Adolescents’ DIY Media as New Literacies

MySpace, Facebook, Teen Second Life, LiveJournal—these are terms that teachers hear their students talking about with one another. These words identify new forms of communication and literate practice, often referred to as the new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Teens are leaders in exploring and interacting with these new literacies, particularly those print-based or digital practices that allow them to be do-it-yourselfers (DIYers) who create their own literate products. Today’s adolescents are “digital natives” (Prensky, 2006) who have grown up with computers and online resources like blogs and wikis. They have had their peers’ influence and assistance with these practices to the point that they are almost automatic and natural in their use.
Today’s teachers, however, are often “digital migrants” (Prensky, 2006) who have not grown up with these resources, but have had to investigate and become accustomed to them. Hence, teachers who are older than the millennial generation may find it more difficult than their students to become knowledgeable about these informal literacies. Adults often lack the social community of support and encouragement to embrace these literate practices that teenagers find so readily among one another. In fact, busy teachers may have little or no desire to engage in these new literacies themselves and may not find or make the time to do so.

WHY SHOULD TEACHERS CARE ABOUT DIY MEDIA?

Why is it important for teachers to become familiar with these new literacies? One compelling reason is the need to interest and motivate adolescents. In their conversations with teenagers, researchers have documented that many teens, from those underperforming with traditional literacies (Knobel, 2001) to the high-achieving honors and Advanced Placement students (Guzzetti, 2009b), perceive that school is not relevant to their everyday lives. This sense of irrelevancy leads to feelings of alienation and disconnection with academic settings and literacies. Adolescents report learning more about academic topics from their own interactions outside of school on the Internet than they do in their classrooms (Magnifico, 2005). Their feelings of disassociation put adolescents at risk of dropping out. Capitalizing on and incorporating the literate practices that young people engage in outside of school can help to address these negative perceptions that young people often have about instruction.

A second reason to become familiar with the DIY media that adolescents choose to engage in is the need to view millennial students in a different light. Typically, adults take a deficit view of adolescents. To be effective in this new millennium, teachers will need to see their students in a different way—not as less than adults, but as different from adults (Alvermann, 2009).

This model of adolescence acknowledges the “funds of knowledge” (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) that students bring with them to the classroom, such as their cultural backgrounds and their literacy competencies in other settings. Researchers advocate that teachers acknowledge and provide recognition for these new
literacy skills and practices (Knobel, 2001). By allowing students to teach their teachers and peers these new literacies, educators can capitalize on students’ strengths and acknowledge individuals as capable and articulate people who can inform others.

A third reason for teachers to develop a working familiarity with these practices is to stay current with changing views and innovations. DIY media represent a shift in perspective on literacy from the dominant cognitive model that emphasizes reading to a broader understanding of a range of literacy practices that are situated within social and cultural contexts (Street, 1995). Although the principles of reading and writing have not changed, literacy has shifted from a focus merely on print texts to include the ability to process multimodal text images, including digital texts, lyrical texts, and visual texts (Luke, 2003).

As a result, researchers are attempting to help bridge the gap between adolescents’ in- and out-of-school literacies by identifying and describing these informal literacy practices (e.g., Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005a, 2005b; Mahiri, 2004) and by promoting instruction that incorporates appropriate and relevant new literacies, such as DIY media (Hull & Schultz, 2002). For example, a science teacher experimented with class blogs where students write, read, and peer-review their own murder mysteries where clues represent the forensic concepts and skills that they learned in chemistry class (Guzzetti, in press). English/Language Arts teachers have capitalized on their students’ facility with video games by helping their students compose fiction through creating digital game stories (McClay, Mackey, Carbonaro, Szafron, & Schaeffer, 2007). A high school foreign language teacher used the virtual world of Second Life to establish a disco where class members spoke in French to one another as they danced in this virtual world (Collis, 2009).

Teachers who incorporate new media into their instruction in ways like these tend to realize that those who engage in DIY media practices are learning unique new literacy skills and abilities. Some of these new literacy skills and abilities are multitasking, making intertextual ties, designing texts, learning new digital languages, and writing in hybrid forms or creating texts that use both Internet and print texts. These are the new literacy skills and abilities that will be increasingly needed for the 21st-century workforce (Sanford & Madill, 2007). Already, assessments are being developed to measure students’ facilities with these new literate skills and abilities (Hammett, 2007).
Finally, we recognize that adolescence is a time of self-exploration and self-discovery. Adolescents try on and test out new identities, perhaps more so than they will at any other point in their lives. These new literacies of DIY media are inherently interesting to young people because they enable individuals to represent themselves in alternative ways and create literate products (e.g., blogs, journals, video games, zines) that reflect their current interests and changing identities.

Teachers can use DIY media to help students develop their identities as learners. Students may enact their identities as members of an e-community creating digital game stories, as investigators of knowledge who blog to share information, or as authors of online journals written in the foreign language that they are studying in school. By incorporating these new media into their teaching, teachers acknowledge that students do not stop learning when the school bell rings (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

ACCESSING AND VALUING NEW DIY LITERACIES

Even as we advocate for instruction that celebrates and embraces these DIY media practices, we are mindful that not all students have equal access to engage in them either in or out of school. Too often, students from low socioeconomic groups, those that are isolated geographically, and students of color lack access to computers or do not have up-to-date computers capable of providing access, or they may lack Internet connections. Access to technology support is important because even print-based DIY practices may be facilitated by word processing, e-mail, and Internet networking and broadcasting. Many young people may be unaware of or unable to consume and produce these new literacies.

Lack of access leads to another problem related to social justice—awareness of the value of these new literacies. Adults and young people who do not engage in DIY media, particularly digital DIY media, often fail to realize their value. This is such a serious concern that it is has been referred to as the new civil rights issue of the millennium (Carvin, 2000).

As the new millennium progresses, the literate skills and abilities that are fostered by these DIY practices will become increasingly in demand in tomorrow’s workforce. A new global society and
global economy are being fostered by digital literacies, including digital DIY media. Those who lack these skills will be left behind in the world marketplace.

**GENDER JUSTICE AND THE NEW LITERACIES**

Although students’ socioeconomic status impacts their access to and facility with new literacies, researchers have documented that gender also impacts learning both in and out of school (e.g., Mazzarella, 2005; Sanford & Madill, 2007). Gender influences what is socially acceptable learning and what is out of bounds as feminine or masculine practices. Issues of power, exclusivity, and status prevail with the new literacies just as they impact traditional forms of literacy.

**Gender Gaps in Mastering New and Old Literacies**

Traditional forms of academic literacies have typically been associated with girls’ interests and abilities (Skelton, 2001). Although boys resist school literacies where they typically have been less successful than girls, they are becoming literate in new digital literacies outside of school. Young men learn different ways of speaking, listening, viewing, and understanding through their interactions with new technologies (Gee, 2003).

Adolescent boys engage more often and at more sophisticated levels than girls do with new literacies by playing and creating their own video games, making video game music, and engaging in computer-based activities (Sanford & Madill, 2007). In doing so, young men learn a range of skills that will lead to social, economic, communication, and technological value in the workplace (Sanford & Madill, 2007). They are learning these skills in highly complex environments outside of school.

Researchers studying boys developing video games documented both the traditional and new literacy skills that young men learned in creating computer games (Gee, 2003; Sanford & Madill, 2007). These new literacies include how to blend visual and print texts; how to explore new technologies; and, through programming, how to create rules for movement and interaction. Boys enhance their understandings of traditional literacy through using
and interpreting literary devices, such as symbolism and contrast in game creation. Boys who create video games enhance their critical thinking abilities by problem solving, reading and understanding rules, decoding meaning systems, and reflecting on strategies.

**Cyberbullying and Sexual Harassment**

Perhaps one reason that girls participate less in creating video games or online communities is that sexual harassment and cyberbullying are prevalent in online environments. Cyberbullies spread rumors and make threats (*Weekly Reader, 2007*). A recent survey, *The Pew Internet and American Life Project Parents and Teens Survey* (Lenhart, 2007), showed that teenage girls are more likely to be targets of cyberbullying than boys. Older teen girls reported being intimidated online more often than other young people. Adolescents identified some of these harassing behaviors, such as spreading rumors, posting embarrassing photographs, sending threatening e-mails, and making private e-mails public.

Sexual harassment and disrespect of women are also widespread problems on the Internet. Recent articles in the commercial press have described how cyberstalkers harass and threaten women (Nakashima, 2007). Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (2006) interviewed adolescent girls about their online experiences. Girls described how they tried to fight back against sexual harassment by displaying confidence and rebelling against stereotypical notions of femininity, but were unsuccessful in stopping masculine dominance.

Other studies show that the same stereotypical gender roles and relations that marginalize women in offline places are reproduced in online spaces. Thomas (2005) described how adolescent girls engaged in exaggerated behaviors of femininity online that interfered with online communications, like flirting and incessant giggling by using emoticons and chat language. Others (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006) found that older adolescent males engaged in crude language and explicit expressions of sexuality that offended girls in chat rooms. Flaming (insulting, name-calling, and using expletives) are other ways in which adolescent males marginalize and intimidate females in cyberspace (Guzzetti, 2008).

Finally, girls’ contributions in online environments are often not acknowledged or elaborated on by others, particularly in male-dominated discussion groups. Girls’ voices on message boards and
electronic discussion lists can be silenced by being ignored. Lack of acknowledgment jeopardizes girls’ participation, since females are less likely to persist in posting when their messages receive no response (Herring, 2001).

PROGRAMS THAT ADDRESS SOCIAL INJUSTICES IN DIY MEDIA

Many social service agencies, public information centers, private foundations, and government agencies have recognized these issues. These agencies attempt to address the racial, cultural, and gender inequities that create the digital divide through supplementary programs. Their intent is to help compensate for the limited access and capabilities of schools or homes or provide a supportive and safe environment for girls’ participation in online communities.

After-School Programs

One of the largest types of programs that promote digital access are after-school and summer programs. Global Kids (www.globalkids.org) is an independent and nonprofit program based in low-performing New York City high schools, formed in collaboration with the New York City Department of Education, the After School Corporation, and the United Way of New York City. The mission of Global Kids is “to transform urban youth into successful students and global and community leaders by engaging them in socially dynamic content rich experiences.” Through the virtual world of Second Life, Global Kids network with other students across the world to investigate and report on international issues. A machinima film, a computer animation done in a three-dimensional environment that some of these students created in the virtual world of Second Life, can be seen on the YouTube video (www.youtube.com), Global Kids Race to Equality.

Gender Equity Programs

There are also after-school programs that specifically target either girls or boys to address gender inequities in technology. One of these after-school programs is CompuGirls (www.compugirls.asu.edu), a project that services adolescent girls from underresourced
high schools in the Phoenix area in grades 8–12. This program, funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), is conducted both after school and in summers and focuses on teaching participants digital skills as they investigate community issues of their choice, using the digital abilities and technologies they learn in the program to do so.

Perhaps the largest program that addresses gender injustice in digital literacies is the National Girls Collaborative Project (NGCP) (www.pugetsoundcenter.org/ngcp/). Funded by the National Science Foundation, this program provides resource sharing, conferences, a directory of girl-serving projects, and mini grants to girl-serving agencies to encourage young women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Examples of these projects can be seen on YouTube.

**Programs in Youth-Serving Agencies**

Many youth-serving agencies also have programs to help to compensate for lack of access to digital technologies. These agencies also encourage youth in technology through their personnel who serve as role models. Youth workers in social service agencies are more likely than teachers to share racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences and live in the same communities as the youth they serve (Rubinstein-Avilla, 2007).

These programs include projects by the Girl Scouts and the Boys and Girls Clubs. The Girl Scouts sponsors a Girls Go Tech program (www.girlsgotech.org) that provides computer workshops, a merit badge for achievement in digital technologies, a short film and video contest, and digital tools to create designs on the web. Their website contains descriptions of careers for girls in technology, a list of print and online resources, and a booklet of tips for parents to encourage and support girls in technology.

The Boys and Girls Clubs (BGCs) service youth ages 6 to 18, and are found in schools, public housing developments, homeless shelters, military bases, and on Native American lands. BGCs provide computer access and training with Club Tech. Club Tech provides fluency with the Internet, access to productivity software, such as word processing and spreadsheets, and offers creative and artistic software, such as digital arts and video editing (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boys_&_Girls_Clubs_of_America).
Community Technology Centers

Community Technology Centers (CTCs) offer resources to families to help bridge the digital divide by offering public access to computers and the Internet. Once funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education, these centers now rely on a variety of funding sources, including benefits, donations, other grant programs, and revenue-generating projects (www.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_technology_center). CTCs provide training in basic computer skills, digital media production, and applied computing skills. CTCs may be found in public libraries, schools, social service agencies, neighborhood centers, and religious centers.

Public Libraries

In 1993, public libraries began offering computer and Internet access to the public. Private foundations, such as the Gates Foundation, offer grants to help libraries improve the quality of their free computer access. These grants are needed because local libraries offer variable services. They often lack up-to-date computers with adequate bandwidth for high-speed and reliable Internet access, and frequently have outdated programs (www.gathermodust.com/2008/05/public-access-computer-problem). Despite these problems, public libraries provide the only viable access to computers and the Internet for some students.

MOVING FORWARD: THE CHALLENGE OF DIY MEDIA

These outside resources are important not only because they provide access, but also because they provide the opportunity for teens to pursue their own interests and create their own media. Many adolescents perceive their use of computers in school to be boring and trivial (Gasmo, 2004). Yet young people engage in increasingly sophisticated digital literacy practices outside of school (Alvermann, 2002). Schools tend to play a minimal role in adolescents’ learning of digital skills in comparison to their out-of-school learning, which is stimulated by popular culture, new media, and social networking (Kearney, 2006a). It is important to keep in mind that focusing solely on students’ school-related literate abilities only in school itself
suggests that young people have no life outside of school (Street, 1995). We believe that effective instruction is student–centered, ac-
knowledges the complexity of the individual, and incorporates stu-
dents’ backgrounds and interests. By becoming familiar with and 
recognizing the importance of adolescents’ DIY media, teachers can 
acknowledge their students as articulate and capable young people 
who have myriad ways of demonstrating their literate abilities.