Review Essay: Points of Viewing Children's Thinking: A Digital Ethnographer's Journey, 2(8)

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Abstract

This is a review of Ricki Goldman-Segall's *Points of Viewing Children's Thinking: A Digital Ethnographer's Journey*, New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998, 285 pages, $29.95 (U.S.-paper) ISBN 0-8058-2431-6 (cloth) ISBN 0-8058-2431-4 (paper).

This book has been written for people who are interested in how learners view and interpret their real-life and virtual life worlds as they work in partnerships within cultures mediated by technology. Goldman-Segall's view is that each person has become a researcher exploring known and unknown domains searching over and over again through layers of meanings. She not only offers readers descriptions of her encounters with children, but she also provides a website where we can actually see and hear the children speaking for themselves. This book invites the reader to explore video versions of stories from their point of viewing at the website in addition to reading the text of the publication, in order to add further layers of thinking as you read the book. For the reader to be able to download videos of the children speaking and then add their comments to the page adds a whole new dimension. New technologies should not simply augment pre-existing modes of communication but should complement them through multiple layers of interpretation. This is accomplished in the book through the use of new media which

enables possibilities for multiple "ways of telling" and multiple "ways of viewing" and interpreting the message.

Points of Viewing Children's Thinking is a skillfully written and an engaging account of the author's experiences and insights as an ethnographic researcher working in two distinctively different elementary schools. The author obviously enjoys the company and minds of the children she is working with and she pays particular attention to the subtleties of body language, voice inflection etc. Goldman-Segall deals with a complex array of topics including:

- the ways in which ethnographic accounts can be created as fully manipulable digital media which requires new theories of the possibility and plausibility for anthropologists to represent the lives, interactions and worlds of their subjects;
- the viability of constructionism as a learning theory;
- new roles for teachers and students in wired classrooms;
- the author's own learning experiences as a video-ethnographer; and,
- the pedagogical significance of apparent gender differences.

The book is divided into three parts:

1. storyreading
2. storymaking
3. storytelling.

In the introduction to Section 1 (Storyreading), the author explains why two overlapping bodies of knowledge-multimedia ethnography and the nature of children's thinking in two computer-rich school cultures, are integrated in the book. She states that putting them together forms a new entity, a kind of double helix that is strengthened by a close spiraling connection which enables each focus to move around the other and inform the other. The book contains linear descriptions that have emerged from video "data" collected from the two schools and made into digital video portraits, prior to her written interpretation of the portraits. Segments of these digital portraits can be seen at the [Points of Viewing Children's Thinking website](). The integration of the two overlapping bodies of knowledge provides an effective form of integration that enables the reader to become part of the double helix as you take a journey through the schools with your own multimedia ethnographic lenses. The linking of the stories about individual students with the video clips and the provision of Constellations, (an annotation and linking tool designed in Goldman-Segall's research lab) allow the reader to become actively engaged with reading, interpreting and reinterpreting the text.

In the introduction to Section 2 (Storymaking), Goldman explains some of the complications of story making for the video ethnographic researcher which include issues such as authorship, ownership, censorship and public access. She highlights the importance of repositioning oneself as a member of the community of enquiry as only one voice among many. She explains how the ethnographer, the video technology and the total environment within which the researcher and children interact are inseparable.

In Section 3 (Storytelling), the stories of girls and boys in computer-rich learning environments are presented. Goldman-Segall suggests that although we introduce innovative programmes in an attempt to reach our students, we do little to find out how they view their own thinking. These stories or portraits are based on an analysis of digitized moments on video that provide the opportunity for a discussion about how children, as epistemologists in their own right, make sense of their digital, home and school worlds.

Goldman-Segall's discussions of ethnography are closely tied to the specific ways in which video and other digital tools can mediate research processes. The author (and colleagues) has developed a tool for annotating specific segments of video data called Constellations. This web-based interface allows multiple viewers of the same segments of video to author and post their own interpretations. It also allows the users to create links between video segments. Goldman-Segall refers to the process of inviting various readings and interpretations of her data within a multimedia environment as "multilogueing" which stands in stark contrast to the more limited concept of "dialogue."

The two schools chosen for the study are Hennigan School (an elementary school) in Boston, Massachusetts and Bayside Middle School which is located in a semi-rural community on Vancouver Island, Canada. It is interesting to note that the author's identity seems much more congruent with Bayside Middle School, the well-endowed technology rich school that serves the predominantly white and comparatively affluent student population. Goldman-Segall describes the school as a bright colorful friendly place to learn and her research there was definitely more productive, stimulating and "successful" than was the Hennigan LOGO project. The author participated with Bayside students in the creation of a multimedia project, The Global Rainforest, a CD-ROM published by Oracle Corporation. This project explored a contentious environmental dispute over a rainforest area located near the school.

The Hennigan School project considered the role of LOGO as a mediational element in the learning of inner-city minority students who were deemed to be "at risk" students. In the eyes of the author, Hennigan School is a rather bleak environment where students were over-regulated and at a distance from their teachers. She describes herself, quite rightly, as an "outsider" at Hennigan. It seems that the author neglects to situate Papert's intervention project within the complex socio-historical causes for the plight of underachieving African-American minorities living and working in underfunded and neglected schools and communities. Instead, the author documents clearly the power and level of intellectual fervour from the research group at MIT (invasion) that descended upon this school with a dream that constructionist technologies would be able to address widespread social and educational problems by enabling students to be architects of their own knowledge. Very little is mentioned about the ways in which the researchers found out how best their project could meet the needs of the students from the people living and working within the school community.

Points of Viewing Children's Thinking ends with some brief discussions of several important issues including the author's analysis of gender differences and children's construction processes which she calls "attitudes" as opposed to "styles". Her view of gender as a more pliant and flexible structure than we once thought it to be, has some promise. Neither boys nor girls need to be limited to being either "soft" or "hard" programmers, and it is no longer helpful to

conceptualise girls as relational, soft learners needing warm fuzzy experiences. However, Goldman-Segall advocates that students be encouraged to engage in a process she calls "gender-flexing." It appears that the author is arguing that "gender" as a socio-cultural category is richer than its biological counterpart "sex," however she does not adequately explain what gender flexing actually refers to in practice. Neither is this consistent with her previously gendered discussions about maternal behaviour as a "natural" young woman's occupation.

This book makes a very significant contribution to discussions about the mediational role of modern technologies such as digital tools in the cultures of research and school communities. Ricki Goldman-Segall is one of the first researchers to use digital media as a tool for ethnographic research and communication of children's thinking. It works well in that it makes clear to others the richness and excitement of children's minds. This book will be of interest to researchers in the area of media and culture and educational researchers who are actively concerned in the ways in which new technologies can assist us to gain a clearer insight into the ways in which children think and learn.

Reviewer Note

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