CHAPTER EIGHT

Looking from the Inside Out: Academic Blogging as New Literacy

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Introduction

This chapter draws on an ongoing ethnography of blogging which centers on our lived experiences of digital writing and online publishing, tracing how this maps onto and extends social networks, and contributes to an emerging affinity group or online community (Gee 2004). The production and consumption of blogs is seen as a new form of social practice, dependent upon specific genres of writing and meaning making—a practice which reconfigures relationships and can engender new ways of looking at the world. Our autoethnographic approach provides an insider view of blogging as a new and popular screen-based literacy practice. In this chapter, we reflect on the processes involved in the production and consumption of blogs as well as blogs as textual material in their own right. We have become interested in exploring the way in which blogs work as interactive texts; as texts which are jointly composed and which are interwoven with other texts, texts for which authorship is often multiple and unpredictable.

We have found that an autoethnographic approach has allowed us to experience at first-hand, and therefore to understand more closely, how blogs work as a new type of text. Furthermore, the nature of the inquiry itself repositions the researcher, as both subject and object, and in this way breaks with the more separate stance of traditional cultural ethnographers. Here we comment on some key
features emerging from our data, beginning with an overview of blogging as a social practice. This leads into an exploration of methodological issues raised in the study of online textual practices. We then focus on three key themes. The first of these is concerned with the experience of self-publishing online; the second with the nature and fabric of blogs as texts; and the third with the development of social networks through blogging.

**Blogging as a Social Practice**

The growing popularity of blogs that use relatively simple publishing tools that allow users—at little or no cost—to publish on the web, is of particular interest to us; we have been keen to understand how blogging has become such a seductive activity so quickly, and for so many. New blog technologies provide new affordances which can be at once both simple and complex; simple because they share some of the characteristics of paper-based texts (such as typographical conventions, spelling, paragraph, layout and so on) and complex because of the capabilities offered by hypertext. New affordances include textual connections with others on and offline; the facility to comment on others’ blog posts and the possibility of replying to comments on one’s own; hyperlinks to information sources; site meters which monitor “visits” from others; RSS feeds, which alert subscribed readers to other newly updated sites; the facility to embed other texts within one’s own; hyperlinks to information sources; site meters which monitor “visits” from others; RSS feeds, which alert subscribed readers to other newly updated sites; the facility to embed other texts within one’s own and the possibility of including a range of modalities, from audio podcasts to video streams. We have come to think about the “depth” of a text in this regard; the fabric and nature of the text seems to foster a stronger articulation of the social. Blogs which have “frequent commenters” often develop a strong sense of audience, yet there is also a sense of a potential wider audience being considered within blog texts, too. Blogs seem to be embedded in a social context related to both local and global discourses with the notion of participating in a network of bloggers being a strong drawcard for both readers and bloggers themselves. We have also found that these dynamic connections challenge our conceptions of what it means to be writers and readers, and even unsettle our ideas of what constitutes a text in online environments.

Blogs are essentially online journals which are regularly updated, often with fairly brief postings (Merchant 2006). The most recent post is usually shown at the top of the screen, with previous posts listed below and older posts are archived and hyperlinked, all in date-of-posting order. Requiring relatively little specialized technical knowledge, blogs have become a very popular way of producing digital text (Mortensen 2004). In fact, experts estimate that there are literally millions of blogs worldwide (Blogcount.com 2005) serving the needs of a wide range of individuals and affinity groups.
Blogs, as an emerging genre of digital communication, are characterized by a tendency to blend the personal with the public. The similarities with more conventional journal writing are reasonably clear, but yet, to write a blog is a little like displaying a personal journal in a shop window, for friends and passers-by to read at their leisure. Similarly, blogs often blur distinctions between the serious and the frivolous. Although multiple ownership of a blog is possible, most blogs are produced by individuals, although this is a complicated concept, since most blogs allow comments from readers so that blog posts can develop over time by means of multiple authorship.

There may be as many different reasons for blogging as there are blogs, and the range of blogs we have seen has been immense; everything from cookery blogs with detailed recipes, tried and tested (e.g., Kramer Bussel et al. 2005); to knitting patterns and experiences (e.g., Carrieoke 2005); to blogs which advertise (e.g., Nokia 2005); to blogs which satire (e.g., adbusters 2005); to blogs which showcase obsessions (e.g., Manolo 2005); and through to blogs which share professional stories (e.g., Scott 2005), to name just a few examples. Nevertheless, whatever the articulated purposes of a blog, academic deconstructions of blogs have, among other things, discussed the social and personal affordances of these new literacy activities. Bortree (2005), Stern (1999) and Scheidt (2006), for example, have all written about teenaged girls’ blogs or homepages as providing spaces where these girls can self-present and explore aspects of their identity. Bortree describes the “dual use” of a blog “as a tool for interpersonal communication and mass communication” (Bortree 2005, 25). Bortree’s work reflects on ways in which girls’ online writing is often specifically targeted at known readers, yet social complications occur when there is a wider readership. This multi-purpose dimension of blogs can also be seen, for example, in the work of “Riverbend,” the pseudonym used by a young Iraqi woman who blogs her political views as well as her mundane experiences as a young woman living in a war zone (see Riverbend 2005). She writes in English to include an audience beyond Iraq, but her posts are also filled with references to and for local bloggers as well.

Indeed, while a blogger may write for a specific readership, often also known personally off-line, there is also the knowledge that the audience for a blog potentially exists beyond these known readers. Accounts of online affinity spaces have been useful in defining the coming together of like-minded interactants with shared interests (Davies 2005, Gee 2004, Knobel 2005) yet it is not altogether clear how one might define the parameters of such affinities and this, as has been discussed by Bortree (2005), can be problematic to the blogger; knowing whether one is communicating beyond an immediate group or with unknown others can cause at best stylistic difficulties, or at worst, offence. As will be exemplified later in this paper, discovering one’s readership can be a disconcerting—as well as a gratifying—experience.
The complexity of audience and authorial positioning, as well as the blending of these roles, is of particular interest to us in this chapter.

Mortensen (2004) has written extensively about academics blogging, not least in her own blog. Her awareness of the potential influence of readers who comment was shown through her recent decision to disable the comment facility on her blog in order to think about her writing in a new way (Mortensen 2005). Farrell (2005, 1), also online, writes of the academic blogger:

Academic bloggers differ in their goals. Some are blogging to get personal or professional grievances off their chests or, like Black, to pursue nonacademic interests. Others, perhaps the majority, see blogging as an extension of their academic personas. Their blogs allow them not only to express personal views but also to debate ideas, swap views about their disciplines, and connect to a wider public. For these academics, blogging isn’t a hobby; it’s an integral part of their scholarly identity. They may very well be the wave of the future.

This is certainly something others have found—that blogging can promote discussion of ideas in embryo:

Through my blog and engagement in my blogging affinity spaces, I have been afforded the opportunity to build, refine and sharpen my intellectual ideas. By simply having a web presence I have found other like-minded colleagues who enter into dialogue with me about my work on a regular basis. This new type of networking has been and continues to be, for me, an invaluable force in shaping my thinking and my career choices (i-anya 2005).

The presentation of self in a particular way, as showcased through our own blogs, has been a focus of our recent academic work and we have been interested in the range of social practices we have been able to enjoy as a result of our blogging. As such, we have drawn on the New Literacy Studies and its emphasis on a social account of literacy. We suggest that this theoretical orientation is particularly helpful in analyzing new meaning-making practices associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs). As we shall show in our data, not only do new ICTs such as blogging tools fundamentally change the ways in which we write and communicate, they also change how we interact and with whom we interact with. And, thus, as Nixon (2003) also argues, a theoretical perspective that focuses on literacy as a social practice is likely to be most helpful. The work of Barton (1994) and Barton and Hamilton (1998) is particularly influential in this respect. Their explorations of literacy as a social practice show how specific literacy events are linked to the wider social structures in which these events are embedded and which these events in turn help to shape (Barton 1994). Specific “situated” literacy acts or events can then be
analyzed; for instance, by examining the participants and settings, and the particular artifacts, activities and technologies that are used within the event (Hamilton 2000). These events are aspects of literacy practices which are linked to broader sets of values, attitudes, feelings, and relationships (Street 1993). We have observed that the online practices and events in which we have been involved via our blogs are frequently not confined to specific online literacy events and practices but are rooted in, or developed by, additional associated social events and practices beyond the internet (e.g., within our academic or private lives). This suggests that we need to expand our definition of a literacy event to include surrounding contextual factors and also to acknowledge the fact that the “situatedness” of a specific event is more complex online. Furthermore the notion of “event” seems to suggest that it is temporally and spatially bounded—clearly this does not apply in the same way to a blog. This is, of course, because of the way in which the text is never complete and readers can add to the text at any point and from any location.

Another useful perspective on blogging as a social practice comes from paying closer attention to text, design and communication. New digital technologies invoke new ways of meaning-making, and these challenge the authority of the book and the printed page as dominant sites for representation (Kress 2003). The socio-semiotic approach developed by Kress (1997, 2000, 2003) has led us to careful consideration of the characteristics of screen-based communication. His work has highlighted the affordances of the screen and the facilities of different media. And this in turn has helped us to understand the visual—and not just the alphabetic—nature of the texts displayed on a computer screen, and how the characteristics of these screen texts differ from those of the page. A growing academic emphasis on the materiality of new textual forms has shifted our attention to the multimodal design features of screen texts as primarily visual constructs. For example, reading a blog includes much more than simply reading the printed text of each blog post, but paying attention to layout, colors, images, and even sound. Thus, descriptions of literacy practices and events (Barton 1994) combined with a socio-semiotic approach (Kress 1997) usefully enable us to demonstrate the intricate connections between textual production and consumption, and to explore social interactions within particular discourse communities.

The research presented in this chapter draws on recent work in digital literacy including that of Markham (1998), Mortensen and Walker (2002), and Sunden (2003), as well as the theoretical overviews of Lankshear and Knobel (2003) and Herring (2004). In addition to our interest in blogs on their own terms as new literacies, as researchers, we are interested also in exploring methodologies for studying digital writing which need to account for the multiple perspectives of readers and writers of blogs, as well as encompass methods of analysis that do justice to the complexities of blog texts.
Methodological Issues in Researching Online Texts

There are a number of approaches that can be taken in the study of new forms of digital literacy and online practice. Textual analysis is an obvious starting point, and certainly, the history of research within the social sciences provides many blueprints for this, along with a rich tradition of working with print-based texts. But even print-based textual material can be problematic as research data at times (Hodder 2003), and the sheer complexity of digital environments presents whole new sets of problems. Hodder (2003, 156) reminds us that, “texts have to be understood in the contexts of their conditions of production and reading,” and underscores how a single text can be read in many ways. While this is true of all texts, the complex configuration of digital texts which are often multimodal, hyperlinked and dynamic in character, make even partial readings increasingly problematic. In looking at a blog, for instance, we need to accept that the text is seldom static, it is regularly updated and interactive via the comments function attached to each post, and that a visitor to the blog is highly unlikely to follow all the available hyperlinks or explore all of the archived posts, and that multiple visitors are unlikely to follow these links in exactly the same way anyway, and so on. Instead, readers will make choices about what to read and what to ignore, designing their own reading path (Kress 2003) through the text. These features conspire to make traditional textual analysis problematic because the different paths that readers take will inevitably impact on meaning.

As mentioned earlier, recent theorizing in the domain of literacy studies has been dominated by a social account of literacy. Street’s concepts about socially embedded literacies (Street 1997), along with literacy practices and events (Barton 1994) and the social semiotic approach to text analysis (Kress 1997), all demonstrate the intricate connections between processes of textual production-consumption and social interaction within discourse communities. Therefore, a methodology for the study of digital writing would need to explore at least some of the multiple perspectives and relationships between readers and writers along with analyses of the complex texts thus produced. This suggests that researching digital writing needs to be informed by a robust theoretical position that can capture the complexities of relationships and identities; interaction, text production and consumption; and the role of the mediating technologies that are used.

If the complex interactions between people and machines lie at the heart of communication through digital writing, methodological questions about the nature of enquiry and the position of researchers are equally important. Existing work in the field of digital writing shows researchers adopting a variety of relationships to digital culture. It is useful at this point to identify some of these specific research positions as we ourselves see them. The list of positions below captures our own “take” on the various methodological positions available in the research literature,
although we recognise these positions may overlap, shift, disappear or expand over time.

- Researcher as identifier of new tropes (Ito 2004; Lankshear and Knobel 2003; Rheingold 2003)
- Researcher as insider (Markham 1998; Sunden 2002)
- Researcher as analyst (Werry 1996; Shortis 2001; Burnett et al. 2003)
- Researcher as both subject and object (Mortensen and Walker 2002)
- Researcher as activist (Prensky 2001; Gee 2004)

Our own methodological position can be classified as “researchers as both subjects and objects.” That is, we are both authors of the texts (our respective blogs)—which offer a range of narratives about our lives, experiences and thoughts as well as researchers of our own blogging activities.

Lankshear and Knobel (2003) draw our attention to the importance of “insider research”—research of and by people who are immersed in the use of new media. This kind of research is needed in order to complement and enrich the important work that they and others have done in keeping up with new developments in digital literacy. We may recognize in this kind of work an attempt to capture and document new practices and, in the case of Rheingold, for example, even to predict the future (Rheingold 2003). There is perhaps also an unspoken concern here that age and scholarship may combine to create the distance of an outsider, as the researcher becomes remote from the practices she or he is studying. From this perspective, even detailed ethnography of the textual worlds of Japanese schoolchildren have the potential for being read as deconstructions of “exotic” practices (Ito 2004). By exotic, we mean practices which are innovative, culturally located, often marking the emergence of a new trend. These particular research positions seem to condense around a conception of researcher as identifier of new tropes and memes.

While a focus on new tropes and memes provides a starting point for the systematic study of the role of textual production and consumption within digital culture, there is clearly scope for development, revision and synthesis. The inter-relationship between the unit of analysis and the mode of data collection, for example, provides fruitful ground for rethinking the methodologies needed for effectively investigating digital writing practices. A common characteristic of popular digital writing is the way in which onscreen text mediates a social relationship between two or more people. From this it seems that a more rigorous approach would involve the study of digital writing in its broader social context, uncovering the nuances of local settings and their interplay with the different perspectives of participants. So for example in Julia’s post (digitalliteracies.blogspot.com/2006/07/31/things-that-make-me-go-hmmm/) on defining digital literacies one would need to
have access to a range of sources of information in order to attempt a thorough analysis of this text. This would include a knowledge of who the participants were, their previous familiarity with the topic and with each other, the degree to which their settings were similar or shared and an understanding of their purposes for posting and commenting. To clarify, some of these commenters had been discussing definitions of digital literacies at a conference, another is a doctoral student and another is a complete newcomer; all came to the text with differing degrees of knowledge of each other, with differing shared experiences and discussions. Their backgrounds would be clear to some readers and not so apparent to others. This in turn would have implications for modes of data collection. Keeping with our example above, specific data collection methods might include an understanding of the topic under discussion, its progeny and the social networks of the commenters and their social location. A researcher’s options might include entering into the blog discussion and/or contacting the individual participants for further clarification. Ways of describing the dynamic nature of onscreen communication are needed in order to understand collaborative text construction, movements between reading and writing, and the changing, visual nature of screens (Kress 2003).

It is important to ask to what extent the study of practices within digital culture could (or should) influence ways of conducting and disseminating research. As Facer argues, we could easily see new literacy practices as:

> a phenomenon existing "out there" in the world of research subjects rather than a set of practices that might reciprocally alter the ways in which researchers interact with research subjects, each other and the wider audience for [...] research (Facer 2002, 3).

Here, there is the suggestion that studying digital culture in daily life may not only lead us to rethink how we do research but also how we present data, involve participants and disseminate our findings. Clearly we need more work in this area and, as Nixon (2003) observes, more focus on how we research as well as what we research.

In our work we have adopted an innovative approach by drawing on Markham’s (1998, 2004) ideas about autoethnography as one potentially fruitful way of addressing methodological issues in studying digital writing. While Markham’s work offers a close account of her involvement in an online community, our own collaborative work traces the overlapping, yet distinct, experiences of two individuals engaged in online events and practices. This researcher-as-subject-and-object analysis has enabled us to capture the similarities as well as the differences in our lives on- and off-line and to extrapolate from these certain degrees of commonality and areas of difference. Analysis examines the ways in which our own blogs have reflected the intersections of our academic lives with our personal, social and cultural worlds (cf., Ellis and Bochner 2003). Our position as research subjects-and-objects...
affords us maximum “insider” access to the online and offline nuances and complexities entailed in producing-consumbing our blogs.

Turning Inside Out: Our Study of Blogging

From November, 2004, through to November, 2005, we used our own activity of blog-posting (drjoolzsnapshotz.blogspot.com and myvedana.blogspot.com) and associated digital practices such as reading, linking to and commenting on other blogs as a focus for reflection and analysis. This included our engagement with Flickr.com, an online photo-sharing service which was initially used to publish images to our respective blogs, but subsequently developed for each of us as a semi-autonomous digital practice in its own right. Our blogging and Flickr posting began some time before November 2004, so our blogs were reasonably well established at the start of our autoethnography. The data we collected for this autoethnography included: blog design, posts and comments, and the use of the multimodal affordances of blogging software. Part of our subsequent methodological work included comparing and contrasting the different ways in which we conceived of, designed and composed our blogs. Unstructured fieldnotes were published on a regular basis on a shared metablog, Blogtrax (Blogtrax.blogsome.com) using a webhost which allowed each writer to categorize postings through the use of tags. Tags are keywords or search terms a user can append to a post (or image) that enables like things to be grouped by the user or found by readers viewers. Initially an in-common list of tags was generated in quite a rough way, drawing on areas of interest we already shared in our academic work; some of these were broad themes, such as ‘identity,’ while others were very specific, such as “Flicker,” which referred to a specific website and hosting service. Because our Blogtrax blog was a formative text, and was used to record our thinking as we went along, it was difficult to predict in advance which categories we would use and which ones might be redundant, too vague, or too broad. As such, our initial list of tags was not used to confine our thinking, but we hoped that these early tags would help us sift through the information on the blog at a later date. As we wrote each post, we ascribed one or more tags to that post in order to help order and review the data later. As a result, the metablog became a denser, more overtly co-constructed text which cross-references to our personal blogs as well as to other relevant sites, and in this way contrasted with our respective personal blogs. These published fieldnotes and reflections thus were simultaneously a record of research-in-progress and a product in themselves; the metablog constitutes both data and analysis.

The list of tags or categories we used on the metablog gradually developed over time, reflecting both our shared and our individual interests; we found the affordance
of tags useful in our qualitative research. In terms of specific data analysis methods, we adapted Wolcott’s system of interpretation and analysis (1994) and grouped our final categories into wider themes. Specific examples from within each of these grouped blog categories were used to illustrate these themes. The themes we identified are described briefly below, and provide a framework for the following three sections.

1. **Publishing the self** which includes specific issues about performing online identities, our sensitivities as bloggers to impression formation and our decisions about what to post and what not to post. In considering the content of our blogs, we look at how postings can work on the boundaries between private and public life. We also include the affective dimension of blogging in this category (such as feelings of pride, embarrassment and so on) and their relationship to respect and reputation in blogging communities.

2. **The nature and fabric of the text** as an interlinked and constantly evolving work, that is fluid, visual and, at least in part, created by readers, other bloggers and the comments that are added. The fabric of the text is concerned with the tools used to construct meaning. Predominantly this is about the use of multimodal text to signify group membership, reference to shared understandings and humor. However, we are also keen to show how the visual mode is used and, particularly focus on the use of photographic images. This section talks about the way in which medium, modality and semantics connect.

3. **Social networks** looks at how interactivity gives rise to the notion of blogging as a shared endeavour, a network than can lead to the development of a community of practice or an affinity space and how this relates to other platforms for online interaction (email, Flickr, MSN, shared blogs, others’ blogs) as well as to offline interaction.

### 1. Publishing the Self

One of the attractions of blogging is the potential for immediate publication and opportunities to communicate with a multi-faceted audience—one which is potentially wide, diverse and dispersed, but also one which is known and familiar (Bortree 2005). What is communicated through blogs varies enormously from political and journalistic material to niche interest and personal or family information. While blogs can serve a wide range of purposes, they are ultimately an arena through which we communicate about ourselves.

As academics, we are no strangers to the world of publication, and are familiar with the formal and informal procedures that constitute gatekeeping when we
publish, or attempt to publish, our work in high-status academic journals and books. For instance, we know well that it is part of the function of referees and peer-reviewers to determine the boundaries of what is acceptable to put into print. Our institutional and professional lives often guide the sort of topics that we write about. Furthermore, we are keenly aware of the time that it can take for our ideas or our research to finally make it through to publication—not to mention some of the gains and losses that occur on the way (e.g., editorial changes beyond our control; conversion of standard UK English into US English which affects word choice, idioms, punctuation and spelling; helpful reviewer suggestions).

For some academics who blog, the opportunity to write outside the boundaries of traditional academic publication is appealing (Mortensen 2005). One of the features of our experience of this is the manner in which our own blogs became a way to explore a wide variety of ideas and other material, thus constituting an alternative way of presenting the self. As Guy suggests in a post on Blogtrax:

the blog is more than a showcase of themes, or random interests. It gives me a space, albeit a limited one, to explore what I want to explore. I enjoy composing posts and I like writing. And in contrast, I often feel constrained by the writing games we have to play as academics. Constrained by the scope as well as the genres we write in (Blogtrax 2005a).

Our initial analysis shows a high level of boundary-crossing in our immediate blogging networks as we seamlessly blend personal with professional worlds, seriousness with frivolity, addressing popular as well as academic concerns. References to developments in new digital technology feature alongside personal jokes, popular culture, critical theory, photography and the visual arts; the self is performed through an amalgam of discourses so that the blog becomes a textual expression of how discourses are appropriated from so many spheres and used to perform the self.

Private Lives in Public Spaces

As we began to reflect on our own experiences of blogging, the idea of “authoring the self” (Holland et al. 1998) often came to the fore. Not only were we pushing at the boundaries of academic self-publication, we also became aware of broader issues of identity in our online writing. As described above, threading through our posts were stories of our lives. Our notions of identity are informed by social theory, and perhaps best captured in the work of Giddens:

The existential question of self identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual “supplies” about herself. A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the
capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing “story” about the self (Giddens 1991, 54).

This idea of keeping a particular narrative going, building a dynamic story of oneself in our social worlds, is explored and developed in one of Julia’s comments posted on Blogtrax:

I have an ongoing story. But I think we have several ongoing stories. I also think that if we bear in mind a particular audience, we change our story to suit them and this change our notion of who we are according to our audience (Blogtrax 2005b).

So here we see the idea that identity is produced through action and performance (Grosz 1994). A plural narrative begins to develop, and our perception of an actual or imagined audience prompts us to think about what we wish to show. Identity performance, involves a sense of audience—an audience to whom one is presenting a particular narrative (or narratives) of the self. A perspective on this is offered by Guy, writing on Blogtrax, who suggests one way in which this can work:

I wouldn’t wish to bore readers with unfiltered outpourings. So there are some, admittedly fuzzy, boundaries. There’s also some themes—gadgets; footprints; web’s wonders; new literacy; music; and me—although, interestingly enough, I’ve never consciously decided on these, they’ve just emerged over time. I guess I’ve constructed and performed a blogger identity which overlaps at points with my social/professional worlds (Blogtrax 2005c).

Here, Guy uses the idea of themes to explore the way particular threads weave in and out of his own blog (myvedana.blogspot.com). This is described as being quite an organic process, as these narrative threads or interests “emerge” in successive posts. These threads comprise the fabric of the textual self or persona that is being performed. Julia captures the sense in which active identity performance leads to a distinct “Dr Joolz persona” in which she is engaged in the activity of writing the self—as distinct, but not entirely separate, from other aspects of her lived experience. In this way, in blogging DrJoolz, she becomes DrJoolz, even to the extent that this influences real world actions such as collecting images to blog and so on.

[I] have been thinking about how in some ways I have developed a DrJoolz persona who is a little bit different from my identity as a researcher at work, as a colleague, as someone at home with family relationships. Maybe on the blog I present myself as having some kind of coherence; some sort of joined upness. In writing about myself I am somehow writing myself. I am subject and object of the work; and interestingly because I am
writing about blogging, I sometimes do stuff so I can blog it. In this way, the blog influences my life; it does not simply record aspects of it (Blogtrax 2005d).

This leads us to consider the emergence of a particular kind of blogger identity; an identity that has a symbiotic relationship with other aspects of the self. Within the context of our blogging, both of us are engaged in self-disclosure; as Julia reflects, “I have even told the world my feelings in a very uncharacteristic act of openness” (Blogtrax 2005e).

The tension between self-disclosure and public performance seems to be quite central to our experience of blogging. What has become clear to us is that while we are both sensitive to this tension, we explore it in characteristically different ways in our own blogs. Guy, for instance, aspires to a way of writing that is exploratory and not overtly interested in maintaining readership. He explains his view that:

The inner workings of jottings, musings, impressionistic thoughts and emotions go down, go public prior to substantial reworking. And as they go along they collect and discard readers, comments, and other links (Blogtrax 2005f).

But of course, in online environments, even the most intimate revelations of one's private life can be constructed or perceived as a carefully managed process of self-presentation. And indeed, what for the individual blogger may be a tension between private and public worlds, may for the reader merely seem like authentic (or inauthentic) communication, as Julia's comparison with television chat show environments illustrates:

this strange thing of chat shows where they [are] pretending they are in a lounge at home or something, and refer to interviewees as 'guests' (they are paid after all)—(sofas; drinks; flowers on the table; some 'guests' even bring presents)—Yes, I think the blog has a lot in common with that; this sort of pretense at exclusive views on the 'real' thoughts and so on of a guest; and it is presented as if to a group of friends—even though it goes totally public, is not exclusive etc etc. Except that people do sometimes choose to reveal a lot of their 'private lives' both on chat shows and on their blogs. In this way that 'private/public' thing is shared by blogs and by chat shows (Blogtrax 2005g).

The chat show analogy is helpful in conveying the idea of a public performance space, that, no matter how contrived it may be, does contain real “personalities” in a real location (or locations). From time to time, bloggers give us a sense of their experience in relation to the space they are in, even though in fact they report to us from within a shared cyberspace. Despite the fact that they could be anywhere, we still can get a sense of their location through their blogs. Guy writes about how this background can be helpful, “Even the trivial stuff—S. blogs there’s snow in New York . . . —can turn out to be interesting” (Blogtrax, 2005h).
Through the accumulation of information about bloggers’ lives, readers build a richer picture and an understanding of how multiple discourses make up complex selves. When such details are offered and reciprocated across a plurality of blogs, a sense of a shared social history is acquired, especially where comments are made about others’ lives and views. In turn there is a new sense of self, as it is woven into a joint narrative text across the blogs; a sense of a new self in a new and complex internet space.

Bloggers Have Feelings, Too

A recurrent theme in our blogging activity relates to the affective aspects of onscreen writing. We cannot control or limit our audience, and so once our blog is “live,” it exists in a more or less public arena and can attract praise or criticism, support or derision. And perhaps because blog posts are relatively quick and straightforward to publish, humiliating errors of judgment are always possible. In a sense, we put ourselves “on the line” when we go public; we have found that we need to be brave to blog! As cited above (Blogtrax, 2005e), Julia expresses regret about a particular posting, worrying that it may have seemed like a “rant,” and ends her post with the note, “(. . . Must not use blog to rant as this can be very offensive to others. Have learned valuable blogging lesson.)” (Blogtrax 2005e). Here, Julia is wary of a common criticism of bloggers: encapsulated in the idea that they “rant” or use their blog as a soapbox to indulge and proclaim their particular pre-occupations. Here the self-criticism is evident in the way she describes her own post as an “unprecedented outburst” and the concern that this may be “offensive” to others.

In a more introspective posting, Guy writes about his feelings about his blog (see Figure 8.1).

Here Guy uses the image of an eye in order to emphasize his feeling of being under surveillance as he writes, “My blog is watching me, staring out from the screen at me, and just the other side through the darkness of the pupil, visitors peer in at me” (Blogtrax, 2005i). This seems to communicate the sense of a vulnerable author who in some ways feels under scrutiny, or that he is being judged by imagined readers. More often though, our analyses suggest this sort of self-consciousness manifests itself in a concern that things may look wrong on screen or be misinterpreted.

The sense in which one is publicly exposed via one’s blog is mentioned quite often on Blogtrax, My Vedana and DrJoolz. Indeed, we found that we both commented on feelings of nervousness and apprehension about particular posts. This suggests that alongside anxieties about public exposure through blogging, there is, as suggested above, also the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. Both of us have had experiences of this. A specific example occurred when Guy posted a link to a blog to which someone subsequently added pornographic images in the
comments section. This led to Guy being upset because he felt he had inadvertently put pornography on his blog because of the hyperlink. As Julia observed, “He felt he was tainted by association.” (Blogtrax, 2005e). Through this incident, we saw more sharply how texts were so closely woven together online, that in some ways another person’s words and actions, become part of one’s own text. Authorship and identities can become blurred as texts intertwine and merge.

The affective dimension of blogging is nonetheless more subtly nuanced than these examples of anxiety and embarrassment suggest. In fact, we should be quite clear that our initial enthusiasm for the research we report here stemmed from the pleasure and excitement that we found in our own early experiences of blogging. Feelings of freedom from being constrained in what we wrote seemed to combine with the pleasure of seeing our texts on screen, and this in turn generated a very real attachment to our respective blogs.

In this section we have reflected on ways in which our own blog publishing has provided a vehicle for us to narrate ourselves and to present our different social identities. This aspect of blogging is one we have found both challenging and, in turn, liberating. As academics we feel we have been able to make contacts with others in ways we have not previously experienced. We explore this social aspect of blogging in later section (see Section 3). Within the current section, we have seen how our presentations of identity have often been influenced by the nature and fabric of the
text, in a familiar “medium is the message” manner. In the next section we offer fur-
ther details of this and of other affordances of the blog modalities.

2. The Nature and Fabric of the Text

Blogs are designed to be read and used on screen rather than on paper, but perhaps
like newspaper readers, blog readers tend only to regard the most recent entries as
worthy of their attention. These recent entries appear first, at the top of the screen,
with older posts generally archived in monthly groups, and as such, made periph-
eral to the central part of the blog. Despite this, the idea of archiving does suggest
that a blog is a cumulative text, one with a present and a past history. This customary
layout, negotiated easily with experience, is an online textual convention to be
learned (see Figure 8.2).

This layout is presented to most bloggers as a ready-made template; the dat-
ing system, the archiving and the comments sections, all appear “magically” once
a new blog has been set up. While the default template can be left as it is, many
bloggers customize the basic shape after a while, and sometimes even move on to
using more complex hosting systems than they began with as they become more
experienced and discriminating about what they want from their blog. For example,

Figure 8.2. Dated archives and a site meter
Julia moved Blogtrax (first set up on Blogger.com) to another host (Blogsome.com) so that posts could be tagged and categorized as they were being written. In describing this on Blogtrax she wrote:

Have spent quite a while today moving all the posts over from Blogtrax (one) to its new home here. Hopefully this will help Guy and I in the long run when we use it as a database to help us write.

The next big task, (and the whole thing will have been pointless without this next step) is to categorise all the posts.

This in itself is of course an analytical process (Blogtrax 2005j).

The categories facility, as described earlier, provided by some hosts such as Blogsome, allows flexibility in the organisation of the database of posts beyond the date-only ordering available on most blog hosting services. As described earlier, this tagging facility enables posts to be collated under any category that a blogger wishes to create and subsequently tag posts with. Hyperlinks to each category or set of posts appears in the blog’s sidebar. Thus in Blogtrax, categories include affinity spaces; learning; and communities of practice. Clicking on one of these hyperlinked categories means that posts allocated to that category will move to the “front page” of the blog. Posts may be allocated to more than one category so that multiple appearances across categories are possible. The software that drives this categorizing function thus requires some new skills to be learned in order to use the function effectively. At the same time, this function also provides important new textual affordances with respect to more easily following threads of interest across a blog’s entire set of posts. Many of these skills are what make the difference between a non–dynamic text that is intended to be kept as “flat”—something which when printed on paper, loses no affordances—in contrast to the more densely layered and flexible hypertext. In this way the skills to be learned, while involving digital technology, have implications for literacy.

The blogroll, also a common feature of blogs in general, is a hyperlinked list of other blogs, and allows bloggers to signpost sites that are of interest to them. Such a list could of course, be hidden on the blogger’s own computer under “favorites” or “bookmarks” on their internet browser interface of choice. The public display of blogrolls, then, sets out affinities clearly for readers, allowing the blogger to publicize and share her interests and priorities. Furthermore, blogrolls allow bloggers to contextualize for themselves and for others their space within the “blogosphere.” So through blogrolls, bloggers can stake out an interest, an identity and even loyalties to others; through blogrolls a certain “character” for the blog can be established. Blogrolls are also known as blog “referrals” and are often mutual (e.g., Guy’s My Vedana blogroll includes a link to DrJoolz’s blog, and vice versa). Being on a high-profile blog’s blogroll confers instant high-level status to one’s own blog and may lead to one’s blog
appearing on multiple strangers’ blogrolls. Networks thus are drawn out with interwoven threads of often reciprocal patterning (of course, including a high-profile blog in your own blogroll does not ensure that your blog will be listed in this high-profile blogger’s blogroll). In this way the affordances of the blog medium promote interaction between bloggers and increase their potential for social networking.

This phenomenon can be seen in the blogrolls of My Vedana and DrJoolz Snapshotz, that each contain links to other academics’ blogs, literacy sites and related research sites. These lists reflect our dovetailing interests as well as our divergences (see Figure 8.3).

The way that links on blogs can be used to establish allegiances has already attracted the attention of researchers. Van House (2004), for example, writes about the mutual linking and blogrolling of bloggers in this way:

While much blogging is a form of personal expression, when the bloggers in question are a community of mutually-referenced topical bloggers . . . they see their work as collaborative (Van House 2004, 2).

Van House, like us, argues that the norms of blogging promote a high degree of self-disclosure, but also that the closeness woven through online links means that blogging allows close collaboration and knowledge sharing. Visits to one’s blog can be monitored closely by means of add-ons such as site meters. Site meters allow bloggers to

Figure 8.3. Blogrolls on My Vedana and DrJoolz (as at November 18, 2005).
track from where “visitors” have come (i.e., the referring URL), what page on the blog they enter by and where they exit, as well as the number of pages they have looked at, and so on. All this information might motivate the blogger to keep writing, or even to visit the sites of those who have looked at their blog. This is another route through which connections can be reciprocated and deepened.

The feature of any hypertext which most obviously distinguishes it from other kinds of texts is the hyperlink; it gives the onscreen text a kind of “depth,” a richer texture than a printed page generally has. This facility allows readers to jump from one text to another and back again, to trace a journey across the web from one text to another, or simply to ignore the links altogether. In composition, hyperlinks make it possible for bloggers to easily reference other work; jackdaw-like, they can gather threads of texts in one place, weaving these texts together by means of hyperlinks. By including the URL of a website into a blog post, a blogger enables readers to choose to “click on” and move to cited texts on other sites in order to read more about a topic, issue or event, etc. In this way, blogs are partially composed of other texts, gaining the Bakhtinian buzz of “double voicing” and “ventriloquism” (Bakhtin 1981). To clarify, by inserting hyperlinks and thereby incorporating other texts into one’s own, the words of other writers are read within the context of the host text. Within the words and images produced by the blogger, there will be importations from elsewhere, giving the text a rich diversity of voices.

For example, in My Vedana, Guy uses a series of links to make a point about regulation, self-regulation and ethics on blogging,

After serving her time as blunker [i.e., a blog lurker; someone who just visits and reads posts] and blog commenter, Kate now has her own blog and so, in celebration drkates artifacts (Kate 2005) is top blog. I really liked the agenda setting statement in her first posting:

“Commenters may be interested to know the themes in advance, so they can adjust their comments accordingly.

For now the themes are:
rucksacks
lost tickets
lost items”

I liked it because I’ve been reflecting on regulation, self-regulation and ethics in blogging. So, Kate’s provisional agenda reminded me of this, and what Torill does not write about on her blog. And then, from another point of view Danah Boyd writes about other people wanting to control what she blogs. “I want the right to control my voice”, she says, and that’s a theme that’s emerged for me through this last week.

// posted by guy @ 2:33 PM
Comments:

That’s funny, I read both Torill and Danah’s posts the same day and noticed similar themes too. And yippeee, isn’t it wonderful that Kate is blogging, now she can be a 100% insider too! *applauds*

# posted by Anya : 11:06 PM

Strange to be wandering around in the same territory, leaving footprints in cyberspace.
Off to see Kate now, must dash!

# posted by guy : 9:45 AM (My Vedana 2005)

It is possible here to understand the text quite well without following all the links (i.e., all those words in Guy’s post that are underlined are links to sites outside his blog), yet it is nonetheless clear that to fully understand the gist of Guy’s post, one must go and see the sites to which Guy refers or links. The text of his post is not self-contained and one can in a way see a history of his thoughts by visiting the same texts he read prior to making this post. In this way, the text of his post is to some extent dependent on these other texts. However, hypertextual reading confers particular degrees of freedom to the reader who is able to determine not only the reading path taken, but also the level of attention and depth of reading allotted to a text. While academics are well accustomed to citing and quoting widely (and in the example above, Guy cites Kate’s words for emphasis), blogs can also link directly to the other texts, so that these other texts can be read at source, in context, and all at one “sitting.” The relationship goes two ways; the other texts gain an extra dimension too, in that they are now linked to another text or site. Julia talks about this on Blogtrax:

And our blogs’ fabrics are constituted of our links as well as our words and pictures (etc). Other people’s texts become part of ours, because we weave them in . . . . our blogs are continuous texts with each other; our links tie us together and are mutually constitutive (if I can say that). So in building texts we constantly re-affirm and regenerate what the group is. We are our associations (Blogtrax 2005e).

Here Julia discusses how others are drawn into an affinity, as they can see from their site-meters, feeds and “trackback” functions that show where links have been made to their work. The originators of texts that have been linked to, can visit a blog and read and comment back, and meanings can be developed, shared or disputed. Multiple links can be made into and out of any online text; some texts will gain renown through such multiple links and of course, the more visits that such texts receive, the higher up a search engine’s set of returns for key words they will move.
There is a sense on both Julia’s and Guy’s respective blogs and on their shared Blogtrax, that there are some regular readers and commenters. Again Julia remarks:

We have found each other through common interests through a series of links, through degrees of separation. We have traced paths via each other and kept within a group with some pretty high status cultural capital. No wonder we love the web; we talk to people ‘like us’ and we go through the links on many people’s blogs in this way. Our network is safe (Blogtrax 2005e).

Just as with the blog roll, commenters are valued; Anya’s comment on Guy’s post on p.185, indicates that commenters play a constitutive role in text making. While bloggers—ostensibly at least—seem to set up their blogs in order to serve their own purpose, it has become clear that certain aspects of blogs are responsive to comments by and declared interests of others. At times, questions are asked of readers; references are made as to who might be interested in a post; sometimes bloggers will post entries that mirror those of others. For example, on August 26 2005, Julia posted a photograph of a cake she had made and linked to cakes made by other academic bloggers, such as, SimplyClare (SimplyClare 2005) and MaryPlain (MaryPlain 2005). These three bloggers had made cakes and posted photographs of them. Through their blogs they were able to demonstrate a certain synchronicity of life rhythms with each other and to show shared interests beyond the academic field of their professional lives. In this way affinities were declared and boundaries were perhaps also set. There is also an unspoken irony which works across these blogs; the three academics had met recently for the first time in “real space” at an academic conference. The blogs were allowing them to take risks in showing aspects of their private lives, but which indeed seemed to also help them take risks in the way they discussed new ideas on their blogs. Allowing the boundaries between seriousness and play, between home and academic lives to blur is a new way of writing that blogging promotes.

As a screen-based form, a blog is a distinctively visual text and bloggers quickly become aware of the multimodal semioses at work (Kress, 2003). Both of us, in turn, became pre-occupied with the look of our blogs. In order to include images on our blogs, we made use of the photosharing site, Flickr.com. By doing this, we became members of separate communities within Flickr itself with each becoming involved in Flickr to varying degrees, with Julia taking more of an interest in images as a digital medium and in the Flickr community. In this way we saw how the technology itself began to influence relationships and activities; we also saw how blogging could impact on ways in which bloggers spent their time offline. Julia began to search for photographs to contribute to Flickr and this, in turn, directly influenced what she wrote about on her blog.

For example, in the post presented below, we see evidence of Julia’s involvement in the Flickr community, her interest in academic debates about play and learning,
and the treatment of dolls. She refers to an academic paper she has written, as well as links to another blog she is involved in within the academic community. She uses an image from Mohawk (see Figure 8.4), a Flickr member (Mohawk/Limbert 2005a) as an integral part of the post, and discusses the image within this—and elsewhere (DigitalPlayer 2005). In this post, Julia also refers to Guy and his daughters, revealing information about his offline life, and to a photo he has posted on Flickr. The responses of readers equally blend playful, serious and personal comments (underlined words and phrases denote hyperlinks):

Mohawk

claims to be lazy and confused (Mohawk/Limbert 2005a) as well as aged 31.

I am interested in the exciting artifacts he uses in his photographs.

'What an interesting juxtaposition!!!!!',

I hear you say.

And others call out:

‘Check out the semiotics in that!!!!’

thanks so much to Mohawk [Mohawk/Limbert 2005b] for showing us this [Mohawk/Limbert 2005c] too.

You must see the discussion here [DigitalPlayer, 2005] of what is going on.

Figure 8.4. Mohawk/Tea (Mohawk/Limbert 2005b)
Aaanyway at the weekend (when I was working) a student told me she had read my Babyz paper [here]. [Davies 2003]

She told me she had to stop reading after a while as the thought of cyber babyz being tortured upset her so much. When I told her this was just girls (gurlz) playing experimentally and it was only pixels being manipulated not Babyz being tortured, she explained that many murderers had been found to have brutalised their dolls when younger.

So I now worry about Guy’s daughters’ futures. See [here]. [on-the-run, 2005]

# posted by Joolz : 10:40 PM

Comments:

I once wrote an essay for Peter Smith (yes I was his student once) on The Little Mermaid as an example of bricolage.

My son was very attached to Barbies (so there all you gender determinists) but also liked to cut their hair off and mutilate them (he was 3 at the time)

So my essay for my MA was on the Little Mermaid as bricolage.

The final version that my son played with had a pink punk haircut, and wore an attractive ensemble of clothing including some tattered Cinderella outfit but sadly the legs had been amputated for unknown reasons.

He is obviously in danger of being a mass murderer.

I will go and tell him now (he is sick at home).

# posted by Kate : 9:06 AM

- When I was nine, I brutalised my Girlsworld head. It had to be done: the makers provided makeup and extending/retracting hair. Perhaps all doll manufacturers can be held accountable for the mass murderering tendencies of mass murderers.

I also bit my cat’s tail once. He bit me first.

# posted by Simply Clare : 5:07 PM

- I had Sindy’s little sister Patch (I was a Sindy girl not a Barbie girl) and I cut her hair, made a right mess of it.

# posted by Mary Plain : 8:49 PM (DrJoolz 2005/10)

The meanings of this post are inscribed within the complex image, a sophisticated visual joke, as well as through the posted words and links. The blog entry itself grows with the addition of comments and becomes multi-authored—and as a result new
meanings develop. It reflects aspects of the academic world as well as making references to personal lives. No attempt is made within the comments to explain to others beyond the group and in this way meanings are kept closed; the group is in some ways exclusive despite the fact that the discussion is taking place online. While the post could be understood by a wider audience, some of the readers who commented created quite specific meanings anchored to discourses located in shared online and offline worlds (e.g., the concept of “gurlz,” “gender determinists,” “bricolage” as a concept within literary analysis, the difference between Sindy and Barbie dolls). So there is a sense of intimacy in this exchange, despite the potential readership being much broader. The social and the academic networking are blurred and the academic and playful are both evident. This illustrates how the blogging software is structured in such a way that makes this kind of textual interaction and semantic development possible.

3. Social Networks

Throughout our study of blogging, we have been grappling with ways of describing the social dimension of this popular new literacy practice. As the previous sections have shown, our blogs overlap with and expand on pre-existing networks and more established modes of communication. So, for the two of us at the centre of this study, blogging has certainly enriched our familiarity with each other, both as academics and in more general terms. For two academics working in the same field in the same city, but in different institutions, occasional face-to-face meetings and email exchanges would not be atypical. However, “meeting up” and “interacting” through blog posts and comments has changed and enriched this professional relationship.

At the same time as our blogs are professionally and textually related to each other, however, these blogs are also located in a wider network of academics who work in the literacy field in the UK. They constitute a small group of colleagues who are more geographically dispersed than we two are and with whom we would normally have less frequent contact; perhaps at most meeting up bi-annually at seminars or UK-based research conferences. Beyond this, our blogs are also linked in with academics in Australia and the U.S.; colleagues who we meet occasionally, that one or the other of us has met, or those who we have yet to meet face-to-face. Wellman (2002) describes these sorts of social networks as being glocalized in the sense that they blend local and global communication and interaction. So, although blogging is the focus of our ethnography it becomes impossible to separate it as a practice from the contexts and networks in which it is embedded. Furthermore, it is quite apparent that with this kind of blogging there is no clean separation of online and offline
activity. As Leander observes,

> It is increasingly less tenable to hold onto a vision of culture, identity and literacy practice in which the “offline” and the “online” are held radically apart in the ways that they are practiced and signified (Leander 2003, 392)

As we have seen above, blog comments often pertain to both offline and online discourses and practices. This blending of worlds perhaps makes it even more problematic to describe online inter-relationships. A sense of this is captured by Julia, who comments on Blogtrax that

> although I write with a group of people in mind, I am always hoping for more like minded people to listen—and join in. Thus the use of links for people to follow up on previous conversations, allows them to ‘catch up’. Many links will not be read by ‘regulars’ as they refer to old stuff. In this way it is like explaining a family joke, or a bit of social history to a new member of the group. And this of course brings us yet again, back even closer to a need to refine ‘Affinity Spaces’ as a concept. The drive to involve more people, comes from my constant desire to interact with others; to be social; to find more like me; so I can learn from them, with them, find out stuff. Anything. I love to follow their links; I love to have a reaction from others. I like to see them (Blogtrax 2005g).

In our work, we have both been exploring the concepts of “affinity spaces” (Gee 2004) and “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) in order to try to describe our relationship with others who blog and who seem to operate within a similar “constellation of sites.” Affinity spaces, according to Gee (2004), are guided by purpose and content. Thus the endeavor or interest around which the space is organized is, for Gee, the primary affinity; it is thus less about interpersonal relationships. According to this definition, blogs could provide an affinity space, but yet apart, perhaps, from Blogtrax itself, our own blogs do not easily condense around a clear-defined “endeavor” or “interest.” Rather it is almost as if the shared point of contact—perhaps broadly described as an enthusiasm for new literacies—has become the point of departure, from which we begin to explore other interests and other dimensions of our lifeworlds. In this sense, our personal blogs seem to be a way in which we function as networked individuals, keeping and creating contacts and links between a diverse group whose varied interests reflect our own.

For a personal blog, it is the individual rather than the place that becomes the locus of connectivity, and in previous sections of this chapter we have developed an account of how this occurs. We can and do access, post and comment on blogs from anywhere where we can be online. This enables us to publish ourselves, and to use the textual and social affordances of the blogging software to remain active in our social networks. From this point of view, blogging constitutes a new literacy practice (Lankshear and Knobel 2003), albeit one which we suggest can only be properly understood within the context of other forms of interaction. This may go
part way to account for the reaction of some colleagues and friends who will visit a blog and later comment that they “just don’t get it.” “Outsiders” may not only fail to understand how the blog works, but also how it is located in new webs of communication.

Conclusion

In a special edition of Reading Research Quarterly, Hagood (2003) urged literacy educators to engage with new technology as a way of understanding the characteristics and potentialities of communication in the new media landscape. She suggested that:

Researchers who attempt to explore research questions that address how new media and online literacies affect youngsters’ constructions of identities and notions of self need also to apply such questions to themselves as they engage these same media technologies in their lives (Hagood 2003, 389).

In following this, the autoethnographic study we have reported here has brought to the fore a number of features of our own online writing and text-making practices and opened up further avenues for exploration. Although the nature of the study has revealed a number of key differences in the way we approach writing online as individuals, it has also enabled us to identify some key aspects of blogging as a new literacy practice.

First, blogging seems to be closely tied up with self-presentation and impression formation. On our pages we perform our identities in a particularly public arena, one which can be accessed by friends or rivals, family or strangers, colleagues at work, those from our own professional networks and those from the wider academic community. In this sense our blogs are texts for self-presentation which we hope will “be accepted as appropriate and plausible performances” (Hine 2000, 122). Through this unfiltered self-publication we are potentially vulnerable, open to misinterpretation or even ridicule. Yet at the same time our blogs, by making us visible, can also develop respect and reputation. In our metablog, we traced the theme of identity performance and the ways in which it mirrors multiple and shifting perceptions of audience. Writing online provides us with the opportunity to “author the self” (Holland et al. 1998), to sustain a narrative of identity (Giddens 1991), and even to explore a number of different stories of the self, but these identities always are forged through our connection with others. So, although we have identified different ways in which we, as individuals, conceive of and respond to audience, how we imagine our readership is important to us. As Hine argues, a webpage:

is made meaningful primarily through the imagining of an audience and the seeking of recognition from that audience (Hine 2000, 136).
How we position ourselves in relation to our imagined or actual audience informs and is informed by the nature of the texts that we produce and consume in our blogging lives.

Second, we have shown how the social software used by blog hosts (Blogger, Blogsome, Xanga etc.) facilitates particular kinds of textual practice and supports the development of online relationships. The salience of visual style and regular blog updates provide a sort of invitation to those in a social network to visit regularly. In this social world the visitor or reader has considerable freedom and is able to determine not only the reading path but also the level of attention paid to the text, depth of reading and degree of interactivity. At the same time the blogger uses the genre to signal allegiances and affiliations through various textual and hypertextual moves. Bloggers, whether at any one time they are producers or consumers, navigate their way around a thickly interwoven fabric of online and offline texts, which often blend serious and more frivolous discourses.

Third, we have explored how blogging is characteristic of a particular kind of social networking. Borrowing from the work of Wellman (2002), we have described this in terms of glocalized and networked individualism. We have traced how those particular social networks operate in both online and offline spaces and how at times the blurring of those boundaries which demarcate the public/private spheres of our lives is a strong characteristic of our blogs, as well as of blogs in general.

Finally, in the context of this ethnographic study we have adopted an approach which places the focus on the social and cultural aspects of being a blogger and shows the overlap of private, personal and interpersonal worlds. This enquiry has repositioned us as central, as part subjects, part agents and part observers within an autoethnographic process. This contrasts with the more separate stance of traditional ethnographers. Online ethnography has presented us with new opportunities that force us to reconsider the linear trajectory of research design that until now has followed a simple timeline from the identification of subjects, materials and context through to analysis and publication. In this way our study adds to the understanding of new literacy practices and signals the emergence of new epistemological approaches. Of particular interest here is the metablog Blogtrax which not only became a place in which we stored our fieldnotes, but also provided us with the opportunity to interact with our research audience and fellow bloggers throughout our study. Blogtrax also used a tag and search facility which enabled us to code and classify our fieldnotes as they were written. As a result, the traditional authorship boundaries were relaxed, as commenters became involved in ongoing discussion and debate. This shows the possibility of a more transparent research process which in turn places researchers in a new relationship with participants and user-groups, who can view, comment on and even help shape the research as it unfolds. As blogging itself offers new opportunities for networking and encourages new relationships
between readers and writers, so using new technologies can encourage new relationships between producers and consumers.

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