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SOCIAL MEDIA AND ACADEMIC SPACES

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Abstract. This paper explores the tension that exists between informal and formal media spaces. At a time when youth are increasingly drawn to social media as places to produce and circulate culture and knowledge in relation to their identity, educators are struggling to understand how to respond to writing and forms of social interaction that do not run along traditional lines of academic literacy. The paper considers how educators in secondary and post-secondary contexts are responding to the challenges posed by social media spaces, spaces that are calling into question traditional means of knowledge production and relationships within formal academic communities.

Sudden extensions of communication are reflected in cultural disturbances.

Harold Innis. (1949) "Minnerva's Owl"

All of my high school teachers are on facebook and it's weirding me out

projectnat, Twitter

No friending or touching

According to an article published on the CBC Vancouver website, "Guidelines wanted for teachers on Facebook" (Sept. 8, 2009), the Vancouver School Board recently updated their policy guidelines so as to ban teachers from sending friends requests to their students on Facebook. The move was a response to concerns about appropriate boundaries between students and their teachers. Alongside inappropriate touching or language, "contacting students on social networking sites" is listed as unacceptable behaviour for teachers. As Chris Kennedy, West Vancouver School Board's assistant superintendent explained, Facebook "is a private journal. It's like opening their bedroom to their teachers, and that's the boundary issue. And I think students need to understand, they don't want teachers to see in there. Teachers don't want to go there." Kennedy, who uses Facebook to teach, does see value in using Facebook, particularly for school-focused Facebook pages where the school can "push out information" to the "third of Canadians who are on Facebook" as well as to kids, who "live online." Pushing out

information about school is appropriate. Going there, to the spaces that students set up on Facebook, or interacting with them in such spaces is not.

It is unsurprising that Kennedy equates Facebook to a private journal or, even more sinisterly, to a students' bedroom, a place where teachers and parents fear to tread (much to the students' relief). What is curious, though, is that it is unlikely that anything all that mysterious is taking place within the pages of Facebook. According to Boyd, (2008) these sites are "providing teens with a space to work out identity and status, make sense of cultural cues and negotiate public life" (p. 120): activities in which youth have always engaged. What is new, however, is that a nearly ubiquitous and persistent digital communications network that spans computer and mobile devices now allows youth to constantly stay in contact with one another through what Boyd calls "networked publics." Comprising social network sites such as FaceBook, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr (to name just a few), networked publics are "the spaces and audiences that are bound together through technological networks" and they are "deeply affected by the mediated nature of interaction" (p. 125). A key characteristic associated with networked publics is that membership is defined by active participation, not passive consumption. As the authors of the "Digital Youth Project" (2008) put it:

> Rather than conceptualize everyday media engagement as "consumption" by "audiences," the term "networked publics" places the active participation of a distributed social network in producing and circulating culture and knowledge in the foreground. The growing salience of networked publics in young people's everyday lives is an important change in what constitutes the social groups and publics that structure young people's learning and identity. (p. 10)

For youth, social networks are places to produce and circulate culture and knowledge in relation to their identity as individuals and as a group. In essence, their engagement with social media is about relationships more than it is about information. This focus on relationships is quite important, especially if one considers ways in which society as a whole looks at the impact of computers and networked communications on education. Schrage (2001) makes the point that "the so-called "information revolution" itself is actually, more accurately a "relationship revolution," and perhaps it is this disposition to use social media for relationships that creates many of the awkward boundary issues concerning the digital spaces youth occupy in their social lives and, to a much lesser extent, in their academic lives. This difference between relationships and information exchange is also a potential indication that there is a growing divide between the everyday literacy practices youth engage in through social media and the schooled literacy they are expected to develop in school (Merchant, 2007a).

In this paper, I will explore the tension that exists between informal and formal media spaces, particularly in relation to non-academic uses of social media and the literacy practices that are valued within educational organizations. This is a productive site for analysis. There has been extensive critical attention devoted to the experiences of youth with digital media (Luke and Luke, 2001; Prensky, 2001; Gee, 2003; Oblinger, 2005; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006; Buckingham, 2007; Boyd, 2008) and there are on-going debates concerning the extent to which these experiences have (or have not) equipped youth with communication and critical tools likely to help them succeed in school, let alone become competent and active participants in society (Selwyn, 2009,

Bennet, 2008). A key component of this debate is the question concerning whether or not the literacy practices students engage in within social media represent meaningful practice within formal academic settings. I will take up this question by considering the positions of those who either see youth today as a new digital generation or, instead, as a group that is increasingly impoverished and at risk due to their deficits in traditional literacy. I will then consider how some educators are responding to the challenges posed by social media spaces, spaces that are calling into question traditional means of knowledge production and relationships within formal academic communities. I approach this analysis from a sociocultural perspective in that I see literacy practices as embedded in social, cultural, historical and economic contexts (Bourdieu, 1991, Gee, 2000, Wertsch, 1998). I am also strongly influenced by McLuhan's critique of the classroom as a media artifact (1960, 1969), an artifact that has been historically constituted through literacy practice and knowledge production associated with print media, and that is currently undergoing transformation as a consequence of shifts in reproduction and multimodality that are evident with networked, digital media.

Digital Natives

It is not unusual for dramatic societal changes to be described in terms of generational differences. As Selwyn (2009) usefully notes, "‚children' and ‚childhood' have been long established as discursive sites through which adults can conceptualize and (re)construct past, present and future aspects of societal change" (p. 364). For example, in the sixties, McLuhan (1960, 1969) challenged the educational system of the day to find ways to respond to the new TV generation, the first generation ever raised with the television and the popular media ecology that resulted in children being bombarded with popular, multimodal media long before they experienced classrooms organized according to the principles of print literacy and industrialized models of education. And today, the children of the baby boomers are often defined as the net generation, the N-Gens, or digital natives in response to the fact that they have grown up, as Tapscott (1997) claims, "so bathed in bits that they think it's all part of the natural landscape." Prensky's (2001) provocative essay "Digital Natives Digital Immigrants" takes up a similar theme with a rather harsh analysis of existing teaching and learning relationships between "Digital Natives", youth, who have grown-up with digital technologies, and "Digital Immigrants", older people who were born before the invention of the Internet and did not grow up within such a pervasive digital environment. According to Prensky, "our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (p. 2). This struggle is characterized by Mabrito and Medley (2008) in their article "Why Professor Johnny Can't Read: Understanding the Net Generation's Texts":

> While many faculty members are technologically literate, routinely using computer resources in research and teaching, most did not grow up in the digital culture common to many of their N-Gen students. As a result, while N-Gens interact with the world through multimedia, online social networking, and routine multitasking, their professors tend to approach learning linearly, one task at a time, and as an individual activity that is centered largely around printed text. (n.p.)

The suggestion here is that faculty members simply possess a different set of skills when it comes to information management and social interaction using technology. While they make use of digital spaces for research and teaching, they do not typically engage in the patterns of social interaction within digital spaces that are so prevalent amongst youth. They do not, in other words, partake of the networked public described by Boyd; rather, their interactions with media are still largely defined by the dynamics and of printed text and the knowledge economy of books.

Critics of the digital native thesis point out that the claims made concerning the technological sophistication of youth are overstated and that proponents of the digital native concept are making an essentialist argument in relation to a whole generation as well as a technologically deterministic one in relation to the impact of new technologies (Bennet, 2008; Selwyn, 2009). Bennett (2008) equates much of the attention given to the debate as being a clear example of "moral panic," in which

> a particular group in society, such as a youth subculture, is portrayed by the news media as embodying a threat to societal values and norms. The attitudes and practices of the group are subjected to intense media focus, which, couched in sensationalist language, amplifies the apparent threat." … [T]he concept of moral panic is widely used…to explain how an issue of public concern can achieve a prominence that exceeds the evidence in support of the phenomenon. (p. 782)

That this particular debate gained such attention likely has to do, too, with the implicit challenge of imagining a situation where youth have greater mastery over the tools of literacy than do their parents or teachers. As suggested by Bennett, the idea that digital natives wield meaning-making tools different to those of their teachers is constructed as a threat to the societal values and norms within most educational settings. Such a shift in relationships is perceived to be disruptive to traditional educational practice. As such, it is not surprising that one can also hear a tone of moral panic in the voices of those critics who are concerned about contemporary ways in which youth interact with one another and media within social spaces. Keen (2007), for instance makes the following claims concerning youth culture and media:

> MySpace and Facebook are creating a youth culture of digital narcissism, open-source knowledge sharing sites like Wikipedia are undermining the authority of teachers in the classroom; the YouTube generation are more interested in self-expression than in learning about the insider world; the cacophony of anonymous blogs and user-generated content is deafening today's youth to the voices of informed experts and professional journalists; kids are so busy self-broadcasting themselves on social networks that they no longer consume the creative work of professional musicians, novelists, or filmmakers. (p. xiii-xiv)

While the tone of Keen's diatribe against these digital narcissistic amateurs reveals the amount of passion and energy that often attends such debates, the particular points he raises concerning youth's interaction with media serve to reinforce Schrage's (2001) point that the revolution we are seeing is really about relationships, in part due to new technologies, but also due to the new ethos of those who interact within, and are constituted, by those spaces. The sore points Keen raises highlight some significant shifts taking place in our contemporary knowledge economies, particularly with respect to creation, distribution and consumption of knowledge and media products. These

shifts impact relationships to authority, relationships to expertise within organizations, and relationships to the products from which expert communities earn their livelihood: all of these relationships are undergoing change.

New Literacies and New Media

Even if one does not invest an entire generation with the media and technology skills often associated with the idea of the digital native, it is clear that traditional conceptions of media and literacy practice, as well as the identities and roles that are defined by those spaces are in considerable flux. A good indication of this flux is the evolution in the definition of literacy itself from a disposition defined by the coding and encoding of printed texts to a much broader definition that acknowledges literacy as diverse and involving a range of semiotic systems and modes well beyond those defined by the configuration of written text and the page. Carmen Luke (2000), for instance calls for an expanded form of literacy because of the presence of new information, social and cultural environments:

> "book- and print-based literacies, and the industrial model of schooling built around book culture, are no longer wholly adequate in a changing information, social, and cultural environment. In light of the accelerated shift toward electronically mediated communication and social exchange in almost all facets of everyday life, there is a need for an expanded form of literacy" (p. 424).

And the New London Group (2000) (of which Luke is a member) suggests that a whole new terminology and critical framing of literacy is needed, one that cannot reside within the narrow definition of literacy too often associated with language acquisition within the boundaries of a 19th century nation state:

> We want to extend the idea and scope of literacy pedagogy to account for the context of our culturally and linguistically diverse and increasingly globalised societies; to account for the multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate. Second, we argue that literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. (p. 9)

According to the New London Group, in a world that is increasingly global and influenced and connected by multimodal communication technologies, literacy pedagogy must necessarily expand to include multiple literacies, or multiliteracies, and literacy pedagogy must attend to the skills and dispositions that students need to succeed and fully participate in societies that are predicated upon diversity and difference as opposed to uniformity and normative literacy practices.

It is worth noting that where some critics, like Keen, see shifts in media and literacy practice in terms of loss and a reduction in the social capital associated with expert knowledge, others see it in more positive terms, as a process that is generative of new cultural possibilities. For instance, contra Keen's negative description of youth's interaction with media in terms of narcissism, anarchism and loss of central authority, Lankshear and Knobel (2006) consider these new media practices as signs of cultural practices that are participatory, collaborative and distributed in nature:

> the more a literacy practice privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise, collective intelligence over individual possessive intelligence, collaboration over individuated authorship, dispersion over scarcity, sharing over ownership, experimentation over "normalization," innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, creative-innovative rule breaking over generic purity and policing, relationship over information broadcast, and so on, the more we should regard it as a "new" literacy. New technologies enable and enhance these practices, often in ways that are stunning in their sophistication and breathtaking in their scale. (p. 21)

The new literacy practices that Lankshear and Knobel describe relate directly to the social interactions that commonly take place within social media spaces, where active participation rather than passive consumption determine status, and where distributed affinity groups (Gee, 2004) interact in an unprecedented expansion of public engagement with the creation and representation of knowledge. What is certainly worth considering is how educational institutions might critically engage with new media and new literacies. As Merchant (2007a) asserts,

> We need to begin to explore pedagogies that are sensitive to emerging patterns of interaction, to the sorts of social networks that are created by the interweaving of online and offline practices, and to the kinds of knowledge-building processes that are starting to develop with more widespread use of media. (p. 244)

Merchant's call harkens back to the point raised earlier by the authors of the Digital Youth Project (2008), that there is an "important change in what constitutes the social groups and publics that structure young people's learning and identity" (p. 10). It behooves educators to help to make sense of this change and to play a positive role in assisting students (and themselves) to critically engage the challenge and potential of how this change impacts learning, identity and the world at large.

A new digital divide: everyday and school uses of social media

The expansion of literacy to include modes of meaning-making beyond the configuration of the printed text and the page does not mean the end of print literacy. It does mean, however, that educators must examine what counts as literacy in their own practice and find ways to respond to expanded modes of representation and sites for interaction rather than ignore them as irrelevant to learning processes or only value them when they take on the characteristics of traditional literacy practices as understood in the particular configuration of print-based literacy and book culture. Recent data on the use of technology by students both in their personal and academic lives suggest that our educational institutions are struggling with the challenge of new literacies and, generally, having difficulty engaging the digital skills that students bring within them into school or tap into the potential of networked publics for the purpose of learning. For instance, the ECAR Research Study on "Students and Information Technology, 2009" identifies "the shift of the web from a repository of others' content to a medium for creative contribution and a medium of social exchange" (ECAR, p. 9) as the central story in the evolution of student use of computers and technologies. As the authors of the study put it, "interactive communication tools such as instant messaging, text

messaging and social networking sites are shaping how college students connect to the world and each other" (ECAR, p. 13). Drawing upon responses from over 30,000 students from universities in the United States and Canada, the study found that a high percentage of students are participating in social networking sites for personal use with close to 86% of students using such sites on a weekly basis. In terms of active participation or creation of content in social networking sites, the percentages of use by students is also quite high: 44.8% of students contributed content to video websites, 41.9% contributed to wikis, 37.3% contributed to blogs and 35% use podcasts. In noteable contrast, only 27.8% of students report using social networking sites in the context of their courses, with only 25.5% using wikis and 11.5% using blogs. And in response to questions about use of video and audio software tools (to create video and podcasts), students reported very low use of just 6% (ECAR, p. 15). When asked about the skills of their instructors in using information technology (IT) in the context of academic courses, fewer than 45% felt that their instructors used IT effectively. 45% also indicated that they felt that their instructors lacked adequate skills for carrying out instruction (ECAR, p. 17).

The concept of the digital divide has long been used to draw attention to ways in which access of use of technology commonly reinforces existing inequities and hierarchies of power within society, and it is possible to consider the same metaphor in the context of the gap evident from the research between everyday literacy practices of youth using social media and their teachers schooled literacy within the classroom. On the one side are students who are increasingly adept with and constituted by the networked publics that Boyd describes. On the other side are teachers who defensively resist any disruption of the ways in which information and social capital currently flow within the knowledge economy of educational institutions. The gap that is evident in the uses of digital media by youth and by educators (at least in the context of North American universities), indicates a number of interesting characteristics that define the boundaries between everyday and school literacy practices. One outcome Merchant (2007a) fears is that "a whole range of cultural resources fail to be translated into cultural capital in the school system" (p. 247). Here, Merchant is drawing upon Bourdieu's (1991) notion of *Habitus*, and in the context of literacy pedagogy, to the subset of *habitus* he described, literary *habitus*. Bourdieu defined literary *habitus* as a set of dispositions that we acquire as we learn to speak within particular contexts that mark us with differences that have symbolic value. This linguistic sense of place strongly influences how we consume the symbolic signs of wealth and authority that set the market conditions for how we and others value ourselves and our own acts of production. A question worth considering is how the literary *habitus* youth develop through their on-going participation in networked publics influences their encounters with schooled spaces.

If the data from the ECAR study is any indication, it is reasonable to conclude that the literary *habitus* constituted through the literacy practices of youth in social media do not achieve social capital in terms of the market for academic success. As Marbrito and Medley put it, "texts that do not look like books or essays that are not structured in unfamiliar ways may leave educators with the perception that the authors of these texts lack literacy skills" (3). On the other side of the social capital equation, there is a "low level of professional confidence in the use of popular digital texts in the classroom" on

the part of teachers (Merchant, 2007b). Harbman, Dziuban and Brophy-Ellison (2007) draw attention to this identity crisis on the part of faculty in their article "Faculty 2.0":

> Most faculty members are experts in their respective disciplines, and as teachers, they expect to be regarded as such. Confronting new and unfamiliar technologies can quickly turn them into novices, and with technically savvy Net Generation students in their classes, they may find that their students know more about specific technologies than they do, creating a balance-of-power shift in the faculty-student relationship. (p. 64)

A factor that further exacerbates this issue is that faculty often do not receive sufficient support in the form of training around pedagogical methodologies or in the use of learning technologies. One response to this situation is to react negatively and defensively to the presence of new forms of literacy or new media spaces and to carefully control their use (to ban them outright or, as one high school principle in British Columbia attempted, to set up a jamming device to disable their use on the school grounds, an action that proved to be illegal) so as to reduce the disruptive influence of these media in traditional classrooms and to discourage the literacy practices of the students on the ground that it is not appropriate for an academic setting.

Leander (2006) in his cleverly titled article "You won't be needing your laptops today": Wired bodies in the wireless classroom," interviewed a group of teachers at a school to gauge their responses to the presence of laptops and the Internet in face-to-face classrooms. Drawing upon their answers, he came up with a list ways in which the "pedagogization" (Street and Street, 1991) of digital literacy practices, a process to reduce the disruption of media and technologies by aligning them within existing conceptions of practice (habitus) within educational contexts, takes place:

- Defined plans precede resources and activity; actors know what they need or are seeking in advance.
- Sequential activity is dominant, and everyone follows the same sequential path.
- Asynchronous communication is primary to synchronous communication (e.g., e-mail or web searching is more "schooled" than instant messaging).
- A single space is dominant (and under surveillance) for each task; "task" is mono-spatial and "off-task" is partially defined as departure into another social space.
- Public social spaces, including the Internet, must be bracketed for student use; school needs to produce kindergartens of public spaces for students to understand them, learn within them, and be safe within them.
- Material print texts and print spaces (the built environment) are primary and are authorized, while virtual texts are unauthorized and supplemental.
- The Internet is primarily tool for information rather than a tool for communication. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) are primarily "IT's" in school. (p. 41).

This list of pedagogical practices and attitudes concerning the Internet and social media is dramatically counter to the aforementioned cultural practices that Lankshear and Knobel described as typical of new literacy. The last point is particularly interesting as it illuminates a key point made in the ECAR (2009) study concerning "a shift of the

web from a repository of others' content to a medium for creative contribution and a medium of social exchange" (p. 9). While many students seem to have made that shift, particularly in their everyday use of the Internet and social media, more often than not their teachers have not followed them.

It is essential to point out that teachers are rarely able to fully determine the curriculum taught within their classrooms let alone the technology infrastructure. Regardless of whether they work in the K12 schools or in post-secondary universities or colleges, teachers are governed by the social and political dynamics within the institutions in which they teach. In most settings, it is rare for teachers to have a say in the selection or deployment of technologies that are sanctioned for use within the classroom or on the institutions computer networks. Administrators or individuals who have an IT rather than an educational role within the institution typically make decisions about technologies in the classroom. And as the aforementioned policy restricting Vancouver teachers from using Facebook with their students, indicates, teachers are often highly constrained by official policies and restrictive firewalls within their classrooms. Even if teachers want to make use of the wider internet and social media, tight restrictions placed on academic spaces by trustees in the school boards and parents often produce the "kindergardens of public space," that Leander (2006) describe.

Fortunately, not all teachers and educational institutions respond to the presence of new media and new literacy practices by attempting to narrowly restrict their use so as to bolster conventional print-based literacy practices or reinscribe existing pedagogical strategies and hierarchies within academically domesticated interfaces. For example, at the University of British Columbia, increasing numbers of instructors are designing activities or entire courses within social media spaces so as to give students opportunities to actively participate in community knowledge building with peers as well as taking the process of learning within a course into public spaces. Within courses where students meet face-to-face, such online conversations both extend and enrich the exchanges that take place when students are together once a week. In completely on-line courses such as ETEC540: the changing spaces of reading and writing, a course that operates both within a standard course management system, WebCT Vista, as well as outside in social media spaces, students can not only more frequently engage with one another's ideas, but they take on lead roles in designing the actual spaces in which they will interact. As well, because their conversations and work occupy such a central place in the learning processes and spatial configuration of the course, students take a great amount of ownership over their learning, as well as quickly form into a vital affinity group around the topics of the course. When the students in these courses interact as a group within these spaces and negotiate their ideas and sense of identify with one another, they experience something close to the networked publics Boyd describes in the context of everyday literacy practices. In order to be comfortable with such an integration of both new literacies and new media within such classrooms, teachers need to be sufficiently comfortable negotiating their role as experts alongside of a group of students, and sufficiently competent with the media tools to engage alongside of them as contributing (not dominating) members of a learning community.

The boundaries drawn between how we use social media in our personal and academic lives need to be seen as sites for on-going contestation and negotiation. As Bulfin and North suggest,

> the bounded and distinct notions of home, school, community, online and offline make little sense when we carry so much of these spaces around with us. The relationship between these spaces need to be retheorised in light of new technologies and the practices they encourage and afford….Home and school, offline and online worlds connect in and through the everyday practices of young people in complex and rich ways. Recognising the significance of such texts and practices needs to be framed within a critical understanding of technologies and their social and cultural meanings. (p. 260).

There is much to be gained within formal education if more critical attention is directed to understanding how these new communication technologies disrupt existing relationships at the same time as they open up the potential for rethinking how we might best leverage the affordances of such powerful tools for social interaction. Networked publics as defined by social interactions in digital spaces need to be places for active engagement, not spaces constrained by the literacy practices of print culture, nor spaces out of bounds to educators, who should be finding ways to expand participation and collaboration with their students, not keep them off the school grounds.

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