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Education remix: New media, literacies, and the emerging digital geographies

Lalitha Vasudevan

Abstract

This article explores instances of youth educating themselves beyond the boundaries of school through engagement with and production of “digital geographies,” or the emerging landscapes that are being produced through the confluence of new communicative practices and available media and technologies. A framework of digital geographies, which is grounded in theories of spatiality, literacies, and multimodality, is used to analyze the social media practices and multimedia artifacts produced by two court-involved youth, who are part of an ongoing, multi-year ethnography of an alternative to incarceration program. Attention to digital geographies, and attendant communicative practices, can yield important insights about education beyond the school walls. The conclusion addresses the implications of this research for meaningful educational contexts for adolescents’ literacies and how learning might be conceptualized and designed within school.

Keywords:

Literacies, new literacies, digital, youth, social media, geographies, education, multimodality

Introduction

The current digital moment is replete with spaces of representation, communication, and information dissemination. Temporality and synchronicity of identity performances have given way to multi-spatial and cross-temporal instantiations of the self. Drawing on recent conceptualizations of multimodality in communication and representation, this article focuses on instances of youth educating themselves beyond the boundaries of school. Specifically, I explore how youth enact education through the engagement with and production of “digital geographies,” or the emerging landscapes that are being produced through the confluence of new communicative practices and available media and technologies. In these spaces, the practices of communication and representation draw on multiple modes of expression and capitalize on technologies that facilitate social collaboration in new ways. What I am referring to as digital geographies are not limited to online spaces, but rather include the broader landscape of multimodal literacies and digital practices involved in composing of meaning and diverse texts for a variety of purposes. Thus, the digital geography of [flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com), for example, extends to include the production of the photographs, the processes of editing and subsequent uploading and commenting that comprise the experience of interacting with this photo sharing website. Attention to digital geographies, and attendant communicative practices, can yield important insights about education beyond the school walls, which can inform how we construct spaces for education and literacy practices within schools.

Situating “new” literacies

Nearly 30 years ago, in the early 1980s, literacy studies was marked by a significant methodological and theoretical shift that Gee (1999) later termed the “social turn,” which was a turn towards attending to the social and cultural contexts of literacies. Heath (1983) published seminal findings about the school experiences of working class children who struggled to have their literacies, which did not match school definitions of literacy, accepted in school. Prior to Heath’s work, cultural differences in how language and literacy practices were situated across different communities were rendered largely invisible. Heath’s study and related investigations of local literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), in which researchers sought to understand literacy in practice and as located in social contexts outside of school (Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Knobel, 1999; Street, 1984, 1995), further challenged the dominance of school-based and behaviorist orientations toward literacy education policy and practice. The New Literacy Studies (NLS), as this body of work came to be identified, was characterized by the methodological influences of anthropologists and sociolinguists who relied on ethnographic methods to engage in sustained, nuanced, and situated explorations of phenomena for the purposes of developing understandings about the practices of individuals and communities. These approaches allowed these researchers to retain the complex relationships between and among human interactions that involved language and literacies.

An important chronology that parallels the growing availability of personal and portable technologies through the 1990s and early 2000s followed this social turn in literacy studies. The confluence of technologies and sociocultural approaches to the study of literacies inspired a body of important research that expanded the scope of NLS. The New London Group (1999) built on studies of semiotics to advance a pedagogy of multiliteracies, in which they called attention to the growing variety of texts and design practices made possible in a world of increasing technological, cultural, and linguistic diversity. An important distinction to note here is between Street’s (1995) argument for an understanding of literacies as multiple (or multiple literacies) – which was a rejection of the reductive tendencies of institutions to privilege a singular, “school standard” definition of literacy over other literacy practices – and the conceptualization of multiliteracies, which signals the multiple resources and communicative forms that inform the design of texts. The latter, then, prompted a series of studies that expanded upon the idea that technologies qualitatively change the nature of our literacy practices; these are now widely referred to as studies of new literacies (e.g., Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Squire, 2008; Thomas, 2007). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) offer a nuanced discussion of what scholars writing in the tradition of new literacies (in a slightly different, but related, posture than sociocultural studies of literacies) mean by “new literacies.” They point out that with new “technical” stuff comes new “ethos” stuff; put another way, Web 2.0 technologies have provided both infrastructure and technical capabilities in order to communicate and compose in new ways.

Digital literacies, a semantic cousin to this conversation, signals the intimate relationship between literacies (by which I mean literacy practices, and I use these terms interchangeably throughout this article) and the digital tools by which and the digital spaces in which they are mediated (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Lewis, 2007). It is here, at the intersection of studies of new literacies (and thus new ways of designing and communicating meaning) and sociocultural studies of literacies (that continue to be relevant for foregrounding the social, cultural, political, and historical meanings of

literacies across contexts) where I locate my research. In a final note about terminology, it is important to remember that while “new literacies” and “new literacy studies” are not synonymous, they do share a discursive genealogy that is rooted in recognition of the plurality and evolving nature of literacies. These understandings depart from more instrumentalist uses of “literacies” wherein the term is defined as the ability to do something or knowledge about some body of work, most of often taken up in content areas: e.g., “science literacy,” “math literacy,” “computer literacy,” and so on.

New literacies and education

Despite the rich history of literacy studies and robust body of evidence to the contrary, definitions of literacy and learning that operate in schools today are often far removed from the actual practices in which children and youth engage. This dichotomy is especially true in urban institutions in the United States whose assessment practices are under heavy surveillance and regimentation. However, cultural narratives such as the “digital divide” and the “literacy crisis,” which saturate urban education discourses, are being challenged by the participatory, engaged, and multimodal communication practices of the current cultural revolution inspired by social media. Particularly for many youth who have been labeled “at risk” and are identified as “struggling readers,” school can be an alienating place (see Vasudevan & Campano, 2009 and Alvermann, 2002 for extended discussion about the negative consequences of literacy labels for children and adolescents in US schools). Often, these are young people who live digital lives but who are confined to analog rights in school. In other words, too many of our urban schools are increasingly characterized by policies that prohibit the use of digital technologies (cell phones, cameras, handheld video game consoles) and limit access to many websites (e.g., social networking sites, video sharing sites) within school boundaries. In urban contexts in the United States, such as the one in which the research reported in this article took place, classroom teachers are routinely negotiating between national and local policies that threaten to further constrain the definitions of concepts like literacy and learning, even as these very concepts are being re-imagined in significant ways through the actual practices of youth, as the ensuing discussion will illustrate. Many of these youth are among those who routinely traverse spaces that exist across online and offline, virtual and physical domains, and who are transforming the digital landscape by engaging in a range of communicative practices – e.g., creating multimedia texts to enhance their online profiles; commenting and providing feedback on a variety of blogs, wikis, and other collaboratively constructed sites; and using cell phones for text messaging and the exchange of photos and videos.

In this article, I analyze the social media practices and multimedia artifacts produced by court-involvedⁱ youth from an alternative to incarceration program (ATIP)ⁱⁱ to understand the ways in which education is being remixed—or re-imagined through the reconfiguration of texts, technologies, and resources—by the same youth who are often marginalized in school contexts. Education is intentionally decoupled from both schooling and learning in this article, and informed by recent theorizing by anthropologists who understand this term to refer to “deliberate and deliberative human activity” (Varenne, 2007, p. 562) through which knowledge is produced and acquired in everyday interactions. For example, one can understand [Youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com) as a site where not only does the video content transmit information about a wide range of topics, but so too do the practices of commenting, rating videos, video selection, and even the culture of uploading content scaffold the production of new ways of knowing. In turn, participants in such spaces are engaging in education and are being educated, and

participating in a remixing of cultural resources, texts, and practices while engaged in the production that is afforded by emerging digital geographies.

This article illustrates how two youth involved in various creative endeavors at ATIP leveraged their digital literacies and facility with portable technologies in the production of multimedia narratives and new narrative spaces. I begin with a conceptual framing of digital geographies, drawn from recent scholarship on multimodality, literacies, and spatiality. Next I present detailed portraits of two participants. One young man, Joey, was involved in a digital media workshop where his production and engagement of digital geographies was reflected in his media artifacts and multimodal literaciesⁱⁱⁱ. A second young man, EJ, engaged in practices of writing across various digital spaces, that were especially inspired by his involvement in the ATIP's Insight Theater Project, and through which he garnered new audiences and purposes for writing. What emerged was a robust set of digitally mediated literacies connected to the digital geographies created by the youth involved in both of these creative spaces. Here, I analyze communication practices and expressive artifacts – such as multimedia narratives, online profiles, handheld technology use – to explicate a discussion of digital geographies. Following these two portraits, I conclude with a discussion of the implications of digital geographies for how we conceptualize and create meaningful educational contexts for adolescents' literacies.

Conceptualizing digital geographies

Youth, who routinely traverse spaces that exist across online and offline, virtual and physical domains, are transforming the digital landscape. For example, a fan of anime can also watch and produce anime music videos (AMVs), in which clips from one or more anime movies are edited together to illustrate a popular song. This type of remixing genres across spaces is also found in the sharing and (re)producing of music, video, and other textual genres in which many youth engage (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008). As listeners, youth carefully craft play lists for their iPods that they then share with peers, or publicize on their social networking sites. As music performers, young people routinely record themselves and overlay their voices with beats, either produced on their own or borrowed from someone else, thereby extending the production of a song across various social networks, tracks, instruments, and spaces. The literacies and participation practices of adolescents reciprocally transform and are transformed by the hybrid digital spaces they habitually traverse (Jacobs, 2006; Lam, 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Nixon, 2009; Wilber, 2007).

Digital technologies facilitate this movement, often seamlessly executed through engagement with technologies such as cell phones, digital music players (used interchangeably with the term “MP3 players” here), social networking sites, and virtual worlds. Salient to these travels are the literacy practices that accompany them. When youth are “in” the virtual world of Second Life, for example, they are verbally communicating with other inhabitants, and also conveying aspects of their identity and intentionality through the creation, movement, and interaction of their avatar (Thomas, 2007). Furthermore, mobile technologies such as multifunction cell phones, handheld video game consoles, and digital video and still cameras, in concert with wireless Internet access, afford entry into spaces without the tether of a desktop computer. This rather obvious point underscores the need for current educational practices—such as assessment, curriculum development, instruction—and educational geographies—

including classrooms in schools and even afterschool programs—to be reconceptualised in light of evolving digital capacities.

As the youth-produced texts and practices of composing and production are being transformed within and by digital geographies, the perspectives offered by multimodal literacies research and spatial theories offer important interpretive lenses to bring to these phenomena. The theoretical lens of multimodality calls attention to the design and composing practices involved in the production of meaning through texts (Jewitt, 2008; Kress, 2000; Leander & Vasudevan, 2009). This lens builds on the work of multiliteracies scholars by calling attention to the orchestration of multiple modalities – the objects of production, themselves – as well as the juxtaposition of modes in meaning making and text production. Within digital geographies, therefore, youth orchestrate multiple modes, such as images, music, narration, and writing, in the production and consumption of various forms of digital and non-digital texts and communicative practices (Kajder, 2004; Ranker, 2008; Skinner & Hagood, 2008). The range of new media technologies, which are increasingly present and accessed by youth and “that afford multimodal composing might helpfully be viewed not as a threat to or impoverishment of the print-based canon or traditional means of composing, but rather as an opportunity to contribute a newly invigorated literate tradition and to enrich our available means of signification” (Hull & Nelson, 2005, p. 226). In addition to a “newly invigorated literate tradition,” these new media also provide multiple ways “in” for young people who are kept at the margins of the composing process in schools. Emerging media spaces, such as digital stories and social networking sites, and digital composing technologies, like smartphone cameras, form a dynamic nexus for the design and production of multimedia texts through the engagement of multimodal literacies.

Thus, digital geographies is a concept that builds on earlier work that explores the geographies of childhood and youth as sites of identity production and exploration (Aitken, 2001; Skelton & Valentine, 1998), and more recent conceptualizations of the ways in which these geographies are changing in a digital age. In particular, these studies of “cybergeographies” (Holloway & Valentine, 2003) focus primarily on the happenings that occur online, in virtual spaces. However, “to think of cyberspace as only a playground for the mind is to forget that intimate connection between body and mind” (Thomas, 2004, p. 364), and thus in this paper the geographic lens is broadened to understand the lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996) that youth inhabit and produce, with and through their engagement with technologies. In other words, a spatial lens foregrounds the dynamic nature of contexts while de-emphasizing the material and physical dimensions that tend to be interpreted as static. For example, a bench in a park is not a neutral object; the meaning is found in how this material dimension of the park is ascribed with meaning. The transformation of contexts – buildings, parks, photo sharing sites, apartment lobbies, classrooms – into “lived spaces” (Soja, 1996) occurs through the social engagement between and among people and surrounding material contexts for a range of purposes and at particular times. Thus space must be thought of as social space (and, in Lefebvre’s conceptualization, space is always understood as space/time) in which we bring with us, on our digitally mediated bodies, our histories of interaction, which inform not only how we interact but also how we make sense of the contexts in which we engage.

Portable technologies and new digital geographies

Alan sat in a classroom with six other students and when the teacher's focus was not directed at him, he continued to look down. When I observed his actions more closely, I saw that he was fidgeting with his iPod nano. He looked down and then up and then back down. When Norman, the teacher, posed a question to the class about the branches of government, Alan looked up, offered a response, and then resumed his downward gaze in the direction of his iPod he was holding and manipulating in his lap. After a couple of minutes of this multitasking, he put the iPod back in his pocket and began working on the writing assignment for which Norman had just given instructions. After class, as the students gathered their personal items and began to head out of the classroom, I asked Alan about his iPod use in class. He took it out of the pocket of his navy blue hoodie, as if it was a prop necessary for his response, shrugged, and told me that he used it to play Solitaire or other games during class. He claimed that it helped him pay attention while Norman talked in class, by shutting out the side conversations his classmates were engaged in occasionally. MP3 players, such as the iPod that Alan was using, along with handheld video game players, and cell phones equipped with cameras and keyboards are common in the emerging youth communicative landscape. Yet, the value of these technologies is underrepresented in studies focusing on the intersections of literacies and technologies in the lives of youth who, like Alan and his peers at ATIP, are perceived to be on the margins of educational discourses. The research on adolescent literacies (Alvermann, 2002; Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005) and emerging digital practices of youth (McPherson, 2007; Thomas, 2007)—which is not solely focused on literacies—has been instrumental in shaping our understandings about the multiple and digital terrains that young people traverse on a daily and even moment-to-moment basis. But how might this knowledge transform ongoing literacy learning for adolescents, particularly for those adolescents who, despite their technological prowess, have experienced highly interrupted formalized education?

After that conversation with Alan, I talked with several other students attending the same program and found that most of them had regular interaction with a variety of technologies that demanded specialized literacy practices: cell phones that were used for text messaging and downloading music; computers in the computer lab or in friends' houses used largely for navigating the many layers of Myspace.com; mp3 players used for listening to music and playing games; handheld video game players used for passing the time on the long subway ride to the program, downloading music, and storing images and other files. As this brief overview suggests, the majority of these young people's digital geographies were enabled by the interconnected web of mobile communication and entertainment devices that are not in any scarcity, contrary to still prevalent narratives about the digital divide that privilege an argument about access. To view youth as being on one side or another of the divide can shape subsequent interpretations of their actions and practices; an identification as "tech-savvy" promotes a favorable view of youths' unsanctioned use of technologies in ways that the lack of such a moniker may inhibit the nurturing of these tendencies.

Recently published findings by Ito and colleagues (2008, 2010), who spent three years conducting ethnographic research to understand how youth spend time online, show the ways in which youth regularly navigate various media and technologies including social networking sites, online games, video-sharing sites, mobile phones, mp3 players, and the like. While these artifacts of digital culture saturate the daily lives of youth, Ito and her colleagues assert that when youth engage in these practices and spaces, they are developing a range of social, intellectual, cultural, and technical knowledge that should

not be dismissed. Thus, they argue, adults who impact the lives of youth—including educators, caregivers, and policymakers—must take seriously the ways in which “new media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn” (2008, p. 2).

Research context and methods of inquiry

ATIP is spread across two floors of a multi-story building in a busy downtown section of New York City. Within ATIP there were several opportunities for youth to meaningfully access their “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that originated and were cultivated in home and community spaces (for examples of this pedagogy, see Vasudevan, 2009; Vasudevan, DeJaynes, & Schmier, 2010; Vasudevan, Stageman, Rodriguez, Fernandez, & Dattatreyan, In press). This was especially true in the arts and media electives that were designed to be rich with storytelling where the “multi-storied” lives of youth were welcomed. The digital media workshop I co-taught with a graduate student was designed to allow maximum flexibility in how the participants proceeded with the composition of their narratives. We taught two 10-week cycles between the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007. Joey participated in the first cycle of the workshop and brought with him a complicated relationship with school, a deep-rooted curiosity about the world, and everyday engagements with a variety of technologies. Similarly, the Insight Theater Project, which grounds my discussion of EJ in this article, was planned and facilitated by Dave and Norman, two teachers at ATIP who sought to create an experience to make the stories of youth accessible to wide audiences through dramatic performance. Joey and EJ both revealed distinct geographies that were reflective of multiple literacies and the engagement of various media technologies. The spaces of the two creative projects described above were transformed by the constant flow and engagement of the participants’ digital geographies.

When determining an approach to analyzing the varied data generated throughout this study, I drew on principles of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) and connective ethnography (Leander & McKim, 2003). Both are approaches to ethnography that retain the attention to the everyday, lived experiences while directing the ethnographer’s gaze to the shifting terrain of inquiry. Leander and McKim (2003) in particular recognize the new challenges that technologies and virtual spaces pose for traditional ethnographic methods. For instance, what does it mean to participate and observe when the boundaries of virtual spaces are not always clear? How do online and offline practices, identities, and texts inform each other and in what ways are they distinct, or not? Once again, the theoretical lens of spatiality helps to frame the analysis of identities, practices, and texts across discursive and modal domains as indicators that have a spatializing effect and also become spatialized. Thus, when interpreting these cultural indicators as they were associated with Joey and EJ, I understood their discursive interactions to productively shape the online and offline spaces in which they participated. Technologies, such as digital cameras and smart phones, were found to have dual functions in this calculus: as modalities of spatial mediation and as spaces themselves.

All of the data used in these portraits are part of a larger longitudinal study of literacies, digitally mediated lives, and education of court-involved youth attending an ATIP.^{iv} The program serves over 350 youth each year and provides a range of services including pre-GED and GED class, arts and media electives, an employment program, and a variety of mental and physical health services, all of which are administered using a case

management approach. In locating an exploration of digital geographies within this context, I was especially interested in the digital literacies and media engagements of youth with interrupted schooling histories. Thus, as part of my data collection at ATIP, I co-taught two cycles of a digital media workshop in which participants were invited to produce multimedia narratives (referred to as “movies” within the workshop) on a topic of their choice. I also documented three cycles of the Insight Theater Project, in which participants worked together to co-author scripts that were performed for a multitude of audiences. Thus, the portraits of Joey and EJ that I present below were informed by my relationship to them as a teacher, documentation collaborator, tutor, and mentor.

Remixing technologies: Creating new spaces for composing

Three desktop Macs and two to three Mac laptops were brought into this classroom (see the labeling at the top of Figure 1); in addition, youth participants also brought in a variety of their own technologies and digital artifacts (as indicated by the label at the bottom of Figure 1). Among these were CDs full of music, cell phones, and digital cameras. One participant, Joey, immediately caught my attention. He used his PlayStation Portable (PSP) for a variety of purposes that I had not expected, including capturing, transporting, and transferring images, music, and video. He, like several of the other youth, also imported images and music from his MySpace.com profile. The arrow at the bottom of Figure 1 signifies the traveling of the texts produced and engaged in our workshop across multiple spaces, including neighborhoods, homes, and social networking sites. As the analysis of Joey’s participation will demonstrate, education resulted through his composing, which was remixed across the digital geographies that were produced through the orchestrated confluence of portable technologies, online and offline spaces, and a variety of texts.



Figure 1: Layout of the classroom during the digital media workshop

Prior to enrolling in the media workshop, Joey had already experimented with video and audio editing software in both formal and informal contexts. As part of his involvement with ATIP, Joey had been placed as an intern at a media design company where he became proficient with video editing software, Final Cut Pro, and digital audio

editing software, Pro Tools. In his role as an intern, he was given increasing amounts of responsibility and contributed to the completion of projects for which the company had been hired. Joey participated in the first cycle of the digital media workshop, which began after he had graduated from the program. He was allowed to enroll in the workshop and long after his official departure from the program Joey continued to maintain good relationships with many of the staff and teachers, whose guidance he would occasionally seek out as he pursued his higher education goals.

As an introduction to the multimedia storytelling we were focused on in the workshop, each of young men was given a disposable camera during the second session and asked to “bring it back full” of images the following week. Following this first foray into focused visual documentation, we supplied them with digital cameras. However, we began with the very tactile experience of not only creating but also handling photographs, which were developed as prints and also digitally on CD. Joey was a young man whose tech-savviness was obvious and who had a passion for digital explorations, and he embraced the challenge to produce images quite seriously. He returned with 33 thoughtfully framed photographs, several of which he used to create an introspective introduction to his multimedia narrative. They included images of his best friend, his writing notebook, family relationships, childhood, the woods, and his “thinking spot” that is described in further detail later in this article. The themes of Joey’s photographs collectively reflect a particular geography that crossed time and space. When seeking images of his childhood, Joey photographed old pictures of himself, rather than bring these photos to class to be scanned. Joey viewed this initial assignment as an opportunity to revisit familiar locations and the identities they evoked that he had not had an opportunity to cultivate recently. The visual documentation of his writing notebook, one of many he had filled over the last several years, was intimately linked to the images he produced of his “thinking spot,” a thin strip of land overlooking some water that was located in a park not too far from where he lived. A digital camera in this instance was not merely a tool for photography, but rather a space itself within which to produce a layered geography of Joey’s life.

The images that Joey produced with the digital camera circulated across a variety of other spaces. Most immediately, he sought out his preferred social networking space, Myspace.com, and used multimedia editing programs, ProTools and Final Cut Pro, to remix the images and create new texts. His personal narrative artifacts – including the images produced with the digital camera as well as other visual and aural artifacts – were reflective of the physical geographies where Joey composed them: home and community, ATIP, and his internship (see Animation 1 for a temporal representation of this composing across contexts). As Joey imagined composing his multimedia narrative, he drew from the artifacts he produced with the digital camera and also from those he had previously uploaded onto his online profile. The PSP was partially a mediating tool he used to transfer files between the camera and online profile, and partially a space within which to compose texts. Like the digital camera, the affordances of the PSP – its portability, embedded image editing software, data storage, ability to access and toggle between more than one program at once, and the camera attachment that Joey purchased from a street vendor – inspired the production of unique textual artifacts, some of which Joey imported into his multimedia narrative.

Joey used ProTools to compose short bits of music, as well. He notes that he developed his facility with the audio editing software during the course of his internship where he occasionally “played around” with familiar tunes that he downloaded from his

MySpace.com profile. When composing original pieces to accompany specific sections of his emerging narrative, Joey once again used ProTools to create a haunting set of melodies that reflected the occasionally somber tones to his three-part composition. He further manipulated this tune, once again in ProTools. I use “in” here intentionally to emphasize a conceptualization of this software as not merely as a tool for editing audio and music, but also as a space that Joey inhabited through specialized modes of interaction, physical postures, and the identities he brought to and were also shaped by his musical compositions.

Like his use of ProTools to manipulate audio, Joey used the popular video editing software, Final Cut Pro, to remix visual artifacts he produced using the digital still camera and the PSP. For instance, Joey applied a stop motion effect to a sequence of images showing his “thinking spot,” which he favored over video, in order to represent time and movement associated with his journey to and from a location that had great meaning for him. The close of this sequence momentarily freezes on an image of the notebook that he used for writing. For Joey, these software “tools” functioned as spaces within which to cultivate not only new representations of his discursive identities, but also as spaces that were part of a larger set of digitally-mediated geographies he negotiated daily. The technologies were connected through the myriad practices of composing and distribution, and their original purposes of social networking and editing were revised in the purposes that Joey brought to his compositions. As an example, the physical context of his digital media internship was animated and invoked in his use of the particular video and audio editing software, which were more advanced in their composing affordances and allowed Joey to produce a more stylistic final narrative.

Similarly, Joey used his PlayStation Portable to support his multimedia narrative production in unexpected and fruitful ways. What is primarily viewed as a handheld video game console at once transformed and was transformed by Joey’s use in the multimedia storytelling workshop. After the initial series of photographs he produced using the digital camera, Joey walked excitedly into the classroom one afternoon saying that he had more images and clips he wanted to show me. He proceeded to extract the PSP from his black leather jacket and, seeing my confused face, he smiled and informed me that his latest image and video production had been done with the aid of this particular device. He clicked and flicked his way through program menus and files and arrived at a song he had created using ProTools, the audio editing program, and several self-portraits he had composed himself and with the aid of some family and friends. The PSP functioned as Joey’s main portable multimedia production space, and afforded him the ability to produce, archive, import, export, edit, and distribute texts.

When interpreted as a space, the PSP is where representations and instantiations of Joey’s multiple selves lived in dynamic forms. The PSP also implies when artifacts were created and manipulated, thus reinforcing the temporal composing affordances associated with portable multifunctional technologies; Joey could document whenever inspiration struck: while riding the subway, at the park, at home, attending the digital media elective. As a digital modality for composing meaning, the PSP digitally mediated a range of practices: the documentation of everyday life; enhancement of images using software native to the handheld that Joey installed; storage and transfer of data, which was mostly music and photos in Joey’s case; the use of filters to experiment with self-expression and portraiture; and, of course, the playing of video games. The portability of the PSP enabled Joey to engage in various forms of cultural production with temporal immediacy and spatial variation (Leander & Vasudevan, 2009).

Many of the multimodal texts that Joey used for subsequent multimedia narratives originated with his use of the PSP camera attachment: a love letter “written” using iMovie, a reflection on his experience with the US National Guard, and a story of his educational journey that included steps he was taking to enroll at a four-year college. These are reflective of what Gustavson describes as youth engaging in creative endeavors “on their own terms” (2007). These are not wholly unmediated spaces, but rather intimately connected to the spaces – in which are found peers, adults, and material resources, as well as lived histories – within which they were produced. The spaces of multimodal creative practices further illuminate the presence of shifting, spatially hybrid digital geographies that youth inhabit as well as create. Below are three media artifacts that emerged through his digital composing (Figure 2). Each was composed through the engagement of a range of digital literacy practices, which are described alongside each artifact:

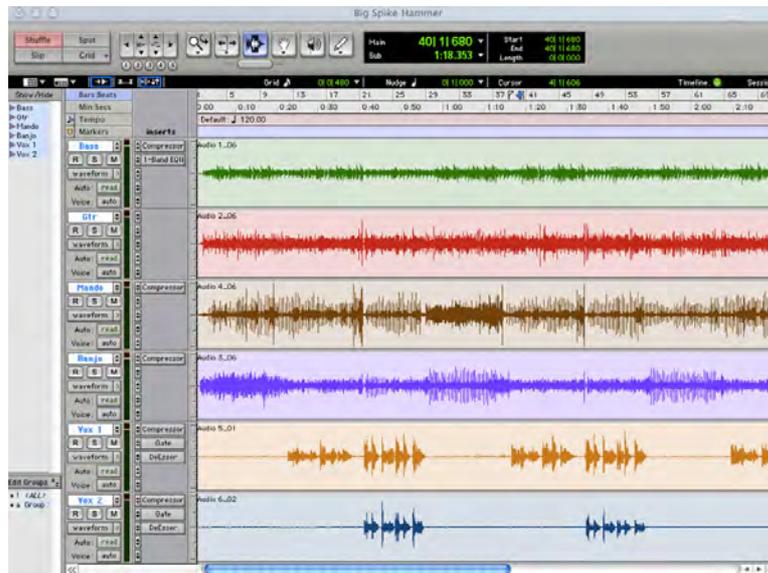


A screenshot of Joey’s Myspace.com profile page, from May 2007. Joey frequently moved images and music between his online profile and PSP, and gained the necessarily digital skills to accomplish tasks such as customizing backgrounds, uploading unique music and multimedia poems.



Inspired by the autobiographical invitation of the digital media workshop, Joey composed a series of self-portraits. Some were created using a digital camera, and others, like this image, were created using the PSP camera attachment and the help of a family member who was instructed to simply “click the button.” He then used the

filters available on the PSP image editing software to create a mosaic effect that reflected his fractured state of mind at the time of image composition.



Joey used his growing knowledge of ProTools to compose a beat for his multimedia narrative. This exercise evolved into a collection of beats he composed over the course of the digital media workshop, which he incorporated into subsequent multimodal compositions. During a conversation about his experimentation with ProTools, Joey found this screen capture of an active editing session using Google Images.^v

The narratives Joey produced over the course of a year, during and well beyond the scope of the digital media workshop, brought together digital photos, popular music, and musical tracks created using sound editing programs, all of which Joey had downloaded onto his PSP. Authoring practices and participating in social spaces are not “new” literacies, per se. What Joey’s case illustrates are the unexpected affordances of modalities to mediate literacies and participation in broader community discourses. By producing texts that initiate interactions and ways of being for which the script has not yet been solidified in the broader social conscience, Joey helps to complicate the cultural narratives about and urban youth technology practices, and urban youth identities, more broadly. EJ’s case, presented next, will show the discursive affordances of digital geographies participation wherein navigating “new” digital terrain opened up social access and the recognition of new possible identities.

Remixing identities: Navigating new discursive spaces

Lalitha: And you’d see her doing what? Cause you said, you’d see here on the computer...

EJ: Clicking.

Lalitha: Clicking.

EJ: Clicking. Opening up computers. Switching stuff in and out. I’d just be there watching.

...(about two minutes later)...

Lalitha: And so what, how did you go from just having an interest into what she was doing to then having people start asking you questions about stuff? Like you just said you had a bunch of stuff in your room and you were this big geek and whatever.

EJ: I didn't even probably tell her that I wanted to get into what she was doing, but and her friends. And another woman downstairs, she was into computer engineering. And I would tell her, like, I like what you're doing here. But that's something different—they knew each other. So she was like, I'm going to give you a computer and let you fix it up yourself. So, she gave me a computer and I went upstairs and messed with it. And that was an Apple, so it was, ooo! [EJ waves his hands in the air to parallel his verbalization – “ooo!” – to suggest the uniqueness of having access to an Apple computer.] No way possible you could get me, get me to fix that.

Lalitha: And did you?

EJ: I was working with... No. Cause it had some hard drive signal in the middle of the screen that wouldn't go. I don't know if there was no operating system on there or nothing. But, she gave me some, a Window's computer that had like Windows 95 on it, so I went from... I updated it to like Windows 98 and stuff, so now... And then, put memory and stuff in it and got my little hard drives. To see which ones are better. Yeah. And then started getting computers and stuff from other people and... they thrown it away. Don't throw it away. Give it to me. And I just kept messing with it.

Excerpted from interview with EJ, 1.21.2009

To know EJ is to anticipate his flick of the thumb – a gesture that had become synonymous with this young man's writing identity. When inspiration struck, when he heard a saying he didn't want to forget, or when he remembered a task or errand to complete, EJ would flick open the screen of his SideKick and put his thumbs to work on the QWERTY keyboard. It was not unusual to see EJ engage in this practice several times in the same hour, during class, sitting in the hallway, or while involved in conversation with another person. For him, as for many young people whose daily discursive practices are mediated by multifunction mobile phones, this gesture did not signify disrespect but rather was a vital component of how he participated across a variety of spaces within the same time period.

I met EJ prior to his involvement with the Insight Theater Project when I was documenting a cycle of the Next Steps class, a college preparatory class for ATIP youth who have taken or passed the GED exam, in which he was enrolled. As the interview excerpt above indicates, EJ's curiosity about technologies began early when a family friend would look after him and his brother when their mother was at work. EJ was about seven or eight at the time and the keen sense of curiosity that was evident underneath a veneer of cautious engagement when we first met was clearly cultivated at an early age. His quiet, yet persistent questioning nature was not well-served by the public schools he attended and by sixth grade he had nearly stopped attending school altogether. His penchant to “just [keep] messing with it” was a philosophy that permeated multiple aspects of EJ's literacy practices.

For the first several weeks of our interactions, EJ displayed a quiet engagement as he would lean forward and listen intently during group discussions, and occasionally take out his SideKick, type for several seconds, and return it to his pocket. He wore a black backpack in which he carried with him a folder of all the writing he had done in the year and half since he had entered then left his group home. Often he would share multiple copies of a story he had written or an essay composed in response to a prompt. EJ would bring forth these written artifacts as signifiers of various moments of his life, and would point to them or mention a specific piece of writing when telling a story about his recent past.

Soon thereafter, I began tutoring him in preparation to take the Social Studies section of the GED, the only section he had left to pass. We read about significant events in American history and laughed together at the Schoolhouse Rock production of “How a Bill Becomes a Law,” and at my suggestion, EJ agreed to participate as an author on a private blog. I used WordPress.com to set up a blog for just the two of us. EJ was eager (in his own measured and cautious way) to “work on [his] writing” and I reassured him that only he and I would have access to the writing we shared with each other. When asked to name the blog, EJ chose the title, “Writing Potential,” an apt moniker for this space as well as the identity he would cultivate through his participation within it. EJ signals his awareness of the disjuncture between his penchant for writing and the lack of institutional support he felt he had received for nurturing this writing identity in his first entry:

Unfortunately earlier in my life i was never given the chance to put my talent to full use due to the lack of communication and interaction between myself and school teachers' I've been “taught” by throughout my educational experiences. ... The reasoning for my lack of education comes as a result of my arrogance and the dislike of the daily operations of my schooling environments. (Entry #1^{vi}, 5.08.2008).

In a later entry from September 2008, EJ reproduced a portion of a speech he had delivered as the graduation speaker at ATIP in July of that same year. In this entry, he once again wrestles with notions of self and education:

Even though I wasn't attending school that much since I started middle school, I'm still a bright and self educated individual. (Entry #8/Life, 9.22.2008).

Our occasional posts to “Writing Potential” occurred at a frequency of approximately one to two posts a week over the period of four months and we generated a collection of entries related to the following aspects of writing: writing identities, purposes for writing, and sharing texts that inspired us. The blog became another space that we invoked in our conversations; in the same way we would discursively locate happenings in the classroom, my office, EJ's home, the group home where he lived temporarily, and the theater. And like these other spaces, the blog also had unique affordances and constraints. Thus, while the number of actual posts was relatively small, EJ used the editing and drafting functions to compose multiple versions of some entries, a practice he would engage in using his desktop computer at home and increasingly using his SideKick. Through blogging, EJ developed increased appreciation for the possibility of multiple audiences for his composing. This recognition was further solidified through his involvement with the Insight Theater Project where he, along with his other

castmates in the first cycle, performed a co-authored play for three nights of sold out audiences.

Whereas once he carried all of his writing and the memories they evoked in paper form in his backpack, EJ soon began to carry his compositions with him digitally. A short while after he was invited to take on the role of intern for the second cycle of Insight, EJ collaborated with the documentation team on a second blog. This blog was primarily maintained by Dave, EJ and me, although it soon became clear that EJ was the main contributor. As his participation as a member of the documentation team deepened, he took on the mantle of ethnographer and took great pride in the daily notes he kept. Often after submitting an entry, EJ would email me to ask whether I had a chance to read his latest post.

These entries helps shape sort of a thought provoking cycle where we all(as in the bloggers) get a chance to allow this process to evolve for the better or the worse. Allowing us to inform each other about our thoughts, opinions, and ideas. ... I really don't mind these blog entries. I just have problems at times deciding what to enter onto the site. I stated that because i don't wanna seem repetitive. But i'm starting to realize that the constant overall observation entries help to remember what exactly happens during each class. (Entry #6, 10.6.2008)

His tentativeness with this genre of writing – field notes – dissipated over time as he gained confidence in his identity as a participant observer. Injected with his observations were expressions of enthusiasm, ongoing analysis of the group dynamics and other happenings, questions, frustrations, and musings about his changing role, as the examples below highlight.

I carry myself as a mentally and emotionally stable person and i almost shed an actual tear because of how emotion stricken that scene turned out. I pictured myself in that moment because of how connected and was able to relate to that story. It touched me internally and had me thinking about how i haven't had that Father figure in my life, and the scene also allowed me to see sort of the same situation being acted out in front of my eyes (Entry #9, 10.20.2008)

These improv's are just so surreal and come off structuring this play to be one of a kind. I just can't wait to see the final performance. (Entry #16, 11.06.2008)

The first night i got the chance to play the three separate roles of Max, T, and Kez the Don. What a rush!! I had a bunch of running around to do. Transitioning from scene to scene. I was running up and down stairs, in and out of doors, and from costume to costume. BUT I LOVED IT!! (Entry #31, 12.19.2008)

EJ's self-identification as an intern and ethnographer was mediated by this space, further amplified by the constant accessibility with his smart phone. As his involvement in digitally mediated spaces of composing continued to evolve, so did his practices of self-identification. For example, in his Twitter profile, with the most current accounting of his tweets and followers as of this writing, EJ describes himself as a singer, actor, ethnographer and writer (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: EJ's Twitter Profile

Against the backdrop of the Insight Theater Project, his other discursive identities flourished as EJ sought and found spaces to nurture his emerging literate identities and nourish those identities that had been institutionally deprived. As EJ continued to “mess with” social media, his digital geographies grew to include participation on Twitter, a Facebook profile, and most recently a personalized YouTube channel to showcase his singing abilities. His literate identities were remixed through these forms of spatially hybrid participation as he became known to multiple audiences for multiple forms of text production and literacy practices (see Animation 2 for a representation of the interrelationships of four of these digital spaces across time). His early musings about wanting to be known, where he writes, “if people know who i really am, you might see where I’m coming from,” are continued in his evolving digital navigations. In recent months, EJ has revisited his writing from the first two blogs in a reflexive attempt to re-educate himself about how his literacies have evolved in just two short years. Motivated to receive focused feedback from engaged audiences, EJ has invited the input of Norman and two graduate students (who are working with me now) for whom he, as an administrator of the blog, has granted access. He continues to carry his digital geographies with him. The social spaces he inhabits, lives, embodies, and negotiates allow him entry to evolving social networks and audiences, and afford him the opportunity to meaningfully participate and contribute his storied life into the spaces opened up by social media.

Digital geographies and adolescent literacies

When the literacies of adolescents are understood within the broader landscape of their digital geographies, rather than isolated interactions and moments of communication, we begin to more fully realize the interdependent nature of literacies and modalities. To an extent, “new technologies require new literacies to effectively exploit their potentials” (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004, p. 1570); but as these portraits show, the traces of technology and modal determinism in theories of multimodality and literacies must be rethought. Relationships between literacies and modalities profoundly impact and are shaped by the spaces in which they are engaged and the spaces produced through their engagement. Thus, sociocultural understandings of literacy are once again helpful to situating our interpretations of multimodal literacy practices by calling attention to the moments of interaction – such as that between modality and expressions of

meaning – and attending closely to the temporal and spatial dimensions at play in these moments, which collectively contribute to the creation and recognition of and navigations through digital geographies.

Joey's use of the PSP, for example, connected his engagement with social networking sites, other portable technologies, video and audio editing programs, and simultaneously afforded a diverse range of digital literacies. The spaces of remixed education are found embedded across these interactions between multiple modalities and literacies. For Joey, a handheld video game console was used for multimedia editing; a digital camera inspired a renewed exploration of personal history; and ProTools was a space within which to compose a new identity. For EJ, the ability to access multiple digital composing spaces using his smartphone provided a chance to participate in new discursive communities; to take on and be recognized for new identities; and to gain new audiences for his writing.

Far from being isolated to two individuals, the hybrid remixing of technologies, spaces, and identities resulting in diverse digital geographies is common across many youth who routinely traverse emerging digital landscapes. For some, the use of portable technologies allows their literacies to circulate across multiple contexts; for others, multimodal composing spaces and texts provide the opportunity to shape their literacy learning experiences by intentionally blurring artificial in/out of school binaries that are institutionally reinforced. Out of this work emerge two main implications for educators:

- The way we read youths' engagement with technologies must be rethought in schools. Too often, the integration of technologies in schools occurs in linear ways—e.g., demanding that students demonstrate proficiency in one technology or piece of software before gaining access to another. Particularly in schools technologies are placed in a hierarchy that often socially reproduces literacy hierarchies, wherein the ability to compose linguistically—e.g., blogging, wiki contributions, and producing informational podcasts and documentaries—is privileged over other communicative practices such as creating and sharing videos, participating in online gaming communities, and texting. The value of these practices is found not solely in the nature of their communicative ability, but in the semiotic power they allow youth to harness in their practices of conveying ideas, soliciting information, and engaging in acts of self-representation. As the portraits of Joey and EJ suggest, technologies like the PSP that are unexpected in the classroom and the emerging social media landscape can inspire layered composing and communication that is reflective of sophisticated meaning making through the varied literate engagement and orchestration of multiple modalities.
- The spaces for composing in schools must be reconfigured. Given our growing understanding of the multitude of spaces in which and modalities with which youth compose texts, spaces for composing in schools should include access to a range of expressive modalities, both digital and non-digital. Composing should not be limited to the physical domain of pen on paper or a desk in the classroom. However, educators should not feel compelled to supply digital modalities, nor should they feel constrained by limited access to multimodal resources. Rather, as my experiences with court-involved youth illustrate, classrooms that are open to being transformed by the texts and modalities that youth bring into the space hold the promise of inspiring new sites of education

through composing. Such a stance also has implications for the roles that teachers and students assume in classrooms, as co-learners or as partners in what Soep and Chavez (2005) describe as a “pedagogy of collegiality.” They describe this approach as “a context in which young people and adults mutually depend on one another’s skills, perspectives, and collaborative efforts to generate original, multitextual, professional-quality work for outside audiences” (2005, p. 410). This stance is particularly important when textual and modal expertise is potentially more distributed than pre-packaged curricula presume on the part of teachers as well as children and youth.

In a national curricular climate where testing too often leads discussions of pedagogy, it is imperative to seek out spaces of education that are governed by principles of discovery and play and that are free from punitive measures of learning and engagement. By paying attention to digital geographies, particularly the navigation across digital spaces and orchestration of multiple modalities, educators can cultivate youths’ literacies while at the same time inspire new sites of education. Educators engaged in teaching and learning in an age of rapidly evolving communicative landscapes are poised to take advantage of existing practices of multimodal communication and representation in the development of curriculum that supports the education of youth. For those young people whose digital geographies are under-recognized and over-criminalized, opportunities to live education differently are not only desired, but can be life changing.

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Biographical Statement

Lalitha Vasudevan is an Assistant Professor of Technology and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She is interested in how youth craft stories, represent themselves, and engage in ways of knowing using different literacies, technologies, and media. Currently Lalitha is studying education, literacies and media in the lives of court-involved youth using a multimodal storytelling methodology. Her research has been published in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *E-Learning*, *Review of Research in Education*, and *English Education*, and she is co-editor of the volume titled, *Media, Learning, and Sites of Possibility* (2008, Peter Lang).

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ⁱ I use the term “court-involved” to refer to youth who are involved with the criminal justice system in some way. This can include incarceration in jails, prisons, or detention facilities; or it can refer to youth who are on probation or attend programs that are designed to provide an alternative to incarceration. The youth with whom I worked had been arrested, and were mandated to attend the alternative program in order to earn “youth offender” status following their completion of the six-month program, at which point their juvenile criminal record would be cleared.

ⁱⁱ All names of the research site and participants are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Like Jewitt (2008), I maintain that all literacy practices are multimodal; I use the term “multimodal literacies” occasionally to emphasize the multimodal nature of literacies, even when composing is “only” printed based or utilizes writing, alone.

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^v The ProTools image can be found here: <http://bit.ly/9BiB8g>

^{vi} EJ used a numerical chronicling system to label his posts in this and other blogs. His entries are reproduced here without grammatical correction to indicate the ways that these entries captured and embodied the speed and immediacy with which EJ would compose them.