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Title

Digital spaces and young people's online authoring: Challenges for teachers

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Abstract

The digital spaces that young people inhabit are rapidly changing as the technologies and tools of the Internet evolve. As online environments reshape, so too do the identities of the content creators and the texts they produce in community spaces such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. Outside of the school environment, many young people are avid online authors of multimodal texts (Lenhart & Madden, 2005) while, in school, these same students may show a reluctance to engage in paper-based authoring (Witte, 2007). Furthermore, online texts produced by these young authors vary in sophistication and quality (Jenkins et al., 2006; Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, in press). This paper explores current research about middle years students' online authoring and engagement with digital spaces. We will then discuss the curriculum, assessment and pedagogical challenges for us as teachers as we endeavour to engage students and support them in becoming proficient creators of new texts in this new literacies environment.

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Digital spaces and young people's online authoring: Challenges for teachers

Rachael Adlington and Diane Hansford

Introduction

The literary experiences of teens today are vastly different from those of previous generations. The online world ventured into by many young people on a daily basis, provides opportunities to consume, compose and even inhabit new texts. Online environments rapidly change, as do the responses and identities of young content creators and the texts they produce in these spaces. Outside of the school environment, many young people are avid online authors of multimodal texts (Lenhart & Madden, 2005) utilizing social networking spaces, such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, and other web services including blogs and video sharing. But, in school, these same students may show reluctance to engage in paper-based authoring (Witte, 2007). Furthermore, online texts produced by these young authors vary in sophistication and quality (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, & Weigel, 2006; Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, in press). This paper will explore current research about the online environment in which young people participate, and discuss the pedagogical challenges for us as teachers as we endeavour to engage students and support them in becoming proficient creators of new texts in this new literacies environment.

Evolving, involving environments

Today's teens inhabit social, cultural and literary environments rich in texts and artefacts both physical, such as books, and digital. Children are born into a world of digital technology with an order distinctly different from the past. Print is not the dominant feature of texts, and texts are not only encountered through the mediation of family or school. Furthermore, literacy learning does not necessarily position the child as apprentice recipient of text and lessons carefully selected by the parent or school 'master' (Carrington, 2005a). Indeed, the net-savvy adolescent is quite able to produce texts and publish online as easily as any adult.

Texts are no longer experienced as singular artefacts. Individual texts are mirrored in a wide range of forms, and children are apprenticed as consumers of these textual products from a young age. For example, the *Harry Potter* series (e.g. Rowling, 1998) is a conventional text mirrored across multimodal realms, such as film, the Internet and computer games. Movies are promoted everywhere from television advertisements and children's shows to websites, and accompanying merchandise is unashamedly unrestricted in its breadth. No longer is this paraphernalia limited to lunchbox lids. Popular cartoon icons, such as *Dora the Explorer*, can be found on linen, clothing, stationery, camping equipment, children's furniture and even toilet seat inserts for toddlers. Leading up to the premiere of the third instalment of the *Shrek* movies, characters could be found displayed in every aisle of the supermarket, gracing the packaging of everything from breakfast cereal, spaghetti and snack food to shampoo and toothpaste.

But it is not only storybook characters that are appropriated for other uses. The reverse is also occurring, where childhood artefacts are finding their way into texts. The young children's television show *Sesame Street* has published over six hundred hard copy storybooks (Mackey, 2003). Young devotees of *Sesame Street* can also experience *Sesame Street* online, where they are invited to partake in a wide range of activities including reading on-line stories (Sesame Workshop, 1998-2005 online). Toys marketed at 4 – 8 year olds, such as *Hotwheels* cars and *Barbie* dolls, have their own websites (www.hotwheels.com; www.barbie.everythinggirl.com) that allow children to play games, view videos of ads for products, create personalised webspaces and use chat facilities. Online texts such as these websites are interactive and encourage young children to create content to a greater or lesser extent.

As young children grow into adolescents, the interactive webspaces they encounter require much higher degrees of user input and content creation. Sites such as *Students of the World* (www.studentsoftheworld.info) provide children with the ability to create their own blogs in the form of a website. The author makes many of the design, layout and content decisions, using a WYSIWG (What You See Is What You Get) web editor similar to a word processor interface and an html editor, where code can be written. Social networking spaces, such as *MySpace*, allow users to change the look and function of components of the site. Free blog services, such as Google's *Blogger* (www.blogger.com), provide blog authors with an easy to use blog creation interface and web space on which to store the blog. Many blogs are simplistic in design and usability yet powerful in their appeal to young people. They are used for creative expression, similar to the journaling habits of the teens from yesteryear (Prensky, 2004). Young people write volumes on their blogs, adding both alphabetic text and non-alphabetic components, such as movies, music and graphics (Walsh, 2007; Witte, 2007). Blog services aimed at youth, such as Xanga (www.xanga.com) also include social networking features, separating them from other, more 'adult' blog hosts, such as *Blogger*.

While computers, the Internet and electronic gadgetry were once perceived as the playthings of young 'nerds' and 'geeks', this is no longer the case. Across the Western World, many adolescents are using the Internet. In Australia, approximately 90% of teens use the Internet, with nearly all of them using it daily or several times a week (ABS, 2006; Education and Training Committee, 2006). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2006, p.49), most young people use the Internet for school or educational purposes (90.2% of 12 – 14 year old users), as well as for emailing or messaging (67.9%), 'accessing the Internet for leisure' (51.6%), playing online games (43%), downloading music (39.6%), using chat rooms (23.6%) and 'other activities' (23.6%). In the United Kingdom, a similar picture is painted. The 2005 *UK Children go online* report found that 75% of 9 – 19 year olds have accessed the Internet at home and 92% have accessed it at school. Many of these children are daily (41%) or weekly (43%) users, almost all of them use it for both school (90%) and non-school related (94%) activities (Livingstone & Bober, 2005, p. 2). American teenagers parallel this usage of the Internet, with 87% of 12 – 17 year olds accessing the Internet (Lenhart, Madden &

Hitlin, 2005, p. 1), often daily or at least several times a week (Lenhart et al., 2005, p. 4). Going online appears a major pre-occupation for most teens today.

Adults are spending time in the online environment, too, but Marc Prensky observes that young people or 'digital natives', who are born into a technology rich world, interact in online environments in fundamentally different ways to the older generation of 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2004). Among other differences, Prensky notes that digital natives use the online world to share, evaluate, create, report and program with each other differently to digital immigrants. Digital Natives engage with chat and instant messaging technologies, and enjoy trading everything from songs and videos, to jokes and advice on how to use online tools, frequently using peer-to-peer file sharing software as a medium. They utilize peer-evaluation ratings systems to establish their own reputations, ratify others' reputations and discriminate between reliable and unreliable sources. These teens borrow ideas from one online tool or object and use them in a new situation or for a new purpose, often 'inventing new, online ways of making each activity happen, based on new technologies available to them' (Prensky, 2004, p. 1).

Importantly, Prensky identifies that a determining attribute of digital natives is their 'desire to create' (Prensky, 2004, p. 6). Digital natives are programming to some extent, whether it be by including a piece of html code that personalizes a MySpace page or creating a Flash animation. They are creating web pages, blogs, avatars and worlds; and, in stark contrast to digital immigrants, digital natives readily report and share their ideas. They take full advantage of the amiable publisher that is the Internet, happily composing for the world. For Jenkins et al. (2006, p. 8), technologies and their affordances have made way for a new, 'participatory culture', in which '...the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways'.

Differences between adult and teenage usage of new and emerging technology are reflected by a sense of dissonance between the home and school worlds dually occupied by today's adolescents. This is particularly evidenced by the authoring demands required by both. As one teen, Cassandra (quoted in Witte, 2007, p. 92), notes, the difference between writing prose at school and elsewhere is clear; 'that's online writing, not boring school writing...we all do it on Xanga'. While some teens move between these worlds effortlessly, creating flawless texts that are perfectly apt for each social situation encountered, others appear to stumble with the nuances of textual horses for courses (Dowdall, 2006). For example, Cassandra writes prolifically at home online, but is a reluctant participant at school (Witte, 2007, p. 92). Another now-famous example of dissonance is the 13-year-old Scottish girl's txting faux pas, whereby the girl submitted an English essay written in txt to a very unimpressed teacher (Carrington, 2005b). The media portrayal of this event defines txting as alarmingly sub-standard and the young creators of such texts as blindly unable to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable literacy practices (Carrington, 2005b). Not explored in the media hype, is whether the girl was unable to write an essay in Standard English, chose an inappropriate genre for the task at hand or was

motivated by the desire to engage in an act of subversion (Carrington, 2005b; Dowdall, 2006). Regardless of the motivation, there is clear disparity between what the student created and what the teacher, and the media, deemed as appropriate.

However, young people are not the only ones to experience this dissonance. Dissonance between in-school and out-of-school practices wasn't felt so much by the Scottish creator of the unsanctioned text, but more so by the receiver, when 'the expectations of one [were] not fulfilled by the behaviour of the other' (Dowdall, 2006, p. 153). The seed of this dissonance is located in certain features of the text, rather than the text as a whole, as the range of text types created by teens are only somewhat divergent. This notion is illustrated by Dowdall's examination of one teenage author's in-school and out-of-school texts. Both texts provide opportunities to establish social identities, demonstrate social, cultural, technological, personal and linguistic 'masteryes' required to position the author, draw on intertextual associations and elicit feedback from audiences (Dowdall, 2006, p. 161). But the school text focuses on endorsement of linguistic and cultural masteryes and the locus of control is located away from the teenage author. As for the case of the Scottish schoolgirl, tension was created when the essay failed to meet the teacher's expectations of social, cultural and linguistic proficiency. The point of literacy education is to engender powerful communication dexterity in children that they may draw upon regardless of context, which can only occur as a result of embracing a wide range of texts and masteryes as legitimate (Dowdall, 2006). Dissonance can be lessened, particularly for students who do not make the transitions between texts and contexts easily, by focusing on the aspects of texts that are assonant (Dowdall, 2006).

It is important to note that not all young people have the same resources to draw upon. Prensky's observations position digital natives as one homogenous group. He describes the skill set of young people as if they are common to all (2004), and observes that 'our students today are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet' (2001). But not *all* students are 'native speakers', nor is there one common digital language. During its infancy, the Internet was optimistically predicted to be the great egalitarian leveller that transcended socio-economic divides, owing to its relative accessibility and inexpensiveness (Willis & Tranter, 2006). However, these hopes have been dashed, and while many children in countries such as Australia, America and the UK, enjoy easy access to the Internet, some children are still excluded from access along socio-economic lines (ABS, 2006; Lenhart et al., 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005). Children from metropolitan homes with a higher socio-economic status have better and more frequent access to the Internet, and consequently, these teens spend more time online and have better developed online skills (Livingstone & Bober, 2005). For these young people, simply being a teenager today does not guarantee that they are fully-fledged and avid users of new technology. Even among teen Internet users, similarities and differences in usage are apparent. While most teens use the Internet to play games and engage in social activities, some young people are using the Internet for more 'tech-savvy', sophisticated purposes such as creating blogs, webpages, artworks and morphing online content (Lenhart & Madden, 2005, p. 1, 5). Indeed, Jenkins et al. argue access to the new 'participatory culture' of the Internet 'functions as a new form of the hidden curriculum, shaping

which youth will succeed and which will be left behind as they enter school and the workplace' (2006, p. 3), resulting in a participation gap.

Challenges for teachers

New texts in the curriculum

The traditional texts explored in the conventional manner as part of the writing curriculum are vastly different from those being encountered and created by young people, and those that will be mainstream in the future. Classrooms that privilege alphabetic, print-based, hard copy texts over electronic, multimedia and online texts are failing to capitalise on their students' expertise and creating dissonance, as well as perpetuating disadvantage for those teens, who are not engaging with new texts outside of school. However, some middle years educators are using the new tools and resources available on the Internet to provide their students with online authoring opportunities.

Désilets & Paquet (2005) used a wiki as a collaborative online authoring tool with their grade 4 – 6 classes in Canada. The class worked in small collaborative groups to write choose-your-own-adventure non-linear narratives. The non-linear nature of the wiki naturally suited this text type and the wiki enabled students to work both synchronously and asynchronously using separate computers on the same piece of work. The wiki was also seen by the teachers as simple to use for online authoring.

Walsh (2007) discovered his 12 and 13 year old students were much more familiar with creating blogs than writing essays, and capitalized on this experience by setting a homework assignment to create a blog on the humanities topic being studied. Walsh observed that the online blogging environment provides creators with the ability to upload and integrate multimodal objects. He required his students to move away from print-only responses and include '... and orchestrate images, written text, sound, music, animation and video into their designs' (2007, p. 79). Walsh found that his students became empowered as authors, producing sophisticated pieces of multimodal work that portrayed the nuance of the text in ways that would have been very difficult for his students in a conventional essay. His students were given the opportunity to speak 'using their individual voice as meaning makers who were reflexively conscious of their own meaning-making and designing process' (2007, p. 81). The texts produced were able to be non-linear, include many visual elements and include 'linguistic, visual and audio hybrid medium' (2007, p. 82). The greatest benefit that Walsh identified to his students creating blogs was that his students could draw on their cultural capital to acquire 'traditional school literacies' (2007, p. 84).

Witte (2007) also describes her use of blogs in school. Witte capitalized on the fact that her reluctant eighth-grade authors were spending hours authoring online every night. The blog was used for a different social purpose to those created by Walsh's (2007) students; a class blog facilitated conversation between Witte's students and a group of pre-service teachers.

Each of these examples highlight ways to use blogs and wikis in the classroom, but they also raise pedagogical challenges to address when exploring new texts. These

issues include: the affordances and demands of new texts, text quality, assessment, social purpose and learning design.

Witte (cf. Ferris & Wilder, 2006; 2007) described how blogs and wikis can be used to perform certain tasks, including facilitating collaborative narrative construction, which build on print-based traditions and text types. However, wikis and blogs are not just nice online facilities capable of creating digital versions of conventional texts; they are new texts in themselves with their own potential and purpose. In contrast to Witte, Walsh (2007) used blogs to engage his students in learning, but expected their efforts to utilize the media's multimodal elements. In this, students weren't using technology to create digital social studies reports. They were creating blogs that explored and commented on society. The task not only engaged students and enabled participation, but also endorsed the blog as a legitimate text with its own affordances and requirements; each necessary for successful integration of new texts and technologies into classrooms.

Kress (2000), a member of The New London Group that developed the notion of multiliteracies, reminds us that humankind is designed to use more than one of the senses and stresses that these senses never operate in isolation. He points out that Western notions of 'sight' are limited to the outdated view that communication should focus on hearing and sight, that is, hearing, which refers to 'sounds of speech' and sight, which relates to graphic representations or merely 'letters' on flat surfaces' (2000, p. 184). This limited interpretation does not take into account the many ways that sight can translate the visual. Increasingly, educators have at their fingertips multimodal texts, both digital and print-based, which provide pedagogical opportunities to maximise learning by building on this innate human capability. The affordances of computer-based programs and online environments, with their interactive potential, demand the use of all our senses. The design elements, as described by The New London Group (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), which inform the notion of multiliteracies: linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual and audio, match well to the meaning-making capabilities of digital environments.

Walsh (2007) notes two fine examples of texts produced by his students. As Walsh sings the praises of his talented students' works, he identifies a number of aspects that make these works appealing, such as the use of colour, space, text, image and sound. He notes that the examined students are very adept at wielding the technological tools to best effect, and believes these students came to the task with this technical know-how. In Walsh's class, many, if not all, students had enough expertise to create multimodal blogs. However, many classrooms house a wide range of students with diverse technological experience, not all of whom are able to determine the best ways to utilize the most appropriate tools to create the most effective multimodal texts of all persuasions. In order to enable all students to actively and powerfully engage with online authoring in the classroom, it is imperative that we identify and articulate what makes these new texts work well. It is only then that we can assist our students to compose effective and high quality new texts.

Designing meaningful tasks

Knobel and Lankshear (2006) in their Typology of Blogs, highlight the diversity of purpose and form that can be found on the web. This range includes personal blogs, group blogs, corporate blogs, photoblogs and meta-blogs, to mention a few. Knobel and Lankshear (2006) claim that the make-up of the blog will mainly depend on its purpose. They identify three criteria for effective blogs, which they consider are significant for the education sector: 'a strong and clear sense of purpose'...a 'well-informed point of view' and 'quality of presentation'. They are critical of attempts by schools to include blogging in their writing pedagogy, as they note that numerous samples of school blogs do not display the criteria for successful blogs mentioned above, and further, these school blogs show a lack of purpose and commitment to the task. Their example below highlights the need for careful consideration by teachers to use blogs as part of their classroom writing pedagogy.

Hellooo
oooooo I just dropped in to say a gigantic enormous hellooooooooooooooo.
Good bye to you and you and you. (Knobel and Lankshear 2006, p. 89).

One dilemma for teachers, then, is the pedagogical challenge of designing meaningful tasks that will 'engage and enrage' (Prensky, 2001) students. Out-of-school blogs may well be considered interesting, but in themselves do not, as Knobel and Lankshear put it, require 'grammatically correct sentence rules' (2006, p. 88). Personal blog spaces that attract young people do not follow a set of easily defined rules for effective writing. While good practitioners design tasks that make links with students' prior knowledge, much school writing focuses on purpose and audience, where students are rarely asked to write an authentic piece, for an authentic audience. Knobel and Lankshear (2006, p. 91) suggest that for effective powerful writing to take place using blogs, the focus should be on 'genuine affinity spaces' that will interest and challenge students into writing effective pieces for significant purposes.

Just as traditional texts serve particular social purposes (Halliday, 1994), so too do new texts. Whether deconstructing a new text or using it to facilitate other learning it is necessary to keep social purpose at the forefront of teaching decisions. Walsh (2007) was careful to select the blog as the text type suited to his task. He noted the purpose of the task as social commentary, the multimodal capabilities of the medium that facilitated students' self-expression that was core to achieving outcomes, as well as the avid blog authoring habits of students outside of school hours. The blog was chosen for these very reasons, and Walsh's successful experiences highlight the importance of selecting new texts and learning experiences matched to purpose, student experience and educational outcomes. Désilets & Paquet's (2005) use of a wiki was perfectly matched to the social demands of the task, as well as the structure of the text being created. A wiki is primarily a collaborative writing print-based technology that incorporates the hall-mark of the Internet; the hyperlink. The wiki facilitated students' collaborative writing, and made it very easy for students to create the non-linear text structure with which they were familiar from print-based stories. Witte (2007) found that, while students and pre-service teachers interacted to some extent in the online environment, interactions were better when students and pre-service teachers met face-

to-face and worked collaboratively. In this instance, the blog was perhaps less suited to this particular collaborative task.

Reviewing assessment practices for new texts

With new pedagogies comes the need to reconsider assessment practices. As schools increase the use of new technologies, new literacies, and include sophisticated new texts in their students' learning, old testing practices are inadequate and are rapidly becoming redundant. Kalantzis & Cope *et al* (2005, pp. 90-94) are highly critical of the use of 'back to basics' type testing and urge teachers to measure learning by using assessment strategies that acknowledge the complexities of in-depth tasks which reflect 21st century teaching practices. Likewise, Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (in press) note that while ICTs have been in use in schools for some time, the appropriate assessment of effective design using ICTs has been to date 'largely overlooked'. In their chapter, they present two case studies: Animated Film Character Creation and Visual Diary, through which they discuss criteria for assessing the effectiveness of students' online multimodal texts. Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (in press) identify four criteria for assessment of students' multimodal digital texts. These are: e-proficiency; cohesion; content; and design. They claim that these criteria can form the point of discussion: a metalanguage, through which students and teachers can identify effective, quality pieces of work. As mentioned previously, students often appear to be highly proficient with digital technologies, seemingly able to juggle multiple tasks at the one time. On the surface this may seem the case, however, there are aspects of multimodal designs that need more careful scrutiny and explicit teaching is needed of the more subtle design elements. This is an area that teachers and researchers need to explore.

Planning and design for learning

Witte's (2007) example also serves to highlight the need to consider learning design when implementing new technology in teaching. She found that it was important to ensure expectations are clearly communicated at the outset of such projects. In her reflection of the process, Witte points out the pitfalls due to the lack of careful planning and design considerations, prior to implementation. During the first attempt at literacy and technology integration, there was no clear match between the tasks and tools being used, nor was the learning sequence well thought through. By rethinking the end to the project, ensuring students and pre-service teachers had to collaborate for this final activity, student development was significantly improved compared with the first attempt. Like Witte (2007), Stone (2005) emphasised the importance of the '...relationship between processes and products'. This relationship needs to inform learning design. Stone also described other 'lessons' she learned as a result of designing learning experiences to teach 7th grade students about web design, which apply equally to teaching about other texts. She found that, given their complexity, good planning is required to create good web sites. Stone suggested we attend to the 'multimodal aspects of writing' (2005, p. 2), and create an understanding that grammar changes across social contexts (2005, p. 3). She also learned that 'literacy teachers and students need to examine the relationship between the texts students write and other texts/context' (2005, p. 4), fostering a critical eye. Finally, 'we need to provide students with avenues for engaging in original research and writing across multiple media and genres' (2005, p. 5).

Learning design can be viewed from another perspective if we consider why the new writing practices with which young people are engaged are so appealing. In his analysis of the learning design of computer and video games, James Gee (2003) compares the commitment of the learner within a gaming environment with that of the school. Gee is highly critical of approaches to literacy where the learner is subject to a cycle of failure and advocates that the design principles underpinning successful games has much to contribute to classroom pedagogy. Gee questions the quality of approaches to teaching and asks why learners who are deemed failures at school are willing to spend 50 – 100 hours playing sophisticated, demanding games (cited in Kalantzis, Cope et al., 2005). Gee's (2003) perspective provides challenges to traditional approaches and urges us to reconsider pedagogical design and to approach new texts in refreshing ways.

Ways forward: Responding to the challenges

The affordances and demands of new texts, and their treatment in the classroom, necessitates pedagogical change, as illustrated by Witte (2007), Walsh (2007) and Désilets & Paquet (2005). New texts must be endorsed as legitimate by providing the same consideration that is given to traditional texts. Educators need to spend time becoming familiar with contemporary texts, as well as being informed about the technologies used to create them. To initiate student learning, effective digital texts can be co-examined to determine the multimodal components that combine to result in effective texts. The design components, such as, linguistic, spatial, gestural, visual and audio elements can be analysed both for their separate and synergistic qualities. Such an exploration would be a strong starting point to scaffold students in composing effective contemporary texts.

Students need to learn *with* digital texts, as well as learn about how *to create* texts within a digital environment. Exploration of digital texts to determine their social purpose, wholistic structure, grammatical components, and the technical skills required to create them is necessary to ensure learning experiences are explicit and fruitful. When learning with wikis and blogs, for example, teachers need to think about the social purpose of each of these media, matching appropriate texts with learning experiences. For example, in English, a student might be asked to explore character development in a narrative by journaling through the eyes of the character. The use of a blog would well match this type of activity. Perhaps more importantly, students must be explicitly and systematically taught the social purposes, structure and grammatical features of these new texts. When journaling, the student might well be able to write from a character's perspective, but the text will be a more effective and powerful piece of work if the student has a good knowledge of how to manipulate a blog's features. Adhering to structural conventions, utilizing literary devices, such as simile and metaphor, writing neatly and perhaps including images enhance a paper-based journal. So too does the blog become a powerful and quality text by structuring entries and links, considering the synergistic relationship between images, sound and text, and including elements, such as video, animation and music. Again, critical analysis of example texts before and during the writing process by students and teachers is a very good starting point in determining social purpose and structure.

However, teachers also need to seek out existing literature on grammar, such as Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) work on the grammar of visual design, as well as Van Leeuwen's (1999), and more recently, Noad's (2007) emerging research on sound in multimodal texts. As this field is still emerging and evolving, teachers and students are also in a very good position to engage with this kind of research and development.

With changes to what constitutes a legitimate text, so too must assessment be realigned to reflect these changes. English outcomes and indicators (i.e. Board of Studies NSW, 1998; 2003) touch on multimedia, but syllabus documents need to broaden the scope of texts, expand the parameters of grammar taught and assessed, and include all modes of meaning, not just text and image (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, in press). Attributes of effective online texts are emerging and changing rapidly as technology advances. As Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, Cammack, Ruddell & Unrau, (2004) point out, it is impossible to keep up with the deictic online environment. However, Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (in press) provide useful starting points for assessment, considering e-proficiency, cohesion, content and design, which align the affordances and demands of contemporary texts.

Many young people are used to multitasking when using the Internet and computer-based programs and seemingly do so with ease (Education and Training Committee, 2006). But even though they appear to have sophisticated skills in the online environments, they are inefficient in some aspects of text construction (Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, in press). Teachers have knowledge and understanding about what powerful and effective writing entails. While many teachers are generationally positioned as digital immigrants, teachers' training and prior knowledge of conventional texts can enhance students' understandings and creation of purposeful, quality contemporary texts. The challenge for teachers is to identify the commonalities between traditional and contemporary texts and writing pedagogy, but also to acknowledge that new texts require an extension of our understanding of effective writing. We need 'an expanded set of understandings of texts and literacy' (Beavis, 2002, p. 49) in order to identify and build on the strengths that young people bring to their learning from their out-of-school experiences with technology.

Assessment needs to address new skills taking into consideration the multimodal nature of the new texts. Defining the qualities of multimodal texts, whether paper-based or digitally created, is an initial step to rethinking current writing assessment tasks and strategies. Researchers such as Knobel and Lankshear (2006), and Gee (2003) warn that merely transporting current approaches to school writing into an online environment is inappropriate. Nevertheless, teachers do need to identify what is required in terms of purpose, content and design in order to define new grammars, which incorporate image, sound and print, appropriate to these new texts.

When seeking to understand why young people so willingly put long hours in to out-of-school text construction, we need to take advantage of learning theories that inform our learning designs. Just as Gee (2003) urges us to consider that which motivates gamers, so too can we employ the design elements that engage online authors when designing activities for the classroom. Furthermore, as teachers, we need to consider

the social purposes online environments address that classroom situations cannot. While we don't want to replicate out-of-school activities within school, linking and building on students' prior knowledge and experiences will be paramount to student success. Selecting appropriate uses of the tools we choose and exemplifying high quality digital examples will provide students with models for the classroom and their future endeavours.

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