



Dr. John M. Richardson

Abstract

Over the years that I have taken grade 11 and 12 independent school students to the theatre, the 'radical reconfiguration and cultural re-articulation' wrought by the digital revolution has begun to call into question my goal of contributing positively to their identity formation through exposure to live plays. What effect can a play have on students sitting in the blue glow of their cellphone screens, or watching the drama unfold while cellphones pulse and glow in the darkness? Responding to calls to examine the ways in which young people's experience of online social networking is 'interwoven with life offline', this qualitative, multicase, interdisciplinary study of students from five Canadian independent schools draws on the fields of identity formation, audience studies and elite education to ask three questions. What role might live theatre play in young people's identity formation given the intensity of their digital lives, their position within networked publics, and their participation in convergence culture? What, if any, is the nature of the identity formation that occurs when teachers take students from elite schools to the theatre to see a live play at a time characterized by the pervasive use of digital media? How should educators and theatre professionals think about the place of live theatre in their programs given the context of students' digital media use both in and out of theatre? An analysis of focus group data, interview data, and student artworks, suggests that theatre can still play a role in youth identity formation and the creation of 'cultural capital' although online settings feature prominently in students' development and a new 'digital habitus' can inform the ways in which students respond to a play. Rapidly changing and hotly contested, emerging digital practices engender new forms of 'identity work', disrupting the theatre space and providing opportunities for educators to engage with students around questions of identity, status, and culture, while challenging theatre professionals to review their art-form in light of changing audiences. The paper confirms the work suggesting that youth identity is performed in on- and off-line fields in an ongoing series of presentations. These can exist entirely online, as in the presentation of identity that remains entirely bounded by a particular social media site. They can exist in powerful and sometimes incendiary collaboration, as in the student who adopts a controversial pose on social media one night and then must negotiate her school-mates the next morning. Or they can exist entirely off-line. This is effectively represented as the 'transmediated self' at work telling stories across multiple platforms.

Bio

Dr. John M. Richardson teaches senior English at a Canadian independent school while researching and writing on youth culture and digital practices. He has presented at the conferences for the Canadian Society for the Study for Education and the American Educational Research Association, and most recently he spoke in the UK at the University of Sunderland Centre for Media and Cultural Studies conference, 'Toy Story' at 20'. He has been published in UK journals such as Participations, and Learning, Media and

Technology, and has appeared as a youth culture commentator on CBC radio's flagship arts show, 'Q', and in The National Post. His research interests include adolescent responses to live theatre, youth digital culture, critical pedagogy, identity formation, and arts-based research.