

RUNNING HEAD: ALVERMANN, MARSHALL, ET AL.

*Literacy Practices in Afterschool Web-based Youth Communities*

An Edmund A. Stanley, Jr. Research Grant

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It was Saturday morning in a relatively quiet academic building. In the back corner of a seminar-sized room, near three unopened boxes of pizza, Brad was explaining to Daskittlebandit how to dub a vocal track for the synthesized music Daskittlebandit had composed using the FL Studio software available on the internet. Right next to them, Cheryl McLean, one of our research associates, was interviewing Free4lifezone about the latest additions to her MySpace site. At the same time, Cheryl was keeping an eye on her own laptop screen since she and Brad had begun an instant-message conversation some moments ago; Brad preferred IMing to face-to-face interviews, and he and Cheryl often conferred this way during the week. At the other end of the table, Godschild was showing Fredman and Pretzel several “miracle prayer” videos he had located on YouTube. The different clips showed people praying enthusiastically, sometimes in Danish, sometimes in Spanish, followed by a physical healing of one of the participants captured on the video. Sandy meanwhile had finished her interview with Dan Kirk, another of our research associates, and was quietly checking her email on Yahoo. So ended an eight-month-long project on adolescents’ web-based literacies that brought together researchers from The University of Georgia and eight high school students enrolled in an afterschool academic enrichment program that met on Saturday mornings.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to document and analyze the ways in which the literacy practices of afterschool Web-based youth communities contribute to young people's engagement with reading and writing. A study of this kind is especially needed in a time of high accountability and a narrowing of what counts as literacy—two characteristics of the present push for educational reform aimed at closing the literacy achievement gap among underserved adolescents in the United States (Ferguson, 2005). Because afterschool settings allow for flexibility in studying the diverse ways in which youth interact with multimodal texts (e.g., print, image, sound, music, performance, artifacts), we think our study has the potential to increase an appreciation for, and a better understanding of, the ways in which Web-based communities foster motivation and a sense of self-efficacy among underserved youth who, while sometimes struggling to complete school assignments, behave more like proficient readers and writers in informal learning contexts (Alvermann et al., 2007).

The afterschool Web communities in which youth participate are often unexplored, un surveilled, and even unknown to the adults with whom they interact on a daily basis (e.g., teachers, parents, community workers). These communities go well beyond email and instant messaging to text messaging, chat rooms, 'blog communities' advice exchanges, online 'zines,' online video gaming, and online searches for information, entertainment, and relationships. Many adults would not be able to find their way into these worlds and most would not know their way around once there. They need an expert informant, someone who could both introduce adult researchers into the Web communities and offer an informed perspective on the social and literacy conventions

that obtain within them. Thus, we reasoned, our best informants would be high-school age youth who themselves participate actively in a range of Web-based relationships.

With this population in mind as our participants, the following research questions guided our eight-month-long investigation:

- How and why do underserved students find their way to Web-based communities and Web-based literacy practices?
- In what kinds of Web-based communities do these students participate? What literacy practices are invited and supported within these communities? How do students learn those practices?
- Do these students see differences between school-based literacy practices and those of the Web-based communities in which they participate after school? If so, what might contribute to these perceived differences?

### **Theoretical Frame**

The theoretical frame that informed our design of the study and the methodology used therein subscribes to two key tenets. One is that literacy is always connected to social purposes. It is first and foremost concerned with getting things done in the real world (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000). Moreover, the multiple literacies of today's youth are not confined to basic reading and writing skills, such as comprehending and responding to school-assigned texts, but instead are ways of interacting with texts of various kinds in various situations for various purposes (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). As noted earlier, because young people often find their own reasons for becoming literate—reasons that go beyond reading and writing to acquire school knowledge of academically

sanctioned texts—it is important to study literacy practices common to afterschool Web communities.

A second tenet of our research is derived from Lesko's (2001) work on deconstructing accepted understandings or ideas about adolescents. In particular, Lesko reminds us of the need to question much of what developmental psychologists have told us about youth, about the history of the very category *adolescence*, and about what they (young people) can learn from us (adults) as well as what we can learn from them. Such two-way learning was made possible within our study due to the fact that we included young people as our co-researchers.

### **Design and Methodology**

Working within a qualitative case-based design, the research team included two professors in language and literacy education, three graduate research assistants, and our eight high-school co-researchers. The two professors, Donna and Jim, share in common a lifetime of having focused on teaching teachers how to teach young people how to read. Of course, most of that lifetime, until recently, was in an era where everyone assumed reading equated with reading print from a book, newspaper, magazine, or manual. More recently, they have found their reading habits changing, and while they would never give up on books and other forms of conventional print, it is also the case that they cannot imagine a time when the Web wouldn't figure prominently into their everyday reading lives.

The three graduate students on the team are enrolled in a doctoral program in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of Georgia, where Donna and Jim are members of the faculty. As former secondary school teacher, and

teaching assistant working with preservice high school teachers, Cheryl continues to challenge herself and her teachers to learn from and with students, and to create meaningful opportunities for students' range of literacies, interests and competencies. Previous to joining the team, John created a Web site with his sixth-grade students to showcase their writing (<http://www.johnny.myweb.uga.edu/mrbishop>), an experience that led to an interest in ways multiple modes of composition might function on the Internet. He is currently teaching a basic video editing and digital storytelling component in a preservice education course, and is designing a summer digital storytelling workshop with local middle school students. Originally from the United Kingdom, Dan had the opportunity to teach English for ten years in the UK and in the Middle East and Bermuda before beginning doctoral study. As a gamer himself, he is especially interested in adolescents' negotiations of game environments.

The eight co-researchers, all enrolled in local high schools, were drawn from a Saturday academic support effort entitled Empowered Youth Programs (EPY). The program is directed by Dr. Deryl Bailey, a faculty member in counseling education at The University of Georgia. Each Saturday the EPY brings to campus young men and women from local elementary and secondary schools to practice their academic and leadership skills. During the Saturday sessions, students engage in activities and discussions that focus on the Empowered Youth Programs' key leadership traits—traits that include respect, courage, responsibility, and initiative. Almost always dressed in crisp blue uniformed attire, the students also work on study skills, test preparation, and time management. The program has been recognized by multiple state and national awards

including the 2004 Multicultural Program Award by the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME).

For a period of eight months, eight young people from the EPY program, four males and four females, became our co-researchers (See Table 1). We asked them to keep a daily log of their Web activities both in school and after school, and to meet with us once a week on Saturday to discuss their logs, and more importantly, to take us within some of the online communities in which they participate to explain how they work. In this way, they were able to demonstrate in real time how they themselves engaged in Web-based literacies. We also asked them to describe the differences between their afterschool Web literacies and those literacies sponsored at school. To compensate our co-researchers for this work, we provided each with a laptop computer and high speed Internet access for the duration of the study. At the end of the study, they were given ownership of their computers.

Our co-researchers' attendance and levels of participation varied for predictable and sometimes unanticipated reasons. The Saturday meetings often conflicted with afterschool jobs, family responsibilities, or competing activities sponsored by EPY. In the fall, the University of Georgia's home football schedule meant that the campus building where we usually met was closed; consequently, we had to conduct interviews at a local high school that did not have wireless Internet service. About half of our co-researchers experienced virus-related problems with their laptops (these were remedied by our college's technical support center) while others periodically lost their wireless connection at home for a week or more. Although the eight young men and women continued to

meet with us over the summer while EPY was not in session, several missed meetings because of family vacations.

The study's primary data sources included our eight co-researchers' weekly Web logs and the corresponding weekly interviews that we individually conducted and transcribed. The log and interview data are summarized in Table 2. All Web logs and transcribed interviews were stored on WebCT, an online content storage and e-learning site, so that each member of the research team had access to them. Ongoing and summary analyses of the weekly, audio-recorded Web log discussions, interview transcripts, and audio-recorded research team meetings resulted in the following profiles.

### **Profiles of Our Eight Co-Researchers**

For the purpose of this report, we chose to focus on three of our co-researchers' profiles and to present only brief snippets from an analysis of the other five profiles. Our rationale for selecting Daskittlebandit, Brad, and Godschild as the three focal participants stemmed from our consensus that these three young people used the Web in interesting and very different ways—ways that set them apart from the other five co-researchers.

#### **Daskittlebandit**

Daskittlebandit is an intelligent, disciplined, and forward-looking young man who made an entrepreneurial effort to harvest the resources offered by the Internet and by his new laptop computer. His self-chosen pseudonym is related to his school-based candy business. He buys candy from Walmart at low prices and sells it at school, with the school's permission, at a higher retail rate. In the first weeks after receiving his laptop Daskittlebandit engaged in a number of activities: 1) purchased a mouse with a retracting USB cord so that he wouldn't have to use the scratch pad on his laptop; 2) searched out

multiple possibilities for the wallpaper for his opening screen; 3) created a music library of downloaded songs; 4) purchased a CD math tutorial which he downloaded onto his computer and used to prepare for his end-of-course tests in math; 5) created a spreadsheet to keep track of sales for his candy business; and 6) began to write poetry on his computer.

Some of these activities are Web related (the music downloads, for example), but most seem also to reflect Daskittlebandit's sense of ownership of the computer. He created a space for himself that suited his taste in images and in music that served his academic and work interests, and that offered a new and private venue for his developing engagement with poetry.

A sense of ownership and sense of privacy informed Daskittlebandit's use of his new laptop from the beginning, a pattern that we had not directly considered. It's likely that our co-researchers' previous computer use took place on computers that were more-or-less shared by at least several people and that were housed in more-or-less public spaces. All but one of our students had computers in their homes before the study, but our early interviews suggested that most of these were family computers, located in rooms where any family member could log on if they wished. The computers our co-researchers used in the schools were clearly shared and clearly public. But the laptops in our afterschool community belong to our eight co-researchers. They can make the computers look and sound the way they like, they can build libraries and download music videos that suit them, they can download software that helps them with their school work, and they can use the computer to pursue literacy interests that they are not yet comfortable in making public—in Daskittlebandit's case, writing poetry.

While surfing the Internet one evening, Daskittlebandit came across some poems by Langston Hughes. As a kind of response to his reading, Daskittlebandit began to write poems of his own. This is one that he shared with Jim.

### **Back in the Day**

I remember the times from back in the day,  
Before I knew about these dark and troubled ways.  
I remember a time before I was scarred of personal insecurities,  
When I was a young boy who lived life in tranquility.  
Before I was addicted to MTV and 106 & Park,  
I used to watch shows like Rugrats, Recess, & Are You Afraid of the Dark.  
Even in the midst of the stormiest weather,  
I felt that my life would last forever.  
No snares or obstacles from reality,  
Could ever contain my fantasies.  
I remember the times before the lies and strife,  
I remember the greater times in the road of life.  
Before I knew of life's complications,  
There was no limit to my imagination.  
I remember when I used to think that I could fly,  
Like all the superheroes that'd ever graced the sky.  
I used to think that throughout all my toys and bungles,  
Was an endless world of space, castles, and jungles.  
I used to think my Daddy was the world's strongest man,  
In my eyes, he was greater than all heroes, even Superman!  
I used to think that when life hit me with its big complications,  
My Momma's warm kisses and hugs would change any situation.  
I used to think that girls were full of cooties and germs,  
But now... well... they're a BIG concern!!!  
I used to think that my folk's were mean and out of touch,  
But now I realize it's their way of loving me ever so much.  
But despite all of my success and pain,  
I wouldn't dare trade it in for another walk down memory lane.  
Cause' had I never shed a couple of tears,  
I wouldn't have the strength nor courage to face my fears.

Thematically, the poem's reflective, sometimes humorous meditation on a young man's changing concerns is reminiscent of Hughes's poetry, but its rhythm and multi-syllabic rhymes ("Before I knew of life's complications/There was no limit to my imagination") echo the patterns of hip-hop.

That Daskittlebandit began to write such personal poems only after he took possession of his laptop is a reminder that the laptops not only provided increased access to the Internet for our participants; they also provided a different kind of access, an access not likely to be surveilled by teachers, parents, or siblings where the items they saved will not be questioned by other users.

### **Daskittlebandit's Web Use**

Daskittlebandit uses the Web for a range of purposes, but his most frequent activities include communicating with his friends through email, downloading and listening to music, downloading images of his favorite artists, and learning about his favorite video games. Unlike some of our other co-researchers, he does not participate in on-line chat rooms nor has he registered for space on one of the social-networking 'identity' Web sites (MySpace.com or Tagged.com). When Jim asked him why, this exchange occurred:

Daskittlebandit: I would, but my mom said don't mess with that.

Jim: Why'd she say that?

Daskittlebandit: I don't know, it's that people might ask for personal information. I'm afraid of like spyware. Cause I did it like one time before and my computer was messed up for like a month.

Notice that Daskittlebandit mentions his mom's warnings about the identity sites and chat rooms, though he is primarily interested in the possibility that such sites might lead to spyware or virus problems. But Daskittlebandit is happy to use his computer skills to honor the requests of his parents. In fact, his parents often seek the help of his Web skills. After a conflict kept him from church one Sunday in May, his mom asked him to visit the Web site of the church the family attends in order to watch a video of the service

he missed. And when his father found a bottle of prescription pills for which he'd forgotten the purpose, he asked Daskittlebandit to use the Internet to find the information he needed:

Daskittlebandit: Like my dad had an old prescription that he didn't know what it was for. Before he took it he asked if I mind looking it up and I went to Health Digest.

Jim: And you were able to find out what it was?

Daskittlebandit: Yes sir, it was like for muscle spasms and he needed it.

Jim: Now on Health Digest, did you know about that, had you been to that site before?

Daskittlebandit: I just typed it up in the top part on a search engine, and Health Digest came up.

Like many of his peers, Daskittlebandit uses the Web to pursue his interests in music and games, but he is calculating and deliberate in how he goes about it. He regularly visits Gamefaqs.com to retrieve "cheat codes" for the video games he likes to play. Jim visited the Gamefaqs Web site to see what kind of information it offers. Here is a brief sample of the kind of text Daskittlebandit would encounter there. The game being described is one of the many titles in the Mario Brothers series—"Luigi's Mansion"—which is one of Daskittlebandit's favorites.

*Taken from the Luigi's Mansion instruction manual:*

*One day, Luigi received an unexpected message: You've won a huge mansion! Naturally, he got very excited and called his brother, Mario. "Mario? It's me, Luigi. I won myself and we'll celebrate, what do you say?"*

*Luigi tried to follow the map to his new mansion, but the night was dark, and he became hopelessly lost in an eerie forest along the way. Finally, he came upon a gloomy mansion on the edge of the woods. According to the map, this mansion seemed to be the one Luigi was looking for.*

*Luigi's not exactly known for his bravery. Can he get rid of all the prank-loving ghosts and find Mario?*

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*During Gameplay*

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*Control Stick - Move Luigi*  
*Start Button - Pause the game*  
*A Button - Check things, open door, continue dialogue*  
*B Button - Turn flashlight off (hold)*  
*X Button - Search Mode (GBH) \**  
*Y Button - Map (GBH) \**  
*Z Button - Inventory List (GBH) \**  
*R Button - Use the Poltergust 3000 (vacuum)*  
*L Button - Expel Element \*\**

This text was written and made available by an individual game player who is identified by name on the Gamefaqs Web site and who provides an email address for visitors who might want to ask follow up questions. The opening description is what the game makers provide. The writer of the Gamefaqs text quotes from that description, and then provides a series of highly specific moves that a player would need to make to navigate this phase of the game successfully (e.g., “X Button-Search Mode (GBH)/ Y Button-Map (GBH).”

Daskittlebandit makes hard copies of such directions (there is a different set for every phase of every game), and keeps them close by when he is playing a game. He doesn't like to use the cheat codes unless he fails to navigate a screen on his own, but they are a welcome resource when he gets stuck.

What is interesting about the codes themselves is how thoroughly they rely on a shared conceptual context in order to be understood. The author of the code and the player must know the technical shorthand of gaming and the particulars of the screen being navigated. A reader could not comprehend the code unless that screen was open

before him, and he would not know how to follow the code unless he knew what steps were indicated by directions like “X-Button-Search Mode (GBH).” The codes, in other words, require a fairly elaborate amount of background knowledge before they can be deciphered, and in one sense represent a fairly sophisticated kind of technical reading.

But Daskittlebandit used the Internet in the service of other kinds of literacy as well, many of them academic. He used a range of search engines (Google, Yahoo, Ask, and Galileo) to complete two school-related reports: one on current immigration policy for a social studies class and another on the diminishing ozone layer for his English class. As mentioned earlier, he also made significant use of some math tutorial software that he had purchased and downloaded onto his laptop. His observations about the tutorial are interesting for their perspective on the differences between such “teaching” and the kind often found in classrooms. Jim asked Daskittlebandit to take me through the tutorial:

Daskittlebandit: So like here they're talking about conic sections? So last night I just went to circles and parabolas. Cause I know we're going to study this, and I want to look ahead. And so you can click on this and it shows you a different example of each. And at the end they have definitions of all of this. You can just click them. And it's got a whole book of definitions for algebra too

Jim: Now how did this line up with the textbook you use in your math classes? Is it pretty similar?

Daskittlebandit: This is easier to understand. I mean the math book just uses these big terms and half of them aren't in the book. You can't follow it. But this breaks it down so I can understand it better.

Jim: Did you find this on your own or did somebody say this would be a good thing to use?

Daskittlebandit: I found it on my own .

Jim: Does this give you practice problems, too?

Daskittlebandit: Yes sir. So you can do the problems and it can tell you if you got it right or wrong. And then what you did wrong if you did. And this is Chapter 6

and each chapter has a test. And it has report cards to show how much you've learned. Tutorials where you just get basic help. And then a final exam to show how much you've learned over all the chapters .

Jim: And so you found this a lot easier to use than your textbook in the math class?

Daskittlebandit: Yes sir. Because you can move around and it uses language you can understand. A lot of times teachers they won't repeat the information. I know because really this is just one person talking to you and you can say 'say that again' or say it in a different way and a teacher won't do that because you have a whole bunch of people in there.

The tutorial, in other words, provided Daskittlebandit with individualized instruction—instruction that defines terms, provides practice opportunities, and re-teaches concepts that he hasn't yet mastered. Such high quality software may be widely available, but what impressed us is that Daskittlebandit sought it out on his own as a supplement to, if not a replacement for, the instruction he was receiving in his math class. The individualized instruction that characterizes the software allowed him to prepare confidently for his exams.

### **Brad**

Standing 5'10", the 11<sup>th</sup> grader enters the room each Saturday, nods respectfully, a half smile crossing his face as he navigates the chairs to take a seat at the conference room table. Strung across his shoulders and chest is his brown laptop bag. With practiced precision, the teenager eases his HP laptop onto the table, powering it on. As strong fingers fly across the keyboard, his eyes and cursor move in rhythmic coordination, opening up multiple Web sites. He quickly settles himself comfortably into the padded chair, glances expectantly at Cheryl, nods toward the computer's screen emblazoned with bright colors, images, and text of [www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com) and [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)...Brad was welcoming Cheryl into his world.

Still waters run deep. In the case of Brad, these words ring true. A reserved young man, Brad appears to be not much of a talker, somewhat the loner in the group, who would respond only when prompted, and, even then, would limit himself to a few words. And yet, with the passing weeks and months, we witnessed a gradual change in Brad. His willingness to open up his world to our questions and observations was eventually matched by animated talk about his online activities. We soon found Brad initiating the conversations, sharing information about himself without prompting, and actively directing the sessions.

Brad is very adept at multitasking. He is able to efficiently attend to a range of tasks while online. It is not uncommon to see him working with multiple screens: he checks schedules for the weekend football games; while he waits for the results to pull up, he immediately switches to his electronic mixer and adjusts the faders for the song he is working on that is playing softly; then, his head bobbing in time to the music, with a rapid click of the mouse, the cursor maps the movement of his eyes scanning the dates, times of the games—he immediately clicks on the link with the Miami Heat basketball game, and opens up his MySpace account; an alert sounds as AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) pops up; swift fingertips meet in a rapid fire response, the message read, and reply sent in an “instant”. Multiple activities occurring within a few seconds—all performed with nonchalant ease; Brad’s head still literally and figuratively moving to his own beat.

### **Social Spaces**

The online social spaces that Brad occupies very distinctly reflect his various identities and interests: sports enthusiast, rap artist, musician ([www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com), [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com), [www.limewire.com](http://www.limewire.com) ). The Web sites he accesses and the social

spaces in which Brad operates help develop his interests, knowledge and skills, and shape how he publicly presents himself. It is clear that, for Brad, these Web sites provide for him, an important blend of entertainment and education for he is ever aware that he is learning. He admits to enjoying reading “information” on the various Web sites—something he says he may not have done with as much enthusiasm had it been a traditional text. Because Brad wants to learn more, he finds himself often navigating multiple sites by doing his own research to supplement his knowledge. Perhaps one reason Brad finds this comfort with the Internet is due to how he assesses himself as a visual learner who likes hands-on activities. Brad is quick to point out that he masters classes that cater to this style of instruction, and that he frequently uses the Internet to do research to support his learning in school.

How then does this young man navigate the Internet effectively? Brad considers himself a discriminatory reader and selective user of the Web and shows keen understanding of the reciprocal shaping the Internet provides. He employs specific strategies to read the Web sites and select the information he needs. For example, when bombarded by multiple pieces of information online, he focuses on the middle of the page where, experience has taught him, the important news can be found; he scans captions before reading in-depth; he even takes note of color-coding of pages as indicators of where information can be found. Through methodical practice, by asking questions, troubleshooting, he learns and teaches himself how to manage his online activities. On any given day, Brad can be found putting together and upgrading his Web sites. His online activities and choices of spaces are motivated by personal interests, connected to teaching and learning, and a matter of convenience.

**Multiple Spaces: Multiple Identities**

Rapper and composer. Strains of familiar melodies fill the air...Bill Withers? The O'Jays? Marvin Gaye? Etta James? Brad nods solemnly each time, and then breaks out in 16-year-old laughter that belied his keen knowledge of soul and R&B classics. Enter Brad the composer and arranger. The clips of songs that he plays are his own compositions sampled from classic hits from the 60's, '70s and '80s. With no formal training, but motivated by his interest, and his "ear for music", the Internet provides Brad with the tools and experiences to teach himself. After installing the software (Fruittloop Studio 6) and downloading songs ([www.limewire.com](http://www.limewire.com)), Brad's laptop is transformed into synthesizer keyboard, a mixing board, and a virtual recording studio. It is in this world that he continues to teach himself, and to learn by doing. Brad's work as a composer is a work in progress, one that he is careful to continuously refine before "going public". So, there is only one song that he has composed that is on his Web site, and even then, there are a few songs he chooses not to share because he is not ready to do so. Over the eight months of the study, Brad's interest and passion for music, composing and rapping showed growth in terms of the range in artists who influenced him. For example, toward the end of the study he was spending much of his time online reading poetry by Tupac Shakur.

The sports enthusiast. Brad prefers [www.nfl.com](http://www.nfl.com) and [www.nba.com](http://www.nba.com) because these two Web sites feed his passion for football and basketball. Having shown to be consistent in his interests in these two sports, Brad accesses these sites diligently to keep track of scores and rankings, watch game highlights, and get information on drafts, trades

and player profiles. Here, the Internet provides a convenient complement to television, newspapers, and magazines.

The Web site owner. As owner of three Myspace accounts, Brad appears to carefully construct three public images of himself. As a member of the rap duo, one Web site is shared with his partner. On this site, Brad presents himself as the professional—it is a formal space constructed specifically about his rap group with a particular audience in mind: the group’s fan base (to provide them with information on performances) and potential producers. This identity space becomes both a marketing and networking tool.

Brad’s other social spaces offer more insights into the multi-dimensional portrait of his character. His second Myspace account is shared with his girlfriend. Brad sheepishly admits that his girlfriend “controls” it because it’s a way to “keep him in line”. It appears that Brad consciously negotiates and determines what kinds of information are produced and what relationships are cultivated within that space.

On the other hand, Brad’s third account is his “private” site that gives him greater flexibility to move away from the more definitive identities of rapper and boyfriend. As a communication tool, MySpace is Brad’s favorite. Through MySpace and AIM, Brad is able to maintain contact and communicate with his friends. He admits to talking daily to friends, sometimes for hours because: You have a whole lot more to say...than when you’re on the phone [and] it’s so much easier to type what you’re thinking.

### **Godschild**

Much can be learned from attending carefully to how youth for whom academic success does not come easily, for whatever reason, apply the literacy skills learned in school, presumably, in ways that shape their identities as competent literate beings in out-

of-school time settings. This was definitely so in Godschild's case. Here was a young man who, when we first met him, had been enrolled in the Empowered Youth Program for a longer time than any of our other co-researchers. Though not an academic standout, Godschild nevertheless impressed us (and other adults in his life, plus his peers) as being a serious student, bright, and certainly motivated in matters related to religion.

Judging from Godschild's weekly logs, Christianity was a big force in his life. The sites he visited regularly were all related to Jesus Christ and the scriptures. For example, the 700 Club ([http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=700\\_Club](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=700_Club)) is a live television program that airs weekdays before a studio audience from The [Christian Broadcasting Network's](#) (CBN) broadcast facilities in Virginia Beach, Virginia. The program commenced in 1966 and is hosted by Pat Robertson. The 700 Club is a mix of news and commentary, interviews, feature stories, and Christian ministry.

Another Web site—one that Godschild said he visited at least weekly--was The Fish ([www.thefishatlanta.com](http://www.thefishatlanta.com)). It links to a radio station (104.7thefish) that Godschild said he listens to daily. He knew (in the sense that he could put names with pictures) all of The Fish people and their various jobs at the radio station. The Web site itself is quite interactive in that it invites visitors to the site to describe what they'd like to see or hear. On one occasion Godschild took Donna on an extended tour of The Fish, painstakingly pointing out every hyperlink and showing her what she could expect to find at any particular link.

Godchild's screensaver was also Christian-inspired. He visited Web sites such as <http://www.screensavers.com/search/results.jsp?tmpl=2D&qry=jesus+christ> on a regular basis. But there was more to his interest in Christianity than simply visiting religiously-

oriented Web sites, including Bible study games, cartoons, and the like. He engaged fully with the texts at sites that feature sermons (e.g.,

<http://www.sermons.org/sermons/sermon11.html>) with titles such as “Diggin’ a Ditch in Jesus’ Name”:

Donna: Is this a ... diggin’ a ditch?

Godschild: It’s a sermon.

Donna: Oh, it’s a sermon.

Godschild: Diggin’ a ditch in Jesus’ name.

Donna: Okay, so do you sign on to this one every week? And there’s a different sermon?

Godschild: Well, I was just lookin’ around for information. I had picked up certain information and things and put it on a Wordpad document. And so then I went to this site. I was looking for some Bible movies that have like cartoons. And then I also went to this place, still lookin’ for comics and stuff like that would still show the information from the Bible, you know, but in a more interactive way.

Not all of the Web sites that Godschild visited were that interactive. In fact, a few were simply sites that featured book after book (and verse after verse) of the King James Bible. Godschild often discovered such sites by beginning his search with Google. In this next excerpt, Godschild demonstrated that while his online search strategies were not that sophisticated, he did indeed have fairly well developed critical reading skills:

Godschild: I was on Google lookin’ for just pictures and stuff like drawings and I clicked on this one cuz it looked interesting and I’m not sure how...it doesn’t have a dot.com. It’s just a link from google. And then I went to this right here and it has different Bible scriptures and stuff and you can just go look up whatever you want...

Donna: Oh my goodness. This is Genesis. Are all the books in the Bible here?

Godschild: Yeah, you have to go back and it has like you can click on whichever book you want.

Donna: Oh my goodness!

Godschild: Yeah, it is nice.

Donna: When you read all of these lines, do you...explain to me how you read it. Like do you read word by word, do you skim it, how do you...

Godschild: I might just start reading at the beginning and just read from there. And then like maybe if I get sort of... I might go to another book and look for like other information. But basically I was just picking out certain verses that I would copy and so when I need to look back I can look back and sort of meditate on those words.

Donna: All right. You know, one of the things that always interests me when I'm using the computer and jumping around on Web sites, how do we know that what's on here is accurate?

Godschild: Yeah, that's why I always, sometimes look back to the Bible, you know. I don't take anything literally that the Internet says, mostly. I also read the Bible, too, you know, just to be sure cuz Internet could have anything on it.

Although Godschild showed that he had good critical reading skills in the example above, on another day, he surprised Donna by his seemingly lack of such skills. He was pointing out a Christian t-shirt collection on the website that advertises "Godly Garb." The t-shirts, with cleverly designed religious slogans, advertised well-known products (e.g., Coca Cola with a slogan that read "Jesus Christ, Eternally Refreshing." When Donna asked him if he thought the makers of these commercial products might be trying to sell him something, he responded this way:

Godschild: I think the way they're probably trying to get children and teenagers connected with the idea they're trying to send out and sort of make it a little fun. Like when you come on to a computer—you don't wanna just sit down and read a book like in school—so they have games on computers so that you can learn more about what you're studying at school. I'm pretty sure that's what they're trying to show right here. You can wear it on a t-shirt and have fun with it and let people know the message at the same time. (He proceeded to explain how video games and other things appeal to children and teenagers] And see on this t-shirt it has scriptures on it? That way when somebody sees it, if they don't believe what the t-shirt say, they might go and look for it in the Bible.

Donna: So it's a way to engage people in a fun way.

Godschild: Plus you don't have time to go around testifying when you're walking around the halls because you have to get class and so you don't have time to say, "oohh, let me tell you about Jesus", so your shirt can give off information about it. I think they call them gospel tracks... like sorta make your mind wonder if I'm doin' the right thing? So this could be like a self-advertising thing, you're walking around and advertising it.

Interview sessions with Godschild could be quite exhausting. He left no stone unturned, so to speak, in an effort to explain to Donna why he was interested in a particular site. For example, during one interview session, Godschild had just spent 6 minutes at The Fish giving Donna a thorough tour of the Web site. Then, moving on to a new Web site ([www.thelionofjudah.org/gotoheavan.htm](http://www.thelionofjudah.org/gotoheavan.htm)), he began reading long paragraphs of text that appeared to be sermons or at least warnings to sinners. Donna asked him whether he thought those passages were based on the actual Biblical passages, as in the King James version. He looked at her ambiguously but said people who were reading on this site could always check it out in their Bibles. Then, he continued (uninterrupted) to read every word orally to Donna for the next 7 minutes. He'd stop from time to time to interpret for her what he thought the passages were telling people. Some of the passages described what "it would be like when you die," he said. He did not appear a bit critical of what he was reading. Then, suddenly, he stopped reading for a second, looked at Donna and asked:

Godschild: Do you want me to go on?

Donna: I guess... probably not. I can go back to this site. [She was exhausted and amazed at his tenacity.]

Godschild took the cue and moved on to the next Web site ([www.victorious.org/strnghld.htm](http://www.victorious.org/strnghld.htm)), continuing to read paragraph after paragraph for

almost another 2 minutes. Donna stopped him to say that they were probably going to run out of time and that she could always revisit the site another day.

Of particular interest to us were the Web sites Godschild visited that provided notes, commentary and interpretation regarding Biblical scriptures. For example, <http://www.mhmin.org/ch-resource/Scripture.htm>, which linked scriptures with specific topics of need, such as abuse, depression, anxiety, and [http://www.dltk-bible.com/fruits\\_of\\_the\\_spirit.htm](http://www.dltk-bible.com/fruits_of_the_spirit.htm), which suggested possible interpretations for various fruits and their use as symbolic objects. Although most of the Web sites Godschild visited were predominantly text-based, some contained podcasts and/or other audio files related to religious topics. He also visited Web sites that shared personal religious testimonials about different topics including fasting, church life and other religious experiences (<http://www.christian-faith.com/testimonies/1fastingtestimonies.html>, <http://www.christiantestimonies.org/>). A feature that seemed most striking about the testimonial sites was the sheer span of community sharing, often moving from local to national and on to even broader international communities.

In sum, although Godschild focused strictly on Christianity, he was aware of how other religions intersected with his own. For example, during 2006 when Israel and Lebanon were at war, Godschild made posters using digital media that supported the Israelis. He also prepared weekly devotionals, using the Power Point tool in MS Office, and then distributed both the posters and devotionals to members of his family and friends whom he thought would be sympathetic to his views.

**Brief Snippets from Dana, Free4lifezone, Pretzel, Sandy, and Fredman's Profiles**

Dana. A dominant pattern in Dana's use of the Internet was her devotion to Web sites that offer personal profiles and the ability to chat and/or email through the site's online interface. Her exploration of chat Web sites included two especially interesting ones—[www.gURL.com](http://www.gURL.com), a site described as an all-girl online community, and [www.mygirlspace.com](http://www.mygirlspace.com), advertised as a site “created by girls and made for girls” with “the largest selection of Myspace Layouts, Myspace Codes, Myspace Cursors, and Myspace Graphics for girls.” Not only did Dana look for new chat experiences, she also sought ways to supplement her experiences on sites she already frequented, gathering codes and graphics to further represent herself online. Judging from her numerous Web log entries that dealt with shopping, one would need to interpret the term *shop* rather broadly. It included shopping for colleges, music, cars, birthday party venues, jewelry, handbags, and other perhaps less tangible information such as directions, movie times, entertainment gossip, and university admission requirements.

Free4lifezone. This young woman's repeated visits (on six different occasions) to [www.hungersite.com](http://www.hungersite.com), where with a click of a button one purportedly donates food through the site's sponsors, is interesting because this site has links for other charity sites, creating somewhat of an online charity network. However, according to Free4lifezone's weekly Web log entries, the site that receives most of her attention is [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com). Like Dana, Free4lifezone spent considerable time each day on Myspace. For example, in a May 20th interview transcript for Free4lifezone, she stated that she visits Myspace “probably like twice a day for fifteen to twenty minutes.” Free4lifezone also stated that she reads and responds to comments made by “friends,”

candidly acknowledging her control over the ability to both add and remove people from her list.

Pretzel. Unlike the other co-researchers, Pretzel did not record in her weekly logs the actual URL addresses that marked the Web sites she visited. Instead, she chose to describe what she did while at those sites. Her interest in music provides a good example. She wrote that she used the Internet for a variety of music-related tasks—looking for pictures of musicians, downloading music, searching for song lyrics, and watching music videos. Most interesting was Pretzel’s online search for specific sheet music (K-Ci and Jojo’s All My Life from [www.8notes.com](http://www.8notes.com)) to learn on her trumpet. Pretzel also visited the Web sites of both Clarke Atlanta University and Georgia Southern University. She was interested in learning whether each school had medical programs, and in an effort to learn more about “pediatric RN”, she looked up the definition of that term on [www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com). She also went to [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) to search for “vocabulary used in the field of Pediatric RN’s.” Regarding her current high school class work, Pretzel wrote only one Web log entry: “I did an essay for a Leadership program I’m in” (June 4). Unlike Dana and Free4lifezone, Pretzel did not have a Myspace account. Instead, she frequently visited [www.tagged.com](http://www.tagged.com), a social networking site that is similar to MySpace.

Sandy. This young woman had the fewest entries in her Web log of all the co-researchers. However, she seemed to use the Internet more than the others for research on school related projects. Throughout her Web logs, she noted seven different topics she had researched online: slavery, diversity in the work place, presidents of the U.S., new laws in the U.S., discrimination in the work place, computer safety, and information for a project in her business law class. In an interview with Donna, Sandy provided some

insight into her online search process: “I typed in U.S. presidents and then it just pulled up the sites and I just looked at the first one that seemed more useful to me.” Sandy also used the Internet for personal interests—looking at Web sites for clothing ([www.babyphat.com](http://www.babyphat.com) and [www.rocaware.com](http://www.rocaware.com)), music videos ([www.vidocure.com](http://www.vidocure.com) and [www.blastro.com](http://www.blastro.com)), and online games ([www.cheatworld.com](http://www.cheatworld.com) and [www.aspenportal.com](http://www.aspenportal.com)). Although she listed [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com) only one time in her Web log, it was evident from her interview transcripts that Sandy was keenly aware of, and interested in, social networking sites.

Fredman. This young man’s Web logs indicated that he spent a majority of his time online visiting sites related to gaming. Like Daskittlebandit, Fredman’s gaming life could be divided into two categories: 1) free online Flash (or Shockwave) types of games and 2) games designed for offline platforms such as Sony PlayStation or Nintendo Game Cube. These two types of gaming offered quite different experiences. For example, when Fredman visited [www.gamesloth.com](http://www.gamesloth.com) (a free online Shockwave type of game), he stated that he was trying to “find a game to pass the time.” [The games on Gamesloth.com are relatively limited in terms of their sophistication.] However, Fredman also visited sites for information about more complex games designed for home entertainment systems. One purpose for these visits was to inform himself as a consumer. In his interview with Cheryl, he stated that he could often find “updates on characters, information on screenshots, trailers, release dates, all that sort of thing.” Along with screenshots and video previews, Fredman read game reviews, particularly from [www.ign.com](http://www.ign.com). He frequently searched Web sites for “cheat codes,” numbered codes that can be entered directly into a game for character enhancement or other elements advantageous when

playing a game. Known for making connections between television and online gaming, Fredman also wrote in his Web log that he visited a site in which he “looked up old comics about games.”

### **Discussion**

The Web is much more than music and games for increasingly sophisticated young users. It is an extraordinary resource for them to practice a wide range of reading and writing skills in a digitally-mediated environment. Whether they were seeking information for a school project or following up on their interest in sports, religion, or popular culture, the eight young people in our study used multiple forms of literacy to navigate a network comprised of various textual modes that require far more than a simple knowledge of print literacy.

We remain impressed with the range of literacy skills we observed our co-investigators use as they explored and produced Web-based multimodal texts. We believe the identities they are forming as readers and writers in their explorations of the Web are worth studying further. For as we are discovering, the Web enables young people “to tell others who they are” and even more importantly to “tell themselves who they are as readers and writers” – a factor that may eventually lead them to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland et al., 1998).

Moreover, we have evidence from our study that most Web sites invite slightly different views about what counts as reading and writing and how cumulatively these views may lead to a new way of being literate in the Information Age. Such reading and writing both reinforces and extends the kinds of literacy students practice in schools. In

some ways, perhaps, young Web users are helping to invent a new form of literacy, one that will provide a powerful tool for those who know how to use it.

In terms of implications that can be drawn for future research, we are of this mindset: perhaps it is our own literacy practices that are most in need of investigating. Maybe understanding them better would help us appreciate the appeal of a hypermediated environment—one in which multiple modes of communication are every bit as important as being able to comprehend the printed word. For we are reminded by Michael Heim, who writes about the digitization of culture, that the

word now shares Web space with the image, and text appears inextricably tied to pictures. The pictures are dynamic, animated, and continually updated. The unprecedented speed and ease of digital production mounts photographs, movies, and video on the Web. Cyberspace becomes visualized data, and meaning arrives in spatial as well as in verbal expressions. (cited in Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 170)

Finally, based on our data, we have come to the tentative conclusion that reifying distinctions between in-school and out-of-school literacies would seem mainly to divorce these literacies from the very spaces that give them meaning and make them worth pursuing in the first place. For it is in “doing” and “undoing school” in out-of-school settings that young people are able to show how engagement with texts of all kinds (print, digital, visual) is achieved across space, place, and time.

### **Recommendations for Afterschool Providers**

- Recognize that we live in a visual age—that images are pushing words off the page and screen. [Hull & Zacher, 2004]

- Support the notion of literacy as a social practice, not simply a static skill – one involving the interpretation of texts that represent a variety of communicative modes (e.g., writing, speech, images, music, sound, and performance) [Kress & Street, 2006]
- Involve youth as co-investigators capable of analyzing what literacy strategies work (and don't work) for them.
- Seek appropriate technology and support that would encourage and sustain young people's out-of-school literacies in an effort to help them expand their repertoire of communicative skills—skills that are likely to enhance their achievement in academic areas as well.

### **Recap of Research Project and Future Plans**

*Literacy Practices in Afterschool Web-based Youth Communities* was an eight-month research project that examined the Web literacies of eight high school students enrolled in an afterschool academic enrichment program. With support from the Bowne Foundation, our eight co-researchers were provided with new laptop computers and high-speed Internet service in their homes. They kept logs of their daily Web use and met weekly with us to discuss the Web sites they had visited, and to demonstrate the kinds of literacies they practiced while at those sites. Our findings point both to the range of multi-modal literacies students practice on the Web and to the sophistication they bring to negotiating those literacies. The Web afforded young people in our study an opportunity to represent and enrich their developing social and academic identities; at the same time, it provided them a medium in which to practice new digital literacies.

Our findings, while limited necessarily by the scope of the study's design, encourage us to take two new steps. First, with additional funding, we would like to further explore the ways in which Web-based activities can enrich and extend the opportunities offered by after-school programs like EYP. Our eight co-researchers taught us that they use the Web, not only to find games and music and not only to connect with their friends in new ways, although these can be important in themselves. They also used the Web to read and design a range of multimodal texts – a kind of literacy that is seldom enabled or encouraged in classrooms.

Second, again with additional funding, we would like to examine young people's Web-based practices within a school environment, comparing them to the practices in which young people engage when they are on their own, among their friends, or as part of communities such as EYP. The range and sophistication of our co-researchers' Internet use makes us wonder if schools are fully drawing upon and supporting the digital skills and Web-based knowledge students already possess. If not, then schools may have much to learn from the students they serve.

**Table 1**

## Co-Researchers on the Project

<b>Co-Researcher</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Grade levels</b>
Godschild	Male	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>
Dana	Female	11 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>
Pretzel	Female	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>
Fredman	Male	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup>
Brad	Male	10 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>
Free4lifezone	Female	10 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>
Daskittlebandit	Male	11 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup>
Sandy	Female	10 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>

**Table 2**

Number of Web Logs and Interviews

<b>Co-Researcher</b>	<b>Web Logs</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Godschild	15	14
Dana	7	8
Pretzel	12	17
Fredman	10	11
Brad	10	10
Free4lifezone	6	6
Daskittlebandit	9	14
Sandy	8	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>93</b>

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