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# Thinking about Feeling: Affect Across Literacies and Lives

**Jay L. Lemke**
**University of Michigan**

Our notions of *literacy* have grown significantly over recent decades. From the traditional meaning, limited to comprehension of 'serious' formal print texts, to a redress of the original bias towards reading alone and so to placing more emphasis on the ability to write such texts. Then from an almost exclusive focus on literary and academic literacy to a recognition that in some significant part we are shaped by all of what we read and write, much of which consists of more personal texts and more popular genres. Most recently, from an exclusive emphasis on print and verbal literacy to acknowledging the multi-semiotic, multimodal nature of the media that are important to our lives and our identities.

As we can see from the papers in this collection, our uses of literacy have become co-extensive with living our lives: across places and times, across media and the roles we play in diverse activities, across the different communities in which we participate. We are always making meaning, we are always drawing on or pushing off from the conventions and intertexts of public and private media, we are always mediating the meanings of our lives with semiotic objects, durable or transient, that are or behave in many respects like texts.

How can we study this extended spectrum of literacies as a system of practices and strategies strung out along the trajectories of our days, weeks, and lives? I think we have so far come to agree that we have to study it *ethnographically* insofar as we need to know the contexts of use of literacy practices and how they link to one another across time and space. We also need to study it *discursively* and *semiotically* insofar as every literate practice deploys cultural resources which can be analyzed into systems of alternatives and contrasts, typical syntagms, and recognizable genres. I would now like to suggest a third dimension: we need to study the literacies of our lives *phenomenologically* and *experientially*, trying to understand how our use of media *feels* to us as creators and interpreters, as participants and as analysts.

Academic studies of literacy practices usually focus on the construction or construal of meaning alone, but it seems clear that the connections of identity to meaning, which are so central to our concerns, are significantly mediated by feelings. Whether we speak of *feeling, affect,* or *emotion*, such phenomena are constructed and experienced along with meanings across multiple timescales and multiple media, along the trajectories of our lives. I believe that meaning and feeling are inextricable. No meanings are made devoid of feeling; the experience of our feelings makes sense to us in terms of available meanings. Every literate practice is always also an affective experience, and how we feel about an event, meaning or action plays a critical role in co-determining our next action, the next meaning.

But our scholarly and intellectual traditions have for so long sought the complete disjunction of Reason and Emotion that it has become very difficult today to find the common ground and meeting points of their contemporary successors, Cognition and Affect, or in the terms I prefer, Meaning and Feeling. I would like to suggest here two small steps toward overcoming this difficulty. The first proposes that we reconceptualize feelings in ways that let us see them more nearly in the same terms we have come to see meaning-making processes over the last two decades, thus making them easier to integrate with more familiar semiotic modes of media analysis. The second recognizes that the media and messages we identify with (or dis-identify from), both as producers and as consumers, depend critically on *evaluations* that we make, both semiotically and affectively. Evaluative practices provide a key meeting point in the analysis of meaning-with-feeling.

**Ilinx in an Interactive Game**

For a few years now I have been fascinated with high-end multimedia digital (aka computer or video) games. Players of these games are doing very sophisticated literacy activities, integrating in real time textual, visual, and auditory information from a computer program (and often also from other players) which (and who) react in turn to our responses to their moves. A complex dynamic cycle is thus produced in which each next display of text, image, video, and sound depends critically on our response to the last one, and not simply in a turn-taking mode, but in a continuous interaction which simulates activity in normal life. This dynamics is organized on and across multiple timescales from fractions of a second (quick hand-eye reaction times are required in many cases) to episodes lasting a few to many minutes, to the whole story-arc of the game, which may take dozens or hundreds of hours to play through. In the course of these events, players may develop and evolve different identities, both as their in-game characters and as their player-selves, and they are certainly learning a lot. For excellent accounts and analyses, see Gee (2007).

But why do so many, especially school-age people play such games? Because they are *fun*. And what does *fun* mean? It can in fact mean dying-in-character; it can mean feeling panicked by threats and events paced beyond your capacity. It can be frightening and tiring. But it also packs in emotional rewards: for winning out after having failed on previous attempts, for developing supportive relationships with other players or game characters, for the sheer joy of running or flying in a beautiful new world. One of these rewards is the joy of *ilinx* (Caillois 1961), a category of emotional pleasure that comes from the sense of vertigo, as you might feel in a drop on a rollercoaster. Dependent in games on the phenomenon of telepresence, in which we feel physically present in the virtual world of a game with well-coordinated visual responses to our active input, *ilinx* appears in games mostly in the form of jumping and flying, or swooping around. As for example in the virtual realization of the imagined aerial soccer known as Quiditch in digital games based on the *Harry Potter* books and films.

In this case it is experientially clear that feelings matter to the meanings made in the game world. In particular, the joy of swooping plays a big part in how you play the game (i.e. the Quiditch game-within-a-game) -- as much so as your calculated sense of good moves and strategy. Far more generally, how we feel at the time we make a choice in an immersive game depends both

on how we feel (e.g. pressed for time, at leisure; frustrated, empowered) and how we want to feel (thrilled, dizzy, proud, victorious, noble, wicked) as well as on our rational calculations of strategic goals and means. Indeed the feeling-qualities of the goals and means themselves matter in a way that is experientially inextricable from their more narrowly rational, cognitive, or meaning-system functions and values.

What is also especially clear from analyzing game media experience is that this interdependence of meaning and feeling, rational calculus and affective loading, is greatly amplified over time as each feeling-dependent choice leads to the next program output and other-players' responses, then our own subsequent choices, and so on and on. Our trajectory through the space of possible game-plays (and more obviously through the virtual place-space within the gameworld) depends in the long run cumulatively more and more on the feelings we've had along the way as well as the meanings we've made.

You cannot analyze the trajectory over time in gameplay, not for where the player went, nor what s/he did, nor for how his/her in-game or as-player identity developed unless you look not simply at the meaning-affordances and meanings-made, but also at the feelings-imagined and feelings-experienced. Desire is both reasoned (these means to those ends) and felt. Choice is the outcome of evaluation, and evaluation is the construction of a meaning about a feeling.

**A Semantics of Feeling and Evaluation**

What I have said implies, so far as a research method is concerned, some sort of virtual ethnography of in-game activity, with player self-reports (real time can be difficult; retrospectively while viewing replays also presents issues) about meanings-made and feelings-experienced (and anticipated or imagined) across multiple timescales. But it also implies that we make use of a reasonably well-developed semantics and semiotics of possible feelings and evaluations and how they are expressed or cued verbally, visually, and acoustically.

The linguistic semantics of evaluations is thus far moderately well-developed (Lemke 1998) (Martin & White 2005); that for feelings, much less so. If we limit ourselves to evaluations of propositions, states of affairs, scenes or scenarios, then there are in fact semantically only about a half-dozen possible kinds of evaluation (Lemke 1998). While surprising at first sight, the basic linguistic facts have been known for a long time (Greenbaum 1969). We evaluate states of affairs for their: probability (including truth as a limiting case), usuality (ordinary or surprising), desirability (good or bad), normativity (appropriate or transgressive), significance (important or trivial), comprehensibility (mysterious or obvious), and seriousness (serious or humorous). The corresponding feelings are evident: anticipation, surprise, desire, virtuousness, importance, mysteriousness, and humor; along with their opposites, variants by degree, and subspecies. All evaluations and all feelings are also matters of degree, not categorical all-or-nothing meanings. All evaluations and all feelings are also bi-polar, with opposite extremes of positive (attraction) contrasting with their corresponding negative (repulsion) forms.

If we move beyond the evaluation of states of affairs to evaluations of people and things, the situation is more complex (see Martin & White 2005 on appraisals), but the conclusions seem to

remain valid. The act or process of evaluation is both a semiotic practice, usually a linguistic one, and also an affective process or experience. Language, or other signs, present our feelings and allow us to link them semantically to whatever else we can put into words (objects, situations, possibilities, ideas, facts and fancies). So, methodologically, a focus on evaluations as grounds of choices in action, and on the feelings tied to those evaluations, both experienced and imagined (or desired), seems essential.

**Reconceptualizing Feeling**

One reason we have not already had a strong focus on the role of feelings in the deployment of literate practices is that our intellectual traditions have made it extremely difficult to understand how to integrate an account of feelings with an account of meaning-making. According to our traditional view, feelings are internal, personal, subjective, psychological-physiological, and if we are critically honest about it: childish, feminine, dangerous, and unscientific. Feelings, it is said, are antithetical to Reason.

In the last two decades or so, most of us who consider ourselves analysts of sociocultural practices and meaning-making have adopted a substantially revised view of cognition. We now see cognition, or as I would rather say, meaning-making, as not entirely internal, but as a process that takes places in interaction with the environment, with people and things, signs and tools and artifacts. It is distributed; it normally occurs in rich complex settings even if we can also learn to do it in relative isolation by a kind of internalization of the more normal distributed process. We also do not see it as entirely endogenous, but rather as a deployment of resources provided to us socially by a community and described as a part of the culture of that community, both the resources and the norms and typical practices for using them. Meaning-making is social and cultural, even if it also involves each participant's body in any particular instance.

But while we have made these changes of conceptualization with regard to meaning as a process, we have not as yet done so with regard to feeling. Are feelings not also social, cultural, situated, and distributed? Do feelings not also arise in and through our interactions with the social and material environment? Are there not feelings that only arise when we are in interaction with other people? And which therefore arise in a system that goes beyond our singular selves? Is our personal repertoire of feelings truly a biological universal? Or is it not actually the case that while there are certainly phylogenetic antecedents for many emotions, the particular experienced forms they take, and most definitely the circumstances that elicit them and the norms of when they are appropriate, vary greatly across cultures and communities? Even more telling, anthropology informs us that there are named and familiar emotions in other cultures that have no correspondence in our own and are indeed difficult for us to imagine or grasp (Lutz 1988).

While we traditionally conceptualize cognition as an active process under our control (hence its ideologically masculine associations), feelings on the other hand are imagined to be merely experienced, passively, and not under our control (hence ideologically feminine). But is it so? Meaning-making can indeed occur by an active construction, but it is also quite frequently something that just happens. A thought occurs to us. An interpretation 'presents itself'. A meaning is simply obvious (or canonical, automatized). And more important for our argument

here, feeling can also be something that we *do*. We can close off or close down our feelings, and we can deliberately open ourselves up to a feeling, reactively perceiving some situation, some person, some phenomenon. We can deliberately tune in to something, actively, more intensely or subtly feeling it. This is not a practice that is taught or encouraged in our dominant culture, in large part because of the myth that feeling more acutely necessarily implies or risks being less rational in our interactions with the environment.

Not so of course in many other cultures, and in some traditions in the West. And more recently, in work such as that of Damasio and others, it has come to be seen that rational processes of choice, necessary to all reasoning-chains, need to be based on values, evaluations, and feelings. When those parts of the brain that supply feeling are damaged, then those that do rational sequential argumentation, even undamaged, no longer function properly and break down precisely at the points where choices must be made and branch-points passed in the reasoning process (Damasio 1994).

Far from inhibiting or distracting adaptive meaning-making, feelings support reasonings and make them possible. Intuitions ground our imagining new, rational possibilities and alternatives, which may later be argued without explicit reference to feelings and values (Poincare 2001). A better understanding of how feelings ground and co-constitute meaning-making, and so all literate, semiotic practice may well allow us to find ways in which the cultivation of more acute feeling will lead to better, more adaptive ways of making sense of the world and one another.

To do that, I believe, we need to examine more closely activities such as evaluations and do so with a revised view of feeling that sees it as more active, situated, distributed, socially constituted, and culturally specific.

We also need, I think, in moving away from the older tradition of a small number of core or biologically-based and therefore universal emotions (Darwin 1998, Tomkins 1995), to ask ourselves just how many named emotions, affects, or feelings there are? In our language(s) and in our cultures and communities. A sociocultural view of feeling also implies that there must be a history of feelings, that the repertoire must have changed over historical time. If we are going to get a better semantics of feelings, we can start with lexicography. Obviously we will need to look also at the grammar of feeling expressions, and we will need a more multi-semiotic model eventually that includes visual, musical, and other modalities. But we can begin with the repertoire of feeling-names accumulated over centuries in a language.

In my own explorations in this area so far, I have compiled a list of many dozens of distinct, named feelings in modern English. Some are traditionally considered ‘emotions’ and others are not. Some of these many others might be termed ‘affects’, and some are clearly very physiological in nature. I am not going to try to present a full taxonomy here, but just consider a few points. If we begin with the linguistic form: “I feel …” and supply a descriptor term for a way we might be feeling, we could have:

I feel sleepy, hungry, nauseous, energized, …
I feel angry, afraid, happy, disgusted, jealous, …
I feel noble, expectant, hesitant, proud, mystified, lonely, …

The first group are clearly feelings, but not usually recognized as emotions because they seem too strictly physiological. I would class them as 'bodily feelings'. The second group are the traditional emotions, and one feature they share is that they all presume (except maybe *happy*) an external trigger or object we are angry at, afraid of, etc. The last (and largest as it turns out) group tend to be evaluations of the self or self-of-the-moment, and might be termed simply 'affects'. All are varieties of feelings.

I want to close this section with one more important observation. The semantics or lexicography of named feelings offers us a practical way to bridge between the analysis of feelings and that of evaluations and meaning-making more generally. But it is not by any means to be taken as exhaustive of the range of actual feeling-states, even culturally common feeling-states, as actually experienced by people in some time and place, or as representable in any medium.

Viewing two exhibitions of portraiture recently, one photographic (Richard Avedon) and one in the medium of etchings (Rembrandt), I was immediately struck by how difficult it can be to name what the person portrayed is feeling. It is very clear that in many of these works there is a strong and definite feeling portrayed. But no words come to mind to name or easily describe it. Some sense of empathy may allow us to gain a nonverbal intuition of the feeling, but clearly many feeling states, even those which are salient to a visual artist and which trigger a sense of recognition in viewers, fall outside the verbal repertoire which is often, I think, mistaken for an adequate accounting of feelings or emotions.

**Literacy, Identity, Traversal**

In this argument I am not concerned simply with how we conceptualize feelings or with their semantics. I am concerned with how feelings interact with meanings as we live our lives across places and times, being and becoming the persons we are moment to moment and across longer timescales.

As we have expanded our view of literacy, we have also been expanding our concept of *identity*. From a near-synonym of *personality*, to an index of position within the structure of social subgroupings, to a claimed sense of self, to a performed practice that affiliates us to some people, things, ideas around us and disaffiliates us from others. Our identity-in-the moment need not coherently cumulate into a single longer-term identity. Identities can be multiplex, strategic, logically inconsistent or incommensurable, and call for quite different conceptualizations when considered at different timescales (Lemke 2008).

Some aspects of our identities are constantly changing, developing, while others may persist more stably over time. One key factor influencing identity development and identity performance is our (more fluid or more stable) identifications with people, groups, symbols, media, and objects. Identity performances, whether by display or by enacting an identification, are also felt. They critically involve evaluations, and those evaluations may occur on multiple dimensions, so that, for example, we may feel a sense of belonging even to a group we are not altogether happy with, or we may find ourselves surprised how much we like something we

don't morally approve of. We can identify strongly with something at the same time we hate it or fear it. The excluded middle of Reason's logic does not apply in the domain of feelings and feeling-based evaluations, in part because we can feel in many different ways about the same thing. Indeed it is this richness and contradictoriness or perversity of actual identifications that artists and literary writers find absent in sociological accounts of our humanity.

A core concern many of us have is with tracking how our engagement with media through literate practices contributes to the development of our identities, and how our identity habits and performances influence this engagement. We may see literacy practices as tools for the development and display of identities. We may wonder how changes in media affordances allow us to make new kinds of identifications (e.g. with distributed, virtual communities; with remote individual others; with imaginary places, times, and characters). These concerns tend to make us especially aware that we live our lives across time and place, across situations, settings, and activities, and we notice how media and communication provide some of the means by which we construct continuities (and discontinuities) of meaning and self along our traversals.

I use the term *traversal* (Lemke 2002) specifically for a trajectory through space and time, real or virtual or both, that crosses boundaries of place, setting, activity, genre, etc. Given that we mean, feel, and act differently in different settings and situations, in different places with different people and possibilities, it is a genuine question of concern just how we construe continuities for ourselves and everything else across events and moments. I want to suggest that feelings are the glue that makes this possible. This may be something of an overstatement, in that our accounts of intertextuality already show us much about how we use meanings to construct such continuities and discontinuities. We can also clearly see that the persistence of material artifacts and landscapes plays an important role in enabling us to carry-over continuities of action from one event and time to another. Indeed this is a key element of many online gameworlds, where the arrangement of the world persists from one login to the next except insofar as someone else has made a change there, or the program clock has advanced the state of things, much as natural processes do in our ordinary experience.

But I want to suggest that how we feel about places (our homes, our personal offices, our familiar neighborhoods real and virtual) and the things and people persistently found in them, and how we feel about meaning relationships across texts, are fundamental to the specific kinds of continuities we make. What is important to us? What is salient? What matters? What is desirable? What is judged to be normal vs. novel? What possible relationships that we can imagine do we feel to be more probable or less so? What connections and continuities are allowed, required, or forbidden in our sense of the norms of our communities? In all these ways the feelings we have about and the evaluations we make of the possibilities for constructing continuities are fundamental to which of those possibilities we actually enact.

We do this in every moment, construing multiple continuities and discontinuities with immediately and more remotely past moments and events. We also project ahead and anticipate, imagine, and desire future events, whether in the next few seconds or the next several years. We develop habits in how we do so, and those habits may persist or change, but generally on longer timescales than the ones on which we make our immediate meaning-and-feeling connections and projections. Some of these habits we model on what others are doing around us, what we might

call a *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990) for making meaning-and-feeling continuities. As Bourdieu notes, such habitus tends to be common within social groups having similar life-chances and life-obstacles, similar social, economic, and political life-trajectories (Bourdieu 1984).

So, in research on new media literacies, social networking, and identity development, we may expect to find similar habits regarding ways of making meaning and experiencing feeling within particular age-groups and social class fractions, with variation by gender and by ethnic cultural background. But we may also find similarities and differences according to our experiences with different media, and our participation histories in various online communities and cultures.

**Feeling and Learning**

If I have not spoken here very explicitly about learning and education, it is because I see learning as an aspect of living, an aspect of development. We cannot *not* learn, because in every activity of life, every event of life, some elements will be carried forward and put into close relation with imagined or enacted activities a few moments, or even a few years, later. Everything that we do, everything that happens to us, potentially alters our later choices and actions. Which of those potential learnings actually do significantly change our future is again very much a function of how we feel about them, how we evaluate them for their desirability, probability, usuality, importance, normativity, comprehensibility, and seriousness.

That our feelings matter to learning, understood as the retroactively re-traceable influences on our present of constructed continuities from our past, is pretty obvious. Obvious to us, to students, to teachers, to parents. But ignored in educational policy, in curriculum, and in most official theories of learning and pedagogy. Good teachers know very well how feelings matter in the classroom, but are encouraged to consider this somehow illegitimate as part of the process of education. Like the mathematician or the scientist who states a proof or provides an experimental result with no reference made to the intuitions that led to success, no account of the trajectory of feelings and tacit evaluations along the way, educational systems simply recount learning outcomes with no honesty about the felt lives that did and did not lead to them.

There is something morally and humanly wrong about an educational system that refuses to take into account what students do or not do want to learn, what they enjoy and do not enjoy, what interests them and what does not, and above all how they feel about the process of learning and more generally about their lives in school. The exclusion of all consideration about how students feel allows a false legitimation of the claimed right of some to say what all should learn. It also works to constitute the fundamental contradiction of formal education: that students have a right to a compulsory education. And its practical corollary, that very little of what is taught in schools does in fact have any significant influence in most people's lives years later. Indeed we know perfectly well that most of what is taught, and is then misjudged to have been "learned" on some examination, is quite forgotten or wholly misremembered even a few months later.

The illusion of education that we maintain in our society also requires that formal schooling be wholly separated from the rest of students' lives and the rest of social activity. We imagine that we can cut the cord of continuity, ignore the traversals of learners' lives. The curriculum pays no

attention to what the students do in the hallways and on the street corners, what they do at home and with their friends, or even what they do in some other classroom an hour later. It cuts learning in school off from adult activity in every other aspect of social and community life. How can it not fail to be felt and judged irrelevant and pointless most of the time by most students? How can it not, simply, fail?

As a result, if you observe students' literacy activities outside school, you find them more varied, more sophisticated, and not surprisingly more specialized than what you observe in school. Students who will write two pages of boring prose for a school assignment will write twenty pages of heartfelt and desperately creative prose to post online in a fan-fiction community which shares their passion for some fictional universe. Students who are expected to do mindless calculations of context-free and interest-free problems with outdated calculating technologies in school, may show considerable insight in reasoning their way to the practical solution of a technological problem that matters in their own lives. School-based literacy practices are recognizably related to the practices of literate adult lives at some level of abstract similarity that can only be perceived by adults who know both and are trained in how to see the similarity.

Our failure to include feeling in our accounts of the nature of learning and living leads to a fundamental distortion and dysfunction in our institutional practices of education. As researchers we have a basic responsibility to show how feeling plays its part in literacy practices, identity development, and all meaning-making activity. And to do so with feeling!

**A coda on communication**

There is one other implication of this reintegration of affect into our views of meaning-making and into our own research practices that I want to briefly mention.

We regard it as a basic obligation of research practice to communicate our research findings, interpretations, and potential implications to our peers and to wider communities. But the genres of research, writing and publication that have evolved in the last century or so emphasize only that we do so with clarity and precision, with well-organized logical argumentation, with citation of data and sources, but not with feeling. The result is communication that is mostly boring and dull, affectively flat, and uncompelling to any but those few specialist colleagues with a real need to plough through our prose (my own included).

This is not simply a matter of talent at writing. We are very much locked in by the conventions of the genre, and very much let off the hook by the low expectations of our specialist readers. Many of us can write more engagingly, or do speak more passionately and personally in other settings, even about our research. Many more could certainly learn to do so, if it were felt that this is an essential part of being a good researcher.

Moreover, as a research community, we are finally recognizing that prose alone, whether placid or purple, simply cannot convey as effectively what audio recordings or videos, carefully edited, could enable us to say and our various communities to learn from. The emotional affordances of these rich media are more easily let loose, if also more difficult to control. Perhaps in response,

we have severely limited our use of them to simply illustrating key points in our data. We do not normally produce movies or multimedia expositions of our work. We do not normally put our own faces, as researchers and analysts, on the screen alongside, or in montage with, those we aim our cameras at. We do not usually point a camera at our processes of research themselves, thus eliding the "I" once again in this new medium as we traditionally did in the old one.

If feeling, affect, and emotion are essential to our accounts of how people live their lives, then are they not equally essential to how we present those accounts?

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