

Chapter 15

What We Do Online Everyday: Constructing Electronic Biographies, Constructing Ourselves

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter addresses the collaborative participatory nature of online interactivity within the range of social networking spaces afforded by Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005). Each individual, through his or her situated usage patterns and choices, creates a unique digital fingerprint or electronic biography. Using a multiple case study method including children and youth ranging in age from five to fifteen years of age, the authors examined children's online interactivity through their electronic biographies. This case report focuses on the children's experiences of online interaction as a seamless component of their literacy (Thomas, 2007) and presents a profile of each young person that characterizes his or her unique online fingerprint. The findings provide insight into how children learn online interactivity, and their communities of practice at different stages of development. Their roles ranged from passive surfer-viewer-seekers to interactive discussant-displayer-players. Infrequently, some youth showed proactive leadership as host-builder-creators. The experiences of these young people provide practical evidence of the transformation of literacy; for them, the Internet serves as an information resource, a collaborative medium, and a design environment (Lapadat, Atkinson, & Brown, 2009). Narrative plays a key role online, especially in the construction of identity. The results of this study have implications for educators, parents, social scientists, and policy makers, and in particular, raise concerns about the commodification of childhood and how commercial interests have shaped sites used by children.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61520-863-0.ch015

BACKGROUND

This chapter addresses the transition from a notion of discussion or computer-mediated communication to a broader theoretical conception of online interactivity in the range of online spaces now afforded by the collaborative participatory nature of Web 2.0. Much of the early research on online discussion was related to text-based applications that first became available for common use, including email, synchronous chat, forums (especially in online courses), and listserves. These applications shaped the nature of online discussion and interaction by their affordances. As new mediums and modalities initially are conceptualized using familiar theoretical frameworks and practical applications, the first wave of researchers wrote about online discussion as contrasted with face-to-face spoken communication contexts and written language conventions. Themes included concerns about the impoverished communication context offered by chat and email (Herring, 1999; Honeycutt, 2001), the emerging notion of interactive written discourse (Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 1991; Lapadat, 2002), a focus on community formation (Conrad, 2005; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Rovai, 2001), and strategies for how to design online discussion forums to create effective learning environments (Kanuka, 2005; Lapadat, 2007).

The rapid development of new technological tools and environments for human interaction and creative expression, as well as people's day-to-day applications or *situated use*¹ of online communication, is radically transforming basic human activities and institutions around the globe—schooling, politics, art, commerce, entertainment, and friendship, for example. For young people growing up digital, it is not a matter of whether to use online communication modalities nor it is a question of which is better. Rather, online discussion and interaction are an integrated part of their everyday social lives (Thomas, 2007). They move easily

between mediums, often using multiple media simultaneously, and combining face-to-face communication with online modalities in the moment or sequentially. The Internet's most recent direction of development as a creative, collaborative, distributed commons, has accelerated the pace of change and generated broad enthusiasm for and uptake of virtual participation via social networking. The very notions of discussion and interaction have changed.

The broad focus of our research is the transformation of literacy itself (Bolter, 2001; Cruickshank, 2004), and the challenge this presents to schools (Merchant, 2007; Weigel, James, & Gardner, 2009). What does it now mean to be literate? What are the literacy practices of children and adolescents? Specifically, how do they “read,” express themselves, interact with others, and construct or reconstruct online environments through their technologically mediated interactions, and do these environments, in turn, shape them?

The authors propose that each individual, through his or her situated usage patterns and choices, creates a unique digital fingerprint or electronic biography (Lapadat, 2008). This presents a paradox. In a global online world in which English is becoming the common language, Japanese artistic traditions such as anime the visual currency, fantasy films and their related role playing games a common interactive environment, and blogging and identity play typical pastimes, nevertheless each individual creates his or her own unique path. In today's world, children interact online by playing collaborative role playing games in teams with people they have never met from any place in the world, write and publish fan fiction, or shop online for products that integrate their online and offline play and social interaction. Our focus is to examine children's online interactivity using the concept of electronic biography, within the broader framework of the transformation of literacy.

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