Adolescents' Online Literacies
Connecting Classrooms, Digital Media, & Popular Culture
EDITED BY DONNA E. ALVERMANN
INTRODUCTION

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The idea for this book originated with a group of graduate students who were enrolled in a course I teach at the University of Georgia called Popular Culture and Literacy in K-12 Classrooms. Some of the students were classroom teachers (mostly at the middle and high school level); others were school media specialists and librarians who had varying degrees of teaching responsibilities at their respective schools; and still others were full-time master’s and doctoral level students who were interested in some aspect of young people’s engagement with digital media and popular culture. To a person, these students expressed impatience with theorizing adolescents’ online literacies. As the semester progressed, they asked for readings that would make concrete connections between what the literature portrayed and what they knew to be the situation in their own classrooms, media centers, and libraries. They wanted to learn from people like themselves—educators who were finding ways to incorporate and use the digital literacies youth engage in (e.g., blogging, zining, gaming, hip hop texts, and social networking) to make classroom learning more relevant.

Adolescents’ Online Literacies: Connecting Classrooms, Digital Media, and Popular Culture is a compilation of new work produced and written up by several of the same authors that the students in my graduate seminar were read-
ing. Not surprisingly, their chapters offer diverse ways of connecting adolescents’ online literacies to classroom practice because I intentionally drew from a range of author-experts (classroom teachers, researchers, graduate students, school media specialists, and librarians) who reside in countries that span three continents (Australia, Europe, and North America). In this diversity lies the potential for dipping into pedagogical approaches that have implications for your own set of circumstances.

The book is also “dippable” in that you can start with any chapter and skip around without losing sight of the overall message. That said, I chose to introduce each chapter by following the order in which they are listed in the table of contents. Thus, the first chapter after this brief introduction is one by Lalitha Vasudevan, Tiffany DeJaynes, and Stephanie Schmier. In it, they vividly capture the multimodal world that youth navigate daily. These three authors take you into school settings that challenge educators to be pedagogically nimble in order to support the learning of adolescents whose literacies move across spaces of home, community, and school in rapid succession. As the authors explain, multimodality provides a framework for observing how young people use myriad digital “tools” to engage in literacies that expand what counts as communicating effectively in different contexts.

In chapter 2, Janie Cowan relies on students in her school media center to teach her how to participate in the online virtual worlds of Webkinz, Chobots, and Club Penguin. From this experience in social networking, blogging, and avatars, Cowan learns firsthand of the social and economic ethos of the Webkinz World. Viewed critically, this virtual environment offers what she terms “uncharted territory” of literacy teaching and learning possibilities in 21st century classrooms and library media centers. The next two chapters explore a range of literacies common to older adolescents’ social networking that have implications for classroom teaching. Guy Merchant, in chapter 3, looks at adolescents’ perceptions of their literacy practices in relation to the identity work they do while designing profile pages on several popular social networking sites. Setting this rich data set alongside teacher interviews, Merchant is able to tease out some of the tensions and contradictions, as well as possibilities, inherent in working with these new literacies in classrooms. Social networking is the backdrop for David Kirkland’s chapter 4, as well, but this time the focus is on how one young Black woman’s writings in MySpace reveal a story of oppression that gestures toward what he calls a therapeutic pedagogy. Using a conceptual lens that creates possibilities for implementing this pedagogy in secondary classrooms, Kirkland argues for taking Black female online narratives
seriously by using them as a “critically-grounded and academically rich litera-
cy learning experience for all students.”

The authors of the next two chapters extend the discussion by examining
the literacy practices of adolescents and young adults whose access to digital
media has changed the way they view themselves. For example, Theresa Rogers
and Kari-Lynn Winters (chapter 5) document through various artifacts the way
street youth use a monthly online zine to re-position themselves in relation to
their audiences. By featuring textual play, satire, and discourse that run counter
to the way mainstream media construct street people, the youth-produced
zine, *Another Slice*, offers educators a glimpse into what Rogers and Winters view
as alternative literacy and learning spaces that have implications for classroom
practice. Then, in chapter 6, Jairus Joaquin turns the spotlight on hip hop texts
and shows through his interviews with three young men how these texts inspire
them during times of adversity. Reflecting on an earlier time in his life when
he had used “hip hop as a social avenue to develop relationships with friends
at the high school lunch table,” Joaquin draws from Freire to construct a crit-
ical inquiry-based learning experience around digital hip hop texts that teach-
ers can use as a model for designing their own lessons.

Michael Dezuanni’s chapter 7 makes connections between 17 young males’
everyday literacy experiences with digital media and their more formal high
school curriculum. Using a poststructural analysis of data from a case study of
the Video Games Immersion Unit, Dezuanni shows how classroom teachers and
media specialists can involve young people in designing and producing their
own games through reflective blogging and online chats. In Chapter 8, Amanda
Gutierrez and Catherine Beavis delve into a curriculum unit that features a fan-
tasy online sports game, “SuperCoach.” The authors present a compelling
example of how young people’s online and offline worlds converge as a result
of their adeptness in reading and interpreting information presented in a vari-
ety of forms, from a variety of sources.

One could hardly ask for a better ending to *Adolescents’ Online Literacies:
Connecting Classrooms, Digital Media, and Popular Culture* than the two chap-
ters that follow. As Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Elizabeth Lewis point out in
chapter 9, despite the centrality of online literacies to many adolescents’ lives,
relatively little attention has been paid to the sense that secondary teachers
may, or may not, be making of this phenomenon. To address this gap in the lit-
erature, Chandler-Olcott and Lewis draw on the idea of cultural modeling to
analyze data from a collective case study in which they interviewed 13 English
teachers, two library media specialists, and an academic intervention special-
ist to document their perceptions of adolescents’ online literacies. In the last chapter in the book, Andrew Burn, David Buckingham, Becky Parry, and Mandy Powell report findings from the first phase of a three-year, large-scale media literacy project designed to ask specific questions about a presumed generational gap between teachers’ and students’ awareness and use of digital media. Viewed from a perspective that takes into account both cultural capital and third-space (hybridity), the four chapter authors suggest “the gap between teachers’ and students’ cultures may not be quite as large, or as simple and straightforward” as previously thought.

Although I have had the privilege of reading each of the 10 chapters and the afterword by Kevin Leander several times over the past year in my role as editor, each re-reading has produced new insights and made me even more cognizant of the expertise represented here. This fact, coupled with the pleasure of working with the series editors and staff at Peter Lang Publishing, will remain with me long after the book has gone to press. So, too, will memories of the graduate students who prompted this book’s origins. If I’ve “kept it real,” I’ve kept my promise to them.