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Schooled Literacy in Teenagers' Online Writing

Cristina Aliagas

THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD, UNITED KINGDOM

This chapter explores the impact that schooled literacies have on teenagers' online communication, and shows that their online writing is sensitive to their school learning processes and identities. This study consists of an analysis of the Facebook profiles and blogs of four boys who were leaders of a school clique in an urban secondary school in Barcelona (Spain). The analysis focuses on a set of 40 screen-shots captured from their online activity, wherein school social life and learning were central themes to their exchanges. The analysis draws on the concept of "dominant" and "vernacular" literacies (Barton and Hamilton, 1998) to look at spontaneous "third spaces" (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moje et al., 2004) that connect the core curriculum with the students' online peer-writing. It focuses on how students make sense of disciplined academic learning across time and space boundaries. It includes, therefore, a questioning of the widespread social and academic prejudice according to which school and online literacies compete in the lives of students.

Cet article évalue l'impact de l'apprentissage scolaire de l'écriture sur la communication en ligne des adolescents et montre que l'écriture de ces derniers est liée à leur propre processus d'apprentissage et à leur identité. La présente étude est fondée sur une analyse de profils Facebook et de blogs de quatre garçons meneurs de groupe dans un lycée urbain situé dans la banlieue de Barcelone (Espagne). Cette analyse se concentre sur un ensemble de 40 captures d'écran de leur activité en ligne, dans un contexte où la vie sociale scolaire et l'apprentissage étaient au centre de leurs échanges. L'analyse s'appuie sur le concept d'alphabétisation "dominante" et "vernaculaire" (Barton et Hamilton, 1998) pour évaluer le "troisième espace" spontané (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moje et al., 2004) qui relie le programme d'étude avec l'écriture en ligne du lycéen. Cette étude porte sur la façon dont les étudiants intègrent

l'apprentissage académique à travers les barrières spatio-temporelles. Elle questionne ainsi le préjugé social et académique répandu selon lequel l'alphabétisation scolaire et la littéracie électronique sont en conflit dans la vie des lycéens.

1. Introduction

Consider this vignette,¹ in which I represent with a literary voice a synchronic online written exchange between two 17-years-old classmates (all the names are pseudonyms). It happened one evening when they were at their homes studying for an exam and they suddenly switched their attention to *Facebook*:

It's Sunday evening. Jaime is in his bedroom studying for an exam on Philosophy. His computer is on, so he decides to check his Facebook for a while. After reading the latest new posts in his network, he decides to erase all the past activity on his Facebook wall. He is feeling awkward again with his life and by eliminating the tracked activity, metaphorically he feels he is purifying his mind. He has previously eliminated his Facebook friends' messages from his wall, and quietly suspects that, since it happened some weeks ago, they won't understand.

Rosalía, one of his classmates, is also at home, studying for the same exam. She is always online, so she quickly notices Jaime's peculiar activity. She opens a dialogue in Jaime's wall by typing, "Why are you erasing your messages?"² Jaime immediately replies, "I'm erasing all the messages, not just yours: you're a bad rat! xd." Suddenly, other classmates join the conversation and demand an explanation. Jaime takes a few minutes to elaborate the answer:

and why shouldn't I delete them? <<memories cause pain in the heart, being able to forget is a blessing>> Kung-fusion 2004

(I know I'm weird, so what? Xd)

Rosalía is not happy with Jaime's pseudo-intellectual justification, building on a phrase from the film *Kung Fu Sion* (original title: *Kung Fu Hustle*, 2004) by Stephen Chow, about an unlucky crook in the chaotic pre-revolutionary China of the 1940s. Rosalía is angry with Jaime and hurls her thoughts:

look man, don't come up with theories cos your behavior isn't rational, just because painful memories exist don't mean that messages that other people leave you have to be deleted. and this thing about Kungfusion . . . it's a bit contrived, Jaime - Lol

Then, she types, "Since you've erased my messages I'm erasing yours, rat." Accordingly, she goes to her wall and hides some of Jaime's comments from her Facebook timeline. Then, she comes back to Jaime's wall and writes: "TO-DAY YOU-CAN STU-DY." Straightaway, she covers Jaime's wall with cultivated words from the Ancient Greek World that they should be learning for the next day's exam: "maslow," "mite," "logos," "physis arkhé," "chaos cosmos," "Pythagoras," "Gorgias." As a result, Jaime's timeline takes on the appearance of school notes, or maybe a blackboard, as shown in Figure 7.1.



Figure 7.1. Rosalía's "philosophical attack" on Jaime's Facebook

A bit later, Jaime types in the conversation:

bastard!! Xddd

I've spent a long time erasing them -- xDDDDD

In a subsequent interview, Jaime explained to me that “Rosalía attacked me with thousands of words from the exam . . . when she’s pissed off with someone she likes to cast a spell as if she had a wand, like Hermione.” Thus, Rosalía was pretending to cast a kind of philosophical spell through the cheeky voice of Hermione, a character in the Harry Potter saga, by J. K. Rowling. Indeed, that snippet that I was able to gather at midnight was just the final small fraction of the larger “philosophical attack” that occurred that Sunday evening, as Jaime took his time to erase, one by one, those mysterious Greek words that he was supposed to be familiar with in time for the following day’s exam.

This vignette describes a moment in time when schooled literacies and online teenage writing intersected in the context of *Facebook*. The episode encapsulates a sort of personal appropriation of complicated terminology associated with the philosophical traditions of the Ancient World. Although it cannot be affirmed that Rosalía and Jaime knew the “official” meanings of these complex concepts, they were actually using them in creative ways that were meaningful to them. These philosophical concepts were contextualized in the space of an online conversation, where they became the magical riddles of a spell. In this particular interaction, teenage humor was the nexus fusing the academic terminology, the online writing and the narratives of fictional literary worlds that teenagers consume on the fringes of school.

The above vignette raises questions about how students make sense of school learning in extra-curricular contexts. What happens with the body of knowledge that students “have to” acquire at school, when they are outside school? How do they make sense (or not) of what they have learned at school, within their everyday lives? What is the role that written online peer-communication is playing in their processes of appropriation of knowledge acquired at school? This chapter explores the impact that schooled literacies have on the literacy practices that secondary school students informally develop within their private social networks, and depicts the central role that school social life and academic literacies have in teenage online communication. It draws on some findings of a 3-year ethnographic study (Aliagas, 2011) examining the complex interface between the in-and-out of school literacy practices of

a secondary school clique in Barcelona. Herein, I report upon some data that point to the continuities that tie some of the “things” that students learn at school and some of the “things” they do behind the scenes. Findings show some of the ways by which schooled literacies “infiltrate” the students’ online activity within their social networks, by triggering interesting “third spaces” (Gutiérrez et al., 1999; Moje et al., 2004) where school discourses, practices and knowledge are re-shaped.

2. Focusing on “Third-Spaces” in Teens’ Online Writing

Teenagers are particularly interesting when looking at how literacy and identity are complexly interwoven, as teenagers’ literacy practices are constructed in tension between vernacular and dominant literacies, discourses and practices. Their position as students moving in-and-out of school puts them in-between traditional and new literacies, in-between the hegemonic discourse on literacy that the educational institution encourages and the other literacy practices that they develop in their private lives.

The language developed within the New Literacy Studies framework (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton & Hamilton, 1999) has been essential for the study of literacy as a social practice, and in raising awareness of how people live in a world where certain ways of reading and writing are socially more visible and culturally more powerful than others. According to Barton and Hamilton (1999), “vernacular literacy practices” are those forms of reading and writing rooted in the everyday life, characterized as being self-generated by individuals, learned informally and not necessarily written in the standard language that defines school literacy. The concept of “dominant literacy practices,” by contrast, refers to those prestigious ways of reading and writing that serve the goals of formal institutions such as Education. To offer an example: writing/reading a teenager diary or a blog would be a vernacular literacy practice whereas writing/reading an exam or a literary poem would constitute a dominant literacy practice. People are used to dealing in their everyday life with dominant and vernacular literacies, and they switch from one to the other with astonishing ease.

The dominant/vernacular binary has been a useful analytical construct to trigger ethnographic data about the so-called “in-and-out of school gap,” even though it holds the two competing models of literacy to be opposing and competing; one culturally recognized by the academic world and the other, which is socially invisible. In a study examining examples of “official” and “unofficial” literacy activities from 10/11-year-olds in two British primary schools, Maybin (2007) shows to what extent official literacy activities are

not necessarily “schooled” and unofficial activities are not completely “vernacular.” Thus, Maybin argues that the dominant/vernacular division leads to a dichotomist description of something that is much more complex and heterogeneous:

I would suggest that a large part of children’s day-to-day learning in many schools is mediated . . . through an unstable hybrid mixture of schooled and vernacular exchange. . . . I would suggest that we need a more fluid and dynamic language of description for children’s ongoing meaning-making around texts which may, simultaneously or sequentially, invoke different complexes of institutionalised beliefs and values associated with reading and writing. (Maybin, 2007, p. 528)

The idea of literacy practices being hybrid in nature has been especially significant to some studies within the field of New Literacies (Mahiri, 2003; Thomas, 2007; Williams, 2009) that challenge the research on language socialization and schooling, which has traditionally conceptualised the in-school and out-of-school literacies in terms of difference, dissonance or discontinuity (Gilmore & Martin, 1982; Heath, 1983; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Dowdall, 2006). Looking at the “in-and-out of school gap” through the lenses of hybridity has pushed the research to focus on the dynamic and hybrid interplay where school and vernacular literacies, discourses and practices merge, cooperate and, as a result, unchain meaningful learning and ways of knowing.

Within Sociocultural Pedagogy, studies grounded on Third Space Theory (Moje et al., 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008) observe the continuities and discontinuities between the dominant and the vernacular in order to understand how young people learn by constantly crossing boundaries between practices, discourses and literacies. Originally, the concept of the “third space” comes from Bhabha’s (1994) post-colonial studies on cultural hybridity to point out the “place of dislocation” of the migrant experience, where the “in-between” subject is reconstituted. In Bhabha’s work, the third space is a liminal space of cultural production and therefore a “locus” where resistance and subversion spring up, especially in relation to cultural dominance. The concept of the third space has been borrowed by scholars within Sociocultural Pedagogy to refer to the “spaces” where the in-and-out of school spheres co-articulate from the point of view of learning. According to Moje et al. (2004), the third space is the “space” emerging as a result of a “melting process” between the “first space” of people’s home, community, and peer networks and the “second space” of discourses associated with more formalized institutions, such as work, school or church. In these interstitial third spaces, people’s ways of

knowing, thinking and doing, typically associated with different spheres of practices, learn to co-exist. This integration generates an alternative “third space” where the established cultural identifications of the “first space” and the “second space” are transgressed, subverted and transformed in creative, new ways.

Third Space Theory acknowledges the students’ “funds of knowledge” (González et al., 2005) that are developed within their families and communities as key resources for learning in the classroom. Thus, it challenges the idea of the student as a passive subject continuously shifting between different systems of knowing. On the contrary, the student is seen as the nexus that actively articulates the different discourses, practices and knowledge she or he encounters in everyday life. In other words, they are “in-between” systems of knowledge but conceptualized in terms of active meaning-makers.

An increasing body of research about teaching practice is challenging established education policies and rusty traditions in teaching practice, in order to bring the students’ vernacular literacies into formal learning and connect them with the school/dominant literacies of the curriculum (Alvermann et al., 1999; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Davies & Merchant, 2009; West-Puckett & Banks, 2014). Behind this teaching ideology lies the goal of creating “third spaces” in the classroom, in order to trace continuities between the dominant and the vernacular in the student’s life. These studies have focused on how to bring the vernacular into the dominant, but have not paid attention to how the dominant naturally shapes the vernacular, that is to say, how the dominant literacy practices internalized by students at school leave traces on the vernacular texts they produce beyond school. The data in this study show how students’ vernacular literacies in online sites are naturally interpenetrated by dominant literacies and “prestigious” ways of reading and writing. Herein, these data are used to problematize the assumption that school learning and online writing in social networks are disconnected, unbridgeable “languages.”

3. A Study of Students’ Dominant/ Vernacular Criss-Crossing

The vignette at the beginning of this chapter comes from a wider ethnographic study in which I investigated the adolescent lack of interest in reading, through the case-study of an urban secondary school clique in Barcelona (Aliagas, 2011). I particularly looked at how the resistant positioning towards reading of four of its male members had been socially and academically constructed during their adolescence. Over a 3-year period from 2007, I documented instances of this clique’s reading literacy practices over time (from 15

to 18 years old) and across social spaces (home, school, leisure, workplace, of-line and online peer-network; see Figure 7.2). Following a body of qualitative anthropological studies that have focused on the “in-and-out of school gap” (Gilmore & Martin, 1982; Heath, 1983; Mahiri, 2003; Cassany et al., 2008), I looked at the boys’ positionings towards reading, associated with different in-and-out of school literacy practices. I also examined how their literacy identities were “sedimented in artefacts of writing” (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005) that they produced within the context of their peer-relationships, both on paper (e.g. flirtatious letters, private writing, diaries) and on online sites (e.g. *Facebook* and blogs). Although my initial expectations were to analyse the discontinuities between the schooled discourse on literacy and the clique’s “vernacular literacy practices” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), my data were particularly indicating some interesting in-and-out of school continuities, which led me to create a body of data with instances of this intersection in the range of social contexts I studied.

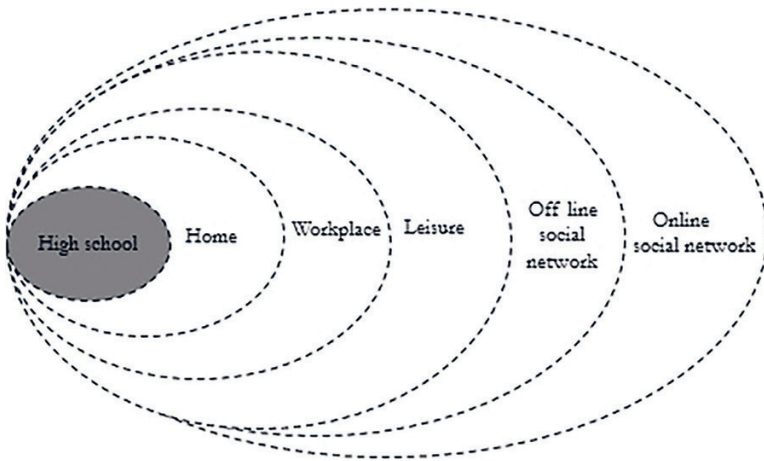


Figure 7.2. The social spaces of the school clique that were investigated

This chapter focuses on data gathered in the clique’s online contexts and examines the continuities between the informants’ school literacy practices and their online counterparts. Over three years I tracked the online communication of the clique in two digital spaces: their *Facebook* pages and blogs. They gave me access to these online contexts and they knew that I was tracking their online activity biweekly by storing screen-shots and taking field-notes. I focused the observation on the online writing where they made references to school learning, people, places or experiences. I combined this approach to the data based on the principles of participant observation (Spradley, 1980)

of the clique's interactions online with face-to-face conversations with the participants. I arranged interviews with the boys on a monthly basis, in different settings of their social life, sometimes individually, in pairs or in a group, resulting in a corpus of about 50 hours of interviews wherein they reflected on the role of literacy in their lives.

In the meetings where I interviewed the boys I used to bring some selected screen-shots and tried to prompt their narratives by asking questions such as: "What was happening here?" In other meetings, we sat at their bedroom desks and they showed me on the computer their recent *Facebook* posts and blogs (see Picture 7.1). They talked about what they usually did online and what they liked and disliked about that communicative practice, and a connection to school life or school learning sometimes emerged. In those particular cases, I would raise further questions on that point in order to unravel a narrative that might help me understand the school/online linkage. Whenever those narratives involved other members of the clique who were participants in the research, I also tried to triangulate the stories and interpretations with the others. Their spontaneous talk around the screen-shots became the cornerstone to understanding those online interactions in the frame of their life experiences and peer-relations.



Picture 7.1. Chatting about the clique's online literacy practices

When designing the methodological approach to be used for obtaining and interpreting data, I was inspired by Leander and McKim's (2003) con-

nective approach to ethnographical research into new literacy practices across spaces and times. The connective approach is based on what Hine (2000) broadly coined as “connective ethnography,” which involves an expansion of the classical place-based ethnography to encompass a “travelling” ethnographic practice that is more suitable for researching online interaction. The difference between classical ethnography and “connective ethnography” lies in the fact that the latter focuses on how things flow or circulate: how discursive material “travels” across spaces and how human beings give meaning to their experiences across online and offline spheres of practice. The connective approach is driven by the idea that online and offline practices are dynamically co-constructed, co-articulated and bounded in everyday life, and thus it seeks to blur the “virtual”/“real” binary by challenging the idea that the internet is a separate world, a representation widely spread in the media, in everyday practice and even in academic research.

4. Ways in Which Schooled Literacies “Infiltrate” the Students’ Online Writing

This chapter seeks to grasp what the relationship is between academic learning and the online writing of secondary students’ by addressing the following research questions:

- In what aspects do dominant/school literacies intersect with the students’ online writing?
- What are the general ways in which schooled learning can “infiltrate” online peer-communication?
- To what extent and how might online peer-writing support secondary school students’ processes of learning?

In order to analyse in more detail how the dominant literacy practices associated with the school’s sphere of practice intersected the teenagers’ online writing, I have selected 40 screen-shots from the wider body of online instances. I based my selection on two criteria:

- the boys’ confirmation that the selected online interaction included a genuine instance of intersection between school learning and online writing,
- the possibility of grasping the online conversation comprehensively, by tracing its history and contextual social meaning.

Four categories emerged from the corpus, where each category represents a general form by which schooled learning was “permeating” the online con-

versations of the clique. Herein, I will refer to these school/vernacular intersections as “marks of school,” meaning those layers of knowledge, skills and ways of doing associated with the school that can be traced in the vernacular literacies displayed by the youngsters. Marks of school in vernacular/online writing are analyzed within the framework of Third Space Theory (Moje et al., 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008). These general forms, whereby the school gained presence in the vernacular, were the following:

- Re-contextualizing words previously learnt at school
- Appropriating ideas personally
- Connecting writing to prestigious ways of writing/talking
- Exchanging practical/academic information

These marks of school are now discussed in further detail. Some illustrative instances are provided or integrated within the analysis.

4.1 Re-Contextualizing Words Previously Learned at School

The mark of school that was most frequent in the corpus was the location in an online conversation of concepts and terminology previously learnt in school activity. Occasionally, the students turned their attention to particular discipline-based words and used them within their communication online—in the interviews the boys reported doing the same within their face-to-face conversations. In this re-contextualization, words were infused with ironic or humoristic meanings, which sometimes reproduced and sometimes subverted the meaning that the word typically represented in the academic sphere.

On the one hand, an example of reproduction of the academic meaning of the word happened when one of the boys commented on a photograph uploaded in the blog where, according to him, his friends appeared with a non-attractive look. He criticized the picture for being “naff” (cutre) and argued that they could look sexier. As he realized he had spontaneously used a verbal periphrasis³ (“can manage to end up being”; original poder llegar a ser), he stated it in the next sentence (“big fat verbal periphrasis!”) and straight-away made it explicit in brackets in order to assure the reader’s understanding.

ohhhhhhh

couldn't you find a naffer photo????????

you don't even look sexy!!! (I mean, I've slept with you and I know you can manage to end up being sexy once in a while.)

by the way, big fat verbal periphrasis! (can manage to end up being)

On the other hand, the vignette that opened this chapter (see Introduction) is an example of subversion of the academic meaning associated with particular words. In that example, Rosalía, assuming her imagined role of Hermione, turned the Greek words she was studying into a “philosophical attack” made on Jaime’s *Facebook*. In that situation, those obscure Greek words were extracted from their philosophical meaning but their aesthetic was preserved in order to create the effect of witchcraft.

These amusing uses of school-based concepts also extended to pictures: for example, the moment when the boys discovered, in a documentary on marine fauna that they had watched in their Biology class, the existence of a species of fish called the “balloon fish,” which has the ability to inflate itself in situations where it feels threatened, thereby appearing bigger and more imposing. That afternoon, their blogs began to inflate with pictures of themselves blowing up their cheeks and twisting their eyes, pretending to be balloon fish.

4.2 Appropriating Ideas Personally

A second mark of school indicated instances where personal appropriations of the literacy of the school were occurring. This was particularly evident in relation to culturally prestigious genres such as poetry or literature, and it usually happened through music, since a large proportion of the boys’ *Facebook* postings dealt with songs. Music gained presence in their *Facebook* walls through the uploading of lyrics and other related items (e.g. clips, interviews, news). Sometimes, they even posted phrases of their favorite songs that would encourage *Facebook* friends to continue the song in the comment section. Since intertextuality is a fundamental condition of texts—as literary theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have argued—so it is also of music (Hatten, 1985). Consistently, some of the songs posted on the clique’s online sites embedded direct or indirect references to pre-existing poetry or, to a lesser extent, to other well-known literary works.

The intersection between music and poetry was especially salient in Arnau’s *Facebook*. Interestingly, he was the one who, in the interviews, maintained a more strongly resistant position to reading literature, by saying things such as “although I don’t read very much, I know that I’m smart” (Aliagas, 2009; Aliagas et al., 2009). In the following example, Arnau was at home listening to the song “Un tipo diferente” (*Someone different*) by Melendi, a popular singer-songwriter who combines classic rumba, pop and rock with a touch of flamenco. The song displays a creative reinterpretation of the classic poem “Retrato” (*Portrait*), by Antonio Machado, who was a key poet of the Spanish literary movement “Generation of 1898.” While Machado described himself

as a poet who deserved a place in the history of Spanish literature, Melendi describes himself as a mundane street poet, wandering around the city of Madrid. At the beginning of Melendi's song, the verse "voy cantando caminante no hay camino" (*I'm wandering along singing there is no path*) functions as a clue to pick up on the deeper intertextual references to Machado's work. That signal verse is an intertextuality to Machado's popular verse "caminante, no hay camino, sino estelas en la mar" (*wanderer, there is no road, only wakes upon the sea*) in his other poem "Camino" (*Path*). While listening to Melendi's song, Arnau posted a reformulation of it on his Facebook wall (see Figure 7.3): "voy kaminando, kaminante no hay kamino" (*I'm singing along, walking there is no path*).



Figure 7.3. Arnau's personal appropriation of a canonical verse of Machado

In an interview, Arnau reported that he connected personally with that verse because he was feeling that nothing in his life was yet decided. He felt himself to be "just walking" in an unknown direction:

I wrote this because at that moment I was feeling exactly like this: "walker there is no path." We're always walking to get somewhere and there're particular moments in life when

the most important thing is the path you're walking on. For instance, I believe that I won't know exactly what to be until I'm . . . mmm . . . let's say twenty . . . five, so "walker there is no path" [because] I'm walking but I don't know where I'm walking to. I'm just . . . walking.

(Arnau, 18-years-old)

Arnau's narrative shows how he was "lending meaning" from within his own history to a verse from a canonical poem which has traditionally been a cornerstone of the study of Spanish literature. Although Arnau was not particularly conscious of the connection between Melendi's song and Machado's poem, that verse helped him to define his musings and share them with his *Facebook* community. That verse, which has historically accumulated many intertextual references, was being placed once again in a new, and potentially infinite, network of other texts.

4.3 Connecting Writing to Prestigious Ways of Writing/Talking

Other marks of school indexed connections between the teenagers' online writing and ways of writing or talking categorized within Education as prestigious, and which are usually linked to particular literary genres, such as poetry, literature or philosophy. In particular circumstances that the boys perceived as important (e.g. a statement of love, holiday goodbyes, special gratitude) and specifically in delicate matters (e.g. making up after an argument, jealousy), they tended to hand-write on paper and in a more formal register and conventional language. This brings their vernacular texts somewhat closer to canonical genres, while still being written in their own way, form, conventions and language. To a certain extent, they believed that conventional language can better guarantee self-expression and communication with others, as it is more fixed, socially shared and thus less ambiguous. This shift in their vernacular writing brings to the surface a particular creatively hybrid process of appropriation of the rhetorical devices associated with dominant literacies.

The emulation of known discursive styles, such as a literary one, was especially frequent in online dedicatory texts. In the following example (see Figure 7.4), Ferran posted on his blog a dedicatory note for his girlfriend, which showed marks of having been written with care. Ferran took trouble over:

- *the visual form*, by imposing double-line spacing,
- *the language*, by using idiosyncratic spelling and depicting metaphorical, naïve scenes of the couple, as when he envisioned themselves as a "married couple of gnomes with a gigantic mushroom-house" (*matri-*

- *monio de gnomos con una casa seta gigante*),
- *the structure*, by tracing the trajectory of the relationship, articulating images of the past, the present and the future,
- *the audience*, by combining an omniscient voice with another in which he directly addresses the girlfriend.

He controlled these aspects because he wanted the dedication “to sound beautiful.”



Figure 7.4. Ferran's dedicatory note to his girlfriend, posted in his blog. Translation: When i met this girl a few short years ago i'd never have thought that we'd have so much in common, that i'd get to no her so well or that i'd luv her like i do ♥ . . . but that's what happened:) and since then tons of stuff has gone down, good and bad too, but i just remember the good stuff, like the kisses ☺, the cuddles, the chats, the movies, the fotos, the travels, the meals, the laughs, the nites, the massages, the walks . . . i luv you so much Mo, and always have. i should've written

*this shit ages ago . . . but let's face it—I'm a wanker LOL. D'you come out too bad here M.? ROFL. I luv this pic on the beach . . . I want U 2 no that the whole time i've been with u really rocks, and i've still got shed loads of good stuff to give u . . . M. go and be a world famous biologist who discovers the cure for AIDS, and i'll be a hot shot sound engineer dude, u remember?? LMAO. Or if you'd rather we'll be a couple of married gnomes with a gynormus mushroom house XD! (you no it girl) whatever—long as its with you!!! a massive *muah* my luv. hope you like it . . . ('}{')*

4.4 Exchanging Practical/Academic Information

In two similar studies on students' education-related use of *Facebook* in higher education (Selwyn, 2009; Stirling, 2014), instances were found where students exchanged information about academic requirements of their courses and reflected critically on the goals of the assessment tasks. Herein, academic exchanges were also found, but these were not as elaborated. The exchanges tracked on the clique's online sites were limited to exchanges of logistic and basic information on assignments (e.g. scheduling homework or exams, titles of books) and usually arose in relation to particular students who, for some reason, had missed the class. In the interviews in the current study, the boys refer to more intellectual exchanges happening on the *Facebook* chat, which I could not document, where they presumably helped each other in studying. Therefore, it seems that students at both secondary and university levels see online social networks as appropriate channels for the flow of academic information, the difference between them lying merely in the profundity of the exchanges.

Occasionally, the boys' online writing reflected that they were studying at home. Academic tasks, such as an assignment, were usually reported as a justification for having to terminate the writing of a post, as in a post where Manuel stated “os dejo ke toi aciendo el puto treball de recerca!” (*I'm off cos I'm doing the fucking research assignment*). In this particular instance, the phrase is written in Spanish but includes the Catalan schooled expression “treball de recerca” (*research assignment*—which in Spanish would be *trabajo de investigación*). This is another kind of infiltration based on what linguists refer to as “codeswitching,” the communicational phenomena where speakers mix language varieties in the same conversation. Manuel used the vehicular language of instruction (Catalan) where he might otherwise avoid it, giving the effect of poking fun at the institution and his “duty” to study. Actually, in many examples where they were reflecting that they were studying at home, the implicit norm was to show tedium over being obliged to study, as when

Jaime wrote the word “ESTUDIAR” (*STUDY*) twenty times on his *Facebook* wall. Thus, comments on academic tasks usually involved adopting a resistant positioning towards the ideal of “good student.”

Alongside these academically oriented comments, online sites were also used by teenagers for sharing photographs and commenting on ongoing school-based activities, such as trips or cultural events taking place at the school (e.g. Christmas, Carnival). Some of these comments focused on amusing anecdotes about something that had happened at school. An example is when Manuel posted in his blog a picture of two of them dressed up as Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf in the previous year's Carnival, thereby opening the floor to a discussion of new ideas about the costumes for that year's Carnival. Especially in the blogs, school-based pictures were used as artefacts to brush with the past, remember childhood, anecdotes or teachers from previous years with nostalgia. These comments on social life around school were the focus of their positive reflections on schooling.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined how teenagers' online writing is interpenetrated by formal practices that come from school. Based on a corpus of 40 instances, gathered in ethnographic fieldwork on a clique, I have shown to what extent secondary students spontaneously create channels for integration of school literacy discourses, practices and values into their online writing. In order to focus on these synergies, I have analyzed instances of school/online intersection within the framework of Third Space Theory (Moje et al., 2004; Gutiérrez, 2008). The categories emerging from the analysis indicated some of the general ways in which teenagers' academic learning “infiltrates” their online writing. These include a) re-contextualizing academic words, b) appropriating ideas personally, c) connecting their writing to prestigious ways of writing/talking and d) exchanging practical/academic information. These marks of school are usually triggered by situations and sensations such as humor or melancholy, and constitute “third spaces” where dominant/schooled literacies and discourses are reproduced, resisted, subverted and even transformed.

Ethnographies of youth literacy practices have shown that teenagers import their literacies into school with or without the permission of their teachers (O'Brien 1998; Maybin 2007), and that they develop an “infra-literate life” to maintain the literacies they value (Finders, 1997; Aliagas, 2011). These works have informed pedagogy by pointing out the importance that linking the dominant with the vernacular has for students' classroom learning (Alver-

mann et al., 1999; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Davies & Merchant, 2009). Moreover, a few studies have also examined to what extent online social networks, such as *Facebook*, contribute to shaping learning and increasing engagement with schooling (Selwyn, 2009; Stirling, 2014). Data analyzed in this chapter extend this line of research by showing how teenagers also “play” on the internet with some of the things that they learn at school, and how these “games with words” actually support young people’s learning at school.

The observation that schooled literacy “infiltrates” or “permeates” teenagers’ online writing within their social networks leads to the understanding that online peer-communication somehow supports secondary school students’ processes of learning at school. This is clearly a disruptive insight, inasmuch as it challenges the social and academic bias that views the internet as a world apart that promotes “bad” uses of the language and that distracts teenagers from their responsibilities as students. During the fieldwork, I was able to interview the boys’ mothers and some of their teachers, who talked about the internet as something incompatible with their school lives. However, if we think more deeply about the typical teenager’s life and culture, it makes more sense to see the internet and social networks as forming a continuum with their academic lives.

The hours spent at school, and all that goes on there, form a large part of the life of a teenager. At secondary school, students develop strong relationships with their classmates and these include shared experiences, shared anecdotes, shared goals, shared tasks, shared language and shared frustrations or thrills. Together they build, negotiate, resist and share the identity of being a High School Student as well as the endeavor such a position implies. Social networks—*Facebook*, blogs and suchlike—afford a means for students to keep in touch easily outside school and thereby maintain their shared world and mutual understanding, which involves both socializing and learning. This communal sense of the school reality grounds their communication and allows certain processes of identification with “stuff” associated with school to take place in the affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) they create across both on- and offline spheres of practice. Through these processes of identification, they share and explore the knowledge and language that comes from the school, and they do so along their own “safe” avenues that include music, photos, amusement, hilarious “games with words” or complex uses of the language such as the codeswitching phenomenon or the switch to the formal register.

It should not be surprising, then, that secondary school students “talk” about their school life and school tasks in oral conversations after class and beyond school, as well as by phone, on their online social networks (e.g. *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Myspace*) or through chat services that they have downloaded on their smartphones, such as WhatsApp instant messaging.

This is because, as others have argued (e.g. Hine, 2000; Leander & McKim, 2003; Stirling, 2014), online technologies extend rather than replace offline relationships and there is no reason to think that students cannot equally extend school learning into their peer-online writing.

In this regard, I have suggested that online social networks constitute interesting “liminal places” in-between dominant and vernacular literacies where trans-spacial aspects of school learning can be studied. Teenagers' online writing is a vernacular literacy practice, in which some of the linguistic, discursive and genre literacy skills learnt at school converge and blend with “freer” self-expression. This fusion generates what I see as “spontaneous third-spaces” between established literacy and the literacy of the teenager's own voice. In vernacular/online literacy practices, teenagers sometimes imitate the style of those canonical discourses that they have partly picked up in secondary education, such as poetry, literature or philosophical essay writing. These instances testify to the idea that young people have their own “comfortable” ways to explore, use and play with rhetorical devices and school-based learning in order to express their feelings and musings, and thus we find academic, literary and even poetical “marks” in their vernacular/online writing.

Notes

1. Vignettes are short narrations consisting of descriptive sketches, moments or scenes. According to Hull and Schultz (2001), these are used in ethnographic works to highlight representations of real people and their activities by hinting at their richness. Herein, italics represent the literary voice while roman script represents my voice as a researcher.
2. Quotations of real *Facebook* postings have been translated from Catalan/Spanish into English. When possible, the translation seeks to represent the styles of spelling, grammar and punctuation of the original postings.
3. A verbal periphrasis is a verbal construction where two verbs are used, one in a personal form and the other one in an impersonal form, but they syntactically function as a single one. The most common verbal periphrasis in Spanish grammar is created with a verb accompanied by an infinitive (e.g. *poder ser*, approximated translation “to be able to end up being something”). In the commented example, the periphrasis is created coordinating one verb in a personal form (*podéis*; “you can”) and two infinitive verbs (*llegar a ser*, approximated translation “manage to end up being”).

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