

The Web Surfer: What (Literacy) Skills Does It Take To Surf Anyway?



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Abstract: This article looks closely at some of the lingering stereotypes that Composition Studies holds toward Web surfing and queries the resulting literacy hierarchy against our students' reading and writing practices that take place online. This article claims that while good progress has been made in the way of revising twenty-first century definitions of (digital) composing, the academy has yet to fully revisit its boundaries of legitimacy surrounding (digital) reading. Additionally, this article contests the academy's use of technology vis-à-vis email, Blackboard, or blogging as a placating attempt to integrate technology into the classroom without genuinely validating our students' dominant literacies or their digital lives. This article leans on the theories of feminist composition pedagogy as it calls for the field to decenter its authority and revise curricula to incorporate critical digital literacies.

The Status Quo Thinking on Web Surfing

A chief concern of first-year composition pedagogues is the perceived notion that our students do not read like they *used to*.^{1} This attitude, what David Jolliffe and Allison Harl describe as “the status-quo thinking that portrays first-year college students as incapable of and uninterested in reading” (607), often leads frustrated pedagogues to the dismissive presumption that today's students do not read because of their fast-paced, immediately gratifying, mindless consumption of the Web. It is not uncommon to hear academics lamenting the perceived detrimental influence that our students' online practices are having on their in-school literacy practices. For example, tweeting and text messaging is currently at the center of many anxieties surrounding the academic literacies of today's students,^{2} with many professors concerned about the consolidated and abbreviated grammar, which could be seen as nothing less than an economy of style to many texting students. This anxiety, and others similar to it, is indicative of lingering stigmas that still circulate in small pockets of Composition Studies where, as Cynthia Selfe explains, “technology is either boring or frightening to most humanists” who still “believe it should not be allowed to take up valuable scholarly time or the attention that could be best put to use in teaching” (“Technology and Literacy” 94). Further proof of the field's reluctance to fully embrace new ways of reading and writing is found in departments where composition faculty simply use and encourage students to use computers as mere word processors instead of “trying to understand and make sense of, to *pay attention* to, how technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country” (“Technology and Literacy” 96; emphasis in original). It is worth mentioning, too, that so many of our first-year writing courses are taught by incoming graduate students with little formal training in digital media studies and even less authority to deviate from the traditional composition curriculum that “constructs students as passive readers” (Adler-Kassner and Estrem 39). Jeff Rice, in *The Rhetoric of Cool: Composition Studies and New Media*, describes the field's tentative relationship to New Media Studies and the lingering hesitation to move into twenty-first century literacies. Rice explains:

I feel that we are fostering a status quo, a restriction regarding what terms and definitions become circulated in our disciplinary vocabulary. The consequences of that restriction are ideological as much as they are practical. The very act of restriction controls the field's perception of itself and ability to represent itself in a variety of ways...the restriction keeps one imaginary element in place (what we imagine ourselves to be doing or what we imagine ourselves to be) and shuts out another (what we imagine we might become). No truer has this claim I make been than with the role of technology in writing instruction. (19)

Selfe and Rice are not alone in their belief that our field must commit to understanding and embracing digital media and the many subsequent affordances. Dennis Baron's scholarship, for example, focuses on technology as a literacy sponsor that very likely will have “a massive change in world literacy rates and practices” (“From Pencils to Pixels” 82). Davida Charney explores the various cognitive styles by which hypertext reading takes place and argues that we must “draw on rhetorical, linguistic, psychological, and literary theories of text structure,” so that we might

better “confront the issue of what kinds of texts can or should be presented in hypertext environments” (102). New literacy scholars, such as Gail Hawisher, Jonathan Alexander, John Slatin, Sean Williams, James Gee, and Patricia Webb Peterson, research digital media issues ranging from online rhetoric and visual hypertext to access and identity politics to pedagogy and literacy. However, despite the good work of new literacy scholars and the many distinguished graduate programs focused on [Digital Media Studies](#),^{3} many traditional first-year composition [FYC] programs still acknowledge only the critical literacies taking place in and through classrooms, libraries, and traditional academic discourse; likewise, these same programs and curricula tend to classify the online literacies used in Web surfing as idle literacies of leisure—unlike the literacies performed when reading for the academy—and, consequently, the term “reading” becomes an elliptical form of “reading *literature*” (Helmets 7; emphasis added). The result of some of these lingering stereotypes and segregations is often pedagogies and pedagogues that limit academic reading to canonical literature and areas *outside of* cyberspace, the space where our students increasingly spend the majority of their time reading and writing. As Jolliffe and Harl’s recent study of freshman reading habits^{4} shows, students are “*motivated* by and engaged with reading, but the texts that they interact with *most enthusiastically* are technologically based” (612; emphasis added). Segregating academic literacy (“our” literacy) from online literacy (the literacy of the Other) may seem obviously detrimental to literacy scholars interested in narrowing the literacy—and digital—divide, but it would be disingenuous to ignore the *small but present* unease that still exists in many composition programs as Web activity and online reading/writing practices increasingly make their way into modern literacy performances. Rice, in his article entitled “Networks and New Media,” writes:

English studies maintains a fixed point of view through a singular notion of writing as static, fixed, and individually composed (typically via the essay or the exam), taking place in a unified realm of thought deemed “English.” The definitions of “writing” produced in this economy of thought (response essay, analytical paper, personal essay) no longer serve the media society of networks and connections contemporary culture generates *as these definitions of writing are now performed*. The time has come to rethink the metaphor of writing because its image is too structured around fixity. (129; emphasis in original)

Rice’s article suggests that Composition Studies should be interested in reshaping the definition of literacy (but most specifically the term *composition*) into a broader application that fits the twenty-first century and beyond. Additionally, Kathleen Blake Yancey’s article “Writing in the 21st Century” asks for composition research that examines the influence of the digital media on *writing*. Yancey explains:

Research on this composing—which is basically a new model of composing in its attention to the visual and to audience—is needed. In this model of composing, meaning created through the interaction between visual and verbal resources is central, and also key to composing is the role of audience and the social nature of writing, an aspect of writing process that received attention later rather than earlier during this time, and that, as we will see, has become a central feature in the new models of composing emerging now. (4)

The question “What does it mean to *compose* with digital literacy?” is certainly important and central to new literacy studies; however, I argue that in concert with this question should be the question “What does it mean to *read* with digital literacy?”

The concern for a modern notion of *reading* in the writing classroom seems obvious to Marguerite Helms in her introduction to *Intertexts: Reading Pedagogy in College Writing Classrooms*. Helms reminds us that “the complex processes of how readers make sense of texts are inextricably linked to the decisions that writers make about audience, purpose, style, and display” (6). I could not agree more with Helms, and as composition pedagogues, we currently enjoy a unique opportunity to work with students whose Web surfing skills have taught them a great deal about the role of the audience—or the *reader*—in communication practices (i.e. Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, blogs, websites, games, Twitter, and Google are all literacy sponsors that demonstrate varying and intentional tones and styles to appeal to various audiences). Bearing this in mind, we must not simply revise definitions of (digital) composition for the twenty-first century without also revisiting the place that (digital) *reading* holds in today’s performances of literacy, for as we ask our students to consider their digital audience/reader when they *write*, our students as voracious online *readers* are inseparable from that very audience. In “Reading Practices in the Writing Classroom,” Linda Adler-Kassner and Heidi Estrem’s article, published in *Writing Program Administration* no less, we are reminded that the same level of care devoted to writing must also be given to reading within our first-year writing programs (39). While we are re-visioning our definitions of twenty-first century writing, “it is important to disentangle the complicated layers of reading expectations, cultural definitions of reading, student practices of reading, and the pedagogical imperatives surrounding reading in the writing classroom” (43). As does Adler-Kassner and Estrem’s essay, this article calls for critical inspection into “cultural definitions” of reading. However, for fruitful discussion to take place and meaningful curriculum revision to occur, we are in need of critical *introspection* into *our own* cultural definitions that engender and perpetuate the current reading hierarchy that segregates our students’ reading from our

notions of academic reading.

Undoing the Web Surfer Stereotype

New literacy scholars have been comfortable “problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (Street 77). In keeping with this attention to power and literacy must come an inward gaze aimed at reexamining our definitions of legitimate *reading* practices and the powerlessness that we impose upon our students’ extracurricular reading habits as long as we continue to disqualify Web surfing from critical literacy acts. Key to overcoming some of the residual anxieties toward digital media within Composition Studies is examining the (new) reading/writing skills (albeit expanded literacies than what formerly fit under traditional definitions of reading/writing) that are present when—and prerequisite to—successful Web surfing.

To do this work—the work of undoing the literacy stereotype surrounding Web surfing—we should start with the word “surfer” and take a look at the etymology of the term, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: The identity of the surfer first enters into the English lexicon in the February 19, 1921, edition of the magazine *Collier's*, an American magazine published from 1888 to 1957. In this early account, we first see the surfer depicted as a beach bum and a “stupid, silly, daft” presence at the beach: “How d’ye like California?’ ‘Fried!’ says Knockout with a goofy grin.” In April of 1917, the *Chambers’s Journal* publishes “the depth of the lagoon is trifling ... , and this it is which makes surfing there so safe and enjoyable.” In 1955, surfing shows up in popular literature, as seen in H. Hobson’s *Mission House Murder*: “When they’d had enough surfing, they brought the boards back up the beach.” The *Wall Street Journal*, in its July 22, 1963, issue describes the surfer’s culture: “Surfin’ music is characterized by a heavy echo guitar sound, supposed to simulate the roar of the surf.” In December of 1965, the *N.Z. Listener* writes: “Once a person is bitten by this surfing bug he seems to become insatiable. He surfs every day he can, the whole year round.” In 1970, *Future Shock* describes the collective obsession found within the surfing culture, stating that surfers “display sores and nodules on their knees and feet as proud proof of their involvement.” In 1971, *Dolly and Doctor Bird* describes the leisurely lifestyle of the beachgoer as “[s]kin diving, rum punches, calypso night-clubs, surfing, dancing, gambling.” And by 1978, *Running & Being* describes the act of “surfing [as] a spiritual experience.” We do not see the term “surfing” regularly applied to internet activity until around 1991, with a *New York Times* article stating, “[w]hen I logged back on, the conversation was still going. Writers, software experts, database ‘surfers’ (researchers) ... had joined in”; and again in 1992, printing an article stating “the huge volumes of information being covered mean surfers are soon likely to specialize in certain key areas, perhaps using only five or six databases regularly.” In 1992, the text *Surfing Internet—a guide to web surfing*—was published, and by 1997, *Business Age* is quoted as stating, “if a site is not kept up to date, as many surfers find to their irritation, links lead nowhere or information is inaccurate.” We now see the term “Web surfing” as a commonplace term meaning “to visit successively (a series of Internet sites); to use (the Internet)” and “to move from site to site on the Internet, esp. to browse or skim through web pages. Also (occas.): to go to a particular Internet site” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*).

While the term surfing successfully made the transition from the water to the Web—bringing with it connotations of the vastness of the open sea—I argue that joining the term “surfer” with the term “Web” rhetorically implies, for some, the same stereotypical identities long misapplied to surfers and beach “bums.” In other words, the image of the “stupid, silly, daft” presence “with a goofy grin” depicted in the 1921 *Collier's* magazine; the reckless and idle behavior of the “calypso night-clubs, surfing, dancing, gambling” portrayed in the 1971 text, *Dolly and Doctor Bird*; and the 1965 *N.Z. Listener's* obsessed, anti-social, and anti-academic surfer who once “bitten by this surfing bug he seems to become insatiable. He surfs every day he can, the whole year round” seems to have also made the transition to the digital application of the term “surf” (emphases added). We see, in an exceptional use of irony, the young surfer below compose his own video depiction of the surfer as spacey, mindless, anti-intellectual, and even truant as a result of his distracting obsession with surfing.

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Example 1. YouTube Video, "[Stereotypes: The Surfer.](#)" (This video is not captioned; [here is a transcript.](#))

Yes, But What Are They “Doing” Online?

In an effort to untangle some of the cross-referencing of the stereotypical surfer with internet use, we must query the actualities of Web surfing against some of the broader assumptions of the academy that suggest our students' online literacies are in fact *non-literacies*, evacuated of critical thinking. While the technology revolution is still taking shape, we can already trace many branches of literacy “evolutions” that have occurred as a result of the internet. What is important to note, however, is that without the ability to “*analyze* and *interpret* materials on the Web and in other digital environments—[the Web users] may be incapable of functioning effectively as literate citizens in a growing number of social spheres” (Hawisher and Selfe 642; emphasis added). With that in mind, we must explore what critical reading (i.e. analysis and interpretation) is taking place online as our students navigate the Web.

We know that many of our students are both capable of and effective at functioning online and that they have “become proficient in the art of multitasking as they navigate in and out of electronic media” (Jolliffe and Harl 612). Increasingly, our students' literacies are being shaped by their Web surfing practices, and they express their multiple literacies (digital, alphabetic, and cultural) as they move in and out of Web spaces. As they click and browse their way from site to site in search of information, many of our students are in fact moving from wave to wave much like the experienced and agile surfer who knows when to shift her weight and direct her board with precision to move from one wave to the next. Additionally, many of our students increasingly communicate Web literacies in viral ways. For example, when our students post a link on Facebook, forward a YouTube video, or send a multi-modal instant message, they are doing more than simply consuming and replicating Web culture; they are navigating its codes and cues and articulating their approval or disapproval of certain sites and the necessarily socio-cultural information therein vis-à-vis Web supported communication strategies. This very style of reading/writing and communicating is rapidly emerging outside of our literacy classrooms, despite “the poor reception their literacy efforts have sometimes received from teachers and parents” (Hawisher and Selfe 667). When we look to the table below, we find some of the meta-discourse surrounding surfing stereotypes, and we see the potential for the academy to “turn” these stigmas when applying them to Web surfing:

Stereotype of Surfing/ers	When Positively (Re)Applied to Web Surfing
An act of leisure associated with “no-brainer” beach bumming	One must demonstrate agility, literacy, and critical thinking when “Googling” for information.
An extracurricular act that often interferes with school	Web surfing is an extracurricular activity that also has a place in the classroom and serves an “academic” function as a research tool.

Juvenile; won't grow up and join the "real world"	The Web is a space where our students' cyber-identities often match more precisely with their own ethos than with what is expected of them in the "real world."
Counter-culture	Is Web surfing a counter-culture, or are we intimidated by the cultural divide and our own illiteracies compared to many of our students' digital skills?
Surfers as fashionable, trendy, and impressionable	Web culture is just as easily influenced as our students, and we see this through their viral influence in Blogging, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, etc.
The surfer follows the current; the waves control the surfer who is "just along for the ride"	The Web waves are navigated by the digital reader as opposed to the surfer having to "catch" a wave; the student is driving the search.
Nothing better to do; no better place to be	Our students increasingly see the Web as "the" place to be to become culturally literate (both in a macro and micro cultural sense).
Surfers as vulnerable humans at the mercy of the vast and dangerous sea	Web waves move from one site to the next, as opposed to always moving back to shore—back to home. Do we see where Web waves actually help the postmodern Web surfer validate her multiple subject positionings?
Surfing is dangerous as the surfer may be overcome by the waves	While the danger is of course present for exposure to inappropriate material online, the Web surfing adult does not follow the current so much as charter one's own course.

Table 1: Stereotype of Surfing/ers Postively (Re)Applied to Web Surfing

If we look at the table above, there is an overwhelming presence of fear and intimidation associated with surfing (both in the material and cyber applications). Is it the generational divide that keeps digital media out of some of our literacy classrooms? Is it the field's somewhat tardy arrival on the scene that has engendered inconsistent training and therefore a lack of confidence in our pedagogical ability to support digital media? Jeff Rice suggests that the lack of enthusiasm may come from "the repetition of the composition grand narrative [that has] done little to startle us, to provoke us, to cause us to wonder what else could have shaped our current [literacy] pedagogies" (*Cool* 16). Hawisher and Selfe remind us that when we do not incorporate digital media into our literacy classrooms—and that most certainly includes new media reading practices—we fail our students:

We fail to build on the literacies that the students already have—and we fail to learn about these literacies or why they seem so important to so many students. We also fail, as we deny the value of these new literacies, to recognize *ourselves* as illiterate in some spheres. And in this intellectual arrogance, we neglect to open ourselves to learning new literacies that could teach us more about human discursive practices. ("Becoming Literate" 676)

Perhaps the answer—or at least one answer—to this lingering lethargy on the ground (where pedagogical theory actually intersects with the literacy classroom) is found in the claims made by Rice, Hawisher, and Selfe. Perhaps the problem is a private unwillingness to place ourselves in the *sometimes* subordinate position as teachers and give up our own "grand narrative" that is self-perpetuating and self-sustaining. This is not to suggest that *all* literacy scholars are digitally illiterate or to stereotype *all* of our students as digital wizards; this binary would be counterintuitive given my earlier claims that digital media programs are located around the country and abroad, and it would marginalize America's students who suffer under what Selfe describes as our "unequal distribution and use of computer technology along the related axes of socioeconomic status, education, and race" ("Technology and Literacy" 101). Creating a binary that pits our interests in digital literacies against our students' interests would also contradict my earlier suggestions that good scholarship supporting digital media does exist (take, for example, the academic journal [Computers and Composition](#), which is nearing its third decade of publication). Instead of falsely

suggesting that the field is overwhelmed by its own technological illiteracy, I cannot help but suggest that we are instead *underwhelmed* by the seemingly absent departmental and institutional discourse validating our students' online reading. What I mean by this is that it certainly would help me to hear the field discussing what *is* happening when our students are online and validating the critical literacies that *are* present. This depends, as Selfe explains, on "individual teachers: on their willingness to experiment with new media compositions, to take personal and intellectual risks as they learn to value the kinds of texts, to integrate attention to such texts into the curriculum" ("Students Who Teach" 57). To do this, however, we have to authorize our students (and perhaps—for some of us—even put ourselves in a subordinate position) and allow space inside our classrooms for our students' digital literacy practices. This means that as we pedagogically exercise our own varying levels of digital literacy, we may have to (at times) let our students teach us about digital literacies and allow those literacies to be "reclaimed from their contemporary position as supplementary and dispensable illustrations to a position of prominence as a semiotic tool of analysis" (Helmers 14). It would also be useful to see more digital media scholarship published in all of our professional journals, not just those dedicated to computers and writing. We may also have to acknowledge Kelly Ritter's claims in her forthcoming text, *Who Owns School? Authority, Students, and Online Discourse*, that there may be "ways in which the socialized, online practices of students in the twenty-first century eclipse and even conflict with liberatory methodologies in ways that may make teachers—even the most radical among them—uncomfortable with their resulting (lesser) positions in higher education" (26). This certainly does not render us incidental in the classroom, but it may afford twenty-first century classroom authority the opportunity to rotate more democratically throughout our classrooms. However, we must not romanticize our students' digital literacies or—as Cynthia Selfe suggests in "Technology and Literacy: A Story about the Perils of Not Paying Attention"—naively reify in digital terms "the potency of what [Harvey] Graff has called the 'literacy myth,' a widely held belief that literacy and literacy education lead autonomously, automatically, and directly to liberation, personal success, or economic prosperity" (100). Instead, I suggest that while we acknowledge our own critical literacies (multiple and complex as they are), we must also acknowledge that more and more of our students are bringing with them into today's classrooms a modernized lens through which they read (and, consequently, write), and one way to learn more about digital reading is to go online alongside our students into their digital practices and listen to them describe what critical moves they make—*how they read*—when surfing the Web.

What My Students Think

In keeping with new literacy studies's emphases, Brian Street argues that literacy is best studied through ethnographic research. Street suggests that "when ethnographic method is allied to contemporary anthropological theory, emphasizing ideological and power processes and dynamic rather than static models, then it can be more sensitive to social context than either linguistics or general discourse analysis in particular have tended to be" ("New Literacy Studies" 442). If we are to research the critical reading practices utilized by our students as they surf the Web, I believe Street's ethnographic approach best fits the research goals of this endeavor and, ultimately, most authorizes the students whose literacy practices we seek to understand. That said, I have been collecting interviews, journal responses, and writing assignments of more than 120 students who have enrolled in the last three semesters of my sections of first-year composition. Teaching at a research university in the United States of America, I have approached these courses as sites of pedagogical research into the implications of digital literacy practices in freshman composition classrooms. It is important to note that during these three semesters of first-year composition and in an effort to open up the traditional FYC syllabus to a modernized context, I designed my syllabi around Terry Eagleton's notions that "literature cannot in fact be 'objectively' defined. It leaves the definition of literature up to how somebody decides to *read*, not to the nature of what is written" (7; emphasis in original). Eagleton also reminds us that "there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. 'Value' is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes" (10). Following Eagleton's philosophy, then, my students all read the Web as literary text, and all of their papers were researched online. Still producing "traditional" academic compositions (i.e. alphabetic text) that were later compiled into student-designed websites, my students all chose topics of interest to them and read their way through cyberspace in search of quality information that might undergird their research objectives. Students researched by Web surfing various topics, such as the 2008 presidential election, YouTube as a discursive space, hip-hop music and culture, Rhianna and Chris Brown and domestic violence, the iPod as a cultural symbol, Michael Phelps and drug use, the current economic crisis, and many other self-directed research agendas. While I hope this ethnographic, qualitative, and observational research will ultimately speak to many of our students' multiple critical digital literacies, for the sake of this article, I will couch the following five students' interview responses around the immediate concerns of online *reading*. While these five sample interviews do not represent a homogenous population of today's freshman composition students, they do speak to much of the underlying intellectual skepticism with which some members of the academy still approach our students as Web surfers.

Interview 1: “The Texts That We Were Given”

This student is a white, working-class woman who will be identified as “A.” As we move through the transcript from A’s interview, be sure to notice her own understanding of Web surfing compared to that of her college professors, and notice how quick she is to subtly compare Googling to using EBSCO.

J: So when you are online, what are some of the moves that you make when you are reading?

A: For this last paper I Googled critics for *Twilight*.

J: Are you spending your time online differently this semester, or is this how you normally work online?

A: Well, I mean not for papers. Normally I just use the—Like, last semester I just used the texts that we were given. I like this semester a lot better because you can develop your own opinions and stuff. We were like forced to use, um, EBSCO host. We had to find all of our stuff from that. I don’t really like that website. I mean I do. It’s helpful, but I would rather find more interesting articles.

J: Would you say that your professors count what you do online as academic work? Do you see what you do online differently than what your professors see it as because they have you work in the library or on EBSCO?

A: I like being able to use Google and stuff. I think as long as I’m finding good websites-

J: —how do you determine that it’s a good website?

A: I like to make sure that it is copy written and stuff and there are authors. Where does it come from? What’s the source? Is it CNN.com or something like that?

J: How did you learn how to do that? You are not being taught this in your classes, so how did you learn to check your sources? This is a very academic thing you are talking about doing.

A: Like, high school, and just always. I don’t know. My mom is really good with computers so she used to show me. And my teachers in high school.

J: So your teachers in high school used to let you do internet research?

A: Uh-huh, yeah.

J: Oh. Very cool.

A: Yeah, we had a lot of ...we could just work with our papers and our teachers were fine with it.

J: How much time do you think you spend online in general, not just for class?

A: Oh. Like. All day (laughing).

J: So you are pretty comfortable in that space.

There are many interesting points about A’s interview, but one of her most significant points is that her teachers typically ask her to limit her research to “the texts that we were given,” and A even points out that she prefers to follow her own instincts through her research because “you can develop your own opinions and stuff.” We know that one of the goals in liberatory pedagogy is to move away from what Freire calls the banking concept. As an alternative to top-down teaching that silences our students’ interests and “to avoid wielding power to promote only the teacher’s interests, some of us—for example, some writing teachers and feminist literature teachers—have attempted to espouse a different classroom configuration of power in which teacher and students are freely negotiating equals” (Bizzell 849). Liberatory or feminist pedagogies—those that aim to decenter the teacher’s authority and instead authorize the student—fit rather naturally in the twenty-first century classroom that extends its literacies of legitimacy into cyberspace. When we listen to A, she explains that “we were forced to use EBSCO host. We had to find all of our stuff from that. I don’t really like that website. I mean I do. It’s helpful, but I would rather find more interesting articles.” If we hear what A is saying, she admits that EBSCO is a useful resource (one that she equates to a website), but she finds more “interesting articles” elsewhere. Here we are reminded by A that, as academics, we needn’t discourage her Web surfing. According to the McArthur Foundation Report on Digital Media

and Learning:

Rather than seeing socializing and play as hostile to learning, educational programs could be positioned to step in and support moments when youth are motivated to move from friendship-driven to more interest-driven forms of new media use. This requires a cultural shift and a certain openness to experimentation and social exploration that is generally not characteristic of educational institutions. (Ito, et al. 35)

What might happen if Composition Studies were to embrace this “cultural shift” that some of us still seem to resist? Would we be able to turn our FYC classrooms toward “interest driven forms of new media use” and engage our students in digital literacies? Naturally, as literacy scholars our instincts prompt us to pause at the shores of the Web and question the quality of the sources that are more “interesting” to A and her peers. This concern is something that we see addressed in the following interview.

Interview 2: “The Way They Write It”

This student is a multi-racial, working-class woman who will be identified as “Q.” As we move through the transcript from Q’s interview, notice her attention to website discourse and how “they are writing it” as she explains her strategies for expediting her search for “current research.”

J: Do you feel comfortable doing your research online?

Q: I think I have to, to get current research. You are going to find out more information online and not just a book. I’ve always been more comfortable doing my research online, though.

J: Why?

Q: I think I can find more stuff that way. I’ve been to our library, and it’s way easier to find stuff online- there’s just more out there.

J: So you feel quicker online?

Q: Mmm-hmm. And more efficient because I can always go back it up with another source instead of having to read through book and books.

J: How do you know when you are on a good site that is a good source?

Q: It’s just in the way that they are writing it. I look at that a lot. I always back up information with another site, and if they have the general idea then I know. If the specifics are the same, too.

J: Do you do this with your non-school related surfing?

Q: [Nodding] I’m just a big music nerd. Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin—that’s my kind of music. I love to learn about the history of music [online].

J: How long have you been researching the history of music through the Web?

Q: About a year. I’m learning to play the guitar this summer, so I want to know what I’m getting into.

J: That’s awesome. How long have you been going online? How old were you the first time you logged on?

Q: Oh. Um. I’ve been on the internet for awhile. Since I was twelve. My mom taught me. She learned at work and taught me how to play around online. She got me my first email address, and my Dad bought me my first laptop when I was 13. It’s six or seven years old now, and it’s kind of a grandma. My roommate has a Mac, and I don’t like it as much. Except the internet. I like a Mac for Web surfing because it’s so fast.

Q’s interview speaks directly to the academy’s concern that our students are not paying attention to their online sources or are not capable of discerning a legitimate source from a *non-academic* source. We learn from Q that she wants access to “current” information, and she finds “more” of that online, and she finds it quicker and easier than at the library. But while easier does not necessarily mean better, it does not necessarily mean worse either. We learn from Q that when Web surfing, she looks very closely at the general information of a site as well as the specifics—*acritical reading* skill that we often claim our students are unable or unwilling to practice when it comes to reading

traditional literature. When Q reads a website, she looks at rhetorical style or “the way that they are writing it. I look at that a lot,” and she counters the potential for bias by “back[ing] up information with another site, and if they have the general idea then I know. If the specifics are the same, too.” We would be disingenuous if we failed to acknowledge the biases present in academic discourse, but our students are often too intimidated by our authority or by the authority granted in the publication process to second-guess our academic journals the way that Q is willing to push back against Web discourse. Most promising of this critical reading that Q describes is the potential for Web surfing to provoke in our students an ability to deconstruct a text in the ways that we encourage in our classrooms. Is this critical reading while Web surfing a result of also being a *member* of the discourse community she critiques, unlike the reading relationship students have with the volumes upon volumes lining the stacks in the libraries and the bookshelves behind our office desks? Do the students naturally read more confidently—and therefore more critically—when they feel equalized and authorized by a text?

Interview 3: “A Few Tricks of the Trade”

This student is a white, middle-class woman who will be identified as “L.” As we move through the transcript from L’s interview, notice her understanding of how to emulate the online academic writing style that she has learned by *reading* the Web, and notice how she explains that by Googling an academic “sounding” paper title, she is better able to read/surf for information. No doubt, this academic mimesis that she performs is a direct result of her attentive and extensive online *reading* habits.

J: What is your paper topic?

L: I want to study the Apple iPod as a cultural symbol and like, I found this website where some grad student did this whole website about her research and it’s just this whole website about like iCulture. So it was really interesting to see.

J: How did you find that website?

L: I just Googled it, and it was there. I just did the right ... kind of made my search sound like an academic article title, and it was there.

J: How did you know to make your search sound like an academic thing?

L: I guess I just learned it. I don’t know. I do a lot of research through Google, and I guess I just learned a few tricks of the trade. You can find people who put their dissertations out there and their research out there. And like, I have a Mac book so I get the Apple email about their stuff. So they are very good at making sure you are still buying their product.

J: I find it amazing how your generation is already thinking more critically than my generation did at your age. I don’t think I was so critical about my identity and fitting in. So your idea about iPhone and identity is pretty cool.

L: Yeah, like I was Googling about how some people like feel like their iPod is a part of their body. They are like, without it, they are like ... I feel like a piece, like my arm is missing, and so I mean it’s like everybody has an iPod. It’s kind of weird if you don’t have one. There’s even like hidden iEtiquette about iPod use. You can look through a person’s iPod and see what they are into, like if they have all metal or all hip hop or straight up alternative. Just like I like Coldplay, so I’m compatible with other people who have similar music on their iPod.

J: Do you feel like you know your way around the internet as a research device?

L: Oh yeah.

J: How did you get to that point where you can use the internet as a research device?

L: I don’t know I just experimented when I was a kid. I mean I just went out and Googled and stuff like that and just learned.

J: How old were you when you started doing that stuff? I mean you said, a kid. Can you remember the first time you got on line?

L: I don’t know I mean like grade school and stuff. Like early on. I mean we still had dial-up in the beginning. It made that horrible noise, and my mom would get mad at me because it would block the phone line.

J: How old were you when you sent your first text message.

L: I don't know like 13.

L teaches us a great deal about our students' ability to write professionally. Admittedly, I am frustrated at times when trying to help my students find their academic voices without simply asking them to write like *us*. I always feel as though I am cheating my students by asking them to mimic our style, and my feminist pedagogy dissuades me from imposing my authority in such a disenfranchising way. I am amused, however, when I hear L admit rather candidly that she is clever enough to mimic *us* when Web surfing for academic resources—to make “my search sound like an academic article title.” What this tells us is that our students do understand what we mean when we ask them to use a certain *style* or *voice*. Certainly, there is a difference between composing an entire paper in an academic manner instead of simply Googling the Web; however, the joke seems to be on us here as our students perform the “tricks of the trade.” Our students are able to identify “our talk” when they read it, and they are able to emulate *us* to reach their goals (not ours). There is power in play here, and it behooves us to step aside and watch our students choose when and where to shift in and out of writing styles. Furthermore, we learn from L that while our students may appear to be *just* Web surfing, they are in fact reading. L points out that “I have a Mac book ... [;] they are very good at making sure you are still buying their product.” Here we see a student who is actively deconstructing the Apple website—unlike the image that the academy holds of the passive, idle Web surfer. L's critical online reading skills remind us that it is “*crucial to listen carefully to [our students] and learn from their experiences of growing up in a changing media ecology*” (Ito, et al. 35).

Interview 4: “I’m Not Necessarily Reading about Smart Issues”

This student is a white, working-class male who will be identified as “W.” As we move through the transcript from W's interview, notice his rather academic and technical uses for Web surfing; however, pay close attention to his self-deprecating image of his online literacy habits as “not reading about smart issues.”

J: Do you feel comfortable doing your research online?

W: Yeah, I can navigate it.

J: How old were you the first time you got online?

W: Probably six or seven.

J: You're kidding!

W: Nuh-uh. We had a computer in 1995. I remember playing games on it and then getting on the internet. We had dial-up, and it was 5 kilobytes a second to download.

J: How do you know what a kilobyte is?

W: I'm kind of a nerd. Not a super nerd. But, um, I took some networking classes in high school, but really the class doesn't teach you anything. All these kids already know how to do this stuff. Plus, I build computers. Like, I build computers—the parts inside them. You can buy them and put them together.

J: How do you know how to do this?

W: I look it up online. You need to look it up—what kind of a hard drive do you need for this, and stuff.

J: You go to a computer to learn how the inside of a computer works?

W: Yes.

J: How did you know you could go to the Web to learn this stuff?

W: You just kind of pick up on it. You get a computer and you're like, how can I make this better? I need to figure out how.

J: And you just know instinctively that you can go to the Web for this stuff?

W: Yeah. Well anything now. You can type in specific problems. My car starts wiggling at 40, and you get the

answer online. You get a computer error and type that error in and there it is. What particular file is this ... [;] how do I open that? YouTube has also become a self help site to help fix any problem you have. For example, if I wanted to install speakers and subwoofers into my car, I would look it up and I guarantee there are many different videos that will show me the step-by-step instructions on how to do this. Some people do complain about the videos posted that are so stupid and irrelevant that they forget this is a valuable learning tool.

J: You know a lot about technology. Are you a computer science major?

W: No! That's math not computers. I'm not that technical. I guess compared to friends, yes. When I'm in my dorm, I'm on my computer. I help my friends. I'm on the computer most of the day. I use it to read articles on game reviews and stuff like that. I'm not necessarily reading about smart issues.

J: I don't know. I think reading about how to build a computer is pretty smart stuff.

W: You do know I'm not talking about getting little circuits and soldering it together. It's just user friendly now to fix your own computers. Computer people who charge you to fix stuff, it's a rip off.

W's interview is very helpful when we take a close look at what we think our students are doing online. It is tempting to suggest that our students are just tinkering away at Facebook (which itself requires very sophisticated cultural, digital, and alphabetic literacies). However, we learn from W that the internet is in fact a vehicle for very advanced learning. W surfs the Web the way former generations used an encyclopedia or read instructional manuals. W points out that "YouTube has also become a self-help site to help fix any problem you have." In W's case, we see a student using the internet as though it were his own personal library. He surfs the Web when he needs to build a computer, fix his car, or "read articles on game reviews." There are graduate degrees granted in these very fields, and yet W is quick to remind us that he's "not necessarily reading about *smart* issues." I cannot help but wonder what mixed-messages W might be receiving from the academy regarding his extra-curricular reading habits. This is a student who spends more time reading outside of class than he does for class, yet he immediately disqualifies it as anti-academic because we do not legitimate his performance of literacy; instead, we segregate it due to a lingering stereotype of the mindless, idle, surfer just wasting time.

Interview 5: "In Terms of Navigating It"

This interviewee is a white, working-class male who will be identified as "R." As we move through the transcript from R's interview, notice how he credits his father for introducing him to computers. However, note how quickly he delineates between the computer skills used for "sales for his [father's] work" as opposed to the Web surfing skills necessary for "navigating" the internet.

J: Do you feel comfortable doing your research online?

R: Yea. I'll probably do both, but mainly online.

J: Do you feel like you know your way around the Web? Can you surf for the best literature on your topic?

R: Yeah.

J: How old were you the first time you went online? Do you know?

R: My dad, his job entails computers and stuff like that, so I don't know maybe 1988. That might be a bit early. Basically when the first Macintosh came out we got one and went online. My dad taught me, but now I think I know more about it than he does now. He uses it for sales for his work, but in terms of navigating it, I know more. I'm pretty sure.

While R's interview may be short, he tells us something very important: our students do not equate skills-based uses of a computer with Web surfing. R informs us that his father taught him how to use a computer, but R taught himself how to surf the Web. In fact, he realizes that his computer skills have surpassed his father's skills simply because his father only uses the computer for work. This important piece of information should inform our pedagogical inclusion of digital media. R's opinion of his father's use of the computer is certainly equivalent to the professors who only engage in technology through apparatuses such as email, blogs, WebCT, or Blackboard. While these small gestures do attempt to incorporate technology into the syllabus, those devices are no different than a mathematics professor using a calculator in a classroom. To the student, email, blogs, and Blackboard are school supplies, not

incorporations of their primary literacy skills. Our students understand that “fluent and expert use of new media requires more than simple, task-specific access to technology” (Ito, et al. 36). Furthermore, while “sporadic, monitored access at schools and libraries may provide sufficient access for *basic* information seeking” (Ito, et al. 36; emphasis added), our students have identified sophisticated, intelligent, and *academic* Web surfing skills that Composition Studies has yet to legitimate. To R and his peers, we (like R’s father) have been surpassed by our students.

How Might Web Surfing Strengthen Freshman Composition Classrooms?

When we consider these five sample interviews (and the similar concerns expressed throughout the 120 interviews and surveys I have collected), we learn that Composition Studies must revisit the term “reading” in search of a new definition that includes and is informed by the twenty-first century literacies that many of our students possess. While Web surfing certainly provides opportunity for *leisurely* reading, so too does reading Austen, Shakespeare, or *the New York Times*. However, new literacies are evolving as a result of technology, and the lingering anti-academic stigmas that we attach to Web surfing foster a reading hierarchy that no longer fits with twenty-first century literacies and learners.

One example of an evolving literacy practice that is a direct result of Web surfing—and that provides opportunity for exploration in the freshman composition classroom—is the ability to navigate hypertext. Dissimilar in substantial ways to traditional text, hypertext requires more of its readers than perhaps we currently acknowledge in many of our composition classrooms. John Slatin, in “Reading Hypertext: Order and Coherence in a New Medium,” discusses the affordances and complexities of online reading:

The reader’s progress through a conventional text is governed by the arrangement of the material; the burden of prediction falls more heavily upon the reader than on the writer. This situation becomes considerably more complicated by hypertext. Given a system of discrete and interconnected nodes, the reader/user must decide which links to follow; in order to make that decision intelligently, he or she must be able to make reliable predictions about the consequences of particular choices. (172)

While I do not suggest that our students are—or need to be—critically aware of the “burden of prediction” that Slatin describes, I do suggest that exploring this concept with our freshman composition students may provoke a self-confidence in many of our students by highlighting and legitimating their literacy instincts in a course that has a reputation (at least among the students I have interviewed) for focusing on what the students do *wrong* as readers and writers. Designing our freshman composition syllabi and writing assignments around hypertext reading/research also acknowledges, as Davida Charney explains in “The Effects of Hypertext on Processes of Reading and Writing,” that students determine for themselves which hyperlinks to follow based “on the belief that readers know best what information they need and in what order they should read it” (97). I find this a promising direction for the students who (like the first sample interview I included) resist being limited to only the texts the teachers authorize. Again, we see an opportunity for many of our students to champion some of their literacy strengths while simultaneously validating the cultural capital of their extracurricular digital literacies.

This is not a proposition for doing away with textbooks and moving online entirely. Naturally, the freshman composition classroom will always need a grammar and style handbook. Perhaps, however, in lieu of the traditional freshman anthology or novel, our students might enjoy and excel at reading and then writing about relevant and contemporary online texts. Practicing rhetorical criticism, arguably one of the chief concerns of the freshman composition classroom, can certainly occur within the socio-political nuances of online discourse. Jonathan Alexander, in *Literacy, Sexuality, and Pedagogy: Theory and Practice for Composition Studies*, reminds us:

It behooves us to introduce students to how issues are cast rhetorically, how they are often falsely binarized in the media, how views about issues stem from complex contexts, and how greater rhetorical awareness of those contexts provides us a more subtle way of understanding those issues and communicating effectively with those whose views differ from ours. (199)

Reading the rhetoric of the digital media in our freshman composition classrooms certainly provides opportunity for our students to deconstruct texts in meaningful and academic ways. Additionally, in the multimodal composition classroom, critically reading YouTube as film and website design as visual rhetoric offers the opportunity for our students to examine “culture’s hold on the visual and rhetoric’s power to illuminate that hold by helping us explicate historically and politically contingent points of view, revealing the anxieties these views produce, and showing how

such anxieties can color what we see” (Handa 4). While these examples (critically *reading* hypertexts, YouTube, and Websites) are just three potential pedagogical applications of critical digital literacy within the freshman composition curriculum, there are undoubtedly unlimited approaches to multi-modal literacy—and, specifically, online reading practices—that are available to the pedagogue seeking to incorporate Web surfing into the composition classroom. For example, a reading/writing assignment that I plan to incorporate into my syllabus this fall will ask my students to critically chronicle their discursive moves when using Facebook or MySpace. I plan to ask my students to keep a journal for one week, and in this journal the students will record what changes to their profile they make (sharing images, status updates, YouTube links, etc.), why they make those changes for their audience, what changes their Facebook friends make and the implications of those changes, whether they consider diction given their Facebook audience, what critical choices they consider when posting or linking, etc. I will then ask my students to write a paper *critically reading* their Facebook activity for that week. In addition to the traditional grammatical expectations of academic discourse, I hope this writing assignment will initiate a consciousness of my students’ online ethos. As I mentioned earlier, an awareness of their online literacy is not necessarily prerequisite to the literacy acquisition; however, in instigating a consciousness of ethos during the first writing assignment of the semester, I hope to create a fruitful platform from which to discuss audience, voice, and style in *all* types of writing—academic, professional, and otherwise—and I hope to use Facebook as a familiar space in which my students might begin to connect reading to writing. As Louise Rosenblatt suggests in *Making Meaning with Texts*, “the teaching of reading and writing at any developmental level should have as its first concern the creation of environments and activities in which students are motivated and encouraged to draw on their own resources to make ‘live’ meanings” and “such teaching, concerned with the ability of the individual to generate meaning, will permit constructive cross-fertilization of the reading and writing process” (27). Certainly, the Web affords cross-fertilized literacy practices that have meaningful implications for the academy and beyond.

It is time for the field to shed the reading hierarchy that marginalizes and segregates “other” ways of reading. Web surfing—while certainly used for pleasure and passive consumption—is also a critical reading practice. Simply dismissing the Web as *nothing more* than a sponsor of leisurely literacy ignores the obvious fact that “new media are the technological manifestations of a shift in the language apparatus of our civilization that has been underway at least since the invention of photography and involving a cultural adaptation to the industrial and information revolutions” (Rice x). While many academics attempt to validate our students’ interest in technology by integrating Web-based research via online journal databases or the use of email, Blackboard, and blogging into their classrooms, some of our students still see this as a half-hearted bait and switch: using the bells and whistles of technology to disguise traditional, hierarchical classroom practices without genuinely validating the online literacies of our students and their digital lives. It is no longer enough for the field to sit proudly behind our computers as we drop our courses into Blackboard or allow our students to access our libraries’ electronic databases to read *our* journals that are now posted online. Composition Studies must acknowledge the critical literacies that are in play as we surf with multimodality alongside our students in what is increasingly becoming—for many of our students—a primary discourse: “the one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others” and that “constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity” (Gee 527). There is certainly more work to be done to fully understand and appreciate what digital literacy means to the twenty-first century reader and what reading means to twenty-first century literacies. Composition Studies is perfectly poised to incorporate online reading into our curricula, but doing so may require sharing our classroom authority with our students—the generation of Web surfers who “can’t remember when”⁵ they first logged on.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Michelle Ballif and the anonymous reviewers of *Composition Forum* for their thoughtful and rigorous guidance during the writing of this article. The editors of *Composition Forum* note that this study was conducted with Institutional Review Board approval from The University of Arkansas (September 30, 2008). ([Return to text.](#))
2. For more on this debate, see David Crystal’s *Txtng: The Gr8 Db8*. ([Return to text.](#))
3. Digital Media Studies programs are located across the country and abroad, including but not limited to The University of Virginia, The University of Denver, The Ohio State University, San Francisco State University, MIT, West Virginia State University, DePaul University, The New School, The University of Toronto, Florida State University, Elon University, and many others. ([Return to text.](#))
4. Jolliffe and Harl’s article “Studying the ‘Reaching Transition’ from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?” traces the reading habits of freshman composition students at the University of Arkansas. From their study, Jolliffe and Harl conclude “that many students in [the] study described having regular, steady, full reading lives in which they engaged with a wide variety of texts for reasons both academic and nonacademic” (607). ([Return to text.](#))

5. I use the quote “who can’t remember when” in reference to the digital literacy interviews that I have been collecting with my students. Consistent within the overwhelming majority of these interviews is the exclamation that my students cannot remember how old they were when the first logged on because a cousin, an older sibling, or their parents have used the internet as a household item since they were too young to recall. ([Return to text.](#))

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