

# **Renegotiating digital literacies in and around the curriculum**

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## **1. Introduction**

In this paper, I examine the unofficial and unsanctioned literacies of young people in five secondary schools in Melbourne, Australia, especially as these practices relate to their use of digital technologies. These unofficial and unsanctioned literacies form part of what I call young people's 'digital literacy underlife': individual and collective behaviours, attitudes and practices which might also be characterised as 'sub rosa' (Gilmore 1986), hidden (Finders 1997), clandestine (Stirponi 2007) and borderland (Gee 1996; Wilson 2000). Research has been done examining literacy underlife in various settings. Most of this work has examined adolescents' talk and writing in and out of schools (Camitta 1993; Finders 1997; Maybin 2006, 2007; Shuman 1986, 1993). The analysis in this paper builds on this work which looks at young people's 'literacy underlife' but shifts the focus to their use of new media technologies in schools and classrooms.

In this paper I present 'findings' from my PhD, which investigates young people's use of new media at school and home. This study is part of an ARC Discovery Project led by Ilana Snyder called *Being digital in school home and community* which also includes a national survey of young people aged 15-16.

In the paper I illustrate three 'practices of negotiation' employed by the young people in the study to 'make do' and 'smooth out the terrain' of school technology use (cf de Certeau 1984). These practices are part of young people's digital literacy underlife, through which young people are able to mix school and out-of-school practices, and to negotiate alternative spaces, identities and relationships within school environments; in essence retain some sense of themselves as people other than students, or as more than students (cf Brooke 1987; Goffman 1962).

## **2. Underlife and tactics**

I use Erving Goffman's (1962) notion of underlife, and Michel de Certeau's (1984) work on the uses and tactics of consumers as theoretical resources.

### *Goffman and underlife*

Goffman developed the notion of underlife in his work on 'total institutions'—mental hospitals and asylums, prisons and army barracks. 'Underlife' can be understood as the activities (or information games) individuals engage in to show that their identities are different from or more complex than the identities assigned to them by organisational roles

(Brooke 1987: 142). In the case of Goffman's studies, underlife behaviours were attempts to assert a different self from the 'patient-self' assigned by the mental hospital. He notes that such practices constitute the underlife of an institution and are 'to a social establishment what an underworld is to a city' (Goffman 1962: 199).

Goffman argues that all people employ underlife practices as part of their everyday life coping strategies and identity making practices. Importantly, rather than being a static concept, the notion of underlife allows for a kind of 'identity dialogue' between competing selves (cf Bakhtin 1981). Social organisations place, organise and co-ordinate people and groups into particular roles, which in turn make particular identities available and others less available (cf Gee 1997). But individuals and groups do not always take up these roles and identities uncritically but actively negotiate their 'induction' or apprenticeship into such roles, identities, or what language and literacy theorists commonly call 'Discourses' (cf Gee 1996). This process, which we might call *identity negotiation*, is key to how I use the idea of underlife. Underlife practices allow individuals and groups to take critical, playful and irreverent stances towards expected roles, and to indicate (display or perform) this alternative position taking to others (cf Goffman 1959).

In his work, Goffman identifies two more or less distinctive types of underlife: disruptive and contained. Disruptive forms of underlife are "where the realistic intentions of the participants are to abandon the organization or radically alter its structure, in either case leading to a rupture in the smooth operation of the organisation" (Goffman 1962: 199). On the other hand, contained forms of underlife attempt to fit into or operate within "existing institutional structures without introducing pressure for radical change" (199). Goffman found contained forms to be much more common. Similar claims have been about underlife in schools (cf Gutierrez, Rymes and Larson 1995; Larson and Gatto 2004).

Literacy researchers have taken up Goffman's notion of underlife. The work of Robert Brooke (1987) and Margaret Finders (1997) are particularly relevant here. Brooke (1987) suggests that underlife practices combine both the creative and the critical, and are not simply acts of dogged resistance. He argues: "exactly because organizations offer definitions of identity, they also offer individuals the opportunity to respond to the definitions in *creative ways*" (Brooke 1987: 142, my emphasis). In the exercise of agency, however limited, creative imagination is required (cf Mission 2003; Pope 2005).

In her fascinating study of adolescent girls' literacies, Margaret Finders (1997) brings sociocultural perspectives on literacy together with Goffman's underlife to develop the concept of *literacy underlife*. For Finders, literacy underlife is constituted through 'those practices that refuse in some way to accept the official view, practices designed and enacted to challenge and disrupt official expectations' (Finders 1997: 24). She contrasts these underlife literacies with what she calls 'sanctioned literacies', defined as 'literacies that are recognised, circulated, and sanctioned by adults in authority' (XX). As she documents the lives of two groups of young women she calls the 'tough cookies' and the 'social queens', she shows how social literacies are 'constituted in the interstices between official classroom literacy activities, the peer group and the literate underlife of contesting official expectations' (Christian-Smith 1997: vii).

### *De Certeau and tactics*

There are interesting connections between the concept of underlife and de Certeau's notion of the 'uses and tactics of consumers' (de Certeau 1984). Most importantly they are both deeply concerned with 'the countless ways of "making do"' (de Certeau 1984: 29), the witty ruses and clever tricks which people employ in their everyday lives to maintain a sense of self and to put distance between institutionally imposed roles and imperatives and their own lifeworlds. De Certeau calls these ways of making do, 'procedures of everyday creativity' (de Certeau 1984: xiv) or 'uses and tactics'.

De Certeau (1984) describes tactics in general terms as 'calculated actions' and as 'ways of operating', which 'constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production' (xiv). Tactics are designed to *play* havoc with established systems. A tactic is

a maneuver "within the enemy's field of vision" ... and within enemy territory ... It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of "opportunities" and ... must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them ... It is a guileful ruse. (de Certeau 1984: 37)

In discussing the ways uses and tactics are employed to resist and manipulate established orders, de Certeau also notes that

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game ... characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining system. (de Certeau 1984: 18)

While the focus of tactics is resistance, it is not prototypical resistance and is closer to Goffman's contained underlife. De Certeau's vision of tactics seems to be much more realistic and is not chiefly about some utopian overthrow of the establishment. His concern is to understand how, despite "the grid of 'discipline' ... everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive' an 'entire society [or students within schools] resists being reduced to it' (de Certeau 1984: XX). This moves de Certeau to examine the 'popular procedures (also "miniscule" and quotidian) [which] manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them' (de Certeau 1984: xiv). De Certeau's work breaks down the binary of production-consumption by suggesting that simple everyday activities such as reading and shopping are in fact productions (or re-productions) where creativity is employed and meanings made, where 'consumers' engage in kind of everyday bricolage, pulling together different threads of social and cultural interactions in an effort to 'make do'.

De Certeau gives an example with reference to language use. He notes that speech acts are ‘the construction of individual sentences with an established vocabulary and syntax’, where infinite variation is possible within a contained system. This dialogic relationship between existing structures and future possibilities is similar to Bakhtin’s ideas about double voicing: “The word in language is always half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.” (Bakhtin 1981: 293-4). In this sense the speaker of language uses established elements, tools, products and spaces all of which are in ‘general circulation and rather drab’ (de Certeau 1984: xviii) in order to reproduce alternative ‘phrasings’ in her/his own voice. Tactics are similar.

Both these frameworks—Goffman’s underlife and de Certeau’s uses and tactics—have at their core processes of negotiation. For Goffman it is about the negotiation of identities and selves, the interplay between private and institutional roles. For de Certeau the process of negotiation is about how everyday practices enable us to make do despite the strategic reshaping of our social worlds around particular types of activities, identities, relationships, politics, sign systems and knowledge (cf Gee 2005). In both these theoretical perspectives processes of negotiation describe social, cultural, technological, political and historical elements jostling for position and influence. The examples in this paper illustrate how young people in the study negotiate both official and unsanctioned uses of digital technologies through the use of tactics and underlife. My argument is that they also require us to rethink Boomer’s concept of negotiating the curriculum.

### **3. The study**

My larger study draws from 25 case studies of young people aged 15 and 16 in Victorian secondary schools (cf Bulfin and North 2007). The study uses ethnographic tools and understandings construct the objects of study and generate data. Participating schools represent a broad range of social, cultural and economic environments and are drawn from all education sectors (State, Catholic and Independent). Care was taken to encourage participation from a wide range of young people—those with an interest in new technologies and those who showed little interest.

A range of data were generated: interview recordings and transcripts, student ICT-media use diaries, field and observation notes, other documents and artefacts including, msn conversations and emails, photos and digital video. These texts form the dataset, along with what Sanjek (1990) calls ‘headnotes’—those thoughts and impressions that don’t make it into written form but inevitably play a role in analysis. Data analysis has involved taking both vertical and horizontal slices though the dataset—a focus on individuals and on broader themes (cf Barton and Hamilton 1998). Compiling detailed profiles of participants has meant piecing together fragments across interviews, conversations and fieldnotes (cf Cruickshank 2006). Thematic analysis involved identifying and coding transcripts and fieldnotes for literacy events, activities and activities (cf Maybin 2007). These codes have then been collated and systematically analysed.

### **4. Digital literacy underlife**

With these conceptual and methodological frames in mind I move on now to develop the idea of digital literacy underlife to describe three broad underlife practices (or underlife tactics) employed by young people in the study. These are things young people did with technologies in their schools that they were not allowed to do. Generally, these underlife tactics were used to create spaces within schools for unsanctioned or unofficial practices. These were:

- importing and insinuating;
- workarounds; and,
- subversion.

First, students used unsanctioned technologies, software and literacies *in school*. That is, they *imported* and *insinuated* into school, technologies and software restricted and proscribed in schools. These imported practices and technologies represented challenges to school literacies using unsanctioned technologies and practices.

Second, students devised *tactical workarounds* when confronted with school practices, hardware, software, rules, blocks and obstacles restricting their engagement in unsanctioned practices, or which made it difficult to use technology in ways proscribed by the school. These workarounds used knowledge and practice borrowed from across different domains and from different sites, (re)introducing techniques from other times and other places into the school space.

Third, young people deliberately *subverted* school practices *with* sanctioned technologies. That is they used technologies readily available in schools to engage in tactics and underlife behaviours which challenged traditional school literacies. In effect, these young people turned school sanctioned technologies and practices back on school ways of doing things. Sometimes this was to deliberately challenge schooled ways of doing things, but more often it was for a variety of other reasons such as boredom or for enjoyment and fun.

These underlife practices offer a commentary on a range of other issues including the significance of social relationships and the making and remaking of individual and group identities. They also overlap and are not always clear-cut and so are best seen as interconnected.

#### **4.1 Importing and insinuating unsanctioned technologies and practices**

A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. (de Certeau 1984: XX)

Young people in the study imported unsanctioned technologies (ie software and hardware devices) but also 'insinuated' unsanctioned practices and attitudes. This importing revolved around the use of popular cultural forms such as computer games and aspects of game culture and also mobile devices like phones and MP3 players. The content of young people's talk and interaction was also significant, for example, cultural references to television, film and music. This practice commonly involved smuggling computer games and other downloading programs (eg *LimeWire*, *BearShare*) on USB flash drives. Students had either done this themselves or reported friends and others doing it. Programs were then loaded onto

computers both in and out of classtime. In addition to using USB storage devices students often downloaded programs directly from the internet.

Students framed this importing in a variety of ways. Sometimes as a response to boredom and frustration, or as an attempt to inject a little fun, creativity or irreverent disobedience into an otherwise ordinary school day, sometimes as quasi-guerrilla combat. In the following interview extract, three students from Basso College are discussing types of digital technologies available in their school and problems they commonly experience using and accessing these technologies. Robert and David, in particular, express frustration at school policies and explain how they have developed tactics to handle such frustrations.

1. SB Why do you think that laptops would be good?
  2. Sarah Well just because there are always times when we really want to **work** on the computer and it's like we can't go down to the computers and they're all booked=
  3. David =I never ask
  4. Robert You (could) go on msn and start insulting people down the other end of the classroom
  5. Robert I wouldn't be putting my **work** on my laptop if I had it, the only reason I'd have//
  6. David //play games ( ) teachers
  7. Robert **=they control the network and we try and put games on anytime we can**
  8. Sarah ( ) h-drive
  9. SB The h-drive is you personal hard disk space?
  10. David Yeah, were we store **work**, and they go in and they delete anything else you've got on there
  11. SB Really?
  12. Robert Well they did last time and also banned all sites with the words 'game' in them, so we tried to **work** our way around that, we made sites called 'the weather' so they couldn't ban it
  13. Sarah Yeah, the weather
  14. SB ((*laughing*)) So what else do you do to get around the rules that they have here?
  15. Robert Um, well=
  16. SB =Well maybe we can start one step back, what kinds of rules do they have here for computer use or for media use?
  17. Sarah Can't put games on your h-drive=
  18. Robert =Can't play games during class or at lunchtime
  19. David **So it's work orientated**
  20. Robert Yeah, we can use it for **work**, and also there's things like bringing//
  21. Sarah //They've blocked hundreds of games on, you know, you can't search for games on Google, you can't, and all the games that everybody used to play like two years ago like Bubble Trouble, they've completely blocked, every single=
  22. David =They've blocked the URLs from games, cause they keep a history of what everybody has been to=
  23. Robert =The more popular the game the quicker they are going to block it
- (Basso interview 1 (2.4-5))

It seems Robert, David and Sarah are engaged in quasi-guerrilla combat. In response to the frustrations they experience because of internet blocks and restrictions (lines 2-3, 10, 12, 18, 21-23, 25) they set up an adversarial relationship with the school, its rules and policies. ‘Othering’ pronouns such as ‘them’ ‘us’ and ‘we’ and strong verbs like ‘control’ and ‘ban’ set these students against the school’s containment agenda. But rather than represent themselves as victims, they indicate their agency and decision making abilities (“I never ask”, “I wouldn’t be putting my work”, “we try and put games on”).

When prompted, they name the school rules as if reading from a list of ‘do not’s’ (lines 17-18) and pointedly identify how these rules direct them, quite forcefully, into uses which are, as David says, ‘work orientated’ (line 19). It is clear though that school notions of work are not all that these students and their friends are up to though. Choosing to use games and other frivolous time wasters constitutes a kind of thumbing of one’s nose at authority—a gesture of defiance in response to frustrations. Further, in opposition to the idea that the school computers and internet should be used for schooled notions of work, Robert and David reframe ‘work’ in ways which better accommodate their own ideas about activities that might legitimately pass for work. Here, ‘work’ also means working around the school’s computer, network and internet blocks.

The importing of both technologies *and* practices can again be seen clearly in the next extract from the same interview. Robert and David are sitting browsing the network looking for games they and others have previously hidden. Two other students, Sarah and Kylie, are also browsing online and chatting on msn. David and Robert locate the game, called slime soccer, and begin playing.

4. David Yes, slime soccer! (*noticing the game that Robert has just loaded*)
5. Robert (*David and Robert, each using the same keyboard, begin to play the game*) This is a, it’s very simple, just two little things and a ball (3.0) so I’m the blue one and David is the green one (5.0) (*to David*) Ah, I could see that coming. So we play this for a while, we have competitions an, anytime we have a substitute teacher in the computer room we use this
6. David We used to
7. Robert Ah, that was close
8. David Hah, nice shot! (2.0)
- [...]
12. David Let’s find something else, we’re gonna have to go back to it
13. Robert Let’s have a look through and see if we can find anything on the i-drive. (*browsing in Windows Explorer*) Students (.) work (3.0) Okay, now we’re in the Year Nine folders (*continues to browse*) a:h
14. David (*looking on as Robert browses the folders*) Maybe they got rid of it?
15. Robert I think so
16. David Go to Year 10
17. Robert I’m sure they got rid of it. It’s so annoying, that you don’t know where it is, maybe there was one
- [...]

28. Robert So this is a series of games called 'Slime games'. This is slime soccer (1.0) they've got slime volleyball, slime cricket, slime bowling, slime boxing
29. David If you search 'slime soccer' on Google=
30. Robert Or just 'slime' actually (2.0) if your search for slime soccer on Google you'll get a site called this (.) game
31. SB Do you know why they call it slime soccer?
32. Robert Uh, I don't know, maybe the characters look a little like slimes=
33. David =The original was actually called slime volleyball
34. Robert Yeah
35. David Which was pretty simple, just//
36. Both //A:::h! ((someone scores a goal))=
37. Robert =Got the ((touch))
38. David At the one minute mark=
39. Both =A:::h! Haw!
40. Robert When you get to three ((three goals)) he ((the game character)) gets a smiley face ((laughter))
41. David **Yeah it adds that extra bit of like enjoyment to the game**
42. Both O:::h!
43. Robert I'm on the attack, I've got to take the risk, I can't do anything else  
(Basso interview 1 (2.21-23))

In addition to playing an 'imported' computer game, the boys also insinuate their gameplay practice into the school environment. While they interact around the game they call it like professional commentators with 'oohs' and 'ahs' as goals are scored and missed (lines 5, 7-8, 37-38, 43). They draw on commentating genres from sports television and radio to give an account of their gameplay and to make meaning through it.

Robert and David also use the event as an opportunity to present themselves as particular types of people, to build identities as gamers and insiders in game culture (lines 5, 28-30, 33-35, 40). They claim this affiliation by knowing the genealogical development of the game and by having played the 'original' and finding it 'pretty simple' (lines 33-35). In their explanations and asides to me, and even in the way they take a break from the game to casually browse the computer network looking for other games (lines 12-17), they indicate their expertise and position themselves as introducing an adult to an aspect of their digital literacy underlife. As important as these elements is the 'fun' Robert and David are having as they interact and play the game (line 43). As David points out, when a player scores three goals the slime begins to smile which 'adds that extra bit of like enjoyment to the game' (line 41). Such practices, then, are also about finding space within an everyday school routine for a little light relief and distraction.

#### **4.2 Workarounds for school practices, rules, blocks and obstacles**

Young people in the study devised tactical workarounds which enabled them to get around (out-manoeuvre) established practices and norms, obstacles, rules and blocks used by the

schools to govern (constrain, police, restrict) new technology use. The metaphor of the ‘workaround’ is borrowed from IT technicians describing a practical, make-do approach to technology maintenance with a low-fi, garage sort of sensibility. Like bush-mechanics where a bit of wire and duct tape can get you back on the road, workarounds are engineered to get a system up and running again at little or no cost. The workarounds used by young people in the study embody this same kind of sense. They used knowledge and practices from across different domains and from different sites (eg home, work, school) to solve challenges and problems with respect to use of new technologies.

There were two varieties of workaround evident amongst participants. The first involved considerable planning, commitment and technical expertise: the development and maintenance of an underground games website, for example. The second set of workarounds was more ephemeral and employed regularly, as de Certeau might say, in ‘isolated actions, blow by blow’ (de Certeau 1984: 37).

### *Making the weather*

In the following interview extract, students from Basso College discuss an ‘underground’ games website popular with students at the school. The website was set up by a student at the school and hosts a huge selection of internet mini games normally blocked by the school’s web server.

1. Sarah      Robert, what is that website the weather? What is that website?
2. Robert     I don’t know if it will work=
3. Sarah      =the weather?
4. Robert     dot tk
5. Sarah      [www.theweather.tk](http://www.theweather.tk) ((reads out URL as she types it in))
6. Kylie      The weather’s got MSN on it
7. Robert     This is a site set up by one of my friends
8. SB          So MSN is like within the site//
9. David      It’s like an online MSN thing, so we can, the teachers deleted msn a couple of years ago
10. Sarah     It works! ((the website loads))
11. Robert    My friend made it and named it ‘the weather’ so they couldn’t block the URL. You can’t block the words ‘the weather’
12. David     They should have called it the Google, they never would have been able to block it
13. SB          This fellow is at this school or is he from somewhere else?
14. Robert    No he’s at the school, and he’s a bit of a wiz at tech stuff and so he just made all these games
15. David     He’s got weather spelled three different ways so in case just
16. Robert    Yep lot’s of backup sites, and this is all the rage
17. SB          So you get on here and it’s kind of like a hub? The whole school uses the site and they don’t know about it?
18. Robert    Well I think they may know but they can’t block the weather

19. David They can't do anything about it
20. SB Cause if they block the weather they'd be blocking a whole bunch other stuff?
21. Robert Yeah anything with the words 'the' and 'weather' in it
22. Sarah Well maybe they can unblock
23. David I don't have a clue how they block stuff but
24. SB So does he ask for donations to keep this secret underground thing running?
25. Robert He's got ads, if you click on them he gets paid every time you click on them so he just goes in and clicks on them a couple of times
26. David So he makes quite a bit of money?
27. Robert Well no he doesn't make quite a bit, I mean he gets like half a cent every time they click on it. Money's money
28. David He didn't do it for money, he did it just for//
29. Robert //I think he has a teacher at home who takes him through it and he does it like for a project or something
30. SB Ah okay, like an out of school project kind of thing?
31. David Really?
32. Robert Yep
- (Basso interview 1 (2.20-21))

In this extract, Sarah, Robert, David and Kylie revel in the fact that one of their own, the website creator, has something over the teachers and technical staff. They seem proud of their 'underground' knowledge of the website and the agency it seems to give them in importing their out-of-school interests and practices into the school and thumbing their noses at policies and systems used to restrict or 'school' their internet use. The young person who created 'the weather' has sophisticated understandings of how internet sites are blocked and how to use creative language strategies to workaroud these problems (lines 11, 15-16, 18-21). Typical school uses of technology are also well known to these students. For example, David notes the importance of Google in student's online searches and wryly observes that the website creator could have named the games website 'Google' and been assured of free access from schools, such is the significance and extent of Google use in the school (line 12).

As a tactical workaroud, the website is a response to the frustration one young man felt at the school's policy of internet blocks and game playing at school, which meant that access to many popular free online games websites were blocked at school. According to Simon, the website's creator,

the idea behind the website is that schools, universities and workplaces are unable to block the keywords 'the' and 'weather' unless they collectively block all websites with such words, ie theage.com.au and weatherchannel.com.au would be blocked as well. (Email communication, 5 February 2008)

Although such motivation stems from personal frustration and a decision to take action, the use of the website by other students in the school comes to be seen as a collective enterprise and as a collective act of resistance. This is illustrated by Robert and other students' common

use of collective and inclusive pronouns (eg 'we') in describing 'ownership' of, or connection to, the website.

Robert        Well they did last time and also banned all sites with the words 'game' in them, so we tried to work our way around that, we made sites called 'the weather' so they couldn't ban it

(Basso interview 1 (2.4-5))

Robert's attempts to establish a connection to the website creator by identifying with Simon's hacker underlife. During the time I worked with these students theweather.tk was updated and continually refined. Its daily traffic, from around the world, grew steadily until it was necessary to update the site significantly. The result is a more professional look and a streamlined approach which makes site maintenance easier and quicker. The site now boasts 578 games and counting and is much more sophisticated, with a feedback facility, a blog, and information for users and potential advertisers. theweather.tk also has a Facebook fan page. Information for users of the site includes a help page advising how to access alternative site mirrors where theweather.tk is replicated. For example, the same website exists at [www.examguide.tk](http://www.examguide.tk) and [www.theweathertk.com](http://www.theweathertk.com). There are explicit references in this help section to assist those having trouble accessing the site at school or work where it may have been blocked. Users are encouraged to submit games they find online that they'd like to play on the site and to provide feedback and commentary on the games they play.

In this example, evidence of organisation, planning, and large amounts of time, suggests that some tactical workarounds need not be, as de Certeau notes, always unplanned or ephemeral. Simon and others organise a calculated, and perhaps 'strategic' response to school policies, taking advantage of their outside of school knowledge and the challenges the school faces in policing such a heterogeneous resource as the internet. The students seem to understand the position of the school, caught between rhetoric about online dangers (technology as catastrophe) and enthusiasm about the educational potential of new technologies (technology as saviour), and they use this to their advantage (lines 17-21).

Knowledge of web authoring and how URL blocking works, as well as knowledge about the existence of the website, enables these young people to employ tactical workarounds to negotiate alternative spaces for their continuing identity work. In the interview, at least, these young people negotiate an alternative discursive space, similar to the underground website, where they construct themselves as part-hackers in opposition to school notions of what is appropriate to be doing with new technologies. The young man who created and maintains the site comes across as a respected figure amongst his peers, someone who has knowledge and expertise in a place where knowledge, expertise and authority is almost always held exclusively by adults. But knowing *about* the website and *using* it also constitute the creation of a space in which identities can be reimagined and reconfigured in ways different from the social roles offered by the school; a way to put some distance between a school-self and other selves (cf Goffman 1962). Using 'the weather' website, for these students at least, and the author's creating and maintaining work, constitute part of their digital literacy underlife; one that enables them to frame alternative views of themselves, and a space where they can actively 'negotiate' the kinds of activities that go on in school (cf Brooke 1987; Goffman 1962).

### *Using ephemeral tactics and workarounds*

In addition to more organised workarounds there were many more examples that were less organised and planned. These commonly arose when students took advantage of existing opportunities or where they exploited and enlarged potential opportunities. De Certeau (1984) notes that those who employ tactics must take advantage of ‘the chance offerings of the moment’, by seizing ‘possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment’ and by making use of the cracks and holes in existing practices and spaces (1984: 37). These ‘ephemeral workarounds’ relied on the ability of students to keep two steps ahead of school administrators and IT technicians. The ephemeral workarounds employed by students across the school often used standard techniques taking advantage of the common computing environment in many schools (ie PCs, Microsoft OS, Novell networking).

Examples of these practices include:

- Accessing blocked websites with the ‘webpage within a website’ method

This workaround requires fairly sophisticated knowledge of how URLs are designed and blocked and how such knowledge might be used to get around typical school blocks. Rather than type a blocked URL directly into a browser—in which case the school’s servers would detect the outgoing request and block it—the idea is to use Google or some other search engine to find a webpage within the blocked website which is not blocked. For example, Jasmine from McMurdo SC, want likes the website [www.bubblegumclub.com](http://www.bubblegumclub.com) but it’s blocked at school. She can access the website if she knows a webpage URL within the website, such as [www.bubblegumclub.com/about.html](http://www.bubblegumclub.com/about.html). This practice is similar to using a ‘proxy’: using a unblocked website to access other blocked websites. In this case her Google search acts as a ‘proxy’ allowing her to ‘browse’ the particular website of interest looking for a virtual ‘backdoor’, without the school server blocks being activated. While not fool-proof, it enables Jasmine to navigate much further than they would normally be able to.

- Using ‘alternative’ or modified search engines

These are often boutique in the sense of being not widely known and are therefore often not blocked by schools. These websites also act as proxies, allowing students to work through them to access blocked sites and images. Some of these copy the Google search engine but are often attempts to subvert and undercut Google in some way. This is sometimes playful, as in the case of ‘elgoog’ which reverses all search text, or ‘gazgoogle’ which ‘gangsterises every page’. Other alternative searches have more serious ideological oppositions to Google Corporation’s size and power (eg [www.scroggle.com](http://www.scroggle.com)). Whatever it is that inspires such sites, they provide a way for students to access websites that might otherwise be blocked at school. For example, they allow image searches usually blocked by schools due to teacher concerns about inappropriate images (pornography, violence etc). But it’s not all serious, again students seem more interested in the fun and distraction such sites offer. Using such sites essentially constitutes ‘being in the know’ or signals the possession of ‘underground’ knowledge. Often knowledge of such sites is spread around online communities or amongst friends offline.

Other examples included:

- ‘Modding’ or hacking internet settings on school computers in order to by pass school web proxy servers and blacklists.
- Stumbling upon opportunities and cracks. Students at Palisde discovered they could bypass the school’s web proxy by simply unplugging the network cable and rebooting the computer which logged the machine on to the wireless system: the result was unrestricted web access.
- Hacking directly into teachers’ computer accounts and using the additional access privileges usually granted to teachers.
- Hacking other students’ computer accounts: often simply because their own access to the computer system was restricted, ie no internet or printing credits or simply forgetting a password.

All these tactical workarounds represent countermoves made by young people to outflank and undermine school attempts at containment and control with respect to use of digital technologies.

#### **4.4 Subversion: Challenging school literacies using school technologies**

‘it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order’ (original emphasis, de Certeau 1984: xiii)

Young people in the study turned sanctioned technologies and practices back on school ways of doing things. Sometimes this was to deliberately challenge schooled ways of doing things, but more often it was due to boredom. These more subversive underlife practices represent challenges to school literacies through a rearticulation and reframing of school-sanctioned technologies. In other words, young people from across the study schools used new technologies available in their schools to subvert traditional school literacies and engage in underlife practices. While subversion might be more readily associated with disruption, this was not necessarily the case. Subversive activity comes in many guises, often in subtle forms. I use subversive in a way similar to Goffman’s two forms of underlife, disruptive and contained (Goffman 1962).

Varieties of these subversion tactics included: mashups, efforts at frustrating or satirising school practices and the tactical use of school technology resources.

##### *Mashups*

Mashups bring together combinations of different technologies, software, practices, intentions and ideologies into dialogic tension. Sanctioned devices or practices are refashioned to perform another function, for example, playing games on graphics calculators.

This practice was observed or reported in interviews and informal conversations across all schools in the study, and occurred both in maths, as one might expect, but also in other classes. These games were usually shared around between students by downloading from another calculator. These games are very basic in function and display, similar to those available on early generation mobile phones. In the interview extract below, from Highview College, Tania, Liz, Jason, May and Ash discuss such games and their uses.

1. Tania I have to say **the best invention though in classes to waste class is Ghetto**
2. All Yeah, Ghetto
3. Tania Ghetto ( ) on graphics calculators, and we have like a drug dealing game and so it's like the best game, you just go around shooting people//
4. Liz //You make money by dealing drugs//
5. Tania //You make money by dealing drugs and robbing people
6. SB So this is a//
7. Tania //Calculator game
8. SB You download it onto your calculator?
9. Jason Yeah, via another calculator
10. Tania You get it, like you can ( )//
11. May //Where did Ash get it from?
12. Ash I got it off my sister and she got it from=
13. Jason =She got it from someone else
14. Liz ((to Ash)) Do you have a Pimp? Does your sister have Pimp? My sister has Pimp and that's where you're a pimp and you make money for like (1.0)
15. All ((laughter))
16. SB For doing 'pimpy' things?
17. All Yeah ((laughing))
18. Liz There's like ho'es ( )
19. Tania **You can get every type of calculator game to waste your time**, you can get Bowling, Tetris, Frogger, Mario
20. Ash **Everybody wastes time playing Mario**. In Maths everybody plays, um basically the whole year guys were playing Snake and the aim was to get the Level 99 score and when they finally got it there was a bug in it so the snake would stop except the head, and then the head would go around, it was like 'oh that is just stupid', and they were like 'we have to get to 100 then' so they would get the next block with that little head that's hanging around and the whole snake is just frozen
21. Jason And you can't see anything?
22. Ash Nah you can, all you see is the head moving around and if you run into the snake that's frozen you're dead, and you can't go anywhere
23. SB That's crazy. So would most of you play these calculator games?
24. Jason Yeah sometimes
25. SB Occasionally?
26. May I won't do it during Maths

27. SB No?
28. Tania I do it mainly during commerce. The commerce teacher confiscated my calculator! Who would do that!
29. All ((*laughing*))
30. Liz It's usually if you have a substitute teacher that lets them do just no work
31. May Oh no, sometimes you get really tight subs
32. Ash Mr Caine, yep, you just play it and he just takes it off you and he's like 'don't play it again' so he gives it back to you and you start playing again

(Highview interview 15.9-10)

These students (and others across the schools in the study) reappropriate the graphics calculator, a sanctioned technology, for game playing and time wasting—different kinds of work. Humour and irony derive from the fact that devices designed to save time and perform mathematical calculations are instead put to work as time wasting devices running software about a gritty urban underground. There is further irony when Tania feigns disbelief after having her calculator confiscated in Commerce class for playing a game, “who would do that!” (line 28) as if asking “what nerve, I was just playing a game during class”.

Tania and Liz revel in the game's subject matter, “it's like the best game, you just go around shooting people”, “you make money by dealing drugs and robbing people” (lines 3-5). Again, ironic given their age and the school environment in which the interview and gameplay take place, and the nature of the device and the functions it is usually used to perform. Tania and Ash also reframe wasting time in class as an achievement rather than inappropriate (lines 1, 19-20). Wasting time in this way is something to do when you're too bored to work and just can't be bothered making much effort with classwork.

These gameplay practices are not solo and isolated pursuits but ones in which a community of players develops across different year levels. The game is shared around so that a genealogy develops which can be traced. In this case Ash's sister game it to him and she “got it from someone else” (line 13). Playing the game then is not simply a matter of individual meaning, but of social meaning made via a community of players, who may or may not be immediately connected by friendship or family.

## **5. Negotiating digital literacies**

As should be fairly obvious by now, I want to depart from the idea that ‘digital literacies’ are simply a set of technology skills that we might think of as operational (cf Green 1988; Lankshear and Snyder 2000). Like basic grammar skills, we might argue that basic computing skills are important on one level, but as the examples used here indicate, conceptualising digital literacies as a set of digital skills is missing the point. In these practices students are not simply employing skills to perform a function or task, they are engaged in fascinating social and cultural work.

By importing and insinuating young people used unsanctioned cultural artefacts to make institutional spaces more liveable, in the same way that a new home or room is decorated and furnished to make it more liveable. By employing tactical workarounds they out-manoeuvred

established practices with regard to sanctioned technology uses, playing havoc with schools' containment agendas. By subverting they found other, arguably more creative, uses for sanctioned technologies turning them on schooled ways of doing things and frustrating and satirising these. These seemed to represent an altogether different behavioural economy within the school; an unofficial behavioural economy of practices and actions which undercut, undermined and playfully worked around and against school goals.

These three broad practices represented attempts to create alternative social and discursive spaces within schools for unsanctioned, identity-laden practices, and allowed students to negotiate distance between the institution and the self. This negotiated space allowed students to indicate to others (eg students, staff), even if only obliquely, that they were not wholly swallowed up or consumed by the demands of school and of the identities that schools offer. As Brooke (1987) notes, employees are never simply employees, similarly, young people are not simply students. The digital literacy underlife practices used by the young people in the study asserted '*more complex personalities outside [these] role[s]*' (Brooke 1987: 141). These personalities are constituted through a wide variety of practices, dialogically in the flow of everyday life (cf Bakhtin 1981; Bourdieu 1970, 1990). In other words, digital literacy underlife practices are attempts to reject the identities and subjectivities that schools offer and to refashion or redesign others.

There is worth in teachers recognising the digital literacy underlife of young people and in taking these social practices as texts for future planning and reflection and for thinking about how we might (re)negotiate the curriculum in ways that open up underlife as a resource rather than a danger which if given attention might escape like a boggart from the wardrobe (cf Applebee 1996; Barnes 1976; Boomer 1982, 1988, 1992; Bulfin 2006; Nystrand 1997; Wells 1999). Of course this means again pursuing dialogic notions of curriculum as communication and as conversation

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