CHAPTER 9

Places and Spaces for Multimodal Writing in ‘One-to-One’ Computing

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1 Introduction

From the perspective of sociocultural approaches to writing and writing pedagogy, one general dilemma about text creation in school has been that no matter how much teachers try to contextualise writing assignments and orient them toward ‘real life’ situations, students tend to write ‘school texts’ in which the teacher remains as the main target reader. In other words, the student texts remain oriented toward the communicative situation within the school, even though the pedagogical ambitions may have been quite the opposite. One way of increasing the interchange of texts between schools and other parts of society and private life is to use technology, potentially allowing for more direct access to a broad variety of communicative practices and resources for text creation. This is also one of the reasons why much of the research within a New Literacy Studies framework has put technology at the core.

This chapter contributes to the field of New Literacy Studies (cf. Barton, 2007; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006) by focussing on writing and multimodal semiotic actions in the context of ‘one-to-one’ computing in two suburban secondary schools. ‘One-to-one’ computing basically implies that schools provide learners with individual laptops or tablets that they carry with them between places inside and outside the school. The laptops are used in learning activities across school subjects, partially replacing pens and pencils, paper and traditional textbooks with digital and web-based resources.

There are a number of pedagogical, social and technical challenges with ‘one-to-one’ computing in schools (cf. Bebell & O’Dwyer, 2010), but it must be recognised that individual laptops come with obvious learning potential. For

instance, the use of portable laptops could extend the sites of learning and text creation to physical places beyond the classroom, but also connect places, such as the school corridor, the school cafeteria, and private homes. Such extensions and connections are certainly possible to achieve by moving books, pens and paper between places, but portable laptops also have a potential to give direct access to an almost indefinite number of virtual spaces which both require and construe knowledge and understanding of writing practices and resources for semiotic action and multimodal meaning making.

However, a quite complex picture arises when such descriptions and interpretations of the potentials of ‘one-to-one’ computing are matched with actual semiotic practices in places like classrooms, corridors, kitchens and living rooms, which was done in the Swedish research project *Spaces and places for literacy and learning: ‘One-to-one’ computing in two Swedish secondary schools*. A quote from a field note from the project illustrates what can happen after a year with the ‘one-to-one’ laptops.

[Researcher] They don’t use it [the laptop] much. They can hardly find the energy to bring it to class anymore. It remains in the locker.
[Participant] We use it very, very rarely now, says Soraya. Hardly at all.
[Researcher] What do you do when you use it?
[Girl in the class] Ahm, some vocabularies, maybe write something (...).
(Field notes from 24 September 2013; this and the following field notes are translated into English from the Swedish original.)

Judging from this, the potential of ‘one-to-one’ computing remains at the level of potential in this case. This is by no means the whole story, which will be shown in the chapter, but the quote is quite significant for how Soraya, one of the five participants in the research project, speaks of her laptop at the end of the extensive field study performed within the project.

Samanya is another participant from a different secondary school. The role of the ‘one-to-one’ laptop in Samanya’s life is described quite differently:

Samanya estimates that she uses the ‘one-to-one’ laptop for computer activities at home for approximately 30 hours a week and between 10 and 15 in school. That adds up to a great amount of time that she spends with the computer. What else is there to do? She finds it difficult to imagine a life without the computer. She hardly remembers how school was before the computer made its entrance. It is kind of taken for granted now. (Field notes from 18 February 2013)