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## Review of Creating Digital Literacy Spaces for Multilingual Writers

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**Bloch, J. (2021). *Creating digital literacy spaces for multilingual writers*, Multilingual Matters, pp.286, £25, 978-1-80041-078-7**

On the back of one of the biggest changes to hit pedagogy in recent memory, there is arguably a need for teachers to take a step back and take a critical view of the move to digital learning and how online teaching is conceptualised. In his book, *Creating Digital Literacy Spaces for Multilingual Writers*, Joel Bloch manages to move beyond what the title suggests, constructing a pedagogical context through which one can integrate digital spaces and digital thinking into contemporary practice. The book argues for “the value of digital literacy in the multilingual writing classroom” (back cover) and evaluates developments in technology, while focusing on the role of the teacher in its design and implementation. The book’s relevance to current pedagogical practice is hard to argue against as it claims and delivers in helping “teachers meet the challenges created by rapidly shifting technology” (back cover). However, the book goes deeper than practical online teaching methodologies. It positions technology and digital spaces as part of a wider social context, considering factors of social justice and the transferable affordances of technology to a wider definition of teaching.

Bloch seems to frame digital pedagogy as a method that enables students to reach their academic and personal potential by providing opportunities for development that are unavailable outside the digital space. In this regard, it stands on the shoulders of conceptualisations of technology that focus on the innovative possibilities it presents, such as allowing access to content previously impossible and introducing instant connectivity as part of learning (Healey, 2016). Due to these concepts that are explored within this book, it is arguably more relevant in contemporary practice than it has ever been and starts a meaningful and important discussion on how digital spaces can be used effectively. However, there are aspects of the book that seem to contradict the overall theme, by positioning multilingual writers within a deficit model in regard to online publishing spaces.

Perhaps the most striking thread presented is the concept that technology and digital spaces hold the possibility to rethink traditional concepts of teaching. Bloch mentions many times that the teacher is no longer reasonably defined as the “sage on the stage” (p. 91) wherein students are considered passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, the book advocates for a more active interaction between student and teacher, made possible in part because of the expertise students bring to the classroom in terms of technological knowledge. This repositioning of the teacher-student relationship and advocacy for student agency, although not new (e.g., Vaughn, 2020), serves to position technology as a crucial part of this shift, an argument I find particularly influential in light of recent teaching transitions.

The book opens with a chapter that lays out the context of digital literacy spaces, including where they lie in relation to traditional conceptions of literacy and pedagogical possibilities if using technology. This is followed with an additional six chapters, each talking about a different category of digital literacy space. Blogging is the first part of the core of the book within which Bloch considers how blogging can and is being used to bring student voices into the forefront of learning. This chapter talks effectively about both the overall importance of “bringing students’ voices into the public sphere” (p. 48), as well as finer practical details on how blogging

can achieve this, including: expressing opinions; developing a sense of authorship; flexibility to address different audiences; generating well-developed ideas; and debating the rules around textual borrowing and usage.

Bloch goes on to discuss the role of multimodality in literacy spaces, continuing the thread of linking technology to widening the constraints of a classroom and how it is defined. Multimodal digital literacy spaces are positioned here as a way to develop multilingual writers' authorial voice, building on the context of blogging in the literacy sphere, which Bloch takes further in the chapters on publishing. This is followed with a chapter dedicated to the role of MOOCs, which are positioned similarly to blogging and multimodality as being used to "break down the artificial divide between inside and outside the classroom" (p. 90). Here Bloch really brings to the fore the idea of teaching shifting focus to decentralise the role of the teacher, bringing students to a point of autonomy over their own learning.

What the chapter on MOOCs seems to focus on is the need to move with these shifting conceptions of teaching in order to keep teaching as active and dynamic. This is demonstrated by the rising popularity of MOOCs and, by learning from their successes, how these can be used in teaching. Interestingly, in a shift from discourse that positions MOOCs as passive, Bloch positions MOOCs as actively involving students in their own learning through putting the student in charge of when and how they engage with the materials. The argument of maintaining active and dynamic teaching is continued in a chapter dedicated to the value of flipped classrooms in rethinking pedagogical principles in multilingual classrooms. While Bloch acknowledges the limitations of flipped learning, in particular around student engagement, he positions the flipped classroom as valuable in terms of student agency and moving away from the 'sage on the stage' approach to teaching.

Two chapters are also dedicated to the publishing sphere, covering both its opportunities and limitations for multilingual students. Within this space, Bloch continues the thread of the value of publishing, including mention of the ability to learn the values of the communities of practice through publishing in a relevant academic space. Further chapters are dedicated to exploring multimodality as a digital space, MOOCs and the flipped classroom. The mix of overarching pedagogy and practical details makes these chapters a valuable tool for teaching academic writing in digital spaces.

Whilst this book effectively analyses the relationship between technology and the multilingual writing classroom, an aspect I feel it falls down in is the balancing of content. I found the chapter on blogging particularly inspiring with a strong practical focus. However, this was only 15 pages of content, while the two adjacent chapters related to publishing make up over a third of the book. I felt that although publishing is a crucial part of digital literacy spaces, the chapters contained an element of repetition within them, which made it more difficult to keep track of the overall points. Having said this, there is still great value in detailing how publishing can be used as a development space for multilingual writers.

An aspect I found myself disagreeing with was, particularly in the publishing chapters, the positioning of multilingual students within a deficit model. Large sections of the book talk about the danger of predatory journals on fledging multilingual writers. Although this is a matter of concern, at times it reads as overly negative in terms of what multilingual writers are capable of, particularly as it is suggested at times that multilingual writers may not be able to tell the difference between respectable and predatory journals. This deficit model I found myself unconvinced by, particularly bearing in mind the argument from Brannon et al. (2008) who suggests that "the deficit model does not allow students to participate as writers and language users – as readers and writers in the world" (p. 18). It is in this space particularly where I feel that the author is, to a small extent, working against the argument they put forward with the overall book by taking agency away from multilingual writers.

On balance, I still feel the overall book has a huge amount of value in contemporary practice. I would particularly recommend it to teachers of multilingual writers and ESL students. It provides useful tips and practices to use digital spaces as effective literacy tools, which I believe could be invaluable in a digital classroom. I also strongly believe it has huge value in current online

teaching practice as a way to question existing assumptions and practices with regard to online pedagogy. I find myself particularly convinced after reading this book that our social perceptions of what it is to teach online would benefit from change. It has led me to question whether transferring traditional ideas of teaching to an online platform is not only ineffective but may also be ignoring the potential for digital spaces to radically alter conceptions of teaching, learning and what it means to be an online teacher and student.

I feel this book also has value in prompting discussions within classes on life within and outside university, making it especially useful in EAP and foundation programmes for feeding into pedagogic practice. For more advanced linguistic students, I feel it could also prompt discussion on how students can use digital spaces to their advantage in terms of academic, linguistic and debating development. However, it is perhaps not a book to give to lower proficiency students, as the writing style is at times fairly complex and semantically challenging. I would recommend this particularly to teachers who feel fazed by the transition to online teaching. It may also have value in appreciating the affordances of digital spaces for both teachers and students. In short, Bloch's *Creating Digital Literacy Spaces for Multilingual Writers* prompts a discussion on digital learning that I feel is more relevant now than it has ever been, and perhaps a discussion that needs to be started.

## References

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