

# Moving On/Keeping Pace: Youth's Literate Identities and Multimodal Digital Texts

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“We’re not in Kansas anymore, Toto”<sup>1</sup>—a statement Dorothy made to her dog, Toto, in *The Wizard of Oz*—sums up reasonably well the point I want to make in this article. That is, as literacy educators no longer constrained (or protected) by older, more familiar 20th-century print-centric modes of communicating, we may at times feel challenged to keep pace with students’ preferences for producing and learning with multimodal texts that combine moving and still images, sounds, performances, icons, symbols, and the like. Often digitally mediated, these texts are familiar and freely available to youth who have access to the Internet. Indeed, a small but growing body of research suggests that young people’s ways of telling, listening, viewing, and thinking in digital environments may factor into their self-identifying as literate beings (e.g., Alvermann, 2010; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005; Ito et al., 2008; McClenaghan & Doecke, 2010; Rennie & Patterson, 2010; Skinner & Hagood, 2008; Thomas, 2007; Walsh, 2008). Although this research on young people’s online literate identities has implications for classroom practice, the literature remains largely untapped by teachers, school library media specialists, and literacy teacher educators. Why is this so? Just as importantly, what does this literature have to offer?

To address these two questions, I engaged in an interpretive analysis of recent research that suggests the following: (a) the work of students who

self-identify as users and producers of multimodal digital texts is rarely visible to their teachers; (b) institutional contexts for secondary schooling and literacy teacher education may wittingly or unwittingly contribute to this invisibility; and (c) in spite of this invisibility, classroom teachers, school library media specialists, and teacher educators are increasingly becoming aware of the instructional implications of young people's uses of multimodal digital texts to construct their online literate identities.

### FRAMING PERSPECTIVES ON IDENTITY

Two key tenets informed this interpretive analysis. The first is that today's youth interact with each other and the web in ways that rely on collective meaning-making, which Jenkins (2006b) described as a condition in which "none of us can know everything; each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (p. 4). The second tenet is that literacy is a social practice (Gee, 1990; Street, 1993) and thus implicated in social reasons for getting things done (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Experiencing social connectedness, while engaging collectively in online literacy practices, affords young people a sense of belonging and an opportunity to identify with others who have similar interests but may vary in their skills and access to resources.

Derived from literacy as a social practice, the notion of Discourse-identity takes into consideration what it means to be recognized or "read" as a certain kind of person in a certain kind of social group (Gee, 2000–2001). This reading is made possible through constructing and sustaining ways of being and belonging (e.g., interacting, valuing, believing, reading, writing, viewing, listening, speaking, acting, and dressing) in order to represent ourselves as particular kinds of persons who will be recognized by people just like us (Gee, 2008). It is an identity kit, to use Gee's term, for belonging or fitting in with others like ourselves.

For this article, I use the term *21st-century texts* as a quick reference point for a range of multimodal texts available for reading online and on mobile devices, though not necessarily through a print medium. Because music, videos, games, web pages, text messages, and podcasts are ubiquitous texts in young people's everyday lives, these media rightfully take their place alongside more traditional paper and print media. So, too, do Internet-based virtual environments that foster social networking (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, and Teen Second Life). In a word, 21st-century digital texts are multimodal. Viewed as interactive in the web 2.0 sense, these texts are used by adolescents to negotiate their literate identities by combining words, images, sounds, icons, gestures, and performances to

communicate who they are and whom they want others to recognize them as being.

#### THE INVISIBILITY OF STUDENTS' ONLINE LITERATE IDENTITIES

According to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation report (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010), young people between 8 and 18 years of age are spending an average of 7 hr and 38 min daily (7 days a week) using media that portray meaning through images, sounds, icons, gestures, language, performances, and other multimodal forms of communication. But that's not all. When the time they spend using more than one medium is accounted for (as they multitask their way through the day), the total number of hours of media exposure rises to 10 hr and 45 min. A comparatively small segment of that time is spent reading print media, such as books (25 min a day), magazines (9 min a day), and newspapers (3 min a day). By far, the largest chunk of time per day is spent on multimodal texts in the form of TV content, music/audio, websites, video games, and movies.

What these numbers fail to show, however, is that adolescents are producers as well as consumers of 21st-century texts. According to a report issued by the PEW Internet & American Life Project (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007), 64% of young people between the ages of 12 and 17 who have Internet access in the United States spend a significant amount of their after-school hours creating web content (e.g., blogs, web pages); sharing original artwork, photos, stories, and videos; and remixing online content to create "new" texts. More than half the youth surveyed in the PEW Project had also created profiles on social networking sites such as MySpace or Facebook. Perhaps not surprisingly, the digital texts adolescents create and the online literate identities they construct are rarely if ever visible to their teachers, which is disquieting given there is research to suggest that teachers who make links to students' out-of-school experiences increase motivation and success in school learning (Guzzetti, 2009; Ladbrook, 2008).

As impressive as the findings from the Kaiser Family and PEW reports are, these findings do not represent all adolescents and certainly not all their literate activities. Nor do these findings fully corroborate findings from other studies conducted in the United Kingdom (Buckingham, 2008; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005) and in the United States with Latino/a youth (Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008). Conflicting evidence aside, ignoring or discounting the kinds of media content that young people are producing in increasingly greater quantities during after-school hours would be imprudent. Knowledge of such content and

the skills required to work with multimodal texts is limited, as is information about how students learn, socialize, and identify with certain literacy practices that reflect the ongoing shift from page to screen. A more robust accounting by researchers of this shift would likely increase the visibility and potential impact of digital texts on young people's literate identities and the implications of such for classroom practice.

Meanwhile, what we do know from the available research is that designing personal web pages, downloading songs, engaging in social networking, and playing video games online require adolescents to decode and encode a complex mix of images, words, sounds, symbols, and genre-specific syntax—skills typically not taught in traditional language arts classrooms. The fact that young people are learning these skills informally and online with the aid of fairly sophisticated authoring software and the help of their more knowledgeable peers (Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Bishop, & Kirk, 2007; Drotner, 2008; Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008) suggests that classroom teachers may be missing out on opportunities to observe firsthand what their students are capable of accomplishing informally in a digital environment. Whether creating visually and orally narrated texts that play to viewers' and listeners' imaginations or downloading fan fiction for their own enjoyment, adolescents are busily at work producing literate identities, which, if known and recognized by their teachers, would likely accrue new respect for what they are able to do either on their own or through collaboration with others who share their interests.

In sum, while the foregoing examples may hint at possible reasons for students' online identity work being largely invisible to teachers, school library media specialists, and the teacher educators (whose responsibility it is to educate future teachers), they do not tell the whole story. Left unaddressed is the extent to which institutional contexts for secondary schooling and literacy teacher education wittingly or unwittingly play a role in the process.

## THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

Institutional contexts can refer to physical structures, such as school buildings, college campuses, and classrooms. Institutional contexts can also refer to academic structures—for instance, the policies, goals, assessments, curricula, values, and turf wars that have historically influenced what goes on in the name of formal schooling. Both kinds of contexts are operational in the discussion that follows, but because they overlap, no attempt is made to disentangle their influences on students' largely

invisible online literate identities. Instead, several potential barriers to teachers having access to their students' online literacy practices are pulled from the research on institutional contexts and used as the organizing subheadings for this section.

#### BARRIER 1: PREVAILING SENTIMENT THAT MULTIMODAL DIGITAL TEXTS DISTRACT

Although recent reconceptualizations of literacy and literacy pedagogy support students' use of multimodal digital texts in constructing meaning (Kress, 2003; Unsworth & Cléirigh, 2009), schools in the United States have been slow to incorporate these texts in their regular curricula. This is unfortunate given the various affordances these texts provide during student-text interactions in content area classrooms (Alvermann & Wilson, in press). While this approach to learning does not displace teachers' direct instruction, this approach does recognize and support the literacy practices, textual identities, and dispositions that contemporary youth display and find appealing in online interactions. This approach also opens up possibilities for teaching critical media literacy because, as Lemke (2009) reminded us, "Media mediate not just among us as we play with our identities, but also between us and the interests of large-scale producers" (p. 150). Such possibilities aside, the prevailing sentiment in most secondary schools and schools of teacher education in the United States is to ignore what adolescents are doing with 21st-century texts outside school in the students' free time. The rationale for this decision goes something like this: The curriculum and school day are already packed. Students are already practiced in using digital texts. Thus, why invite them to bring any more distractions in from the outside?

In fact, one frequently cited justification for adhering to a 20th-century curriculum with its teacher-centered transmission model of instruction—a model that relies primarily on print-centric textbooks (Wade & Moje, 2000)—is the need to address distractions and pressures coming from outside (e.g., meeting curriculum standards and preparing students for high-stakes assessments). Pressures within the classroom to maintain order, regulate socialization patterns, and deal with constraints related to time, resources, and standards also contribute to the transmission model's enduring popularity among content literacy teachers and teacher educators (Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Draper & Siebert, 2004). Regardless of the model's staying power to date, signs afoot suggest larger social, cultural, and economic forces are poised to challenge traditional schooling and learning via unimodal, print-centric texts. This challenge,

which invites its own set of criticisms, is the topic of the next so-called barrier to teachers having access to their students' online identity work with multimodal digital texts.

## BARRIER 2: NEEDLESS AND ARTIFICIAL DICHOTOMIES

In an effort to point out why schools are becoming less important in an era where home schooling, distance education, Internet cafés, and web-based learning communities are revolutionizing how people identify as learners, Collins (2010) offered the following contrasts (which have been slightly adapted for use here) between learning as it occurs in traditional schooling and as it occurs in virtual space:

- Uniform school learning vs. customized online learning.
- Teacher controlled school learning vs. learner controlled online learning
- In schools, teachers are the experts vs. online, there are multiple experts (including youth).
- Schools rely on standardized assessments vs. Internet enables area specializations.
- Schools value head-knowledge vs. Internet values creative uses of web resources.
- Schooling is learning by absorption vs. online, it is learning by doing.
- Schools support just-in-case learning vs. Internet supports just-in-time learning.

Although Collins (2010) relied on these dichotomies to make his point, it is important to remember that reifying monolithic categories is a practice that has attracted considerable criticism from several scholars whose work focuses on youth, identity, and digital media. From Buckingham's (2008) perspective, to reify learning in opposing spaces serves mainly to essentialize differences at the expense of looking for ways to understand a particular phenomenon (e.g., students' online identity work with multimodal digital texts) that cuts across space and time. It is a counter-productive process, in Buckingham's view, and one that can lead to false expectations.

For example, the so-called digital native and digital immigrant divide that Prensky (2006) popularized has set up spurious relationships and expectations for learners and teachers of certain ages and generations, in addition to promoting technological determinism. The latter concept, though not simplistic in itself, still invites some rather naïve views about the exaggerated influence of technology on learning. When this

happens, would-be supporters of tapping into adolescents' online literacy practices and their attendant identities can turn into skeptics, especially if they perceive their influence as educators slipping, making them mere minions of an information communications technology that cares more about the medium than the message (Bigum et al., 1997). If, on the other hand, these same educators were to buy the argument that "neither youth nor digital media are monolithic categories" (Buckingham, 2008, p. ix)—untouched and untouchable—then it stands to reason they would more likely see a role for themselves. This role could potentially be one of teaching and learning with young people in an environment where literate identities are negotiated, not taken for granted, romanticized, or dismissed and, similarly, where multimodal digital texts are subjected to the same critical inspection that traditional textbooks receive. Precisely this kind of learning environment stands a chance of breaking down artificial divides for keeping students' online identity work at bay.

### BARRIER 3: AWARENESS BUILDING THAT STOPS SHORT OF ACTION

Making visible and effectively integrating students' online literacy practices with the existing curriculum will require that content area teachers and literacy teacher educators do more than develop an awareness and appreciation of the texts students create and share online. Awareness is one thing; acting on that awareness is quite another. Of particular note are the challenges teachers can expect when attempting to adapt certain key characteristics of online participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2009) for 21st-century schooling. First, there is the issue of reconciling a school district's common core standards with what Jenkins et al. referred to as a participatory culture's "relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement" (p. 7). The language that Jenkins and his colleagues used to identify what makes an online participatory culture so inviting to youth is unfortunate, for this culture is not a call to lower expectations or water down the standards. Rather, the intent of participatory culture is to open up pedagogical spaces for inviting students' online literacy practices in. Fortunately, the language used to describe the remaining four characteristics of an online participatory culture are quite straightforward and not that foreign to a teacher's undergraduate- or graduate-level preparation, though they may reflect a pedagogical approach (student-centered) that not all teachers find desirable or workable. In brief, the remaining four characteristics of a participatory culture are these: members are encouraged to create texts that they share with others, the more experienced learners mentor the less experienced, everyone's contribution matters, and

members care what other people think about the texts they have created.

The euphoric ring of online participatory culture has its critics. For instance, issues, such as high-speed Internet access and copyright restrictions, need to be taken into account. Sometimes in one's enthusiasm for creating a participatory learning environment, one initially overlooks or minimizes problems with computer access. Likewise, attempts to level the playing field for students without access to the Internet may lead teachers to avoid making assignments that require the students to go online. Even in technology-rich schools of teacher education, issues arise when students live at home in remote rural areas that have no cable or other means of high-speed access. In populated urban areas, as well, disparities in online access can have tangible effects on students who must depend on public libraries, for, as Jenkins (2006a) has cogently argued:

What a person can accomplish with an outdated machine in a public library with mandatory filtering software and no opportunity for storage . . . pales in comparison to what [can be accomplished] with a home computer with unfettered Internet access, high bandwidth, and continuous connectivity. (p. 10)

Making space for learning with 21st-century texts presumes a working knowledge of copyright law and its fair use doctrines that are often written in dense legal prose. Teachers and teacher educators, unsure about their rights and responsibilities as users, tend to avoid various forms of copyrighted materials, some of which could conceivably enhance the teachers' instruction and their students' learning. Most recently, this was brought to my attention when a student in my content literacy methods course used the term *copyright* to signal her concern that a project she was planning on fan fiction (Black, 2008) for a high school English class might be in violation of certain copyright guidelines, at least as she understood them. Though not available at the time, Hobbs's (2010) *Copyright Clarity: How Fair Use Supports Digital Learning* would have addressed this student's concern. Written clearly and in an engaging style, *Copyright Clarity* dispels common misperceptions about intellectual property rights and other confusions surrounding classroom use of digital texts.

#### BARRIER 4: INSTITUTIONAL AUTHORITY AND YOUTH IDENTITY POLITICS

When perceptions of a school's institutional authority clash with youth's perceptions of their right to a certain degree of autonomy from adult

surveillance, discursive tensions can erupt that can create a further barrier to teachers having access to their students' online literate identities. Whether institutional authority is channeled through various contradictory discourses on teaching literacy and using new digital technologies in the classroom (Honan, 2008, 2010) or through a school's positioning of adults as experts on all topics and students (novices) on none, tensions can rise and distrust can follow. Just as the seemingly contradictory discourses in Honan's study—for example, curriculum documents with students' PowerPoint displays presented as products of exemplary practice but read through professional teachers' eyes as add-on activities—can lead to misunderstandings about an intended goal, so, too, can a school's perception of the (in)appropriateness of youth identity politics in a highly regimented curriculum. If that perception is acted on (e.g., new school policies aimed at heightening adult supervision are interpreted by students as inconsiderate and disrespectful of their needs), then the likelihood of teachers having opportunities to learn about their students' online literacy practices would lessen.

Using a rhizomatic analysis to map linkages between and across various contradictory discourses that were operating in the study and that teachers were struggling to make sense of, Honan (2010) demonstrated the importance of integrating activities involving digital texts—especially those that might be perceived as “stand-alones”—into the daily routines of classroom life. She used this insight to contrast the “seamless integration of digital technologies of all kinds . . . [in] young people's lives outside of school” (p. 189). A similar analogy could be applied to institutional authority and youth identity politics, in the sense that life online is rarely hierarchical and isolationist by decree.

In sum, although these four potential barriers speak to the negatives of gaining access to students' online literacy practices, these barriers are not meant to be obstructionist in spirit. Each has its weak spots and loopholes—spaces that can be breached by teachers wanting to move on and make their instruction more relevant and engaging for learners immersed in multimodal digital texts. The next section is filled with examples from research involving teachers, school library media specialists, and teacher educators who have done just that.

#### A CALL FOR INSTRUCTIONAL MODIFICATIONS AND MOVING ON

Moving on, as used here, indicates a willingness to take into account the literacy practices and wide range of 21st-century texts that adolescents use in constructing their literate identities online. Moving on does not imply an uncritical stance toward those practices; neither does it imply

“that digital media necessarily hold the key to [youth’s] empowerment” (Buckingham, 2008, p. ix). Moving on equates to modifying one’s instruction by letting go of tired practices, joining in the exploration of new forms of text, and reaching out to youth whose motivations for staying in school are not academically driven.

## MOVING ON BY LETTING GO

To use the services of online social networking sites (SNSs; e.g., Facebook, MySpace, Bebo) requires much more than basic literacy skills. Rich in language, moving and still images, sound, iconography, performances, and interactive applications, these sites invite users to engage in identity work that is subtly nuanced and performed repeatedly. Far from trivializing the “serious” aspects of literacy teaching and learning that some educators fear will occur if older, more traditional approaches to schooling are corrupted by new technologies, SNSs offer users a venue in which to think creatively, problem solve, and collaborate—all highly valued skills in today’s global society. From Merchant’s (2010) perspective as an adolescent literacy teacher educator and researcher of SNSs, “the purely social sits alongside more informal learning” (p. 66). That claim, in fact, is borne out by data gathered and analyzed from a combined online and telephone survey study conducted by Grunwald Associates LLC for the National School Boards Association (2007). Results from that U.S. study, which involved 1,277 young people between the ages of 9 and 17, 1,039 parents, and 250 school district leaders, indicated that “almost 60 percent of students who use social networking talk about education topics online and, surprisingly, more than 50 percent talk specifically about school work” (p. 1).

Increasingly, teachers, school library media specialists, and teacher educators are gaining in awareness of why it is necessary to let go of some tired instructional practices that, while still valuable, have lost some of their power to motivate and engage students who have never known a time in which collaborative approaches to learning online were not available. For youth born with a mouse in hand, so to speak, the interactivity of web 2.0 is viewed neither as a luxury nor a “new” technology. Rather, it is a necessity and easily available through tools such as the Ning (a closed and managed social networking site). The English Companion Ning: Where English Teachers Go to Help Each Other (EC Ning), created by Jim Burke (a teacher at Burlingame High School in Burlingame, California), describes itself as “A place to ask questions and get help. A community dedicated to helping you enjoy your work. A cafe without walls or coffee: just friends” (Burke, 2011). Membership in EC Ning

provides opportunities to join (or create) special interest groups, blog, attend web institutes, participate in book clubs, and many more activities.

Not to be overlooked, of course, are the large numbers of people (teachers and students alike) who use SNSs to create and distribute content that may or may not be educationally related. Creating, sharing, and learning to use new technologies through DIY (Do It Yourself) Media (Guzzetti, Elliott, & Welsch, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2010) are but a few of the possibilities open for exploration when tired practices give way to new approaches using 21st-century texts. So much is available, in fact, that Merchant (2010) has been known to comment, “Between moral panic about the negative effect of these new practices on our cultural life, on our social interactions, and even on our cognitive functioning . . . lie the everyday practices of a large segment of society” (p. 52). Large, indeed! As of August 14, 2010, Facebook had more than 500 million active users worldwide, with one-half of them logging on in any given day. People spend more than 700 billion min per month interacting with more than 30 billion pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) that are shared each month. The average user creates 90 pieces of content each month (Facebook, n.d.) .

In this age of connectivity, creating and sharing content is not limited to web-based communities, per se. Texting, for example, can include messages containing image, video, and sound content. Research has shown that in online communities where multiple identities are permissible and encouraged, adolescents often maintain three or more separate accounts on the same social networking site: one for friends who share a common interest; another that a girlfriend, boyfriend, or parent can monitor; and still another for private use (Alvermann et al., 2007). Similarly, while instant messaging, it is possible to highlight different aspects of one’s literate identity as a text producer, consumer, and distributor (Jacobs, 2006), or disguise or take on different identities as the context changes (Lewis & Finders, 2002). Interpreted through the lens of youth identity politics, the act of maintaining separate accounts or separate identities could be viewed as adolescents exercising their authority or power over who is allowed to learn certain things about them. The degree, however, to which individual choice actually plays a role in people’s perceptions of who they are (or who they want to represent themselves as being) depends on complex power relations (Foucault, 1994/1997). As used here, power refers not to something that is seized and held on to but rather as something that circulates and speaks through silences as well as utterances. Power relations are everywhere—in the way people use (and withhold) words, images, sounds, gestures, beliefs, and so on to identify as particular types of people who will be

recognized by others like themselves. These Discourse-identities, to use Gee's (1990) convention for naming socially recognized ways of being in the world, enjoy what Lesko (2001) described as "an aura of naturalness or inevitability to them" (p. 15). That it is only an aura (and not "reality") speaks mountains about youth culture and identity politics vis-à-vis institutional authority.

## MOVING ON BY JOINING IN

Sometimes it takes putting yourself into the role of learner before deciding whether or not it is "safe" to join in the exploration of a virtual world inhabited by a group of adolescents from 11 to 12 years of age. That was Janie Cowan's thinking when she set out to explore the world of Webkinz, a virtual webspace in which participants "essentially 'write' the fluidly enacted script in real time as movements, interactions, and responses become 'text'" (Cowan, 2010, p. 30). A school library media specialist, Ms. Cowan frequently received requests from classroom teachers to collaborate in designing curricular activities that linked to the state's performance standards. Surmising that her students' literate lives and learning experiences outside school were not a particularly good match with the collaboratively designed lessons she and her colleagues had attempted to pass off as "cool" in the past, Ms. Cowan decided to cast herself as participant observer in an 8-week study that made her the novice learner and her 20 students her teachers.

Webkinz World, a commercial enterprise launched in 2005, stopped publicly releasing data on its profits when sales exceeded the \$1 million mark in 2006. Usage statistics are unavailable on the official Webkinz site, though Cowan (2010) had located a report (Tedeschi, 2007) that indicated there were 2.8 million unique visitors in 2006–2007. Statistics aside, participants in Webkinz World adopt (purchase) lovable plush pets, each of which comes with a unique code that enables members to enter the virtual space and care for their virtual pet (essentially the owner's avatar), engage in chats with other virtual pet owners, go on road trips, enter tournaments, answer trivia questions, read the news, and earn KinzCash, among other activities. Because Webkinz World intentionally blurs offline and online interactions (e.g., participants can purchase stuffed animals that are physical replicas of their virtual pets), it mimics virtual spaces for adults, such as Second Life. The 10 girls in Cowan's study spent about 3 hr a week in Webkinz World and owned anywhere from 1 to 52 virtual pets. The 10 boys reported spending less time per week (from 1 to 2 hr) caring for 1 to 37 pets.

The parents of the students supported the site because of its

educational value and “safe” activities (e.g., permission was required if members wanted to use unscripted chat). Although Ms. Cowan had no difficulty acquiring parental support for her study, she did encounter some district-level resistance initially that was technical in nature and involved the school’s web-filtering software. Through what she described as “properly channeled follow-up requests” (Cowan, 2010, p. 33), Ms. Cowan eventually secured access to Webkinz World and Chobots (a similar virtual world used for comparison purposes); however, she was granted only limited access to Club Penguin, another virtual world for preteens that is less restrictive in its chat policies. Because Webkinz is a “pay-to-play” virtual space, with all the attendant access and social justice issues one might imagine, Ms. Cowan tried to engage her students in discussions over an 8-week period that probed for raising consciousness on their part about the social and economic ethos of the pay-to-play virtual space in which the students participated. Perhaps the fact that a large majority of the students in her study came from middle- to upper-middle-class homes explains why they were more inclined to be critical of what they perceived as undue authority exerted by Webkinz World (e.g., restrictions on how their avatars could move, what they could say, and how information could be shared).

In assessing the educational worth of her decision to join students in exploring a website with which they were familiar and quite practiced in navigating, Ms. Cowan emphasized that it had brought out the “undeniably collaborative and communal mentality associated with virtual world participation . . . [with] teaching and learning . . . occurring *at the point of need* . . . [and that] roles frequently shifted” (Cowan, 2010, p. 42) at various points in the study. Beyond those larger contexts of social learning, Ms. Cowan was quick to point out that so-called distinctions between real-world schooling and virtual learning are more artificial than perhaps even she had imagined. For example, noting that the literacies students used to navigate Webkinz World and participate in its many activities were no different from those taught in more traditional settings, Ms. Cowan deplored the general lack of opportunities for youth to engage with virtual learning and multimodal digital texts on a daily basis at her school. After outlining several practical ideas for supporting young people as they experiment with constructing literate identities for themselves in content area curricula embedded in virtual worlds, Ms. Cowan ended with this observation: “Authentic experiences and opportunities await us in the field of virtual technology, and our students stand ready to participate and co-create. Will we as educators successfully ‘slip the surly bonds of Earth’ to meet them in virtual spaces?” (p. 45).

## MOVING ON BY REACHING OUT

It is difficult, if not impossible at times, to connect with adolescents whose motivations for staying in school are not academically driven. Although research on youth motivation and engagement has shown repeatedly that young people who have high-speed Internet access will engage in their free time in reading, creating, and distributing multi-modal digital texts with academic content (Lenhart et al., 2007; Lenhart & Madden, 2005; Livingstone & Bober, 2005; Rennie & Patterson, 2010), schools in the United States do not typically support learning with these kinds of texts. Of course, one does not need to be disengaged with academic pursuits to experience a dislike for traditional textbook learning. Nor does one need to score low on high-stakes reading achievement tests to earn labels such as struggling, disenchanting, at-risk, and so on. For far too many young people, *aliteracy*, not illiteracy, is the bigger challenge (Alvermann, 2004). Aliterate youth are the students who have the ability to read but choose not to for any number of reasons. Because many adolescents of the Net Generation will find their own reasons for becoming literate (reasons that go beyond reading to acquire disciplinary knowledge), it is important that teachers create opportunities for them to engage actively in meaningful subject-matter learning that extends and elaborates on the literacy practices they already own and value.

The research literature dealing with aliterate youth is filled with examples of teachers who have moved on by reaching out to students. One example is drawn from a year-long study (Alvermann, 2004) involving Mr. Donlon's (pseudonym) ninth-grade basic English class, and in particular, a small group of aliterate youth in that class who did their best to avoid reading and discussing selections from the school's required literature anthology.<sup>2</sup> In an attempt to appeal directly to this group's interest in, and self-identification with, several different music genres, Mr. Donlon designed more than one unit over the course of the year that had music as a theme. For example, a unit on the blues required students to compare and contrast imagery in Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" and "Dreams" to "Langston Hughes and the Blues," which Mr. Donlon downloaded from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum (n.d.) website. His objectives were to help students make connections between Hughes's poetry and the blues, and to point out the influence of the Black experience on so much of American music, including rock. As a faculty member in a school that had access to few resources related to digital media at the time, Mr. Donlon relied heavily on the local library's digital folk collection for the materials he needed, including a recording of Robert Johnson's "Cross Road Blues" and a copy of that song's lyrics. As a follow-

up to the unit, students read for multiple purposes from a mix of trade books, magazines, newspapers, student-authored texts, digital texts, CD covers, first-person narratives, sound recordings, photographs, videos, and performances by other blues artists. Among the many things Mr. Donlon learned from that experience was the importance of having an appreciative audience once the students had had time to respond (using various formats) to what they had read. In this instance, he did not have to look outside his own classroom for that audience.<sup>3</sup>

A recent review of the research on adolescents' online literacy practices (Alvermann, 2008) suggests that young people's interest in creating multimodal content that is deeply collaborative, easily distributed, and taken up by appreciative audiences is facilitated in part by the students' inclination to write their worlds into existence—even if it involves rewriting their social identities in ways that produce texts that more closely resemble who they say they are as literate beings. One such example was Derrick (pseudonym), a high school youth who created content in MySpace that belied his teacher's initial description of him as a "disinterested and struggling writer" in his 12th-grade composition class (Kirkland, 2007). Working from a critical theory perspective, Kirkland documented over a 3-year period how Derrick's online compositions were well received in a virtual world where he interfaced digital audio and video technologies with stylized African American spellings to convey his identity as a socially conscious rapper, writer, and poet. Although modeling his online literate identity through his MySpace profile may eventually enable Derrick to situate himself in what Boyd (2008) called "networked publics" (p. 120), the process is still subject to the same issues involving youth identity politics vis-à-vis institutional authority discussed earlier.

Creating web pages for appreciative audiences is a mainstay of young people's penchant for remixing texts online. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar's (2003) study of 2 girls who shared an interest in fan fiction and Japanese animation is a prime example of how visualization, imagery, language, and the arts figure into adolescents' online literate identities. One girl constructed a series of animé-focused web pages, while the other contributed to an online mailing list by scanning copies of her own artwork, inspired by her favorite animé shows, for the express purpose of receiving feedback from knowledgeable others on the list. Simply posting to other people's web pages, message boards, discussion lists, and distros (commonly known as online distribution centers) is yet another means of attracting attention and gaining acceptance by appreciative audiences who share common interests. The 2 young women in Guzzetti's (2006) case study—one, a self-identified activist, and the other, a punk rocker—who posted content to web pages that catered to do-it-yourself enthusiasts

were able to produce themselves as “tech savvy” and prepared to fend for themselves in the larger world. Both examples demonstrate that adolescents know the importance of attracting and maintaining other people’s attention in virtual space, a skill that is far from trivial in today’s attention economy where “attention, unlike information, is inherently scarce . . . [with some economists, such as Goldhaber, predicting] that the human capacity to produce material things [will outstrip] the net capacity to consume the things that are produced” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2002, pp. 20–21). That these two examples were known to literacy teacher educators who could make a difference in how future teachers come to appreciate young people’s online literate identities is worthy of note.

Having access to physical spaces in “real life” to share their online literate identities is also a motivating factor for adolescents who like to create content using multimodal digital texts. Indeed, this factor was of key importance to 4,000 sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students in North Carolina who participated in a statewide after-school program (Spires, Lee, Turner, & Johnson, 2008). Based on data collected from surveys and focus-group interviews, Spires and her colleagues reported that students wanted the successes they were experiencing in the after-school program recognized and appreciated *in school*. Until recently, however, the linguistic mode (specifically, writing) for communicating had reigned supreme among literate people. Given this, schools had busily gone about developing core curricula that conditioned teachers and students to rely on writing as the chief means of representing the ideas they wanted to communicate, often using tools better suited for telling than for showing or illustrating multimodally (Kress, 2003). Although these conditions persist, having gone largely unchallenged, contemporary youth with access to the Internet may be in the vanguard for change. They are using free downloadable editing tools to assist with sound production and various other design elements to produce multimodal content that integrates imagery, gesture, symbol, sound, and the printed word. Of course, the extent to which knowledge of such activity is shared with teachers, school library media specialists, and teacher educators will depend in no small part on how institutional authority defines what counts (and does not count) as literate behavior.

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While one does not need to visit the land of Oz these days to detect a change in conditions, acknowledging this change is important in terms of what it means for us as educators, for the textual choices we make when designing instruction, and for the literate identities students may

construct online. As I have noted elsewhere (Hagood, Alvermann, & Heron-Hruby, 2010), we live in a world where we can open our cell phones faster than we can open a letter, where authoring ideas and texts need not be a solitary or a completely original enterprise, and where we can push against students viewing us as simply “pop-up” educators ready to go through the motions that satisfied a definition of teaching in the past. Teaching with 21st-century texts—when attention, not information, is in scarce supply—can make us feel at times like the pop-ups found on computer screens—the ones that students know all too well how to make disappear.

How we make sense of all this, and whether or not we decide to move on by letting go, joining in, and reaching out will make a world of difference in the way we connect to youth’s literate identities in a digital age. In the end, whether or not we accept the prevailing sentiment that multimodal digital texts distract, an almost certain bet is that the next media distractor will not be a textbook or pencil.

### Notes

1. According to an entry in Wikipedia, this is a corruption (possibly accidental) of the original: “Toto, I have the feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore” (Wikipedia, 2011).
2. For an example of a teacher-researcher study of multimodal texts in an Australian secondary English classroom, see McClenaghan and Doecke (2010).
3. Ajayi’s (2009) work with English second language learners’ explorations of multimodal texts in a junior high school context provides an interesting contrast to Mr. Donlan’s class (Alvermann, 2004) and McClenaghan and Doecke’s (2010) study of a secondary English classroom in Australia.

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