Next, Kahn focuses on defining literacy, not as "a singular set of abilities but [as] multiple" [Trifonas 2012, 47], again reminding the reader that such a concept is closely tied to issues of power. The author then situates the increasing importance of technological literacy historically, particularly its emerging in the late 1960s and becoming a popular cultural issue by 1983 with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* [NCEE 1983]; technoliteracy could no longer be ignored. By the turn of the millennium, technoliteracy was seen as a crucial skill, though still largely a "site of struggle [and] a contested terrain used by the left, right, and center of different nations to promote their own interests" [Trifonas 2012, 52]. Kahn goes on to say that "those interested in social and ecological justice should look to define and institute their own oppositional forms" of technoliteracy [Trifonas 2012, 52]. The political battleground is changing and educators

and activities are needed to ensure that the interests of the oppressed are being discussed. A critical sense of all literacies, not just technoliteracy, must be developed. In a world where media culture serves as a "form of pedagogy," it is crucial that individuals are aware of the behaviors and roles being suggested by the media [Trifonas 2012, 53]. Inoculation is not enough, Kahn argues. Rather, students must be able to "read, analyze, and decode media texts" and further "interrogate the political economy, cultural bias, and environmental effects of computer-related technologies" [Trifonas 2012, 53–54]. Technoliteracy, as defined by this article, "must teach people to become more ethical producers," [Trifonas 2012, 56]. Such producers, then, can aid in redesigning technology towards human needs, rather than commercial ends.

Today's information ecology comprises "a system of people, practices, values, and technology in a certain environment" [Trifonas 2012, 63]. This ecology, the authors of the "Learning Environment and Digital Literacy" chapter argue, do not only replace similar analog practices, but rather "alter the basic foundations of our existing conceptions of own cultural basis and value, attitudes and activities" [Trifonas 2012, 63]. The authors call for a new curriculum, advocating for more learning experiences that promote digital competence. Like the previous chapter, these authors account for the fluid and contested nature of the term *digital literacy*. The authors then observe that while the notion of the "digital divide" originally implied access issues, today, it is more likely a matter of "*quality of use*that creates the gap," and continues to be a global problem [Trifonas 2012, 66]. Two Finnish digital literacy pedagogical practices are then defined as case studies. First, a project called *Towards Future Literacy Pedagogies* (ToLP) explored pedagogies "that prepare young people for the literacy challenges of a globalized, networked and culturally diverse world" with the ultimate goal of developing curriculum and teaching practices [Trifonas 2012, 69]. The second project, *Fostering ICT Usages in Pedagogical Practices* (FICTUP), "aimed at transforming expert teachers' pedagogical practices with technology" [Trifonas 2012, 71]. Through these detailed accounts of technology-based initiatives, the authors conclude that the focus should remain on pedagogical practices rather than technology. While technology can often be a useful educational tool, it must be implemented with due pedagogical consideration.

Stuart Poyntz's chapter, "What Haunts the Narcissus-Narcosis," proves to be one of the more challenging reads. The author shifts the reader's focus from definitions of literacy to mediation, a process the author views as an active one that alters the meaning of the message being mediated, and applies a heavy dose of Derrida and McLuhan. Through Derrida, then, the author reminds the reader that critical agency doesn't depend on authority, but rather "it is a function of the instability inherent in the production of meaning itself" [Trifonas 2012, 81]. This idea provides media educators new ways of introducing analysis to their students that are, at least in theory, independent of the educators' authoritative role. Within a McLuhan-inspired framework, the author traces "moments of crisis and opportunity" in media and offers them as possible locations for new media critique [Trifonas 2012, 94]. Ultimately, Poyntz invites these theorists' perspectives into his essay to identify ways in which media educators can benefit from critical theory, specifically of those stated above. While it certainly continues to be a challenge to teach critical agency without favoring the perspective of the teacher, the author aims to provide "ways of putting levels of analysis in productive tension" [Trifonas 2012, 95].

While the next chapter, "Wikilearning as Radical Equality," is highly theoretical, it appears to be equally provocative and influential. In identifying the four antagonisms (which Slavoj Zizek argues Capitalism will not solve), authors Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén define a radical new form of learning to combat the antagonism of intellectual property. The authors argue that learning "in the already existing world of free resources, software and collaboration" brings the possibility to shift from an alienated education to a more just model [Trifonas 2012, 98]. "Wikilearning" imagines a self-organized group of learners assembling open access knowledge. The two authors have collaborated on pieces in the past on similar topics, and have co-authored a book on this very issue. In both this text and their work more widely, Suoranta and Vadén resist closed, top-down models of education and advocate for radical equality, beginning with a transformation of the student/teacher paradigm. Sites such as Wikipedia and Wikiversity offer a strong demonstration of "the power of collective learning in an ethical and very straightforward way" [Trifonas 2012, 104]. Highly knowledgeable of and informed by a pool of critical thinkers, such as Slavoj Zizek, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Rancière, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, these authors set their argument into a critical and convincing framework. Together, Suoranta and Vadén provide the reader with an alternative model of education, one that is voluntary, rather than compulsory, inclusive,

and self-directed. The goal of such an education isn't "unreflective certainty," as the traditional model promotes, but rather "reflective uncertainty," suggesting an epistemology of fluidity and transition. The implications of such a society are immense; as the authors not-so-humbly suggest, "the wikiworld is about changing the premises of living in the world" [Trifonas 2012, 112].

Beginning with a thorough survey of perspectives regarding the impacts of technology of youth culture, pedagogy, and education, John Potter acknowledges larger trends in youth technology engagement. Specifically, "Learner Voice and Lived Culture" explores the pedagogical implications in response to two projects. The first project focuses on hearing the learner voice through audio and video production. Potter finds that "the desire to engage with the 'learner voice' approach was representative of a wider need to see experience of popular culture reflected and acknowledged within pedagogy" [Trifonas 2012, 117]. In reviewing the data from the first project, there appears to be a large disparity between how students are engaging with technology inside and outside of school, revealing a youth-led demand for more crossover between these two social environments. The second project, while still involving student-generated digital video production, shifts more towards authorship and identity. This project finds that "this new media literacy practice can be metaphorically conceived as a form of 'curatorship' in the organisation of digital media assets . . . which might be profitably and usefully explored in pedagogical reforms" [Trifonas 2012, 117]. Such mixing and remixing of the widely available symbols of cultural capital online allows student curatorship to render previously invisible processes visible, especially regarding student voice and identity. Both studies offer examples of Gee's *affinity spaces*, as Potter observes these students behaving "as new media practitioners," conflating a wide variety of skills and literacies to produce a media asset [Trifonas 2012, 122]. Potter leaves the reader with two future implications. First, pedagogy needs to implement technology provisions which "fit better with the needs, values and experiences of young people" [Trifonas 2012, 126–7]. Secondly, the author stresses the importance of finding "rich sources of data through self-representational work with younger learners" [Trifonas 2012, 127]. In all, Potter's piece argues for increased media literacy practice and exposure across the curriculum.

In response to a line of research contending that open spaces such as Wikipedia are little more than amateurs spreading misinformation, John Willinsky argues quite to the contrary. In his case study, Willinsky examines Wikipedia as "a new site of knowledge, with a new level of public access to research and scholarship" [Trifonas 2012, 131]. By examining Wikipedia's interaction and interconnectivity with other open sites of knowledge, such as in this case the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP)*, the author discovers that such sites can contribute greatly to one another. In many cases, individuals who were encountering philosophy concepts on Wikipedia followed links through to the SEP, finding more specialized knowledge. Many Wikipedia articles are informed by the content freely available on the SEP and often provide references to many different SEP topics in one article. Willinsky draws from the conversations of Wikipedia editors as they discuss changes and potential changes to articles within the discussion tab on a variety of Wikipedia articles. Examining these conversations allows the reader to get a feeling for the depth of analysis and understanding across the Wikipedia community. The "educational quality of Wikipedia," Willinsky notes, comes largely from the "stance that its editors are taking on knowledge" [Trifonas 2012, 141]. There is a great rhetorical argument and epistemic implication in the ready appearance of the three process tabs at the top of each Wikipedia article: *editing, discussion, history*. These three elements are essential to learning, and as the title of this chapter suggests, Wikipedia, and open spaces like Wikipedia, provide a space for this new public literacy to emerge.

Returning to the idea of epistemology, the editor of this collection, Trifonas, and Robert Luke describe virtual living in terms of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* [Lyotard 1984]. Accordingly, knowledge, like the language in which it's bound, is temporal. "Representation," the authors note, "deforms, denatures, and supplements the originary eidetic structures of conceptual formations" [Trifonas 2012, 148]. With the help of global technology, knowledge is not necessarily tied to the circulation of capital; rather, social actors can exchange information freely, or at least nearly so. The implications of this shift in information exchange, then, engender an alternate epistemology, one that builds a framework for new forms of education and educational spaces. The authors advocate here for a critical information literacy that not only incorporates the technical skills necessary to navigate digital spaces, but also understands and participates in the culture of the new environments. Furthermore, the authors emphasize access and accessibility as core components of critical information literacy, thus further advocating for the vast array of individuals who engage in

the same digital spaces. Since the digital culture is one of participation, to overlook access issues would detract greatly from this central idea. The authors call for transparency in technology as it evolves and becomes embedded into existing cultural institutions, and thereby highlighting the underlying changes in methodology and its cultural implications. Finally, the authors arrive at "telepistemology," or the remote and virtual nature of today's knowledge communities. It is here, in these poorly defined and rapidly changing virtual environments, that ideas are formed, shared, and shaped again, thus fostering a global learning network.

Chapter eleven provides a critical analysis of *Grand Theft Auto IV* and, more specifically, its expansion pack, *The Ballad of Gay Tony*. This video game offers a "series of homosocial bonding within the context of otherwise traditional forms of masculinity" [Trifonas 2012, 161]. While the main character frequently displays traditional hegemonic masculine traits, including violence and objectification of women, the game itself progresses a narrative plot based around defending an openly gay character, creating a rather complex dynamic. Such a game provides a safe place for individuals to explore and negotiate homosocial bonding. Amidst the milieu of homophobic and sexist commentary and suggestive humor coded into this game's landscape, there appear to be spaces of covert intimacy that problematize the more explicit environmental prejudices. Many relationships, especially in contrast to earlier releases of GTA, are between men, and are often analogous to dating. The player is rewarded for behaving in ways that promote homosocial bonding. It is through the game's humor that a balance is struck between overtly homophobic language and common homosocial behavior, as characters exchange ironic, and often crude, observations about each other's hyper-masculine qualities. Such blatant mockery pushes these traits to the foreground, causing the players to reflect on the idea, and hopefully, assess their own language usage in a world also saturated by homophobic thoughts and behaviors. As modern technology is often cited as a tool that disembodies our identities, Marc Oullette renews frequently overlooked concerns of gender in this discussion of virtual life, providing a much-needed assessment of how digital environments can and do reflect our views on contemporary issues.

Themistoklis Aravossitas provides a familial account of coming to teach with technology in the subsequent chapter. After seeing the many positive encounters his children were having with technology in school, Aravossitas developed a blog concept to explore and demonstrate the identity and activities of his school [Trifonas 2012, 181]. Situating his experiences among the history of blogging and the evolution of Web 2.0 software, the author describes many uses of this technology, noting the transformative power this may have on our notion of literacy. Blogging offers both new ways to communicate as well as new ways to transmit those messages [Trifonas 2012, 185]. Thus, the idea of literacy is intricately linked to that of technology, which may help engender new opportunities and demands throughout the education system. Roles of teachers and students must be renegotiated in terms of the new communities that are made available through emergent technologies. Such expectations can only be met, the author argues, if educators take a transformative approach to pedagogy — if they are willing to construct appropriate curricular requirements, while emphasizing critical literacy. Unlike many of the other authors in this text, Aravossitas provides an explicit application of his ideas in terms of classroom use, including some preliminary results of this implementation. This feature may prove beneficial to the reader who is new to or nervous about technological endeavors in education.

The final chapter turns from writing in an online space to a more immersive experience: digital gaming. While Peter Trifonas does well to problematize and contextualize the debates on the virtual world, he ultimately states that "digital technologies have transformed cultural perceptions of learning and what it means to be literate," rooting this cultural phenomenon deeply within the realm of technology [Trifonas 2012, 199]. With an air of skepticism, Trifonas questions the language commonly used to describe Web 2.0 behaviors such as *interactivity* and *immersive*, each elusive and problematic in their own ways. Approaching the concept of digital games, then, the author proposes a variety of questions spanning from inquiries into historical comparisons to contemporary cultural appreciation. One major shift is a growing tendency to use games outside the entertainment field to immerse "players" into a highly realistic virtual site of army training, commerce, education, or industry, among others [Trifonas 2012, 202]. Virtual worlds can promote a wide variety of social exchanges and even "construct new types of shared cultural participation and communality" [Trifonas 2012, 204]. These new forms of cultural participation, when considered in light of pedagogical concerns, have great potential to transform the learning environments of the future.

These seventeen contributors offer a diverse mix of perspectives on digital learning topics. It remains difficult, even after

reading the text, to say anything conclusive about this growing field. And perhaps that's the point. That the education technology field is emerging quickly with hopeful implications is certain; as this text suggests, it is doing so most likely with more advocates than critics. Nevertheless, while many points of connection appear between the chapters, what really stands out is how highly contested the digital terrain remains. Trifonas has selected voices for this text that challenge one another, demanding of the reader the critical skills so thoroughly advocated for throughout the collection. To distill the ideas of these several authors into a single narrative would be contrary to its ideology and internal logic. Like the digital realm itself, *Learning the Virtual Life* offers multiple answers, complete with contradictions and competing ideologies.

As you take the journey through the multiplicity of these pages, one reader may sense the underlying anarchist tendencies of Illich permeating through, where another reader gathers a sense of technological determinism, or in contrast, the sheer possibility of technology in the classroom. The experience of reading *Learning the Virtual Life* will largely depend on the reader's (de)construction of each chapter/perspective. Yet, this diversity in content is not met by the same diversity in form. Many of the chapters are packed with critical voices that may prove challenging to newcomers in the field, while offering little in terms of application. The task of utilizing these frameworks remains within the hands of the readers, to interpret and implement the ideas of these digitally-minded thinkers, however they see fit.

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