MyLiteracies:
Understanding the Net Generation through LiveJournals and Literacy Practices

by Dana J. Wilber

It is nearly midnight, and "Darla" is just beginning her history paper that is due tomorrow afternoon when her cell phone vibrates nearly off the desk. Darla's laptop screen is alive with small square windows filled with lines of text, flashing one on top of the other. Music plays in the background, and her text for her course on American History Since 1865 lies open. Without thinking, Darla flips open the phone and rests the pink speaker against her ear as she types a response to her friend's instant message with one hand. Underneath the instant message screen is an open, empty document waiting for her to begin. It is going to be a long night, and "Tina," her best friend, is commiserating with her on the phone.

The students of today, sometimes referred to as Millennials or as members of the Net Generation, are living in a world mediated by technological lenses that did not exist when their parents attended school (Tapscott 1998; Howe and Strauss 2000). Gone are the days of working in monastic isolation in a silent library cubicle. College students today not only multitask; they layer sensory experiences and communication avenues one atop another, moving between tasks and ideas quickly (Jones and Madden 2002; Cammack 2005a; Cammack 2005b; Lohnes 2005; Windham 2005a). The contexts of school itself have changed, growing from a set of static buildings on a single campus to include satellite campuses and distance courses; the tools of higher education now include digital technologies hardly dreamed of even twenty years ago, in turn, demanding new literacies from students.

In light of these changes, educators and researchers face the key challenge of understanding how such new technologies have changed college students' literacy practices. My theoretical orientation examines literacy from a social and cognitive perspective, seeing literacy as a set of practices that are intertwined with the settings in which they occur and the tools that they use. This framework yields insights about how the contexts and tools of literacy have changed over time (Street 1994). Such insights, in turn, may provide a valuable foundation for educators who seek to incorporate, refine, or expand such emergent literacy skills in their own pedagogy practices and course design.

In this article I provide the results of an ethnographic case study conducted in Fall 2005, a study that was designed as a pilot for a longer term study of a network of students and their literacy practices to be conducted later. The case study focused on the experience of one student in order to discern how her experience with a particular technological tool—LiveJournal, a social networking site—reflected the development of distinctive literacies that merit further consideration by educators. This article serves as an introduction to LiveJournal specifically, as well as the nature of social networking sites more generally, and offers connections to potential practices in higher education research and pedagogy.

LiveJournal and the Emergence of New, Multiple Literacies

LiveJournal is one of a host of social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, that allow the user to create content viewable by linked friends as well as by a more general public. Students use social networking sites to communicate with friends, meet new people, set up groups, and post content. These sites have grown to such a degree that two in every five teenagers in the United States currently create content on the Web through such portals (Fox and Madden 2006; Lenhart and Fox 2006). MySpace, the largest and perhaps best known of the social networking sites, currently lists more than 106 million users (Sellers 2006). As of July 11, 2006, LiveJournal listed 10.6 million pages created since its inception in 1999 with more than 200,000 posts each day by users around the world.

Together, these sites and the literacy practices they have helped create represent a major cultural and social phenomenon. As Lankshear and Knobel (2003) have noted, the literacies of today's students are not only ontologically new in that they involve technologies that did not exist previously, but they are also paradigmatically new in that the distinctive skills, proficiencies, and affordances they provide also entail a broader transformation of prior concepts and practices of literacy. With regard to LiveJournal and other social networking technologies, this insight also holds true in many respects.

The literacy practices involved in using social networking sites are paradigmatically new in their multimodal affordances as well as in the networks they create and sustain. This, in turn, entails more flexible, dynamic, and interactive notions of the respective roles of author and reader. LiveJournal and sites like it allow users to create their own pages and link to their friends' pages on the same site. They can post comments on friends' pages, upload photos, rate their professors, and post diary entries. In creating posts, users can embed text with images, audio, and video, creating multimodal texts that readers actively navigate. They therefore must choose how to best manipulate the facets of these complex pages to create and recreate their identities online even when those identities comprise contradictory aspects (Hevern 2004). These literacy practices are similar to those of a published author to a certain degree in that the content is linked to the identity of the writer, who must be aware of the potential implications of writing to the world at large. Yet social networking sites also expand and transform the role of the author for the students who use them. Prior to the development of the Internet and these sites, most students did not author works available to readers beyond the classroom or a small circle of friends. Since social networking technology allows users to choose varying degrees of privacy restrictions for their sites, student authors have a much greater ability to manage and refashion their relationship with different segments of their online readership. These new literacies transform the role of the reader as well: Readers themselves become authors, have greater means of interacting with other authors/readers, and can have a much more focused relationship with other specialized groups of authors/readers.

The contexts of literacy practices today have also changed in that the locations of production and participation have been transformed. Students use LiveJournal, MySpace, or Facebook in dorm rooms, lecture halls, cafeterias, and hallways. The interaction of different spaces with students' practices and tools is an important piece for understanding the whole puzzle of the changing literacies of college students today. The difference between these multimodal, flexible practices and the static writing associated with most college courses is stark. While this article is not intended as a call for the use of social networking sites in all academic courses, perhaps it is time to move the writing practices required of our students toward electronically created and connected texts that would bridge student interests and expertise with the development of academic skills.

A Close Look at One LiveJournal User

Over the course of a semester at a mid-sized Eastern public college, I conducted a pilot study of the literacy and technology practices of a single college student referred to in this paper as Darla. Her name has been changed to protect her privacy. I found Darla by Googling the name of the college along with the word "blog" in September and then reading the blogs that came up. I contacted her through the instant-messaging name listed on her LiveJournal blog, and she agreed to work with me for the remaining three months of the semester during which time I printed out each of her posts and interviewed her, via e-mail, once each week.

I wanted to know what Darla's LiveJournal meant to her, what functions it served, and how it could be read in terms of her literacy and technology practices generally. While this article works toward a close reading of one LiveJournal user, it can lead to some wide-ranging conclusions because Darla's uses of LiveJournal are indicative of the kinds of things she reported her friends to be doing as well using technology. Darla and her contemporaries mirror the uses reported in the Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) book *Educating the Net Generation* as well as Jones and Madden's (2002) recent study for the Pew Internet Project on college uses of technology. In other words, Darla's experiences using a social networking site may be typical of a majority of college students who use these sites.

At the time of the study, Darla was a senior in her school's small music therapy program. She was an avid musician and played several instruments in bands and other groups associated with the school; Darla also worked part-time as a nanny to two young boys. Darla was a good student with strong verbal skills and considered herself fairly proficient with technology. She reported using computers her entire life and listening to her first CD via the CD-ROM player in the computer at home. Darla designed her first personal Web site at the age of 14 and remembered fighting with her younger sister over access to the home computer in order to get online to talk to other people in chat rooms using AOL. Interestingly, Darla had never kept a journal before starting her LiveJournal four years before this study, after friends who had LiveJournals kept "pressuring me to get one" (personal communication, October 30, 2005).

At the time of this project, Darla reported being online at least ten times each day to check e-mail, visit her LiveJournal, and instant message with friends. She guessed that each day she read an average of twenty different LiveJournals on which she was listed as a friend, not counting "communities" such as WeightWatchers that she had joined through LiveJournal. Using her computer often involved listening to music, surfing the Web, and talking with friends, often all at once. Darla visited her own LiveJournal several times daily, using it to inform her friends about recent events in her life and keeping a sort of personal living history. For Darla, her LiveJournal served as a combination of diary and planner, a mix of personal reflection and public interaction. (See Figure 1 from my LiveJournal; I do not link to Darla's journal to protect her anonymity).

LiveJournal, and the social networking site in general, is a communication forum neither completely private nor totally public; finding a particular LiveJournal requires either the URL or specific keywords, yet entries are open to anyone with an Internet connection. Authors of LiveJournals also have the ability to control access to posts, so that some may be private, open only to themselves, while others are open only to friends or groups to whom the authors give access, and some posts are open to anyone. This allows users to create levels of access and to manipulate private and public domains. Darla restricted access to her posts to a list of friends, which she permitted me to join, who receive notification from LiveJournal when she adds a new post. She was acutely aware of this line between public and private and knew how it could be used to advantage and disadvantage:

I don't really know if it's like a real journal as I never really kept one. I think it's a place where I can just write without thinking, when the mood strikes. I think the fact that I know people read it keeps me from writing about certain things that are on my mind though—which I guess is what makes it different from a paper journal. (personal communication, October 31, 2006)

Later in the same interview, Darla disclosed that friends in her group had used the LiveJournal format to express anger with each other indirectly, knowing that other members of the group would read anything posted on each others' LiveJournals. This hybridity of public and private allows users and authors to post what would normally be private information with the awareness that anyone can comprise the audience. Publishing arguments or displeasure to a Web journal accessed by a community of readers and friends is one example of how these tools add complex layers to the communication habits of young people today.

In key respects, the readers of Darla's LiveJournal are like an audience for a live performance in that members interact with her and make comments that can shape the narrative as it develops (Lindemann 2005). The author retains the power to keep or jettison comments as she wishes, as a part of her own work in creating the text as a whole. This process, then, is a hybrid between oral and written, mediated and singular—walking the line between forms that prior to the development of blogs and hypertext seemed static and given.

LiveJournal as Border-Crossing

LiveJournal, MySpace, and Facebook sites proliferate in part because they offer users the chance to locate themselves as a part of a socially articulated network that exists in virtual space (Boyd 2004). Authors make use of the semiotic resources available to them to construct profiles of themselves that are everchanging, multimodal, and accretive. While this article focuses on the LiveJournal of a single user, similar work being done by Boyd (2006), Lindemann (2004), Soukup (2006), and others is charting the construction and performance of identities online as well as the development and use of online communities.

Darla's social life involved a close-knit group of friends; she used LiveJournal to locate herself online and among her friends. Her entries worked as a barometer of her mood, a way to position and recreate herself (sophisticated drinker, witty jokester, sarcastic girl) and as a means of writing herself into the world. Sometimes, this was a personal world of figuring herself out: discussing decisions about her career, where to live after college, or whom to love. Sometimes it comprised the larger world of her friends who were creating memories together, and often this was a world beyond the personal, reaching into the larger public sphere of the Internet. Darla was using her journal as a way of mediating boundaries, of border crossing and building a life beyond campus, transgressing and then pulling back and making entries private when she needed more shelter. Just like her friends, Darla used technology to mediate and shape herself and her life.

Future Directions and Thoughts

Faculty need to understand these new literacy practices and consider regarding them as resources for creating new, multimodal practices. Through her LiveJournal, Darla drew on many semiotic and intertextual techniques, developing talents that her academic assignments rarely asked her to tap. Neglecting these resources and the talents they develop widens the gulf between academic tasks and the technologies and literacy practices in which our students engage beyond the classroom. The work of encouraging students to find authentic, meaningful reasons for engagement in college courses could benefit from involving the intertextual and multimodal practices of blogs, wikis, and social networking sites.

Faculty could exploit the literacy practices of students by having them maintain a course blog on a free site such as Blogger.com, noting their reactions to readings and thoughts from lectures, posting drafts or examples of their writing, and discussing group projects with their partners. The new tools that attract students to blogs and social networking software—including the resources that make possible site design, intertextuality, the combination of video and audio elements with text, the ability to comment and respond—can be used for the age-old project of developing the thinking, reading, and writing skills of students.

Ganley (2006), like many others, integrates blogs and similar formats into her courses and finds that students see a personal blog as a more authentic form of expression than posting to discussion boards like those that Blackboard or WebCT provide. Using blogs in classes connects the practices students engage in outside of class to the academic practices of the university. Students are more likely to find personal blogs as meaningful, authentic, and creative spaces for self exploration as they are for academic performance. As Ganley writes in her own blog, "In our classrooms we have for so long woven pretty pale, stiff excuses for richly hued, complex, textured tapestries of a group's time together thinking, listening, talking, and creating. We can do better" (2007b, ¶14). Ganley has seen her students take risks with their writing and learning, reflect more deeply, and create complex and detailed multimodal texts in her classroom following her instituting blogging.

In one example, Ganley's students are using blogs to connect to other students around the globe and then continuing conversation in real time by using Skype to talk to one another. Her students create learning partnerships with other students in other schools; moreover, they use their blogs to develop a deeper understanding of a topic. Her Blogging the World students blog about their experiences living in another country—in one case, Siberia—and develop a series of fictional and nonfictional posts that told the stories and facts of that place. In the Siberian project, the students worked to combine diary posts with factual accounts, using both genres to inform one another; this blog was so successful that students at another

university were assigned to read the blog as preparatory reading prior to traveling to Russia (Ganley 2007a). Overall, Ganley (2004) argues that using blogs with her students supported their developing collective intelligence and resources and allowed them to combine personal insights with intellectual arguments.

Another advantage of using these Web sites instead of Blackboard and similar systems is that students can continue using LiveJournal and other sites after the class is over—a function that Blackboard and its cohorts do not offer. Internet blogs allow students to continue conversations begun in class, which is certainly one implied goal of any college course. It is a small step, perhaps, but the connection it signals to our students' lives and interests is an important one as we continue to learn about new technologies and the shifts they cause in learning and literacy.

Conclusion

Universities have developed reputations for distancing themselves from the everyday; with the use of metaphors like "the ivory towers," higher education is positioned in opposition to the realities of daily life. Yet our students must be able to connect what they learn in their courses to the experiences they have outside them, or deep, meaningful learning will never occur. As faculty, we have a responsibility to help our students make these connections, and one way we can do this is by building on the things they know well. Student expertise in technology is widespread, given the use of sites like LiveJournal, Facebook, and MySpace. Yet students also need knowledge in how to approach the ways in which they create content online in a more critical manner, and the incorporation of blogging offers a powerful way to do this. Students who create and maintain blogs for their classes create something both personal and scholarly by weaving their own experiences and reactions into course material. It is time to move from the sequestered metaphor of the ivory tower to the connected scaffold of the network. Truly, life is shifting, and in order to best teach our students, we must too.

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