EMBRACING STUDENTS’ DIGITAL LITERACIES
A STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ DIGITAL COMPOSITIONS

A Project

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by
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Department of English
Abstract

of

EMBRACING STUDENTS’ DIGITAL LITERACIES

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This study analyzes the digital writings of first-year composition students using Anne Beaufort’s model of the five knowledge domains engaged in composing. Findings of students’ discourse community, rhetorical, and genre knowledge suggest the need for writing instructors to build upon these strengths in digital literacies as a powerful foundation for fostering literacy development.

______________________, Committee Chair
Dan Melzer, Ph.D.

_______________________
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Chapter One

Cover Essay

Throughout my time as a student of Composition, I have had many opportunities to reflect on myself as a learner, teacher and scholar. While I always intended to teach English, I originally knew very little about the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Anxious to gain experience teaching writing, I interned in a writing class at a nearby community college. In the community college class, and in the corresponding graduate seminar, I was intrigued by the Composition theory we discussed and then applied in the writing classes we assisted. The more I studied and learned about Composition, the more convinced I became of the importance of the field, for teachers and, especially, for students. I found writing studies to be empowering; James Berlin (1982) views teaching writing as “not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas…We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it” (p. 776). I felt that many, including myself initially, misunderstood writing studies and did not understand the meaning making, “ordering,” and structuring power of writing. This research portfolio is a culminating representation of my growth these past years as a newcomer in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Compiling this research portfolio has helped me to further understand, apply, and appreciate the practices of composition teaching and research.
Soon after deciding to become a student of Composition, I also became a teacher of composition for English 1A. My teaching philosophy, which grew out of both my studies and experiences as a teacher, reflects the variety of pedagogies and teaching strategies found within my classroom intended for the multicultural and multilingual student body found at Sacramento State. First, I embrace a pedagogy of multiliteracies. This means for me that my classroom focuses on literacies, literacy development, academic literacies, and also the different literacies that students bring with them to the classroom. Explaining their stance on the generative power of a pedagogy based on multiliteracies, The New London Group (2000) contends:

[C]ultural and linguistic diversity is a classroom resource just as powerfully as it is a social resource in the formation of new civic spaces and new notions of citizenship. This is not just so that educators can provide a better ‘service’ to ‘minorities’. Rather, such a pedagogical orientation will produce benefits for all. For example, there will be a cognitive benefit to all children in a pedagogy of linguistic and cultural pluralism, including for ‘mainstream’ children. When learners juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions. (p. 15)

The New London Group’s argument, which they present in *Multiliteracies*, points to the gains that come from a classroom that embraces multiple languages and discourses. However, as I have discovered in my studies, literacy in the United States has historically
been defined as a fixed idea of standard, edited, privileged English. Shondel J. Nero (2010) describes the faulty assumption held in many institutions across the U.S. that Standard English “is an inherently superior code” and that “academic discourse, which primarily uses this code, remains relatively unchanged” (p. 144). The New London Group’s challenge to these ideas has deeply impacted my teaching philosophy, helping me to realize the importance of teaching the ways in which all language is meaning making; a concept that is particularly important for students to understand in the context of college writing and academic discourses. While one of my main goals is for students to recognize patterns in academic genres, ultimately I want students to understand the dynamic, “variable nature” of all languages, to become reflective thinkers, and to develop metacognitive approaches to analyzing a myriad of writing situations (Nero, p.154). As the New London Group explains, these abilities can come through a pedagogy of multiliteracies. My teaching philosophy describes my identification with these views, as well as a few classroom practices that support this pedagogy.

Some of the writing classroom pedagogies reflected in my teaching philosophy also include reflection, collaboration, discussion, and process theory. My research in multiple and digital literacies has taught me that part of the value of focusing on writing and literacy studies is for helping students to become reflective of the many different rhetorical situations they write within. Elizabeth Wardle (2009) argues that self-reflection is one pedagogical method that encourages transfer to other writing situations (p. 771). Teaching students to be reflective of genres and rhetorical strategies in their digital writing worlds, then, can help students transfer literacy skills to academic writing
situations. When students learn to take charge of their writing strategies, and to be metacognitively aware of the different writing tasks they encounter in college, they are better equipped for writing within other disciplines. My teaching philosophy describes the reflective journal pieces I assign students to foster metacognition and self-reflection. In these journal writings, I ask students to describe and “reflect upon their writing processes throughout the semester” in order for them to identify their own successful strategies for writing and learning. Self-reflection is again encouraged through portfolio assessment: my philosophy describes the effectiveness of portfolio assessment to encourage awareness of growth as a writer.

My teaching philosophy also notes the importance of discussion and collaboration in a writing classroom. I align myself with the social constructivist view that “learning occurs among persons rather than between a person and things” (Bruffee, 1994, p. 40). As such, class discussion as well as small group work is central to my classroom approach. In a classroom, each individual is a learner and a teacher, including the instructor. Freire (1970) describes education as the practice of freedom when through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 67)
In order to achieve this kind of collaborative environment, students’ work and students’ voices must be the central focus of a classroom.

In addition to reflection, collaboration and discussion, my teaching philosophy states the importance of process theory to my teaching practice. Donald Murray and Peter Elbow’s writings on prewriting have influenced class activities I assign where students draft and write for discovery and invention. Furthermore, Nancy Sommers’ research on the revision aspect of writing processes heavily informs how I think about and teach revision. Her research illustrates the confusion some writers have between revising and editing, which helped me to recognize the need for distinguishing between these processes and for spending a substantial amount of class time on teaching revision strategies. Pedagogies such as these are ones I value greatly and plan to continue to apply in my practices as a teacher.

Since my primary goal is to teach, I prioritize reading and studying with both a teacherly and scholarly eye. By doing so I have gained a greater understanding of praxis, or the ways theory and practice inform one another. Nancy Grimm, Anne Wysoki, and Marilyn Cooper (1998) explain that theory and practice are alternate representations…of very much the same kind of thinking. The kind of thinking [that]…is part of everyone’s working life to the extent that they are reflective practitioners…Finding ways to represent this kind of thinking in action, and to uncover the everyday praxis that relates theory and practice, is one goal of the current experiments in academic discourse. (Farris & Anson, p. 269)
I view praxis as the enactment of theory and find that as I am reflective and curious about classroom experiences, I continue to revise and make changes to my teaching practices. As an example, while teaching first-year composition, I was quickly struck by how so few students considered themselves to be writers, despite the frequent tweets, blog posts, texts, and commentary that was a part of their everyday digital activities. I was curious why students belittled this kind of writing – why do they feel that it does not count as “real” writing? What kinds of digital writing do students produce and what part should these writings play in a classroom? These questions compelled me to find out more about students’ digital literacies and became my initial research questions for my publishable document.

Throughout my research of digital literacies and self-sponsored writing, I kept a log of notes about teaching ideas that I want to implement in future classes. These ideas came from the theorists and educators whose writing I found thought-provoking and further contributed to my understanding of praxis. For instance, James Paul Gee’s *What Video Games Have to Teach us About Language and Literacy* (2007) sparked my curiosity for how to implement the learning principles found within interactive video games that Gee explicates. While he insists that grounding classrooms upon these principles does not necessarily entail actually playing video games, subsequent scholarship has applied his theories in just this way. I was intrigued by Gee and others’ applications of how play and learning can be combined to lead to increased growth in critical and rhetorical awareness. Jonathan Alexander’s “Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom: Some Possibilities for Transformation” (2009) offers
suggestions for ways games can change a composition classroom. His suggestions were inspired by a case study he conducted of two student gamers who taught him about the critical thinking that goes into play as gamers navigate complicated scenarios that require high levels of literacy. Researchers like Gee and Alexander have shown me the possibilities for how research can and should inform my practice.

My annotated bibliography demonstrates my growing ability to use appropriate methods and methodological frameworks in Rhetoric and Composition. My bibliography includes sources that not only are an in-depth look at digital literacies, but also are sources that provide models for how to conduct research in Composition. For example, Cynthia Lewis and Bettina Fabos’ (2005) study on instant messaging and literacies provided a helpful model for how to organize and conduct research. While Lewis and Fabos used different research methods than my own – they used qualitative coding procedures informed by grounded theory – the way these authors grounded their research in New Literacies studies, defined their own stance towards literacy and its relation to multimodality, and how they managed discussing a larger group (seven) of participants, was insightful for my own organization of my research.

My annotated bibliography also includes several case studies that were useful models for my case study approach. Youngjoo Yi and Alan Hirvela’s case study of a high school girl’s digital writings provided an example for categorizing and describing case study findings. Like Yi and Hirvela, I looked for patterns in the interviews and self-sponsored, digital writing samples I collected from a small group of students. These
patterns ended up falling into categories of purpose, audience, and genre. I discovered that a large part of the job of research is organizing data in meaningful ways. I also learned that the methodological framework is key to organizing and analyzing research data. Midway through my project, I switched from a critical awareness framework to a rhetorical one, and suddenly the writing samples and interviews made much more sense, and it became easier to identify and draw conclusions about my participants. My annotated bibliography illustrates the reading I have done that helped me to conduct my research in a thoughtful and grounded manner.

Each of the portfolio documents exemplifies the writing process I undertook as I compiled this collection of work. Once I narrowed down a topic, my portfolio readers suggested authors that I could read to learn more about New Literacies studies. Some of the first texts I read were by Cynthia Selfe, James Paul Gee, Gunther Kress, and the New London Group; I also began exploring journals such as *Kairos* and *Computers and Composition*. These readings helped me to define my research questions, which initially investigated critical awareness in self-sponsored, digital writings. I was also able to get substantial, valuable feedback through my class, Researching Teaching Writing, where I created my first prospectus and annotated bibliography drafts.

Early in the drafting process for my publishable document, I began receiving writing samples from student participants. These students provided interesting and useful writing samples; I also learned a great deal from interviews with these participants. However, as I began drafting, I could see that I did not have enough data to be able to
support the arguments I was advancing in my article. Since several of my initial participants backed out of the study, I had too few participants and too little data to be able to detect significant patterns and themes among student writings. I decided to recruit additional participants to collect more data for my study. Once I had done so, the drafting of the publishable document began to go more smoothly. With the larger participant group to draw from, it was easier to recognize and justify the patterns I found within student writings.

However, an additional obstacle I encountered was finding the central framework I would use for my article. While I was devoted to Gee and his research on critical learning in video games (my original, intended framework), the data I collected leant itself to a rhetorical framework. During our interviews, students frequently touched upon aspects of the rhetorical situation in their commentary. Lloyd Bitzer’s “The Rhetorical Situation” (1968) helped me to restructure my draft, which led to an additional change, using Anne Beaufort’s *College Writing and Beyond* (2007) as the theoretical foundation for my publishable document. Beaufort provides a more current look at rhetorical situation with her discussion of the five knowledge domains writers draw upon in expert writing performances. These domains include rhetorical knowledge. Using Beaufort as the framework for my article allowed me to connect and discuss the patterns I found in student writings in a meaningful and significant way. While these changes took time and patience, ultimately I feel that they were important steps in my process to not only complete this portfolio, but also to learn about what it is like to produce original research in Composition.
After graduating, my primary goal is to apply to teach at local community colleges. Having interned at Folsom Lake College and working as a writing center tutor at Sacramento City College, I have come to realize how much I enjoy the diverse and varied student population at community college. The wide background of ages, ethnicities, educational experiences, and occupations causes the community college class to always be full of challenges, but also full of rich opportunities to learn from and with students. Additionally, my professional goals include keeping up with current research in Composition, through participating in and attending conferences, and through continuing to read and study Composition journals. I intend to stay closely connected to a community of dedicated Composition researchers and instructors, including peers in the M.A. program and teachers at the colleges in which I am employed, in order to maintain an ongoing discussion and reflection about challenges, ideas, and best practices in teaching and research.

The work I have done through drafting and revising this research portfolio has only increased my commitment to the field of Rhetoric and Composition. As I persist in asking questions, writing, and reflecting, I hope to continue to grow as a learner, teacher, and scholar, in a field in which I am honored to be a part.
References


Chapter Two

Statement of Teaching Philosophy

 NSTextAlignment
To be honest with students is to acknowledge that writing courses belong to them, not to us. Their ideas, their voices shape the course and become its content. To be honest with ourselves is to recognize that we too are writers and, like our students, wrestle with the difficult process of creating meaning through language. A writing course then is also our opportunity to write, to share with students our voice and our wars with words.¹

As a writing instructor, I seek to facilitate an environment where students’ voices and ideas are central to the classroom. I subscribe to Paulo Freire’s articulation of the humanist educator whose efforts “must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization.” Freire believes that in order to accomplish this, the educator “must be a partner of the students in his relations with them.”² I find teaching thrilling because of the multiple ways and directions learning can happen in a classroom and regard my role as an educator as a partnership with my students.

Collaboration is one way that I can focus the classroom on students’ voices and encourage critical thinking. Theorists such as Kenneth Bruffee and John Trimbur have shaped my view of collaboration as an essential component of learning; discussion, then, is a prominent feature of my classroom and students frequently converse about topics such as literacy, language, discourse communities, and writing strategies. Students also work in small groups to provide feedback to each other’s writings, to practice and apply readings, and to work on new writing approaches. I try to provide numerous

opportunities in each class period for students to share their insights and their writing with one another. I seek to facilitate a safe atmosphere where students can engage with each other to grow as academic writers.

In order to create an open environment where a diverse group of students feel valued, my class additionally aims to recognize the multiple literacies that students bring into a composition classroom. Among these are the diverse linguistic and digitally based literacies that are so vital to writing in the 21st century. I concur with the New London Group’s theories of difference as being generative: students “gain substantively in metacognitive and metalinguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions” when they “juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches.” This theory underlines my classroom approach; literacy is a central theme of my classroom and students are asked to reflect on their own literacies and to practice engaging in different literacies through journal writing, process writing, writing in different genres, digital writing projects such as digital portfolios, and through visual and aural rhetorical analysis. My goal is for students to become rhetorically conscious of the different situations in which they write, as well as the multiple linguistic strategies they can employ in order to effectively accomplish their purpose, for a particular audience, and within a certain context. By understanding the contexts that shape writing, students can make appropriate rhetorical choices to better communicate with their intended audience. I believe this adaptability and critical

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consciousness is vital for a student’s success in the academic, social, and professional world.

To grow as critical thinkers, writers, and readers, students must develop a critical consciousness where they question, reason, and work to understand and learn new ideas. Critically conscious students write with greater depth of analysis and insight. They are also better able to examine their own practices of writing, and to evaluate and make improvements to their prose. I teach students critical awareness through helping them learn and identify strategies of prewriting, drafting, revising, and proofreading. I utilize Peter Elbow’s process writing where students write reflective journal pieces that describe and reflect upon their writing processes throughout the semester. My writing assignments also provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in a recursive writing process. Students compose multiple drafts of four main writing tasks: an annotated bibliography; a rhetorical analysis of academic discourse; an essay centering on a student’s discourse community, writing, context and identity; and finally a self-reflection/self-evaluation, written in a genre of the student’s choice, that discusses how the student has met course objectives. I assign in and out-of-class prewriting and multiple drafts for each assignment, and also schedule regular class time for peer review and revision work.

Students develop as critical thinkers through habitual self-reflection. Thus, I design my composition class to help students think metacognitively about the ways that they read, write, and think. I reassert the importance of students thinking about the way they write through analyzing individual writing processes, frequent self-reflective
writings, and portfolio assessment. Rather than base students’ grades on periodic, isolated writing tasks, portfolio assessment allows me to evaluate student work according to development over a period of time. As students carefully select, arrange, polish and organize the materials in their portfolio, by necessity they must reflect on their own growth, and identify for themselves strategies that have helped them to succeed as writers. Liz Hamp-Lyons and William Condon assert that portfolio writing “promotes a greater awareness of learning, both in the sense that learning is taking or has taken place and in the sense of how successful the learning process has been for the individual learner.” This greater awareness leads student writers to understand their own progress and feel a greater sense of achievement. Emphasizing reflection and self-assessment helps put control for learning into the learners’ hands. Portfolio assessment, then, teaches students the value of self-reflection for their work as writers and allows them to enhance and practice their ability to critically reflect.

Ultimately, my writing course does not belong to me, but to my students. While I strive to provide the opportunities for students to improve, it is only through a collaborative effort, incorporating the perspectives, interests, and viewpoints of my students, that together we can improve our ability to create meaning through language.

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Chapter Three

Annotated Bibliography for the Research of Students’ Self-Sponsored Digital Writing


Beaufort advocates modeling writing curriculum after a five-part schema “employed in expert writing performances” that will aid transfer of learning for students (p. 17). These five knowledge domains are: discourse community, writing process, subject matter, genre, and rhetorical knowledge. *College Writing* applies this conceptual model to a university student, Tim, who Beaufort interviews and follows throughout his four years as an undergraduate and afterwards as a mechanical engineer. Her argument is that too often first-year composition is taught as “general writing skills” that could be applied within any discourse community; this approach (as evidenced by Tim) leads to negative transfer of writing skills. For instance, Tim’s first-year writing class focused mainly on expressivist, narrative writing; when he applied that same style to a history paper, he received low marks from his instructor. Beaufort urges educators to clearly situate the context and discourse community for the genres students are reading and writing within. She believes that “[a]ll faculties can benefit from being grounded in the research on transfer of learning and in genre and discourse community theories” (p. 150). Beaufort concludes that modeling curriculum and assessment after her five knowledge domains – through “teach[ing] a set of tools for analyzing and learning writing standards
and practices in multiple contexts” – students will be much more likely to transfer these writing strategies to other situations (p. 11).

Beaufort’s five-part schema serves as a framework for analyzing student interviews and writing samples in my digital literacies research. Beaufort has shown how these knowledge domains contribute to transfer of learning; she encourages writing instructors, departments, and instructors across disciplines to implement these knowledge domains into their assignment sequences. Since my research data indicates that participants are working within some of these knowledge domains, my argument is that teachers can help students make connections to these schema in students’ self-sponsored and academic discourse communities. When students learn to apply these tools of analysis to other contexts, as Beaufort demonstrates, they are more likely to transfer learning to new contexts as well.


During eight years of case study analysis, Berkenkotter and Huckin studied how genre knowledge is (or is not) used by writers as they write the genres of their discourses. Based on this research, Berkenkotter and Huckin conclude that “genres are inherently dynamic rhetorical structures that can be manipulated according to the conditions of use” and that genre knowledge is best understood “as a form of situated cognition embedded in disciplinary activities” (p. 477). These authors define five principles of genres that
ground their research: genres are dynamic and change over time; genre knowledge is situated, it “develop[s] as we participate in the activities of the culture;” genre includes “both form and content;” writers both constitute and reproduce social structures as they participate in genres; and lastly, “genre conventions signal a discourse community’s norms, epistemology, ideology, and social ontology” (p. 478). Berkenkotter and Huckin discuss how academic writers must be aware of the content and form of academic genres, but must also push for innovation if they are to be on the “cutting edge” of research (p. 501). Hence, genre always connotes a tension between stability and change and is deeply embedded in the norms of a discourse community.

Berkenkotter and Huckin’s study synthesized a copious amount of genre research which aided my analysis of research participants’ comments on digital genres.

“Rethinking Genre” also defines and explains the situatedness of genre, which clarifies some of the ways participants acquire genre knowledge. In my study, I analyze the genre knowledge of participants through their writings and through interview questions that ask about various digital mediums and genres. Berkenkotter and Huckin’s research leant a foundation for my understanding of current genre theory and contributed to my analysis of what students had to say about genre.


Clark believes that teachers of writing must adapt to a new digital world and implement a “pedagogy aimed at furthering students’ digital literacy” (p. 27). Her article
details why it is so crucial to update composition classrooms to incorporate digital practices, and how she has developed curriculum to do so in her own classroom. She argues that the writing classroom “should immerse students in analyzing digital media, in exploring the world beyond the classroom, in crafting digital personae, and in creating new and emerging definitions of civic literacy” (p. 28). Clark helps students develop the ability to craft digital persona by assigning ePortfolios, where students learn the importance of audience awareness in their writing; digital stories, where students tell powerful narratives with the aid of visual and other multimodal texts; Second Life activities, which she uses to base writing assignments; and lastly, blogging, where students learn again the importance of audience awareness in writing, as well as how to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources. Clark believes that educators must view the new technologies as a “profound shift in what we mean by writing, by literacy, and by cultural communication” rather than as a “fad” (p. 35).

“The Digital Imperative” is a timely and passionate plea for writing instructors to “reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives” (p. 28). Educators will find Clark’s description of the pedagogical changes she has made to incorporate technology into her classroom as a pertinent example for how to contemporize writing instruction. Clark’s research on the necessity of digitizing composition informs my own argument for educators to support and affirm digital literacies in their classrooms. My study shares Clark’s goal of finding ways to address the “new, digital imperative” in order to further students’ digital literacies (p. 28).

In “Among the Audience,” Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede revisit the concept of audience in the context of new literacies studies. They describe how today’s writers must be able to navigate the shifting and unstable relationship “between writing and reading, between author and audience” that has become a reality for current writing (p. 50). Despite the changing nature of audience, Lunsford and Ede find the term “to be theoretically and pedagogically enabling” and a useful way to think about context specific, rhetorical situations (p. 47). Referring to their earlier work that splits audience into two categories – addressed and invoked – Lunsford and Ede find these categories to also apply to audiences today; at the same time, they remark that understanding audience “calls for a much more specific, grounded, and nuanced analysis than the binary of addressed and invoked audiences can provide” (p. 56). Their research encourages educators to continue “to take a deeply situated perspective on communication” and to bring this understanding into writing classrooms (p. 64).

Lunsford and Ede add to the portion of my research that discusses audience awareness of first-year composition students. My study analyzes students’ knowledge of the audience for their text, as well as the surrounding discourse community audience. Lunsford and Ede’s article illustrates for teachers the complex and tenuous concept of audience and author in the context of new literacies. By understanding this complex,
digital environment students’ navigate and write within on a daily basis, teachers can
better appreciate the sophisticated strategies and knowledge students acquire online. My
research aims to showcase this knowledge acquired by students through their digital
compositions.

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Fife wishes to make explicit the tacit rhetorical savvy students often have but are
not aware of when they read and write online. Her article describes how she leads
students to rhetorically analyze Facebook pages so that they become more critical of a
daily activity in most of their lives. Her class applies Aristotelian concepts such as ethos,
logos, and pathos to Facebook, and they discuss how these features “shift when applied to
new media texts” (p. 558). Fife contends that this approach to rhetorical analysis not
only helps students become more critical users of technology, but also “[teaches] teachers
about an important literacy practice of college students that can easily be written off as a
waste of time by those outside the social network” (p. 561).

Fife’s teaching applies Selfe and Hawisher’s call to embrace and build upon the
technology literacies of students in order to learn more about language and literacy. My
research seeks to address some of the claims Fife and others have made about students’
lack of rhetorical awareness in digital writings such as Facebook. While Fife finds
students to be relatively unaware of the rhetorical choices they make online, my
interviews with students and the writings I have collected from them seem to suggest
otherwise. The students in my study demonstrate varying degrees of rhetorical, discourse, and genre knowledge.


Frost promotes student-innovated composition pedagogy, where students are “lead[ing] the way in their own education, especially when it comes to technology” (p. 270). She compares how user innovation has changed mobile and other digital technologies to how student innovation dramatically changed her classroom. Frost explains how students transformed their culminating project in her class, an analysis of healthcare rhetoric, to a 23-page, classroom collaborated Wiki that analyzes how “social media change[s] the ways we think and interact” (p. 272). She urges instructors to allow “student innovation [to] drive pedagogical practice – just as social media creators let user innovation drive the digital structures they produce” (p. 275). She has found that by doing so, her students have become more critical in their usage of social media and have found empowering ways to connect technology with academics.

Frost demonstrates the powerful ways that classrooms can be changed through bridging academic literacies and goals to digital, self-sponsored writing practices of students. Because my research argues for embracing and learning from students’ digital literacies, Frost’s research serves as an example of how she has done exactly that – her article demonstrates how student literacies and knowledge drive her own pedagogy. My
study, then, aims to provide additional information about student digital literacies so that instructors can continue to learn from the writing practices and habits students have formed. Like Frost, I see great potential in what we can learn from our students’ digital writings and activities.


Gee reasons that the Multiliteracies Project manifesto should serve as a Bill of Rights for all children in the world (p. 43). His chapter defines new “fast capitalist” globalized systems in business as systems of distributed intelligence, meaning that rather than employing individuals with specific, specialized skills, businesses align themselves with “communities of practice,” where intelligence or skills are spread among a group of individuals (p. 54). This leads to new “portfolio people” who “see and define themselves as a flexibly rearrangeable portfolio of the skills, experiences, and achievements they have acquired” (p. 61). Gee argues that “portfolio people” are the requirement for participation in contemporary society and notes two concerns he has with educational systems that prepare students for this new society. The first issue is to ensure that minority and poor children are educated so as to be able to “participate in building and transforming our societies,” and secondly, how advantaged children can become critical thinkers so as to question “issues of power and social justice in the new global capitalist order” (p. 63). Gee argues that the Multiliteracies Project supports this effort to teach
students to not only “master the standard ‘genres’ of…school-based…practices” but also to educate them so they “know how to transform [these social practices], break them, and innovate new ones” (p. 68).

James Paul Gee is a name that has appeared frequently in my research of digital literacies. His chapter in *Multiliteracies* outlines his philosophy for why students need a new kind of education in order to succeed and become empowered. His theories helped me to understand the necessity of learning new ways for teaching multimodal literacies. While Gee focuses on how society and technology has changed to demand a different kind of work and citizen, his argument on building bridges between home and school literacies pertains to my project research. In my project, I discuss how teachers should draw upon students’ digital literacies to help students make connections to academic literacies.


*What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy* is Gee’s argument for improving children’s school education. Gee analyzes a variety of video games, arguing that these games suggest different learning principles that are often better than the principles found within schools. For example, video games are enjoyable to play, yet they are progressively challenging. Gee suggests that our education should be designed in the same way; schools should provide learning that is challenging, yet enjoyable and encouraging for learners. His book argues for how children experience
both active and critical learning when playing video games. Gee defines active learning as learning to play the game and learning to identify patterns that can be applied in similar situations. Critical learning, however, requires the learner to see the game as a design space – a space that can be critiqued, manipulated and modified. Gee discusses the many ways gamers demonstrate active and critical learning through interviews and observations of children and teenagers playing video games and through his own experiences learning how to play video games.

While my project focuses specifically on digital writings rather than video games, Gee’s research demonstrates the considerable amount educators can learn from students’ self-sponsored literacies. Just as Gee describes the knowledge and skills gamers demonstrate playing video games, my study seeks to demonstrate the knowledge students’ employ when writing digitally. Gee’s writings have been influential to my understanding of the kinds of rhetorical, critical, and innovative endeavors in which students are involved.


In her longitudinal study of Eliza, an undergraduate student, Haas investigated how Eliza developed rhetorical knowledge throughout her eight semesters as a Biology major. Haas discovered that Eliza initially understood scientific texts to be “autonomous and context free,” but gradually came “to a greater awareness of the rhetorical, contingent nature of both the activities and discourses she participated in within…biology” (p. 46).
Haas ultimately suggests that educators must learn “more about the kinds of theories of discourse that students hold when they arrive in college” in order to help students view texts rhetorically (p. 79).

While my article describes the rhetorical knowledge held by students writing online, it does not look at how this knowledge is developed over time. Haas’s research describes in detail the rhetorical development of one student, which helps me to have a better understanding of how students attain rhetorical knowledge and literacy. Her research additionally describes rhetorical development through studying a student’s reading practices. Since the scope of my study is limited to student writing, Haas’s research provides a fuller picture of how students gain rhetorical knowledge through both reading and writing.


This article reviews the literacy histories of two middle-class women from different races and born in different generations: Brittney Moraski, a white woman born in 1986 and Melissa Pearson, an African American woman born in 1964. Hawisher and Selfe sought to understand how and why individuals develop technology literacies and in their research have discovered five general themes. They assert that that “literacies have life spans,” “people can exert their own powerful agency in, around, and through digital literacies,” “schools are not the sole...[gateway] through which people gain access to and
practice digital literacies,” “specific conditions of access have a substantial effect on people’s acquisition and development of digital literacy” and that “families transmit literacy values and practices in multiple directions” (p. 644). Hawisher and Selfe describe how each theme is demonstrated through the literacy histories of Moraski and Pearson. These authors ultimately argue for educators to change negative attitudes and embrace and incorporate the technological knowledge students bring with them to the classroom (p. 677).

One of Selfe and Hawisher’s main goals seems to be arguing for the importance of situating literacies within a social, historical, and material context. Their investigation of Moraski and Pearson’s literacy histories provides a foundation for any study of digital literacies. My research examines the knowledge evident in students’ digital compositions, rather than the context for how that knowledge was gained. However, “Becoming Literate” is invaluable to any study that argues for a closer look at students’ digital literacies.


Douglas Hesse asserts in this conference address that teachers own writing – or at least should bear responsibility as stewards of writing. He humorously discusses how computers cannot serve as a replacement for writing teachers and other national policies that have sought to take ownership of writing. Hesse sees writing and writing pedagogy as something that is difficult to define – “so profoundly contextualized is all writing that
it resists any pedagogy, let alone any generalizability” (p. 349). He believes that writing instructors must continue to “own up to the demands of obliged writing on our students” but “must also attend to self-sponsored-writing…as increasingly important forms of action in the world” (p. 351). Hesse concludes that organizations, teachers, laws, and other “interests” all seek to organize writing – however, teachers and composition researchers are the ones with the research and knowledge and therefore must take responsibility as stewards of writers (p. 356).

Hesse’s argument gave me greater insight into the importance of learning about self-sponsored writing. Digital literacies can be easily linked to self-sponsored writing since many students use digital mediums to create, publish, and share writing that is disconnected from institutions. Hesse’s address provides evidence for my position that educators must attend to digital self-sponsored writing.


In this article, Johnson-Eilola and Selber set forth a framework that is adaptable to rapidly changing technologies, such as Instant Messaging and Short Message Service (text messaging). These authors urge teachers to not ignore these forms of writing, but to instead “[integrate] them into their classrooms” (p. 17). Johnson-Eilola and Selber argue that these technologies require “sophisticated skills of understanding concrete rhetorical
situations, analyzing audiences (and their goals and inclinations), and constructing concise, information-laden texts as part of an unfolding, dynamic social process with others” (p. 18). Their framework asks teachers and students to investigate context, change, content, and tools in a communicative situation. Johnson-Eilola and Selber believe that teaching this framework will “provide [students] not simply with sets of skills suited to specific, static situations, but a method for adapting those skills to new situations” (p. 33).

My project follows a similar line of thought as Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s research. These authors describe the developed, rhetorical knowledge of students as evidenced through their digital writings. Johnson-Eilola and Selber’s goal is to announce a framework that teachers can use to adapt along with the fast-pace changes of writing in the 21st century. My project takes a step back to more thoroughly understand the “sophisticated skills” of students as they write in digital environments.


David Kirkland begins his article by outlining three different waves of “space” in literacy studies. The first wave sets up a binary of spaces of “in-school” versus “out-of-school.” However, Kirkland suggests that writing cannot simply be separated in this way because out-of-school writing often influences in-school writing and vice versa (p. 10). The second wave is a “hybridized [space] rather than dichotomous. This hybridity results from cultural and social interminglings – a cross-pollination of sorts of both formal and
informal pedagogical contexts” (p. 11). The third construct of space Kirkland reports is an overlap space, “a key site for classroom activities ‘where teacher and student scripts – the formal and informal, the official and unofficial spaces of the learning environment…intersect, creating the potential for authentic interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge’” (p. 12). Kirkland suggests that these three levels of spaces do not illustrate the complexity of new technologies. He focuses this article on two urban youth research participants, Aja and Raymond, to demonstrate the way they inhabit an “extra” additional space. For instance, Aja has formed powerful social relationships and friendships through Facebook to resist “tempests of patriarchy” (p. 15). Raymond occupies an extra space when he creates a new identity for himself on SecondLife to escape the harsh realities of his life. Kirkland observes that “their digital worlds…offered Aja and Raymond a transitional setting propped against the reality of their own purposes and imagined norms for being and behaving” (p. 18). He ultimately suggests that ELA researchers must continue to study these spaces in order to put them to use pedagogically.

Kirkland’s article complicates the idea of self-sponsored writing: He believes that “in-school” and “out-of-school” writings cannot easily be categorized or separated. My interviews with first-year students have suggested similar findings. While I solely studied compositions that students wrote outside of school, these “out-of-school” writings were often influenced by school experiences. Kirkland’s research has additionally led me to find other studies that consider online self-sponsored writing and potential applications to the writing classroom. His ultimate argument, for teachers and researchers to study the
spaces students’ inhabit through digital technologies, supports my project’s thesis, for instructors to learn from the digital writing practices of their students.


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Kirtley advocates assigning technological literacy narratives as a way to help instructors assess how to incorporate new technologies into their classroom. Kirtley believes that these narratives also reveal the part technology plays in writing processes. Assigning students to write these types of narratives will aid instructors in understanding their students’ relationships with writing technologies (p. 192). In this article, Kirtley outlines the numerous benefits of technological literacy narratives. She interviews students about how they feel about computers and their own composing process. She has found that students often do not realize the tremendous influence technology has on their writing lives. In her article, she explains her technological literacy narrative assignment and describes the many pedagogical benefits from such an assignment. She encourages instructors to incorporate these literacy narratives in their own classrooms partly as an assessing tool to see how to better incorporate technology in the writing classroom.

Kirtley’s article supports the thesis of my project that we can learn how to incorporate technology into writing classrooms through studying the digital practices of our students. However, my project makes suggestions about the discourse, rhetorical, and genre knowledge students may have already acquired through their digital writing
practices. Kirtley’s investigation, on the other hand, suggests how teachers can learn about students’ technological literacies through a classroom assignment, the technological literacy narrative. My project attempts to add to the body of research comprised of articles like Kirtley’s that seeks to discover ways to update and transform writing classrooms to embrace digital literacies.


Lewis and Fabos intend to better understand what motivates young people to spend hours each day on Instant Messaging (IM) in this article. They find that IM practices are closely linked to the social identities of their student participants. Lewis and Fabos discuss how IM users “must perform a version of one’s self, shifting voices moment to moment for many audiences at once” (p. 493). These authors conclude by asking not how IM can be used in the classroom, but instead “how to apply to school settings the literacy practices we observed young people take up with a great deal of engagement” (p. 496).

“Instant Messaging, Literacies, and Social Identities” illustrated one way I could organize my interview and sample based research data coherently. Lewis and Fabos’s presentation of their data is very well organized, particularly in the way they ground their research in New Literacies studies, define their own stance towards literacy and its relation to multimodality, and manage a discussion of a larger group of research participants. While Lewis and Fabos employ different research methods than the
methods I use in my study – they use qualitative coding procedures – the manner in which they organized their discussions of multiple participants’ interviews was an invaluable model for how I could do the same in my own study.


In “Machinima-to-Learn,” Keith Morton argues for the art form, machinima, as an example of how new media can inform multimodal curriculums in writing and communication classrooms. Morton observes that “opposition to technology” has “prevented adequate exploration of how technology can best be used and assessed in the classroom because theorists…must first convince the academic establishment that technology should be used in the classroom” (Justification Education section, para. 1). Morton views machinima as a kind of intervention that will demonstrate new potential for multimodal media in academics. He describes several machinima compositions created by his students and his rationale for assessment. Morton argues that, ultimately, he is teaching his students not to compose in one medium, but to compose multimodally. Analyzing teaching practices of technology and writing is a necessary intervention so as to ensure that education isn’t “oppressive, explicative, and programmatic” (Return to the Intervention section, para. 1).

Morton’s article analyzes and examines ways teachers can incorporate technology into their teaching practices. His research suggests that while students are comfortable
composing online, they often initially resist and struggle with connecting academic practices with their technological literacies. This lack of connection between academic and self-sponsored literacies ties into my argument for drawing upon students’ digital literacies – student resistance is an important factor to consider in the implications I suggest in my research.

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Negretti studied three beginning college composition courses to determine students’ task perception and metacognitive awareness of writing strategies and how perceptions and awareness developed over the semester. She sought to learn how “beginning academic writers use this metacognitive awareness to monitor, self-regulate, and evaluate their writing” (p. 149). In her study, which links the process of acquiring rhetorical consciousness with metacognition, Negretti distinguishes three aspects of metacognitive awareness: “awareness of what strategies and concepts are important in relation to a specific task…awareness of how to apply concepts and strategies (how to perform the task), and…awareness of when and why to apply certain knowledge and strategies” (p. 145). Her findings are consistent with recent scholarship that views literacy as correlated with rhetorical awareness (p. 175).
In my research, I discuss how students are able to identify and talk about the rhetorical moves they make when writing digitally. Negretti’s work clarifies what students are achieving when they can identify and talk about their rhetorical choices – students who have this kind of metacognitive understanding have a greater ability to “self-regulate” as they engage in writing tasks (p. 175). Negretti, then, adds to my understanding of the metacognitive abilities of first-year students as seen in their digital compositions.


Courtney Patrick suggests that composition instructors teach their students to be more critical users of social media like Facebook. While Patrick maintains that students are making rhetorically savvy choices on Facebook, these choices are geared towards conforming to the expectations of a “particular audience.” Patrick uses Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca’s definition of a particular audience as one that “isn’t concerned as much with what is true but rather with information that lives up to what they value.” Thus, the choices students are making online are not real choices in the sense that students are not conscious of how their audience’s values and beliefs predetermine their choices for them. Patrick explains: “regardless of all this power the student-user may think they have over their profile… [Facebook] is actually another way students conform to the values of a particular audience.” Patrick furthermore compares students to
Foucault’s “docile bodies” since they are subject to the expectations of their particular audience. Ultimately, Patrick suggests that teachers invite students to view their Facebook profile critically so that they will be more conscious of their writings online.

Patrick asserts that Facebook users do not consider the choices they make when posting online. My research examines this claim – the interviews and writings I have collected from students have suggested that students are making conscious, rhetorical decisions as they write online. My argument differs from Patrick’s – she asserts that students are like Foucault’s “docile bodies” since they conform to the expectations of their audience, while my position is that students are writing rhetorically to meet the demands of a rhetorical situation.


Schultz suggests that teachers see school as only a small part of the learning that a student partakes in throughout a lifetime. As such, Schultz argues for greater understanding of students’ outside-of-school writing practices. Schultz uses James Paul Gee’s definition and theory of Discourses to underscore her study. Gee defines discourses as “an identity kit … [and] inherently ideological, and like literacies…embedded in social hierarchies and reflect the distribution of power” (p. 360). This article tries to determine the meaning of outside-of-school writing in students’ lives and the potential relationship between out-of-school writing and school writings (p. 363). Schultz used an ethnographic approach: she was a participant observer of students in two
government classes for several years (p. 365). Shultz found that out-of-school writing was typically private, often critical, and lastly a “bridge between [students’] home and school worlds” (p. 368). In her interviews, Schultz discovered that students often expressed embarrassment about their out-of-school writing and, even though they wrote in journals or diaries, “[t]hey thought of themselves as people who hated to write, forgetting the writing they did outside the school walls” (p. 370). Ultimately Schultz takes the position that education must be reconstructed and integrated with social institutions such as households, workplaces, and religious centers, or face the risk of “remain[ing] pure rhetoric” (p. 383). She found that although teachers did encourage their students to write about topics meaningful to them, the teachers did not learn enough about students’ literacy practices outside of school (p. 384).

Schultz provides a closer look at self-sponsored writing and asserts the importance of connecting home and school writings. She demonstrates how students often see their school life and school writing as isolated from their life outside of school. Connecting these two contexts seems essential in order to make education meaningful for students. My research illustrates additional connections that can bridge school, digital, and self-sponsored literacies.

In this article, Sheridan and Hart-Davidson discuss a Multiplayer Online Game called *Ink*. *Ink* allows players to learn, have fun, and write at the same time. The game is a digital world, similar to SecondLife, where players “become immersed in a socially, culturally, and sensorially complex ecology” and where completing a level requires writing and “typically results in producing a portfolio of documents” (pp. 326-327). In the game there are rhetorical exigencies which “[provide] players opportunities to engage in rhetorical interventions” (p. 324). The article describes several of these exigencies. In one situation, players respond to a request for proposals for improving the digital neighborhood they participate within.

Sheridan and Hart-Davidson trace the rhetorical theory that grounds their research, focusing specifically on the rhetorical situation. Their rhetorical framework helped me to conceptualize my own framework of applying rhetorical theory to digital practices. Additionally, the research of these authors adds to the body of knowledge discussing ways to digitize writing classrooms. My research promotes this goal as well through identifying some of the writing knowledge students gain through their digital practices.


In this opening chapter of *Multiliteracies*, the New London Group promotes their argument that meaning is made in increasingly multimodal ways, thus proscribing the
need for multimodal literacies. They argue in this chapter, and throughout the book, that literacy includes “negotiating a multiplicity of discourses;” therefore, literacy pedagogy should account for culturally and linguistically diverse societies as well as multimedia technologies (p. 9). The New London Group details how the working, public and personal lives of individuals are changing due to “dramatic global economic change” and so curriculum must address these changes and “recruit” difference rather than “ignore and erase” (pp. 10, 18). They argue that education should help students develop as designers of social futures and should “seek critical understanding or cultural understanding” in the sense of an “awareness and control over the intra-systematic relations of a system” and “as in the ability to critique a system…on the basis of the workings of power, politics, ideology, and values” (p. 32).

*Multiliteracies* is a seminal text that is referenced repeatedly in research on digital literacies. This chapter provides an overview of the New London Group’s argument for education that embraces multiple literacies, languages, and cultures. Their research is foundational for texts that seek to demonstrate the importance of accepting and learning from difference in a classroom. *Multiliteracies* also provides evidence for the importance of considering the changes to writing due to multimedia and other technological innovations. The New London Group’s research has heavily informed how I understand writing instruction and how digital and other literacies of students should inform educational policies and practices.
Elizabeth Wardle argues for a first-year composition course that does not attempt to teach students “to write in the university,” but instead “teach[es] students about writing in the university” (p. 767). She summarizes the past decade’s research on genre, pointing to the immense difficulty of “preparing students to write in the university and beyond” when recent genre research has shown “the necessity of learning genres in context” (pp. 765-766). Wardle writes: “[Simply] teaching students institutionalized features of various genres limits and simplifies the varied exigencies to which those genres have responded in their rhetorical situations outside of the FYC classroom” (p. 768). She comments that genres “are difficult, if not impossible, to teach people to write out of context” (p. 768). Wardle believes that writing classes should focus on pedagogical methods that are transferrable to other writing situations. These methods include self-reflection, mindfulness, and “explicitly abstracting principles from a situation” (p. 771).

Because of these difficulties of teaching genres out of context, Wardle advocates a first-year composition course that instead teaches about writing. “Such a course” she continues, “is set up to teach for transfer” and “sidesteps…the problem with asking instructors to teach for and about the genres of other disciplines” (p. 785).

Wardle’s argument supports my stance on how digital literacies add to a first-year composition class. Her summation of current genre theory helped me to discuss how
research participants demonstrate self-reflection and how they also practice “abstracting principles from a situation” when they identify and comment on features of digital genres. Wardle’s research complements the central framework of my research article, which is Beaufort’s five-part schema for the knowledge domains activated in expert writing performances. Both Beaufort and Wardle share the principle goal of teaching writing in a way that encourages transfer of writing strategies to other, new rhetorical situations.


Williams explores how online writings “construct a performance of identity” which draw heavily upon popular culture. These popular culture practices allow audience participation to be more easily attained (p. 25). He has interviewed and studied the digital writings of several students and has concluded that popular culture has adapted to online technologies because online technologies “allowed people to continue and expand the uses to which they were already putting their readings of movies, television, and music” (p. 26). Williams also discusses the ways that his interviewees read the personal webpages of others. He found that pop culture elements dramatically influenced how they read the identities of the page owners (p. 31). The students Williams interviewed also displayed a deep understanding of audience perceptions online. For instance, Tony understood that while his friends may understand the identity he has
constructed on Facebook, he would have no control over the other audiences who may view his webpage (p. 33). Based on his interviews and findings with students’ personal web pages, Williams concludes that we must understand how popular culture “shape[s] [students’] reading and writing practices” (p. 38).

Williams’ research design is similar to how I have conducted my research. He bases his research on interviews and online writing samples to determine the influence of popular culture on students’ writing practices. My research project also looks at the online writings of students, such as Twitter, Facebook, and other social medias, to be able to attain a better understanding of their online writing practices. Williams supports this exploration of online practices in his article and provides a potential model for drawing conclusions about writing practices from Facebook and Myspace.


In this article, Yi and Hirvela discuss their study of the self-sponsored writings of a Korean 1.5 generation adolescent named Elizabeth. To introduce their study, Yi and Hirvela briefly outline research in self-sponsored writings and emphasize the importance for researchers to continue to examine the decisions students are making particularly in their online self-sponsored writings (p. 95). Yi and Hirvela argue that “research of this kind….provides a more inclusive view of students as writers…sheds light on the roles that technology plays among young writers…[and] can potentially inform decisions about
how writing should be taught in school” (pp. 95-96). These authors describe Elizabeth’s use of several online writing journals which she used to connect with an online community/affinity group. They noted Elizabeth’s deftness of composing with technology and her strong sense of audience (p. 104). Yi and Hirvela focus especially on the language choices Elizabeth made as a bilingual student. These choices hint “at the complexities at play in the world of literacy…inhabited by many 1.5 Generation students” and often serve to construct her own identity (p. 103). Ultimately, Yi and Hirvela argue for further investigation of self-sponsored online writing and also support the use of journals for 1.5 Generation students to help foster a sense of agency in their writing.

I found Yi and Hirvela’s outline of the history of research on self-sponsored writing particularly useful for my own research question. Yi and Hirvela also provide extensive details about their research design of collecting writings and interviewing Elizabeth. I used a similar research design of writing samples and interviewing; my research presents similar findings about self-sponsored online writing that can be applied and adapted to the writing classroom.


Yancey explains why we should learn from our students’ writings in this conference address. She frames her argument with a discussion of how writing has changed over the last century, and how writing connects to agency and citizenship. She
discusses a few of the cultural attitudes towards writing: Writing has always been associated with unpleasantness or work, and has never been respected the same as reading. Reading was more desired of citizens because “an educated citizenry” needed to read, listen and obey whereas writing engenders “creative individuality” (p. 318). She continues with her history of writing through process theory, “Students’ Right to Their Own Language,” and finally, writing with digital technology. This current era, which Yancey calls the “Age of Composition,” has allowed people to write and share with global audiences. In this Age, “composers become composers not through direct and formal instruction alone (if at all), but through what we might call an extracurricular social co-apprenticeship” (p. 327). Yancey finds students to have a solid understanding of the power, reach, and impact of networking, as well as “new audiences of twenty-first-century composing” (p. 330). Based on these conclusions, Yancey argues that literacy is not learned sequentially, but rather over time; she outlines several questions that composition researchers should consider about how digital technology has changed composing practices. She calls for Composition researchers to develop new models and theories of composing, to design curriculum to support those models, and to implement “new pedagogies enacting that curriculum” (pp. 333-334).

Yancey’s conference address is yet another call for theories and research of digital composing to come forward and for new pedagogies to be created. My intent as a researcher is to begin to address Yancey’s plea for discovering new models and new theories of compositing through describing the digital literacies of first-year students and the kinds of knowledge and literacy development found within students’ digital
compositions. The questions Yancey poses to the NCTE conference attendees also encourages researchers and teachers to explore how composing has changed in the 21st century and the resulting implications for their practice.
Chapter Four

Embracing Students’ Digital Literacies

A Study of First-Year Students’ Digital Compositions

In “Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies and the Literacies of Technology,” Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher (2004) issue a call for writing instructors to incorporate a range of literacies into their classroom. They write:

Writing instructors…face the danger of teaching in ways that ignore the considerable strengths in technological literacies that some students bring to our classes. As a result, we fail to build on the literacies that students already have – and we fail to learn about these literacies or why they seem so important to so many students. We also fail, as we deny the value of these new literacies, to recognize ourselves as illiterate in some spheres. And in this intellectual arrogance, we neglect to open ourselves to learning new literacies that could teach us more about human discursive practices. (676)

This call from Selfe and Hawisher made nearly a decade ago has been taken up by many compositionists seeking to build on students’ literacies, particularly digital literacies. New digital technologies have transformed literacy practices and allow greater opportunities for students to write to and be read by global audiences. Writing teachers face a “new, ‘digital’ imperative, one that asks how we can reshape our pedagogy with new uses of the technologies that are changing our personal and professional lives” (Clark, 2010, p. 28). In regards to students writing in a “newly technologized, socialized,
and networked” writing environment, Kathleen Yancey (2009) reminds us that “these students know how to compose, and they know how to organize and they know audience. How can we build on all that knowledge? How can we help them connect it to larger issues?” (p. 330). To prepare students as they attempt to navigate this changing professional and social environment, educators must broaden their appreciation and understanding of the technological literacies of their students in order for writing instruction to be meaningful and relevant.

Recent scholarship has defined a need for learning how digital practices can best be used in the writing classroom. J. Elizabeth Clark argues for a “pedagogy aimed at furthering students’ digital literacy” (p. 27). She believes “the composition classroom should immerse students in analyzing digital media, in exploring the world beyond the classroom, in crafting digital personae, and in creating new and emerging definitions of civic literacy” (p. 28). The New London Group’s publication *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures* (2000) further establishes the necessity of teaching new literacies. *Multiliteracies* illustrates how meaning is made in increasingly multiple and multimodal ways; literacy pedagogy, then, should account for culturally and linguistically diverse societies as well as multimedia technologies (p. 9). These authors assert:

To be relevant, learning processes need to recruit, rather than attempt to ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning. Curriculum now needs to mesh with
different subjectivities, and with their attendant languages, discourses, and registers, and use these as a resource for learning. (p. 18)

A pedagogy based on the arguments in Multiliteracies requires close attention to students’ experiences, beliefs, ambitions, and literacies. Teachers must design curriculum that draws upon multiple voices, “languages, discourses and registers” as “resource[s] for learning” instead of shunning differences and teaching literacy as a fixed ideal (p.18). Among these resources are students’ digital literacies. The New London Group recognizes that new technologies have altered literacy expectations and implores “educators [to] take a lead in developing appropriate pedagogies for these new electronic media and forms of communication” (p. 71). New digital pedagogies must incorporate students’ digital practices in its design. The purpose of this study is to investigate students’ digital, online writing practices and, specifically, to discover the kinds of knowledge students’ employ when composing online.

Digital Rhetorical Awareness

Much has been written about students’ various digital practices. Erin A. Frost (2011) suggests the power of this generation of digital natives to be “catalysts for change in the future of the web” (p. 27). Jane Mathison Fife (2010) notes the “sophisticated rhetorical analysis [students’] employ” on Facebook (p. 555). However, less has been written that explores in greater depth the rhetorical knowledge we assume students have in their digital compositions. My research presents a case study of seven first-year composition students. I interviewed students and collected samples of their self-
sponsored digital writings. The writing samples provided were several months’
collection of their public online compositions from instant messaging, YouTube, Twitter,
Facebook, Tumblr, online forums, blogs, and other digital mediums.

Participants for this study came from a large, urban university in the Western
United States. The university is a diverse campus and has students from a wide range of
backgrounds. The primary participants in the study included three females and four
males ranging from 18 to 20 years of age. All participants were currently enrolled or had
just completed English 1A, a one-semester composition course. To receive credit, first-
year composition students must satisfy the university’s writing program learning goals.
Following the Writing Program Administrator’s Learning Outcomes for first-year
students, these goals ask students to write for multiple audiences, purposes, and genres; to
be self-reflective of their writing and reading processes; to cultivate knowledge of genre
conventions; and to understand and engage discourse communities including academic
discourses. While the learning goals are the same for all first-year classes, instructors are
free to plan how they will help students achieve these goals.

This study illustrates the kinds of knowledge students demonstrate in their digital
writings. Instead of focusing on one online medium, I examined the broad range of
digital writing mediums through which a single student may be writing. Most
participants wrote on multiple interfaces; many used both Twitter and Facebook, while
others maintained a social media presence while also contributing to online forums or
blogs. None of the participants used solely one medium to communicate online. This
broader look at students’ digital writing practices allowed me to examine the many purposes, audiences, and genres that are in play when a student is writing and publishing online.

I based my analysis on Anne Beaufort’s study of the five knowledge domains writers draw upon in expert acts of writing. In *College Writing and Beyond* (2007), Beaufort advocates modeling writing curriculum after this five-part schema because of its ability to aid transfer of learning for students (p. 17). The five knowledge domains she identifies are: discourse community knowledge, writing process knowledge, subject matter knowledge, genre knowledge, and rhetorical knowledge.

Beaufort’s five-part schema provides a framework for instructors and researchers to better understand what knowledge a writer utilizes when engaged in successful acts of writing. However, Beaufort acknowledges the overlapping and interactive nature of these domains, making it difficult to neatly label knowledge utilized by writers (p. 18). I found students possess expertise in three of Beaufort’s knowledge domains; specifically discourse community, rhetorical, and genre knowledge. For the purpose of this analysis, I focus on students’ genre knowledge and two subcategories of Beaufort’s other domains – students’ knowledge of audience and purpose. These three themes – students’ knowledge of audience, genre, and purpose – dominated the data I collected from participants. By appreciating digital literacies in this light, teachers can learn how to bridge school literacies with the self-sponsored digital literacies of their students and help students grow as writers.
**Students’ Knowledge of Audience**

Beaufort discusses audience under two different sections of her five-part knowledge schema: discourse community knowledge and rhetorical knowledge. According to Beaufort, discourse community knowledge entails awareness of the surrounding values and goals of the discourse community that the writing addresses. Rhetorical knowledge, on the other hand, requires knowledge of the rhetorical situation or context of a text, including understanding the text’s audience and purpose. In Beaufort’s words, “writers must address the specific, immediate rhetorical situation of individual communicative acts. This includes considering the specific audience and purpose for a particular text and how best to communicate rhetorically in that instance” (p. 20).

In digital literacies practices, participatory media such as Twitter, Tumblr, and Facebook are a constant give and take between writer and reader. Oftentimes readers post words of another writer and vice versa – the lines are blurred between audience and author. These unique rhetorical situations require careful decision making to know what words are best. The following is what I looked for in student writers’ digital writing: to what extent are they able to pay close attention to the rhetorical context they are writing within? What is their understanding of the audience their text addresses, as well as the larger discourse community audience? And what rhetorical moves do they make to cue or connect to their audience? Students in this study demonstrated knowledge of both domains – discourse community and rhetorical – by their understanding of audience.
Several students felt they had a strong understanding of the audiences they address online. Ethan, a chemistry major who uses free time to answer chemistry questions on Yahoo Answers, spoke in depth about how he empathizes with and relates to his audience. Ethan feels his understanding of audience has sharpened since beginning college. Because he struggled as a sophomore in high school chemistry, Ethan feels he can “actually relate to these people” on Yahoo Answers:

Some of these people want to become doctors, pharmacists so they want to have a good understanding when it comes to the sciences…And I can empathize with these people and I could actually understand what they are going through. So in terms of audience I look at myself and I see me in them…I was once where they were right now asking questions where [now] I may think, oh this is a simple question, but wouldn’t three years ago.

Ethan’s writings reflect his efforts to imagine and relate to his audience. He spends several hours writing answers to questions posed by other users on the forum. His writings depict a friendly and enthusiastic tone as he responds to questions. In one conversation, Ethan explained to a questioner:

Electrons balance out the positive charge by giving a negative charge (it is more complicated than this, but for this purpose, we will consider this). REMEMBER, all atoms are neutral. Since the amount of positive and negative charges cancel out each other…the amount of electrons in an atom equal the amount of protons.
In response to Ethan’s lengthy answer, the questioner replied: “[You’re] legitimately my hero right now…I have so much stuff going on in my life right now. It’s hard to focus on school...But thank you sooooo much.” Based on his conversations through Yahoo, Ethan appears to have a good idea of the values of this community. While some questioners are looking for quick answers, the feedback from his online peers suggests that many are appreciative of the lengths Ethan goes to not only answer, but to explain the answer in detail. Ethan places great value on the feedback he receives and his interactions within this online community. Pointing out a positive response from one of his questioners, Ethan remarked to me that: “this one made me feel all special inside.” To continue to receive these kinds of positive reinforcements of his writing, Ethan must be closely attuned to the needs of his fellow Yahoo forum users. Assuming characteristics of his addressed audience allows Ethan to enter into dialogue with questioners on Yahoo and appropriately meet the needs of this discourse community.

Ava similarly feels that she has a handle on who her audience is and what they expect. As an avid user of social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, she feels connected to her audience because they are primarily family and friends. Ava is a devoted Dodgers fan, and whenever she celebrates Dodger victories through online writings, she is acutely aware of how her audience may receive these writings. In order to keep things as friendly as possible, she tries to make her Facebook and Instagram posts positive and upbeat instead of jeering at other teams’ losses. One Instagram caption reads: “Nothing better than spending my 19th birthday at the Dodgers game with the ones who mean the most to me! All 6 of us are actually together for once!”
Her playful banter about sports portrays a cheerful, competitive personality while entertainingly engaging an online audience. Like Ethan, Ava consciously considers the choices she makes while writing online and how these discursive strategies may affect her audience. She explained,

I’d say in general, I do think about my audience because I know…especially on my sports posts I have a whole bunch of family who are Giants fans and I’m the biggest Dodger fan ever so I always talk about the Dodgers…and like I know all the Giants fans will see it and comment on it…I’m like not…really rude about it like some people are.

Because her audience’s values are clear to her, Ava tempers her writing to not appear “rude,” but to set a positive tone that cues readers to respond in kind. Like Ethan, Ava’s awareness of discourse community values contributes to the choices she makes as a writer.

Managing an Audience

Further evidence of students’ strong audience awareness is through the measures they take to limit, control, and monitor possible viewers of their writing. By managing permissions to view their writing, these student writers show their knowledge of the important role audience plays in the rhetorical situation and in composing a text. Several students discussed how they block unwanted audience members. In this way, they can actively control who sees what, thus targeting their writing for a more specific group of
peers. For instance, students use blocking and viewing features on Facebook so that they can limit unwanted comments and conversations.

Natalie, a blogger who enjoys writing what she calls blog “rants,” described how she initially posted these rants on Facebook for a select group of friends. On one occasion, Natalie wrote about her view on her school district’s financial problems. She explained that she only wanted selected friends to be able to view the writing because “I didn’t want…[other] people commenting on it with…weird stuff. [I] tried to stay away from that. I just wanted my friends to see it.” By using Facebook features to only allow targeted audiences to view certain writings, Natalie can partially control the kind of response she will receive and avoid the negative comments she might have received from a more public audience.

Emily, a student who frequently reflects on how her public, digital writings may be viewed by others, discussed how online writings on social networking websites can be used to attack and publicly embarrass writers or their audience. Emily tries to stay out of the “drama” on social networking sites by removing pictures, posts, or “tags” that link her name and profile to arguments or other conversations she does not want to be connected to. (Tags are labels that act as a digital indexing system. Placing a tag on a text connects other Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or blog writings that have the same tag.) She explained:

You can definitely get someone under their skin and make it really public. As soon as you post something on someone’s status, if you really want to get to
someone and you really don’t care, everyone is going to see it [and] people are
going to jump in and it’s going to turn into a way bigger issue than it should have
been.

Students like Emily understand, and have seen, the material effects of writing tags on a
status or post. Since tags can be used to cue specific, targeted audiences, as Emily notes,
they can also be used to embarrass peers. Emily demonstrates a keen awareness of
audience through her understanding of the interdependent relationship between writers
and their audiences.

Ryan also discussed how tagging can help determine the kind of audience he
wants (or does not want) to have. Ryan enjoys reading and writing blog posts through
Tumblr, a blogging and social networking website. When he is writing on Tumblr, he
recognizes that the number and type of tags he assigns to a blog post will help determine
his audience. Ryan explains:

[It]…depend[s] on what tags you put on your post. If you don’t tag your post, no
one will see it except people on their dashboard [or people who were already
subscribed to Ryan’s blog]. Lots of times I won’t put too many tags, but if I’m
writing something about an issue that I want a lot of people to see it, I’ll put a
whole bunch of tags on it.

Ryan explains that normally only people who are already following his blog will see his
posts. However, if he wants a wider audience, placing tags on his blog post will link his
writing to other posts with the same tag, making his blog entry more easily found by
other Tumblr users. When Ryan publishes on Tumblr, he decides which writings would be meaningful to his more familiar audience of blog followers and which writings would appeal to the broader, Tumblr community. Through tagging, Ryan determines how public he should make a particular blog post.

Writers like Ryan, Emily, and Natalie use features available online to limit or manage audiences, displaying their knowledge of the rhetorical situation of a specific text. These students understand how their writing must play to certain audience expectations. When Ryan, Emily, and Natalie compose online, they decide which audience is most appropriate to address, and limit their audience accordingly.

There were numerous examples of how student participants closely interact with their audience, and how they perceive, manage, and persuade audience members. Revisiting the idea of audience in “Among the Audience: On Audience in an Age of New Literacies,” Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford note the transitioning, unstable, in flux worlds that writers now write within. They comment:

[W]riters who want and need to shift among worlds must be able to hold flexible views of the real and potential relationships between writing and reading, between author and audience that refuse to remain stable; they must also be able to sort out the competing claims of words, images, and sounds in choosing the best medium or media of communication. And they must also become comfortable with new ways of thinking…about ownership of the messages that are created amidst the dynamic interaction of writers, audiences, and media. (50)
Writing in various contexts and within different discourse communities online is a complex act that requires students to evaluate their audiences. As in most writing situations, it is difficult to thoroughly know and meet the expectations of an audience. However, students are well practiced in their ability to effectively meet the needs of a variety of audiences through the creative efforts they take to understand and connect with online communities. Their understanding of audience demonstrates their capabilities in Beaufort’s rhetorical knowledge and discourse community knowledge domains.

Teachers can have confidence in their students’ abilities to understand and persuade audiences. Teaching will be much more proficient and concrete if we start with what our students know. When teachers discuss audience, they might begin by asking students to name the audiences they address in digital writings and the strategies they use to appeal to these audiences. Classes could then apply these strategies to audiences less familiar to students, such as academic audiences. If teachers found, for example, that students in their class use tagging to target a specific audience, teachers might use this knowledge to discuss and compare ways to target academic audiences. Recognizing and appreciating the effective strategies students already use to communicate to digital audiences will help teachers build bridges between students’ out-of-school and in-school writing practices.

**Students’ Knowledge of Genre**

Beaufort pinpoints genre knowledge as another knowledge domain activated in expert writing performances. Since “good” writing always depends upon context, writers
must “develop knowledge of genres whose boundaries and features the discourse community defines and stabilizes” (p. 20). Beaufort describes genre knowledge as “knowing what content is required, what is not; how best to sequence the content; what specific needs…readers will have, and how common or technical a vocabulary to use” (p. 21). While all of the student participants in this study demonstrated their ability to work within different digital genres of writing, several participants were also able to identify and comment on genre conventions, particularly in regards to content. Almost all of the first-year students interviewed had an idea of the kind of content valued in various online writing situations.

Facebook Genre Content

Several participants felt that writings that are fun and light-hearted in tone made up the content that was most appropriate for social media genres. Since for many participants, social media is a tool to stay connected with friends, posts that describe events in people’s lives and “positive things” are important to maintain a feeling of closeness despite geographical distance between friends and writers in the community. Ava commented:

I have family that posts oh I’m so depressed…today is a horrible day. I’m ready to shut down…I feel like that’s not appropriate for Facebook. I wouldn’t want like all my friends knowing I’m having a bad day. I…like positive things and like happy things that you want people to know about you.
For Ava, writing on Facebook allows her to share selected aspects of her life with friends and family members. Ava explained her view of the main function of Facebook as “keep[ing] in touch…with people you’ve known.” Like a greeting card sent in the mail, the brief “positive” and “happy things” she writes and reads help her sustain relationships through the images and writings shared on Facebook.

Ava and other participants expect their social media audience to publish writings that will make them laugh, or convey good news to stay in touch with one another. Participants demonstrated how they were able to work within this genre convention through their posts about current activities, or about enjoyable events that took place. For instance, Ava described a softball victory on Facebook by writing, “Just got 4th place in nationals. Finally on my way home!! I can’t believe summers already over.” Mike, a reflective student who writes online book reviews, and communicates with friends through Facebook and Twitter, posted on Facebook, “Beautiful night at At&t Park! What a great game so far!” And Natalie captured her first day of college emotions when she wrote, “First day of [school]! EXCITING! I know most people aren’t excited for school, but I was!”

Through the long hours students spend on Facebook, they learn the boundaries of what genre content is required by the community and what content is not. Facebook users who push or cross these boundaries are sometimes regarded unfavorably. As one example, participants explained the importance of being careful to not “project” opinions onto Facebook audiences. Ethan, for instance, discussed how he tries to make Facebook
posts as nonpolitical as possible because he does not “want to get into any arguments.” In general, these students felt that Facebook is a place where personal topics that could offend others should typically be avoided.

Two participants described religion as one personal topic that is inappropriate for the genre of Facebook. Mike recognizes that among his friends and associates, religion can be an unsuitable topic. After posting a review on Facebook about a book he had recently read, Mike remarked:

I guess you don’t really see a lot of people sharing on Facebook this kind of book… Most people probably wouldn’t want to share it. In many ways it’s a religious book and I know a lot of people don’t want to talk about religion or share religion on Facebook. I kind of sensed that maybe it was uncomfortable. It might have made some people uncomfortable or something like that.

Although Mike may not be following typical genre conventions of Facebook, he is aware of the effect his writing may produce on his online audience. Mike’s choice to write about selected personal topics does not necessarily demonstrate a lack of genre knowledge; his recognition of the consequences of bending genre conventions points instead to his sensitivity to Facebook content conventions. Despite recognizing that his writings can be unconventional, Mike consciously chooses to occasionally share writings that speak to this aspect of his identity.

*Blogging Genre Conventions*
The students seemed to agree that while serious or personal topics are not often received well on Facebook, they are readily accepted on blogging sites such as Blogspot or Tumblr. Students saw blogs as the more appropriate genre to write about personal musings or opinions. For instance, Natalie shared a blog post with me where she describes her changing taste in music. In her blog entry, she reminisces about music she used to enjoy at a young age:

I listened to those songs because they were catchy…also because I joined the bandwagon and that’s what everybody was listening to! Now my music is changing…I personally love rock and heavy metal. The music is real and it’s not like the ‘bubblegum pop’…music we have today. I could go on and on about it buuuttttt that’s a different blog for a different time. But going back to the subject at hand, my music is STILL changing!

Natalie finds her blog to be the better medium for reflecting upon and exploring a topic. Because she felt limited in what she could or could not say on Facebook, Natalie began writing a blog:

I think…what’s different is that with the blogging site I feel like you can talk more openly about anything because there are always people who share the same ideas as you. But…on Facebook I very much feel confined because I don’t want to attack anybody, but not to say that on my blog I’m attacking people, but Facebook just feels more confined to say, where blogger.com you can basically talk about anything and just put your ideas down.
Because of the confined feeling Natalie has when writing on Facebook, she turns to her blog to share her opinions on world news events, local politics, relationships, and other topics that are important to her in what she calls blog “rants.” Natalie hesitates to write about these kinds of topics on Facebook, but openly discusses them on her blog.

Ryan also turns to his blog on Tumblr to publish writings that he is not comfortable sharing with other audiences. The majority of Ryan’s followers on Tumblr are all individuals with whom he shares common interests, rather than people he actually knows in person. This audience of shared values and beliefs allows Ryan the freedom to express opinions on personal topics and also to share and seek feedback for some of his creative writings. Ryan’s original publications on Tumblr include the first chapter of a mystery novel he is writing and pop punk song lyrics that he wrote in response to a falling out with a friend:

We never wanted it to end this way,
But I guess it’s pretty clear who couldn’t stay
So bring yourself around this time
and see if your name’s still a memory of mine,
I let it go and in the end, what remains of you
is just an unfinished “we used to…”

Through their immersion in a variety of digital writing environments, students like Ryan and Natalie begin to understand and write different genres within different discourse communities. Ryan and Natalie in particular consciously choose which medium is most appropriate for the writings they wish to publish. While some of their genre knowledge
is implicit, they demonstrate their own beginnings of writing expertise in the choices they make adhering to genre conventions.

Beaufort describes the purpose of her conceptual model by stating: “We are looking to teach...those broad concepts (discourse community, genre, rhetorical tools, etc.) which will give writers the tools to analyze similarities and differences among writing situations they encounter (p. 149). As Beaufort notes, through teaching practices of genre analysis, students become empowered with strategies to apply and transfer to other writing situations. Recognizing the many ways that students are already writing and working within digital genres can only further help instructors to teach tools for genre analysis.

Participants’ discussions of the genres they write and their knowledge of the content required for genres within different discourse communities shows promise in their ability to be mindful and reflective of genre conventions. At the same time, student answers were mostly limited to issues of content; a few of my participants mentioned the importance of proofreading their online writing, yet none discussed other features of genre such as format or arrangement of the text. Understanding this area of weakness in some students’ genre knowledge can help instructors tailor their curriculum to address these needs. Teachers can, once again, start with what students know and begin discussion of genre by having students list the genres they already write, and discussing those genres. Teachers may find that, like participants in this study, students understand some conventions of genre, such as content, but are less aware of other nuances of genre,
such as structure, organization, and vocabulary. Teachers can lead classes in analyzing these other conventions found in digital genres. Starting with a familiar context before moving to academic ones will help students continue to make meaningful connections between home and school literacies.

Students’ Knowledge of Purpose

Establishing purpose in writing situations falls under Beaufort’s domain of rhetorical knowledge. For Beaufort, this area of knowledge is more concerned with the primary rhetorical situation of a specific text. Beaufort notes that writers “must contend with the immediate rhetorical context of a specific text” which includes defining the different layers of audience and purpose (p. 94). In acts of writing expertise, the writer must be able to write with rhetorical effectiveness to achieve her purpose for a specific task. During our interviews, student participants indicated ways they adjust their writing to accomplish particular purposes. The following examples illustrate the range of rhetorical knowledge of purpose that I found among student participants.

Purposeful Writing and Social Media

Several students discussed how writing on social media should be purposeful, meaningful, and thoughtful. Emily views Twitter users who write with a strong sense of purpose as the most enjoyable to read. She says, “I like when people…use [social media] for a specific reason. Some people have a cause, people use it for those purposes…I like] when people [use] it to have a purpose and not just to complain.” Her writings demonstrate some of her own specific reasons for using social media. For instance, one
social media post advertises her childcare services: “Please forgive the corny automated message but seriously I would appreciate getting my profile shared so that maybe I could get into [some] nanny work : ) Thanks everyone!” Emily sees social media as the “most amazing tool” that can help her accomplish career and life goals.

Mike described how he finds online writing meaningful when he is able to share or read writing he views as thought-provoking or profound. For Mike, Facebook, Goodreads, and Twitter should be places where people only post things that they have strong opinions about, or are thoughtful in some way. This is a rule he closely adheres to in his own online writing, including his Twitter updates, which include frequent retweets of religious personalities that he finds inspiring and other introspective writings. One Facebook post considers the subject of responsibility and becoming an adult: “There is not a certain age at which you become an adult,” Mike writes. “You start being an adult when you decide to take responsibility for your life. You can do that any age.” Mike explains that “[his] goal isn’t sharing thoughts of [his] day with people on Facebook.” Instead his purpose is to “keep up with [his] friends and…comment on things that…[he has] an opinion about.” Mike felt strongly about the importance of purposeful writing on social media. He discussed how he does not care to read superficial content on Twitter and Facebook:

So why don’t I post stuff like that? Um, well, because I don’t really think people care. Um, and…I’m not really interested in putting everything, you know, about my personal life on Facebook. It’s a little too much for me…If I’ve got friends
who…continuously are posting things like that, um, I usually remove them from my newsfeed, but keep them as a friend. That way, you know, I’m not getting everything.

Instead of only writing about his personal life, Mike tries to post writings that will encourage thought and discussion. Both Mike and Emily negatively regarded writing that seems to be purposeless and try instead to write with clear intentions in mind.

_Ethan and Yahoo Answer Forums_

Ethan was the most articulate in discussing his purposes for writing on Yahoo Answer forums. An important purpose for Ethan is to teach fellow chemistry students in a way that will help them truly understand the problem, rather than just providing a quick answer. To accomplish this purpose, Ethan described his process of first “reading the material,” “analyzing where he (the student) [is] at in the course” and finally, “working out the problems and…giving him the response that he needs.” This entire process can sometimes take Ethan several hours. However, another purpose Ethan has in participating in this forum is to test his own understanding. He feels that he has mastered a principle if he can write it up in a way that makes sense to questioners on Yahoo. Ethan explains:

I like to personally prove [to] myself and to others that I actually know what I am doing…Sometimes they fail and I, sometimes I feel devastated. Like recently I answered this guy’s question and he told me he did exactly what I said to him and he still got the wrong answer. So…I know that I didn’t answer this guy’s
question correctly and especially since [the] chemistry major [is] a really intense course, the stakes are high for me to actually know the material [and] the feedback is important to me in that sense. If I go answer a person’s question incorrectly, I am going to go back and see exactly what I did wrong and hopefully improve myself for the better…I only have four or five years to actually master the material. So that’s important.

Hence, one of Ethan’s strongest purposes for answering Yahoo questioners is to prepare himself for the current and future Chemistry classes he will take as a Chemistry major. He tests himself on whether he “actually know[s] the material” by his ability to address the needs of his audience.

During one dialogue with a chemistry student, Ethan responded to a question about calculating heat transfer of water to ice. Ethan went through the problem, step by step, and even added a summative comment at the end, recapping the strategy he used to solve the problem:

The way to do these problems is to lower the temperature to reach important points like the heat of fusion, vaporization and then sum them up. Do them a step at a time. If you are going from liquid to freezing, lower down to the freezing point, note the J taken. Do the heat of freezing, note J taken, then lower down to the temperature you want. Then you note the J taken, then sum them all up.

Ethan uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to write an answer that will be understood by his Yahoo audience. The end comment provides a helpful guide to answer these types of
questions in the future; additionally he defines and writes out equations so that the
questioner can visually see which equations may be drawn upon to complete the problem.
The positive responses and high ratings he receives from Yahoo users point to the
rhetorical effectiveness of his writing. Ethan’s perception of purpose and the methods he
took to achieve his purposes was the most developed out of all participants. He checks
back to regulate his writing, to receive feedback, to evaluate himself, and to learn from
his experience and apply it to his chemistry studies. Ethan clearly understands his own
intentions and possesses an understanding of his audience’s purposes and needs as well.

While students ranged in their ability to discuss the purposes of their writings and
the purposes of writings in various digital discourse communities, these participants do
indicate varying degrees of awareness of rhetorical purpose. Students’ understanding of
purpose in digital contexts is a resource for teachers as they teach purpose in academic
contexts. If teachers find that their students recognize their own purposes for writing
online, teachers can then discuss identifying academic writers’ purposes. For example,
classes might begin by analyzing rhetorical purpose in sample blog posts. Students could
next analyze purpose in an academic text, such as a lab report. Students might
additionally consider how the medium and design of a text affects rhetorical purpose.
Beginning with the digital texts and purposes students are already familiar with before
moving to the less familiar academic terrain will help students gain a stronger
understanding of rhetorical purpose in many contexts. Students will learn that purpose
varies depending on the rhetorical situation and discourse community.
Embracing Digital Literacies

Through listening to students discuss their digital writing practices, I have learned more about the thoughtful and often complex interactions and thought processes students undergo as they publish writings online. These students have shown how digital writing not only involves typing and publishing words on a screen, but also incorporates a host of other aspects such as timing, the use of strategic tagging, choosing the proper medium, utilizing images, and reposting or reusing other’s words in creative ways. Students are also thinking of the life span of their digital compositions – who might see this post years from now and think differently of me because of it? Beaufort’s five part schema allows the digital writings of students to be viewed in terms of writing expertise. Participants’ knowledge of audience, genre, and purpose help them to connect and engage online audiences and to achieve their personal writing goals.

Beaufort reminds “teachers, administrators, and researchers” to “look at the whole picture – the five knowledge domains in writing expertise – not one part or two when trying to help writers or to assess them” (147). While this study precluded two of Beaufort’s domains, writing process knowledge and subject matter knowledge, the study aims to provide a beginning look at the important things students are already thinking and writing about and the three knowledge domains that are most apparent in the scope of this study. Through analyzing digital compositions of students in this way, teachers can better understand how to bridge home and school literacies for students. Digital writing necessitates “sophisticated skills of understanding concrete rhetorical situations,
analyzing audiences (and their goals and inclinations), and constructing concise, information-laden texts, as a part of a dynamic, unfolding, social process” (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2009, p. 18). Understanding students’ daily navigation of such complex writing situations can only serve to strengthen composition classrooms and provide a foundation where students can practice and gain an increased ability to apply these writing strategies to new writing situations.
Appendix A

Portfolio Presentation Handout

Embracing Students’ Digital Literacies: A Study of First-Year Students’ Digital Compositions

Research Questions

- What kinds of knowledge do students engage in digital writing?
- How can teachers shape their pedagogy to build on students’ strengths in digital literacies?

Conceptual Model: Expert Writers Draw on Five Knowledge Domains

From Anne Beaufort’s *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*

Excerpts from Student Writings and Interviews

Ryan:

[It]…depend[s] on what tags you put on your post. If you don’t tag your post, no one will see it except people on their dashboard. Lots of times I won’t put too many tags, but if I’m writing something about an issue that I want a lot of people to see…I’ll put a whole bunch of tags on it.
The night was not dark. The night was impossibly black. The night was dreary, hopeless, and dismal. For Detective Hunter, the list of words used to describe this impossible night could go on for miles and miles. At the start, he just believed he was overreacting to just “another night on the job” but a few hours into the case had changed that mindset pretty quickly. No, this was something else entirely. Even for Cole Hunter, a seasoned homicide detective of forty-three, this case seemed so divergent from any he had worked, and solved, before.

Natalie:

I think…what’s different is that with the blogging site I feel like you can talk more openly about anything because there are always people who share the same ideas as you. But…on Facebook I very much feel confined because I don’t want to attack anybody…

Blog Post published on August 21, 2013
“Nostalgia”

The title says it all. It’s that warm, comforting feeling of familiarity that we long for and love. Just hours before I wrote this blog, I was going through some of my old music that I used to listen to back in sixth grade. Boy was it a blast from the past! I had songs by Britney Spears, Nelly Furtado, T-Pain, Flo Rida, Black Eyed Peas, Soulja Boy, and all those artists such as the ones listed…I listened to those songs because they were catchy…also because I joined the bandwagon and that’s what everybody was listening to! Now my music is changing…I personally love rock and heavy metal. The music is real and it’s not like the ‘bubblegum pop’…music we have today. I could go on and on about it buuutttt that’s a different blog for a different time. But going back to the subject at hand, my music is STILL changing!

Ethan:

I like to personally prove to myself and to others that I actually know what I am doing…Especially since [the] chemistry major [is] a really intense course, the stakes are high for me to actually know the material…If I go answer a person’s question incorrectly, I am going to go back and see exactly what I did wrong and hopefully improve myself for the better

Yahoo Answers post published in September 2013

The way to do these problems is to lower the temperature to reach important points like the heat of fusion, vaporization and then sum them up. Do them a step at a time. If you are going from liquid to freezing, lower down to the freezing point, note the J taken. Do the heat of freezing, note J taken, then lower down to the temperature you want. Then you note the J taken, then sum them all up.
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