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Contemporary Literacies Beyond the Classroom: A Teacher Seeks Out Participatory Culture

On a typical school day, the alarm goes off on my cell phone, and after I hit “snooze” a few times, I check my Gmail (who knows what I expect to find at 5:45 in the morning). I might scroll through my Facebook feed or the *New York Times* headlines before breakfast. During my commute, I listen to an audio book through my smartphone, or shuffle between high- and lowbrow radio (NPR and Z100). Once I arrive to school, I say good morning to a few colleagues, sit down at a computer, log in, and check my school email. Perhaps I run off some last-minute copies. As my students enter the classroom for first period, I take attendance, power on my projector, and I’m ready to begin. By 7:30 a.m., I’ve already been exposed to dozens of voices, ideas, and platforms.

Our world demands proficiency in an ever-growing body of literacies. While we’ve traditionally thought of literacy as reading and writing, new theories of literacy move beyond print texts and skills to encompass the competencies required to participate fully in our culture. Accordingly, our jobs as English teachers have expanded.

Contemporary Literacy: Evolving Literacies

Literacy can no longer be understood as simply reading and writing. Contemporary literacies require us to participate in various discourses across contexts. The rapid growth and propagation of technology means that these literacies are developing faster than they can be named. New Literacies theorists Donald Leu, Charles Kinzer, Julie Coiro, et al. explain that as digital technologies develop, “new social practices of literacy will emerge, often within new discourse communities, and serve to redefine literacy and learning” (Leu et al. 1162). Despite the difficulty in pinning down this evolving theoretical concept, “new literacies” requires a blending of both traditional and contemporary concepts in social, collaborative environments (Leu et al.; Jenkins).

Participatory Culture

Henry Jenkins, who has named these contemporary learning environments “participatory cultures” recognizes them as the primary informal learning environment for teens (Jenkins xi). He defines participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices” (xi). Some forms of participatory culture include affiliations (e.g., memberships within groups, including social networks and message boards), expressions (e.g., digital sampling or fan fiction), collaborative problem solving (e.g., working together on Wikipedia or in collaborative games), and circulations (e.g., podcasting or blogging) (xi-xii).

Jenkins sees traditional literacies as prerequisites for the new competencies required to engage in participatory culture, noting that “before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write. Youth must expand their required competencies, not push aside old skills to make room for the new” (29).

Contemporary Literacies’ Implications for Teaching

The contemporary English educator, then, should model expert learning but also facilitate students’ discoveries, guiding students towards participating in a culture in which they can find their own experts and exemplars. In response to developing literacies, Leu et al. suggest that “teachers will be challenged to thoughtfully guide students’ learning within information environments that are richer and more complex than traditional print media, presenting richer and more complex learning opportunities for both themselves and their students” (Leu et al. 1163). English educators Troy Hicks and Kristen Hawley

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Turner argue that to better serve their students, ELA teachers must familiarize themselves with digital spaces: “Digital literacy is no longer a luxury, and we simply cannot wait to build the capacity in our students and colleagues, as well as ourselves” (Hicks and Turner 64).

Teachers who recognize their students’ primary informal learning environments as a form of participatory culture should immerse themselves in that culture. What follows are the results of my experiences this year to boost my own contemporary literacies through connection and exploration.

Developing My Own Contemporary Literacies Creating a Professional Learning Network on Twitter

I created my professional Twitter account (@LGreeder) after being instructed to do so during Fordham University’s Summer Literacy Institute without any intention of using it beyond that day. I imagined this would be like one of the many technologies I obligingly toyed with during a professional development session, and then promptly filed away and abandoned. I thought Twitter was a place for celebrities to talk about themselves and for the rest of us to share our banalities; I didn’t think I could accomplish anything meaningful in 140 characters.

The conference organizers encouraged us to use the conference’s hashtag (#fordhamlit13), which directed our tweets towards a niche audience within the Twittersphere and archived them together, allowing anyone to search them for resources, quotes, and other sparks from the conference (including a link to this beginner’s guide to Twitter). Although I was already feeling overburdened by the temptation to keep up with conversation and activity on Facebook, Twitter did not become just another social network to compulsively check in with. Instead, it has become a forum for me to connect with other academics and English educators to discuss teaching and learning.

Since I began tweeting seven months ago, I have composed approximately 250 tweets. While this may seem to be a large number of tweets, they have been focused in a handful of purposeful, concentrated sessions rather than resembling a digital, line-a-day journal. I have participated in Twitter chats, typically hour-long discussions about a focusing topic led by a moderator, for

English teachers through #engchat and #literacies. While it can take a bit of time to acclimate to the pace of responses and even to accept the ideas that not every comment can be read nor every thought written, I have found the chat experience to be completely energizing. These chats function like professional development seminars with enthusiastic, interested attendees, tripping over each other to share ideas. I always leave these sessions, such as the recent “Multigenre Projects” and “Transmedia and the Evolution of Storytelling,” with a dozen open windows in my browser, each one a resource shared during the chat. I have enjoyed reading archived transcripts of chats, such as #engchat’s “How Do You Teach Grammar.” Archived conversations often have an active discussion thread, which alleviates the pressure of keeping up with a live chat’s frenetic pace, but still allows one to reach out to chat participants. These chats and archives allow educators to pursue professional conversations and development in areas of interest with distant colleagues.

My first Twitter chats immersed me in new literacies, or “Twitteracies” (Junco), demanding that I learn new skills for participation. Besides forcing me to represent my thoughts in a condensed format, the chat challenged me to read in a fast-paced, nonlinear way. Along with learning Twitter abbreviations and the etiquette for participation, I was bombarded with new terminology and texts.

I am still awestruck by the way Twitter allows me to quickly connect with experts. After designing a lesson using storyboards based on an article from *New York Times*’ “The Learning Network” (Olsen and Schulten), I tweeted the authors that I adapted their lesson. Within six minutes, I received a tweet from @NYTimesLearning asking for samples of student work.

When—to my horror—I discovered at the start of my sophomore American Literature class that a streaming video I had planned to show was no longer available online, I turned my horror into a teachable moment. I told my students of my failed attempt to save the video, how I had emailed the website’s support staff last year and asked how long they planned to keep this video online for free. I searched my “sent mail” folder live on my projection screen: “There are no plans to take [the video] down for a while,” my saved

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email read, signed by the Communications Director of the company that produced the film. I recruited my students to use their smartphones to locate a copy of the film online. One student found a free version on iTunes, but when downloaded, the file would not play.

I recognized this unexpected conundrum as an opportunity to practice authentic writing for different audiences. As a class, we composed four messages: a message to our school's technology department; a reply email to the Communications Director; an email to iTunes customer support; and a tweet to the director of the film. I then adjusted my lesson plan and began the next day's activity early. To my surprise, two class periods later, the original website's video was working again. I sent another tweet to the film's director; a member of the director's staff replied, "Hi there—[the film] is back up and working! Enjoy!" I also received a reply from iTunes customer support correcting the problem in iTunes. While the original lesson may not have gone as planned, I was able to model for my students how to solve problems in the digital age; we combined our knowledge and resources to affect change.

Twitter allows me to crowdsource my questions to a network of educators. Before a presentation at NCTE's Annual Convention, I joined an #nctechat designed to preview the upcoming convention, where I asked for suggestions to combat my first-time presenter nerves. After hitting send, I felt a tinge of self-consciousness about tweeting such a personal message, but the thoughtful responses immediately reassured me. "Everyone WANTS to hear the wisdom you have," wrote Lindsay Reynolds. "We are all ready to learn and share and be revitalized." "Just tell your story," NCTE President Ernest Morrell wrote. "You are among friends." Digital writing expert Troy Hicks added, "Right, be yourself. We teach who we are. Invite conversations. Make connections." Those exchanges were not just 140 characters; they were acts of kindness, timely words of encouragement from fellow educators. I shared these tweets with my students, because I wanted them to see the beauty of asking questions with humility, to recognize the potential social networks have to allow for authentic learning, connections, and personal growth.

After receiving this boost of confidence a few days before the convention, the fates laughed

at me. At 8:00 the night before my 9:30 a.m. presentation, I discovered that I had no adapter for my laptop. I called the nearest electronics store; they had none in stock. I sent out a desperate tweet using the convention hashtag, hoping someone would respond. Within minutes, three attendees offered to lend me an adapter.

Tweeting from this year's convention enhanced my experience, connecting me with other attendees and providing access to sessions I could not attend. A highlight of the conference was meeting Meeno Rami, founder of #engchat, whose voice I recognized from a webinar she hosted the previous month. This conversation with an educator I deeply admire would not have been possible without our online correspondence.

NCTE Annual Convention reminds me once a year that I am a member of an incredibly generous and intelligent community of educators; Twitter reminds me year-round that I have access to teachers and learners sharing their thoughts, questions, and enthusiasm.

English Companion Ning

While I still consider myself a novice tweeter, I've used Jim Burke's English Companion Ning, a network designed for English teachers to post discussion topics and converse around common interests, for the last four years. This website exemplifies what Jenkins calls "informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices" (6). The site is constantly abuzz with questions and comments from beginning and veteran teachers, posing questions to an eager audience of mentors. Recent posts range from someone asking how to teach *Romeo and Juliet* to ELL students to someone asking for advice on how to handle a parent's complaint about a film shown in class.

As in other participatory cultures, "members believe their contributions matter" (Jenkins 6). Posts yield numerous quick responses, and the discussion thread often becomes a conversation among many professionals. One of my posts, asking for text suggestions to use with a food unit I was developing, received 18 replies and scores of recommendations. Two years after the original post, a professor and English educator interested in food justice found my post and reached out to me, asking about my experience with the food unit and generously offering to donate resources for my classroom.

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#clmooc: My first MOOC

At Fordham's Summer Literacy Institute, Professor Anna Smith (@writerswriting) asked us to create maps of our experiences with digital writing. She snapped a photo of me working on my map and invited me to participate in #clmooc (a "Massively Open Online Collaboration about Connected Learning"), a six-week learning experience open to anyone interested in "making, creativity and learning." I began my participation in this course by viewing an hour-long webinar called "Writing as Making/Making as Writing" that challenged me to consider writing and composition through the lens of the Maker movement. Addressing revision, Elyse Eidmaan-Aadahl, Director of the National Writing Project, noted, "In the Maker movement, you could say there's a function that I'm trying to create, and I can watch this thing and if it collapses or holds up or functions that's a test of concept, just like meeting an audience is a test of concept for writers" (36:03). Until listening to this discussion, I had not connected my previously unnamed maker self to my writer self.

Andrew Sliwinsky, co-founder of DIY.org, discussed the power of sharing the process of work. "There's a tremendous amount of power and a tremendous amount of community building that can happen around sharing all of the process of work. I think that's a really interesting thing to try to bring to education..., thinking of revision not as 'oh, you made a mistake,' but just as a part of life" (38:12). Teachers of writing know the power of sharing different phases of the process as opposed to simply sharing the final draft; online spaces allow writers to publish their work throughout the process and seek formative feedback from peers.

Though the MOOC offered weekly chats, webinars and activities, participants could join at their convenience. At the end of the six weeks, I completed the MOOC's final activity, documenting my learning (through an infographic on easel.ly), and earned a digital badge from Connected Learning, denoting my participation in #clmooc. As soon as I earned the badge, I was sent a message indicating that I was now eligible to assess other participants applying for the badge.

Just as "online readers construct their own texts to read, as they choose different paths to follow," my MOOC's format allowed students the freedom to choose their own level of

participation, tasks and approaches (Leu et al. 1167-1168). It follows logically, then, that students be given the agency to demonstrate their own learning through a self-selected approach. Furthermore, once I had achieved proficiency, I was entrusted to evaluate my peers. Cathy Davidson, reflecting on how the digital age might change our methods of assessment, asks, "If constant public self-presentation and constant public-feedback are characteristics of a digital age, why aren't we rethinking how we evaluate, measure, test, assess, and create standards?" (108-109) She believes we should assess digital literacies—which she calls "more complex, connected, and interactive skills"—and that we will need new methods, like badges and e-portfolios, to assess them (Davidson 125-126; 129).

This was the first time I'd ever received a badge, so I proudly posted it on my school website. When my students asked, I told them about the MOOC and my forays into digital spaces. They were so interested in my extracurricular learning that I developed a list for them called "Lifelong Learning Resources," with links to websites that offer free online courses and learning opportunities like Coursera, DIY.org, Skillshare, TED.com, and edX. Now that I have pursued these digital learning experiences, I want to find more ways to capitalize on my students' curiosity and bring these literacies into my own classroom.

Next Steps

My recent experiences with Twitter, the English Companion Ning, and #clmooc required me to be a self-directed learner, pursuing authentic interests in new spaces, and developing my own literacies to function in those spaces. Stephen Wilmarth, author of "Five Socio-Technology Trends That Change Everything in Learning and Teaching," refers to this self-directed problem solving as the "apprenticeship model" of learning: "It is *learning by doing*. It occurs without the need for base knowledge. It is just-in-time learning as you go. It occurs beyond the formal rules and classrooms of traditional education" (85). I am not advocating that we abandon our roles as expert learners and guides; however, we should be thinking about how to encourage our students to pursue authentic questions and take more ownership over their own learning.

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The next step for me is to think about how my experiences in these participatory cultures can help me redefine my classroom. How can I encourage my students to explore online communities, direct and evaluate their own learning, and share their processes? How can I foster more informal mentorships between my students? How can I encourage my students to embrace digital spaces while remaining critical of what they encounter online? And of course, How can I provide students with access to online experiences in my classroom?

In terms of my own contemporary literacies, my short-term goals include hosting my own Twitter chat and beginning a blog about my own teaching. When English teacher and author Penny Kittle shared a teacher's blog post about parents' objections to her curriculum, I replied, confessing that I would be scared to write so publicly about my struggles in the classroom. I was honored to receive a response from Mrs. Kittle, whose work I greatly admire: "@LGreader

@RethinkSchools We should be brave in writing to clarify our thinking in the safety of our notebooks. Then decide what to publish." Perhaps instead of imagining myself as a lone blogger, I can think of myself as a member of the ELA community, advocating for our profession and goals. After all, as Jenkins reminds us, "Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from individual expression to community involvement" (6).

Hicks and Turner point out that "there are countless educators who blog, chat, tweet, text, pin, post, podcast, webcast, hangout, or otherwise engage in life online, both personally and professionally" (62). I want to participate in conversations, both on- and offline, about how these contemporary literacies can inform our classrooms, how we can encourage our students to "develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary culture" (Jenkins 7).

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