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The Role of Online Reading and Writing in the Literacy Practices of First-Year Writing Students

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**THE ROLE OF ONLINE READING AND WRITING IN THE LITERACY PRACTICES
OF FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE STUDENTS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

Casey Burton Soto

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts, Amherst in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2015

English

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF ONLINE READING AND WRITING IN THE LITERACY

PRACTICES OF FIRST-YEAR WRITING STUDENTS

FEBRUARY 2015

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This dissertation examines the online reading and writing practices of four first-year college students. Through case studies of these four focal participants, I explore the various roles online reading and writing played in their lives during their first year of college. My work draws on participants' own descriptions of and reflections on their Internet use for academic as well as social and recreational purposes in order to examine what motivated the ways they used the Internet to read and write and the connections they both saw and did not see among their uses of the Internet for various purposes.

The results are based on surveys, logs of Internet use, and interviews conducted at three points during the academic year. These data lead to three major findings. First, in contrast to images of young people as active creators of web content, participants were much more likely to consume than produce content online. Second, they were often aware of the other individuals reading or writing within the sites they visited online but much less aware of the groups and

individuals producing and maintaining the sites themselves, and those levels of awareness were linked to participants' motives for visiting such sites. Finally, the findings suggest that while participants themselves saw relatively few connections between their reading and writing online for academic and non-academic purposes, those connections do exist, particularly in the participants' emerging abilities to critically analyze the texts they read in their non-academic lives.

These findings also suggest that first-year writing instructors can help students examine and broaden their online reading and writing practices for academic and non-academic purposes in light of a range of options available for both. I argue such analysis can enhance first-year writing students' understandings of the potential the Internet holds for the creation and consumption of meaningful and effective online texts.

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CHAPTER 1

READING AND WRITING ONLINE: INVITING STUDENTS INTO THE DISCUSSION

In 2010, research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that 98% of undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities and 94% of community college students were Internet users (Smith, Rainie, and Zickuhr). A 2012 study, also from Pew, found that 95% of American teens access the Internet as well (“Teens Fact Sheet”).

As teachers, we may see our students surreptitiously updating Facebook pages, checking Twitter, or surfing the Internet on smart phones and tablets in class. We may overhear discussions of online content, or they may mention something they read or watched online in a classroom discussion. As academics and instructors we have rich and varied online reading and writing habits of our own and know our students do, too. How much we really know about the online reading and writing practices of our students, however, is unclear.

Within the field of composition, we have certainly examined the online writing practices of traditional college age students. Some have analyzed their personal homepages (Alexander), while others have explored the implications of gender in online spaces (Hawisher and Sullivan) as well as the web as a space for radical social action (Comstock, Rhodes). Researchers have also considered the roles and effects of various technologies in the composition classroom, including online discussion forums (Selfe, Romano), weblogs (Lindgren), social networking sites (Vie, Williams), and even gaming (Colby and Colby). Much of this research,

however, has privileged the technology or the online product rather than the students' perceptions of the reading and writing they do in these spaces. While some studies (Buck, Kirtley, Rueker, Lundsford, et. al) have looked specifically at what students, particularly first-year college students, have to say about their general online reading and writing practices—both inside and outside of their college writing classes—the number of such studies is less pronounced.

Through this dissertation, I work to create a more student-generated image of the various roles online reading and writing play in the lives of first-year college students. I take a case study approach, interviewing and examining the online reading and writing practices of four first-year college students in order to answer the following questions: How do first-year college students use the Internet to read and write for both social/recreational and academic purposes? What motivates the ways students use the Internet to read and write? And what connections, if any, do they see between their Internet use for various purposes? By inquiring into the online reading and writing practices of these four students, I work to provide insights into the nature and purposes of the online sites where students both read and compose content, students' motives for visiting those sites, and the various roles they take on as readers and writers of online content.

I believe this research will help create for teachers a more student-generated understanding of the students we may encounter in our first-year composition classes. This enhanced understanding will better equip teachers to draw on students' experiences and prior knowledge as we teach them to create various kinds of on and offline texts. The aim of this study is not to identify the technologies

students are most familiar with or most enjoy so those technologies can be used for teaching purposes. Not all popular technology can or should fit easily into a writing classroom, and incorporating current, popular technology into curriculum requires careful and critical thought and analysis. Providing a closer look at these four first-year writing students and what motivates their online reading and writing experience may, however, assist instructors of first-year writing as they attempt to incorporate the Internet into their classes in ways students themselves will find relevant and effective.

The Impetus for this Study

My own interest in the online literacy practices of first-year writing students began early in my work as a graduate student. As more and more of my graduate courses included scholarship on writing in the emerging landscape of the Internet, I found myself drawn specifically to scholarship exploring novel (and often overtly political) uses of the Internet to produce and disseminate texts. I was drawn, first and foremost, to Michelle Comstock's examination of grrl zines (or e-zines— independently produced online magazines). Comstock defines the grrl zine movement as a “critical response to the male-dominated punk zine scenes of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s” and argues that Grrl zines online have “constructed a space for young women to act as writers, designers, artists, and Web designers” (385). In the Web spaces they construct, the writers for grrl zines fashion “an alternative collective identity for young women writers” rooted in a version of feminism built on “individuality” and “difference” (386).

In addition to Comstock, I was particularly interested in scholars who highlighted ways writers, especially those around the age of the college students I was teaching, might use the Internet to present their interests and identities or distribute texts in ways they might not have been able to without the Internet. LeCourt and Barnes as well as Sullivan, for example, examine the capabilities of hypertext specifically by discussing its non-linear nature as a form of feminist textuality that allows writers to express various subject positions in one linked text. In what I saw as a similar vein, Hawisher and Sullivan showcased the Web sites of various women whose individual webpages were both constrained by and offered resistance to norms of professional representations of self in different ways and to different degrees.

My interest in the possibilities online spaces offered my students as writers was further influenced by an elective course in digital storytelling offered through the University of Massachusetts Writing program which I co-taught in the Spring of 2005. In that course, I met a small group of students with an intense interest in writing online and experience and knowledge of online fanfiction communities. In fanfiction, I saw yet another exciting way young adults were writing online. Scholarship on fanfiction is abundant—particularly in the field of cultural studies. Jenkins, for example, looks at the online fan culture that surrounds science fiction movies and serial dramas. He draws on de Certeau's concept of "textual 'poaching'" to characterize fan culture as a place where fans "appropriate popular texts and reread them" in ways that serve the fans' own interests and demonstrate their consumption of the original popular text as "participatory" rather than passive

(*Textual Poachers* 23). Often that participation also includes creating new texts of their own in forms such as fanfiction and fanvids (Bury; Lange and Ito; Jenkins).

In all of these examples of writing online, I saw the Internet as a space that offered new ways to disseminate texts to a wider audience, an audience to whom I felt most writers would probably not have otherwise had access, an idea Alexander confirms in his discussion of individuals and organizations using the Internet for social action. For example, one recent college graduate Alexander discusses in his book *Digital Youth* used the Internet to start “a Web-based activist effort” to provide news stories the young man and his team felt the main stream media weren’t covering.

In the case of the distribution of underground e-zines through the Internet, social action in online spaces also led to the formation of community among site users. As writers at e-zines reached wider audiences, they also had the opportunity to form social connections unavailable to them otherwise. Alexander highlights such a sense of belonging as well as political action created by e-zines like *Other* which welcomes potential readers with the following: “Are you bringing contraband thoughts and experiences into our society? [...] then you need *Other* magazine and we need you!” (173). Editors and contributors to e-zines like *Other* often, for example, use “we” and “our” to set themselves apart from what they see as mainstream culture and media. Indeed many Internet users (including two of the focal participants in this study) were and are drawn to the web for the communities they can join or start there, communities reflected in *Other’s* invitation to new readers and writers or the “collective identity” of the grrl zine movement and other

communities formed online around popular and counter culture (Barnes, Bury, Smith).

As I read and wrote about the new possibilities opening up for online reading and writing, I also asked group after group of my own first-year writing students if they were writing texts for public consumption outside of our classroom. Beyond MySpace and Facebook accounts, however, they weren't. It became more and more clear to me that the kinds of reading and writing I was so excited about weren't happening among the majority of my first-year writing students. What, then, I (finally) began to wonder, *were* these students doing online? Theorists such as Sullivan, Comstock, Alexander, and Jenkins certainly offer important directions for the field of composition to expand its view of the reasons and ways first-year college students might read and write online. However, reading and writing for political action, to create communities based on, for example, countercultural interests, or to explore or redirect popular culture texts are uses that often happen separately from academia as well as mainstream culture. As a teacher interested in what Finders terms the literate underlife of my students—their literacy practices outside and against the grain of academic literacies—I was drawn to the kinds of stand-out texts that Comstock, Alexander, Jenkins and others have pointed to from my first encounters with those texts in the scholarship I was reading. But that was the problem—I was seeing such texts *in the scholarship*. From time to time, as was the case in my digital storytelling course, I've encountered students in my classrooms producing text with the specific intention of reinterpreting popular culture or writing to redefine gender or racial stereotypes. But when I've started discussions

with my students individually or as whole classes, I've found that more often than not they don't keep blogs, they don't have personal websites, and they aren't creating lengthy works of fanfiction or producing e-zines.

Certainly, my students have rich and active online lives. The PEW Internet and American Life Projects as well as a search for any of their names within Facebook or Twitter quickly prove as much. Scholars including Williams and Vie have, in fact, looked specifically at the ways in which young people use social networking profiles in general (Vie) and elements of popular culture specifically to create self-representations at those sites (Williams). Where, however, were the politically powerful, lengthy texts disrupting social norms, creating new communities, and rewriting popular culture that I'd hoped to find?

As I looked for the sorts of texts I thought, even wanted, my students to be writing and came up empty handed, I began to wonder what sort of reading and writing I was missing. The kinds of texts highlighted in much of the scholarship surrounding reading and writing online, it seemed, were actually quite atypical among my students. Alexander himself admits that many of the young people and texts he describes in *Digital Youth* "may be the exception" (385), and they are powerful, important exceptions. By examining the kinds of texts and individuals that stand as exceptions, rather than looking to the young people writing less politically, socially, or culturally disruptive texts—the young people who, it has seemed to me, make up the majority of our classroom populations—what do we miss in terms of the ways they read and write online as well as their motivations for and understandings of those online practices?

The Usefulness of Digital Literacy Narratives

The sorts of online literacy experiences I would have been more likely to find among my students may be better reflected in more recent works focusing on digital literacy narratives that look more explicitly toward individual students and their own retellings of their online reading and writing histories. The most prominent of these works is Selfe and Hawisher's book *Literate Lives in the Information Age*. In their study, Selfe and Hawisher collect the technological literacy narratives of several individuals from their earliest exposure to computers to their current personal and professional uses. They define technological literacies as "the practices involved in reading, writing, and exchanging information in online environments, as well as the values associated with such practices—cultural, social, political and educational" (2). Despite the clear importance of technological literacy in today's workforce and today's world, Selfe and Hawisher argue that educators know little about how individuals attain such literacy. Despite this lack of knowledge, however, the education establishment has continued to make policies, create curriculum, and set standards around the teaching and learning of technological literacy (2-3). To best prepare our students to work and live in a time when technological literacy is so important, educators must not only have access to current technology to incorporate into their classrooms, they must also become more informed about the nature of their students' technological literacies (209).

The 2012 special issue of *Computers and Composition*, "New Literacy Narratives: Stories about Reading and Writing in a Digital Age," also highlights literacy narratives as a way to gain insight into reading and writing practices in an

age when such practices are heavily mediated by technology, the Internet included. Working partly from her own assessment that “an important perspective, that of the students, was largely absent from the academic discussions of writing and technology,” Kirtley, (a contributor to the “New Literacy Narratives” issue) developed a digital literacy narrative assignment for her first-year writing students (192). Kirtley argues that the student digital literacy narrative “provides useful data for researchers in the field, incorporating student voices into discussions of writing and technology and offers important information for teachers of writing, rendering an additional perspective on our students’ writing practices with new technologies in and beyond classroom walls” (192). This student perspective on reading and writing practices is similar to the perspective I focus on in my study. Unlike Kirtley, however, I draw not from a formal classroom assignment but from data I have collected in the form of surveys, interviews, and logs of Internet use.

Research into literacy histories and narratives often emphasizes the importance of social, cultural, and political forces that influence and often inhibit an individual’s literacy development (Chandler and Scentors-Zapato; Selfe and Hawisher; Kirtley; Rueker; M. Young). In *Literate Lives in the Information Age*, for example, Selfe and Hawisher trace lifelong technological literacy practices of individuals of a variety of ages who are at various points educationally and professionally in their lives. As they share the literacy histories of their participants, their experiences are set firmly in the political, technological, and economic contexts in which the experiences occurred. This “cultural ecology,” they argue, is significant because such forces often significantly influence the access individuals have had to

technology and, thus, their opportunity to develop technological literacy (58). My own study will take a narrower approach to technological literacy and online reading and writing practices by providing a much more condensed snapshot of only first-year college students in a relatively narrow time and setting. I feel my participants' technological literacy histories are important, and the influences of those histories, particularly family histories, are woven to some extent into the descriptions I give of each of my participants and their histories with technology and the Internet. I also explore some of the historic and cultural factors shaping their experiences as Internet users in my discussion of scholars such as Tapscott, Jenkins, and Ito et. al. Because my primary intention is to understand the online reading and writing practices of my participants during their first year of college rather than to gain further insight into the social and cultural influences that lead to those practices, my focus will be on their current uses of the Internet—for both personal and academic purposes.

Why First-Year College Students

Traditional first-year college students, students whom I define as moving directly from high school into their first year of college, provide a valuable focus for this study on several counts. Most significantly, many of these students will have had access to the Internet from relatively early in their lives. The participants in this study all first used the Internet in elementary school. Born in 1991 and 1992, participants belong to the latter half of what Tapscott terms the Net Generation, a generation of individuals born between 1977 and 1997 who will grow up having always known the Internet (or, at the very least, the technology that would become

the Internet). Within a few short years, exposure to the Internet in elementary school will seem late to many of the students who enter our first-year writing classes. My own preschooler, for example, effortlessly uses a smart phone and iPad, video-chats regularly with his grandparents, and independently navigates our online video streaming account. Even a limited history of exposure to the myriad ways to access the Internet demands that, as teachers, we ourselves have some sense of what role the Internet has played in literacy as it developed for our own students.

Further, popular culture and imagination often position college as a time of greater freedom for students. Greater independence was especially the case for two of the focal participants in this study who were living on their own for the first time. Over the course of that academic year, there was less of the kind of parent and family control young people reported experiencing, for example, in Horst's study on teens, family, and Internet use and Pascoe's study on teens and romantic relationships, both of which appeared in the book *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out*. Additionally, the computers high school students use to access the Internet and even the wireless they use to access the Internet on personal devices while at school is often subject to school district or building-controlled filters, something experienced by students at the high school participants in this study attended as well as by participants in other studies (Ruecker; Horst, Herr-Stephenson and Robinson). Smart phones and 3 and 4G access to the Internet allow young people to bypass some of the restrictions placed on their Internet use by authorities in their home and academic lives. Nevertheless, with the greater amount

of freedom allotted to them in the time students spend on campus, the first year of college is a time of increased independence in many aspects of students' lives, Internet use included. College is a more academically independent time, as well. Because students spend much less time in the classroom than they did in high school, much more of their learning will occur independently, and much of that learning (whether through course management systems, required or independent research, or collaboration with other students) will involve the Internet.

Participant Motivations

In this new and different atmosphere of Internet use, students will surely have much to say about their online literacy practices. By drawing upon student accounts of their own online reading and writing practices, I hope, as stated earlier, to create a more student-generated understanding of the individuals who may enter our writing classrooms. As teachers, I believe we will benefit most by attending closely to what our students have to say about their online reading and writing. In her study of the non-school-sanctioned literacy practices of junior high school girls, Finders demonstrates the value for educators in observing and trying to understand such practices. Finders observed that teachers sometimes made incorrect assumptions about students, their non-school and school literacy practices, the purposes those practices held for the girls, and the subject positions the girls felt various texts (texts they read and wrote both in and out of school) offered them. Through observing their literacy practices and discussing them with the girls themselves, Finders was able to see purposes and attitudes about reading and writing practices their teachers had not seen.

Understanding both school and non-school literacy practices and how students interpret, perceive, and value those practices is equally relevant in the first-year writing classroom. Further, as teachers of writing, it isn't enough to understand what our students are doing online beyond our view. We need to understand their motivations and purposes as well—not what we think those motivations are, but the motivations students profess. When we focus too much on the texts they produce or the spaces in which they produce them, we take away from the agency of our students by articulating for them the purposes behind their uses rather than allowing them to articulate those purposes for themselves. This is not to negate our role as teachers in helping our students to critically interrogate the texts they read and write online, but we must first value their understandings of those texts. If we don't invite student voices more clearly into a discussion of their online reading and writing practices, we may make false assumptions about their online experiences and abilities and attempt to incorporate them into our first-year writing classes in ways students find irrelevant or simply incorrect.

Changing Literacy/Critical Digital Literacy

In the book *Hanging out, Messing Around and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media*, Mizuko Ito and a collective of several other researchers provide an expansive examination of the ways and reasons youth engage with new media. Ito and her research team offer compelling reasons to understand the digital literacy practices of young people outside the purview of their academic lives. The authors align themselves with a

growing body of work in sociocultural learning theory that looks to out-of-school settings for models of learning and engagement that

differ from what is found in the classrooms...[their] approach also reflects an emerging consensus that the most engaged and active forms of learning with digital media happen in youth-driven settings that are focused on social communication and recreation. (12)

They further argue that research into the social practices of youth provides important insight for understanding emerging digital literacy practices and norms. They state that “youth are taking the lead in developing social norms and literacies that are likely to persist as structures of media participation and practice that transcend age boundaries”(12). As technology continues to evolve, our students—lifelong users of that technology—will play a part in shaping the literacy practices linked to that technology. By better understanding the online literacy practices of young people reading and writing in online spaces we learn about the kinds of practices that are likely, to some extent or another, to become common literacy practices for a broader range of people in the future. As teachers of writing, we must do as much as we can to understand reading and writing as it is currently developing. To genuinely reach these understandings, and to shape our classrooms in the ways that are most useful and relevant to our students, their voices must be included in designing the learning experiences they encounter in our classrooms.

While valuing student perspectives on their own literacy practices is at the forefront of my project, as teachers of writing we also have the opportunity and even the responsibility to help students approach their reading and writing practices with a more critical eye. Hawisher and Selfe, Selber, and the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center Collective among others all point to the changing nature of reading and writing that increasingly takes place in online environments and, as a result, the changing nature of what it means to teach writing.

Selber calls on teachers to help students “develop a metadiscourse for political critique” (133) as part of their overall computer literacy. Such a metadiscourse helps students attend to the “dominant discourses at play” when writing and reading in computer mediated environments (133). The WIDE Collective defines digital writing as “writing produced on the computer and distributed via the Internet and World Wide Web.” In a vein similar to Selber, the WIDE Collective calls for pedagogy for teaching digital writing that is “[l]inked to a thoughtful, critical consciousness of technology.” They elaborate, stating, “Like many others we are concerned that the depth and intensity of the media that washes over us is writing us more than we are writing it.”

As we learn about the online reading and writing our students do—both academically and for social and recreational purposes—we can engage our students in discussions of the various roles as readers and writers they see the Internet making available to them. While many, even most, of our students are not engaging in online writing they see as part of counter-culture social or political movements or appropriating and repurposing pop cultural texts, they do, however, read such texts online or, at the very least, see and experience the technology that makes such texts possible. By asking students to critically examine who is writing and for what purposes at the sites they visit online, by asking them to interrogate the power structures and discourses that shape writing online or that online writing is pushing up against, they will be less likely to let such media “wash over them” and more likely to engage with that media in conscious, intentional ways, asking themselves

what they see online writing accomplishing and what part they can and do play in the production and consumption of texts in online spaces.

Dissertation Outline

In the chapters that follow, I describe and analyze the ways four first-year college students used the Internet to read and write for various purposes. Throughout this dissertation, I focus on their voices and perspectives. In doing so, I have attempted to portray the information they gave me as accurately as possible and to analyze that information in ways that hold true to what the participants have told me.

Chapter 2 describes my process of data collection and analysis, a process rooted in Dyson and Genishi's approach to case-study-based research. The chapter details participant selection, the ways in which I collected interviews, and my approaches to data analysis. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the participants and their Internet use.

In Chapter 5, I analyze the similarities and differences that emerged among the various ways each participant used the Internet to read and write. The final chapter links those patterns of similarity and difference to broader issues of teaching and learning in the field of composition studies.

CHAPTER 2

PRIORITIZING THE VOICES OF PARTICIPANTS: PROJECT DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

In this dissertation project I use a case study approach to examine the online reading and writing practices of four first-year college students. From the outset, my foremost goals for the project were to learn more about the ways first-year writing students use the Internet to read and write for social, recreational, and academic purposes, to learn what motivates them to use the Internet to read and write, and to determine what connections they may see between their Internet uses for various purposes. Like Finders in her study of adolescent literacy practices, I wanted to prioritize the voices and perspectives of my focal participants (2). Case study, in its focus on building “detail-rich” descriptions that can be “carefully...situated within broader assertions about teaching and learning” (Dyson and Genishi 131) allowed me to consider the perspectives of four first-year writing students in a way that might provide useful information to other first-year writing instructors as they consider the reading and writing their own students do online. Through surveys, interviews and logs of Internet use, I document and analyze the online reading and writing the four focal participants engaged in for social and recreational purposes as well as academic purposes during their first year at college.

Project Design

Research Site

The pool from which I drew my participants was made up of 2009 graduates of one high school in a growing city in the Southwestern United States. All participants were my former students in 12th grade English classes, and all expressed an interest in staying in touch with me as they moved into their college careers. Ease of contacting and identifying these potential participants was certainly one reason I chose to focus on a group of my former students as participants. However, I also felt a genuine sense of interest in where these students' academic lives would take them after they left my classroom. I also felt that by purposely choosing graduates of the same high school I stood a greater chance of basing my research on participants who entered their college careers with similar high school curricular experiences, similar access to computers during their in-school time, and similar exposure to their school district's overall philosophies and expectations related to using the Internet for academic purposes.

The Community

The school district from which participating students graduated is relatively new, formed in 1993. The high school itself was built, in part, with the help of a substantial grant from a prominent computer hardware company that had recently established a large factory in the community. The company provided this grant to the school district in exchange for \$8 billion in industrial grants from the city. The high school opened its doors in 1997 and, the same year, was recognized by *Time* magazine as "an innovative school ready to try bold new ideas" (qtd. from school

website). The school was also named the state's 2002 Science High School of the Year. During the 2008-2009 school year, the high school boasted a student/computer ratio of 3 to 1.

While the district and the high school may, in many ways, seem idyllic, a closer look reveals the same kinds of complications currently faced by many school districts across the country. At the time the students involved in this study graduated, twelve years after the high school's opening and fourteen years after the formation of the district, the district had more than doubled in enrollment, while the high school remained the only traditional school in the city for grades 10-12. The district also had an alternative high school with a vocational focus as well as a cyber high school for which a large portion of classes were conducted online. However, both alternative schools enrolled only a few hundred students in total, while the high school had an enrollment of over 3000 students in grades 10-12. Classrooms were overcrowded and the school itself was well beyond its intended capacity. The impressive student/computer ratio included staff computers (often desktop models located in separate office spaces) which teachers were required to use each period for attendance-taking purposes and daily for grade information and communication with the school's administrators, making many of the computers frequently inaccessible to students. Finally, the school itself had not met the federally mandated Annual Yearly Progress requirements for two consecutive years and was, therefore, a school designated as "needing improvement."

Financial problems also plague the district. At the time participants graduated, nearly 30% of all students at the high school were enrolled in the free

and reduced lunch program, and that percentage was higher at the district's "Mid-High" (the feeder school for the high school which housed all of the district's 8th and 9th graders). In addition, a \$4 million budget shortfall had required significant budget cuts across the curriculum.

Because the participants in the study graduated from one of the largest high schools in the state, and because the college attendance rate for students from this particular district is relatively high, participants in this study represent a typical subpopulation of the state and local colleges and universities in the area. This subpopulation is further interesting because of the technological nature of industry in their home city—a focus that sometimes obscures the difficulties faced by the district itself. Students may be from a technologically savvy city, but their school district is also experiencing many of the same difficulties in the form of overcrowding, budget restrictions, overburdened teachers, and shortages of school computers faced by high schools throughout the state in which the district is located.

The Participants

In July and August of 2009, I contacted approximately 40 individuals who had been students in my 12th grade English classes during the school year that had ended two months earlier, inviting them to participate in the research project I would be conducting during the upcoming year. These students had all expressed an interest in staying in contact with me and were also aware that I would be sending them information about my upcoming research project. All of my students were aware that I was pursuing a PhD. Further, my interest in the ways young

people used the Internet had come up organically in the context of class discussions throughout the school year, so students were somewhat aware of the topic I would be pursuing (though no discussions of the actual project took place before July 2009). I also informed students ahead of time that participation in any project I might conduct was on a completely volunteer basis. I sent an initial e-mail (Appendix A) to 26 students introducing the project and the attached informed consent (Appendix B), reiterating that participation was voluntary (and that simply contacting me for more information did NOT mean that were committing to the project), and inviting them to contact me for a face-to-face meeting during the following week or a phone meeting during or after that time. I also sent a Facebook message via the site's private message function to students who had sent me friend requests in the two months since the end of the school year explaining my project and inviting them to contact me if they were interested. Then I waited.

After obtaining the necessary informed consent from potential participants, the first step of my research was an e-mailed survey asking students about their typical literacy practices as online readers and writers as well as their own perceptions of the kinds of reading and writing they did online (Appendix C). At the outset of my research, I had planned to collect surveys from 15-20 students in order to collect data from a range of participants with different experiences and attitudes toward reading and writing online. I felt 15-20 students would adequately provide such data while still allowing close analysis of each survey. I assumed that a few students would fail to respond to the survey and drop out of the study; beginning with 20 participants, I believed, would allow for such a decrease in participant

numbers while still providing sufficient data. Through my e-mails and my Facebook message, I was able to make contact with approximately 20 students, but about half of those contacts dwindled away after students' initial responses. A few students sent me e-mails saying they didn't have time to do the survey, but most simply didn't respond to my follow-up e-mail.

To facilitate ease of meeting participants for any potential face-to-face interviews, I initially only contacted individuals planning to attend college at either the four-year state university or the two-year community college in the city where I was living at the start of the research project. Even after expanding my reach to include students attending an additional university in the state, however, I was only able to collect signed consent forms and surveys from nine students in total. This sample was quite small, and for that reason the surveys from non-focal students are only minimally reflected in my overall research project. However, the surveys proved extremely helpful in beginning data collection from the study's four focal participants. First and foremost, the initial surveys guided me toward a group of focal students with diverse Internet use habits, a primary criterion for selection. The surveys also indicated that each focal participant seemed to have a different overall theme to their purposes for using the Internet, whether those purposes were based on popular culture, politics, or accommodating an extremely busy schedule, a second criterion for selection. These themes helped direct the questions I asked during our initial interviews. Survey answers are also included in the portions of chapters three and four dedicated to each participant.

From among the nine students, I chose four focal participants—Erin, Will, Krista, and Rachel. In addition to their survey answers, I was also influenced by my own knowledge of their reliability. I felt these four students represented a diverse array of online reading and writing practices, visiting a host of different sites and using the Internet in different amounts and for varied purposes. I also believed they would remain committed to the project throughout its duration. Though from time to time each participant was a bit difficult to contact or slow in returning logs of their Internet use, in general all four were dedicated and enthusiastic participants in this project over the entire course of their first year at college.

At the beginning of this project all were enrolled in their first semester of college in a major southwestern city adjacent to the smaller city where they had attended high school. Participants Erin, Will, and Rachel were all attending Southwest University (SWU). The fourth participant, Krista, was enrolled at a two-year community college (CCSW). All four were full time students during both semesters of the 2009-2010 school year, and all four generously logged their Internet use, participated in interviews, and corresponded with me by e-mail at various points throughout the year.

Role of Researcher

My position as a former teacher to all participants, and the four focal participants in particular, both complicated and enhanced my role as researcher. Because I came to know participants over an entire school year in the role of their 12th grade English teacher, I had already built a relationship with the four focal participants I followed in this project. When we met for our first set of interviews,

we were able to begin the process after just a few minutes of catching up. As their former teacher, I was comfortable with each of them. Because they were not sitting down for the first time with a complete stranger, I feel a similar comfort level made the interview process at least somewhat easier for the focal participants as well. Each already trusted me enough to volunteer to fill out a survey and to agree to sit for interviews as well as keep track of their Internet use. Less time needed to be spent, therefore, building rapport from scratch or working to understand the wider community in which the participants grew up. I was also familiar with the philosophies and curriculum of the school from which the participants had so recently graduated, knowledge that proved helpful as we discussed the ways they used the Internet to navigate a brand new academic setting.

My role as their former teacher was not, however, without complications. At the outset of the project, I had been an authority figure in their lives for most of the time the students had known me. While I tried to make each classroom I ran a community of learners and strove to help students feel open to expressing their thoughts and opinions, I was, ultimately, the person in charge. Each participant had spent nine months following classroom rules I had established and producing work that I, as the teacher, would grade. My role as authority figure, theoretically, lost much of its power when students graduated. As we began the interview process, however, all but one still referred to me as Ms. Soto rather than Casey (as I began signing e-mail correspondence with them after the initial stages of data collection began).

I took several steps intended to alleviate complications that our former teacher/student relationship may have caused in the research process. In my original e-mail and Facebook message soliciting participation in the overall project, I emphasized that participation was voluntary and that students could drop out at any time. Several students who had initially expressed interest simply stopped responding to my e-mails. However, three students who originally volunteered to participate felt comfortable enough to contact me and say they no longer had time to participate. Throughout the data collection and interview process, I was careful to reiterate that participation was voluntary, all answers were confidential, and participants could decline to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable answering. At the beginning of each face-to-face interview, I told students that if there were any questions they did not wish to answer for whatever reason, they should say “pass” and we would simply move on to the next questions. During the interview conducted by e-mail, I told students to simply skip any questions they didn’t want to answer.

I further attempted to lessen the impact of my former role as authority figure by offering each focal participant the opportunity to read and comment on the sections of dissertation chapters that directly involved data I collected from that participant as well as my interpretations of that data. The success of this last step was somewhat limited in that only one participant responded to my request for feedback. However, as I wrote I tried to be constantly mindful of my desire to create a picture of participants and their Internet use that was at once respectful to

participants as individuals and truthful to their perceptions and ideas regarding their own Internet use.

Triangulation

Dyson and Genishi remind researchers that insight into the perspective of the participants in a study is one of the most important goals of qualitative research (81). I tried to achieve such perspective not only through the kinds of questions I asked, but also through my mindfulness of participant perspectives as I wrote and through my request for participant feedback during my writing process. Invitation of participant feedback was, in fact, one way in which I attempted to triangulate all data.

I also worked to ensure reliability in my data collection through “methodological triangulation” (Stake 114). By collecting three main forms of data—interviews, surveys, and logs of Internet use, I was able to compare each form of data collected from a single participant to the other forms collected from that participant. This data comparison allowed me to identify issues and questions raised by one form of data (generally in the initial survey or Internet Use Logs) and follow up on those issues and questions in more detail during interviews. I was also able to watch for inconsistencies that existed among data for a single participant. For example, on more than one occasion, a participant’s estimates of the amount of time spent online in a typical day or week conflicted with what the participant actually logged. During interviews, we were then able to discuss in more detail the amount of time participants spent online and how, specifically, they used that time.

Research Memos

Over the course of all stages of this dissertation project, I wrote research memos as a way to both record and reflect on my data collection, analysis and writing process—a research process advocated by Dyson and Geneshi (58, 81) and implemented in the research process and incorporated into research write ups in ways I found both useful and intriguing in studies by other scholars in the field of composition (Lee, Paster). Rubin and Rubin view similar memos as a place for researchers to reflect not only on their own position as researcher and the nature of the interpretations a researcher brings to her data, but also as a way to identify additional themes and questions that emerge from that data (231, 235). I used my research memos in all these ways throughout the research process, and I have called heavily upon those memos during the writing phase of this project.

Data Collection

Surveys

The surveys I sent out to all potential participants served as my first form of data collection (Appendix C). I designed these surveys to garner an overview of potential participants' histories as Internet users, how and where they accessed the Internet, the kinds of sites they visited and their perceptions of their own relationships with technology and the Internet itself. While the surveys provided some insight into potential participants' histories as Internet users, with their limited number of questions about Internet access and Internet use, these surveys were most useful in providing a description of how students were using the Internet to read and write at

the outset of the project. The surveys also provided important insight into the genres participants tended toward in their online reading and writing habits.

Internet Use Logs

After completing their surveys, agreeing to my request to continue in the study as focal participants and signing additional consent forms, three of the four participants filled out their first Internet Use Logs (Appendix D). I designed the logs as a means of collecting data on the sites participants visited, the content they read and produced and the amount of time they spent online per day in their daily lives. I asked participants to fill out logs for seven consecutive days during approximately the fourth and eighth week of each semester. I hoped the timing of the logs would give participants time to familiarize themselves with their semester schedules and course requirements, but not interfere with the lead up to their final exams.

The logs themselves were a three-column chart with one column for the name of the site, another for the amount of time spent at the site, and a third column for a brief description of activity at the site (Table 1 provides the sample information a focal participant provided in one of her logs). In the e-mail I sent along with the charts, I stated that participants should only spend a few minutes on the chart itself, though some of their entries indicated participants probably spent more time on them.

Students submitted their logs via e-mail. While I initially asked students to submit their log on a daily basis, most often participants submitted them two or three daily logs at a time. While they sometimes skipped a day here or there and, because of a very intense schedule, Will elected not to complete a log at all during

his first semester, overall participants completed and submitted most of the logs I requested. Like the surveys, these logs provided information on how and why participants were using the Internet to read and write for academic as well as social and recreational purposes. Because they were filled out over the course of a week, however, the logs provided more depth and detail than the surveys did.

Table 1: Sample Internet Use Log

Please fill out the following log for 7 consecutive days during the assigned week. Use additional pages for each day if needed.		
Date: 10/3/2010 5th		Week of Semester:
Website Title and URL	Approximate Time on Website (Report the amount of time site is open, even if you're navigating back and forth to other sites or doing other activities on your computer).	Brief Description of Activity at Site (For example, what do you read/view at site? What do you write/add to site? Do you visit the site exclusively then close the site or is it open while you're doing other activities?)
Millennium Web Catalog http://[web address].gov/	15-20min	I used this site to find book titles and authors of books, that I've read/ will read in the future. I didn't add anything to this website. I had this site open while I was on Gaiaonline.
Blogthings http://www.blogthings.com	2hrs	I was on this website doing random quizzes. The link to this website was on Gaiaonline in a forum.
Barnes and Noble http://www.bn.com	10min	I used this website to find a book author for a forum on Gaiaonline.

Interviews

I also conducted three separate interviews with each participant. Before each interview, I created an interview protocol to use as a guide and then asked additional questions, reordered questions, or omitted questions based on answers a participant gave within her or his interview, an approach advocated by Rubin and Rubin.

The first round of interviews took place face-to-face with each participant during October of 2009. Before the interviews, I created a uniform protocol for all participants with questions pertaining to their personal background, their academic uses of the Internet, their social and recreational uses of the Internet, and any connections they might see between the two. This standard protocol with a framework for additional questions for each participant is included as Appendix E. I then added or altered questions for each participant based on their individual answers to both the initial surveys and the first set of Internet Use Logs. For example, based on initial surveys, I asked one participant about the early age (relative to other participants) at which she first had access to the Internet, and I asked another about his perception of himself as a member of the “technology” generation, something that would become a major theme in his specific interviews and in the final interview for each of the participants. Based on their Internet Use Logs, I asked three of the participants to view specific sites they reported visiting along with me in the interview. Each interview lasted about 90 minutes, and I used a digital voice recorder to record these interviews.

The second round of interviews took place in February via e-mail. I chose to conduct the interview via e-mail because I was living in another state and unable at that time to travel to the city where participants lived. I was also unsure of how I might create a reliable transcript through an Internet-based chat application to which all participants would have access. E-mail, I felt, would address both those potential issues. Before the interview, I created another protocol with both questions that were standard across all four participants as well as individualized questions based on Internet Use Logs and the first set of interviews (Appendix F). To conduct the interviews, each participant and I set aside a 90-minute block of time during which we would both be at the computer e-mailing immediate responses to one another. I constructed a series of seven e-mails, each containing a different cluster of questions relating to one general topic. The general topics included background questions on their current majors and course loads, questions about how and where they were accessing the Internet during their second semester, current academic requirements involving the Internet, their social and recreational uses of the Internet, a question about their understanding of themselves as part of their specific generation of Internet users, and questions based on their previous interviews or Internet Use Logs. The protocol also included a final e-mail that asked follow up questions about answers they may have given in the interview so far. I would send one e-mail to the participant and then, when I had received the participant's reply, I sent the next e-mail in the series. My final e-mail contained follow-up questions based on answers they'd given in the e-mail responses they sent

me that day. While the process was somewhat slow, I was able to create an interview transcript that addressed all of my primary questions.

I had planned to conduct all final interviews face-to-face as well, but in the ten months that elapsed between initial contact and the final interview, schedules became more complicated than anyone had anticipated. In the end, I was only able to set up a face-to-face interview with Erin. I submitted a revision to my IRB-approved protocol and was granted permission to conduct the final interview via the Internet video chat service Skype. Final interviews for Will, Krista, and Rachel took place over Skype. All four interviews lasted about 90 minutes, and I recorded all four using a digital voice recorder. Before the interviews, I created a final standard protocol (Appendix G). This protocol included questions asking participants to reflect on their overall use of the Internet during their first year at college, further questions about their understanding of themselves as part of a specific generation of Internet users, and questions about particular sites participants reported visiting in their Internet Use Log as well as other individualized questions based on previous interviews. All three sets of these interviews were crucial in building my understanding of participants' motives for using the Internet and the connections they saw (or didn't see) between their Internet uses for various purposes.

Transcription

I transcribed all interviews on a computer, listening and re-listening to the digital recordings as I typed to ensure accuracy. For quoted portions of the transcript within this dissertation, open ellipses indicate pauses in the flow of a participant's

speech. Bracketed ellipses indicated places where I have omitted words from the original transcript. As I transcribed, I omitted interjections such as “umm,” or “like” unless those interjections conveyed meaning (for example in cases where they show a participant giving particular thought to a portion of an answer or working to come to some sort of explanation or definition).

Data Analysis

Coding

I began the initial stages of coding after I had conducted and transcribed the first set of interviews. My codes grew and developed as I transcribed, read, reread, and coded the data itself. The coding categories were based on my primary research questions, and I kept those questions in mind as I revised the categories. I started out with the following coding categories which I developed based upon and intended to help me begin to form more concrete answers to my primary research questions:

Audience (A) – places where participants demonstrated an awareness of the audience for the site or for particular posts on a site they might visit or use.

Purpose (P) – the main function of the site; what the participant, the site itself (or instructors requiring students to use the site) aimed to accomplish.

Motive (M) – What, beyond the self-evident purpose of a site, a user gained or accomplished from reading or composing at the site.

Interest (I) – How the site or a participant’s use of the site reflects the participant’s interests.

As I coded the first set of interviews, I began to feel like the codes weren’t quite solid. Their boundaries felt permeable and my understanding and use of the four

initial codes were still evolving. As I coded, I also found that a new category, Evaluation, was emerging. In retrospect, I could see ways my interview questions had asked participants to evaluate, and many times participants became evaluative on their own. For example, participants often evaluated the quality of sites or writing at sites they visited without my prompting. And all participants, often in response to my direct questions, evaluated online components of the classes they were taking. In the chapters that follow, I represent some of the participants' evaluations of course content. Because I did not interview their instructors and cannot fully know their intentions or the ways they presented information to students, these sections represent participants' perceptions of course Internet requirements and uses, not the instructors or their course.

As I coded the second and third set of interviews, my codes evolved even further. While coding and recoding my data was, at times, frustrating, I noted the importance of the process in a research memo that I composed near the end of the coding process. A portion of that memo follows:

I feel like I gained a better understanding of why I was coding and how coding needed, at least in the early runs through the data, to be an evolving process. If I didn't allow myself the time to go back and hone my codes based on the process of coding, the codes would be too confining to allow for good analysis. The coding process is helping me to organize the data, but also to understand the data, and as I got a better sense of the kind of data my interview questions had generated, I could define my codes more precisely.

Through coding, reflecting and revising, and then recoding, I eventually settled on the following set of codes and definitions (Table 2). I then recoded all interviews, initial surveys, and Internet Use Logs based on these specific codes and definitions, keeping the document below at hand as I worked.

Table 2: List of Codes and Definitions.

Purpose (P): Participant’s awareness of the main function of the site; what the participant or the site itself (or instructors requiring students to use the site) aimed to accomplish.

Note: The “purpose” as I see it is the self-evident goal of the site as opposed to “motive” and “interest” which both delve deeper into the question “Why?”

Motive (M): What, beyond the self-evident purpose, a user gains or accomplishes from reading or composing at a site or in an online environment in general.

Interest (I): How a site or the participant’s use of a site reflects the participant’s interests. Interests might be thought of as hobbies; examples include Gaming, Watching TV, Politics, Fanfiction. Interest is already implicitly motive, but it’s a more focused category of Motive.

Example: The Purpose (P) of the site Fanfiction.Net is to provide a place for users to post, read and review fanfiction, while the Motive for a participant who uses the site may be the social outlet it provides. Further, it may reflect the participant’s Interest in popular culture as well as the pleasure (which I would code [I]) the participant finds in reading and providing critical feedback on what she has read. I feel able to identify interest based on an overall picture I’ve gained of each student in the process of following them throughout the year. I envision the major interests I’ve coded for as being described for readers in the initial portrait of each student that I create in the dissertation.

Position as Reader/Writer (R/W): How the participant positions themselves in relation to the content read or produced (either as an individual reader or writer, or as part of a group of readers and writers) at a specific site or in online environments in general. How the participant positions her or himself in relation to the Audience and Purpose of a site or genre of site.

Evaluative (E): Participant’s assessment of the success, failure, worth or value of a particular academic requirement, academic, social or recreational site or site performance, or rhetorical move within the site by self or by other user. Usually double coded as **P, M, I,** or **R/W.** For example, evaluative comments tend to include descriptions of why a student liked or didn’t like a particular Internet requirement or whether they feel a site is user friendly or contains quality information or writing.

Habits and History (H): (Other) information that will help me create an overall a picture of participant as internet user. For example one participant’s description of an Internet-based class in high school or another participant’s description of her longstanding inability to multitask are coded as **H.**

While the varied interests and experiences of the participants meant that each code was applied to very different kinds of Internet use, the following examples provide a brief picture of what codes looked like within the interview

transcripts themselves. In each example, the coded material is both preceded and followed by the name of the code written within braces {}.

In the following example, a participant describes her perception of the solitary but social nature of reading on the Internet, which I coded as Reader/Writer:

{Reader_Writer}Umm, I mean I think going to sites where you don't like contribute or get anything back, you're alone. But you're reading someone else's content so I don't think you could really be ...I don't know I don't think you could really be totally alone.{Reader_Writer}

In another instance, the same participant described an online Advanced Placement Calculus class she took in high school, which I coded as "Habits and History":

{Habits_History}There was no AP class to take, so they were like, "Here, take this online class." {Habits_History}

Often the codes overlapped and intermingled with one another as is the case in the following example in which a participant describes her use of the site Fanfiction.Net, which I coded as "Interest" because reading fanfiction was an important hobby for this participant, "Purpose" because the site offered users a space to both read and respond to stories, "Motive" as she describes why she likes to read fanfiction, as well as "Evaluative" for her description of how the activity benefited her academically:

{Interest}{Evaluative}I guess it kind of made me analyze a little bit more because{Purpose} I would review stories too {/Purpose}and it gave me more to say about certain things and it kinda gave me a broader experience than just a book that's been published, like proofread and edited by some big wig company, "Okay, this is good for you to publish!" {Motive} But for FanFiction.Net, it's like everything's pretty much a rough draft. It's not perfect. And it kind of gives you an open door to give constructive criticism to people{/Motive} and by reading a whole bunch of stories, you start to understand the difference between a skilled writer and a not skilled writer and you get to understand inexperience vs. experience. {/Evaluative}

Post-Coding Analysis

The line between coding and analysis often seemed blurred to me in my position as researcher. I found myself reflecting on meaning as I transcribed and coded and then approaching analysis in ways that sometimes felt like another level of coding (as I organized coded data into two column charts, for example). After recoding all interview, survey and Internet Use Log data using my final set of codes, I began what I saw as a more focused analysis than what I'd been doing through research notes and memos all along. I first approached the data by focusing on one research question, working with the data for that question one participant at a time and creating new Word documents as I worked. To answer my first primary research question, "How do first year college students use the Internet to read and write for both social/recreational and academic purposes?" I created a document for each participant containing a two-column chart. This chart contained data coded mostly under the label "purpose," but I went through all the data, regardless of codes, and the chart represented uses under other codes as well. Any mention of Internet use that seemed to fall under academic purposes went into the first column. Use that fell under social/recreational purposes went under the second column. I placed uses that reflected both social/recreational and academic purposes in both columns directly next to one another. The two column structure of this chart proved as a starting place to consider another primary research question, "What connections, if any, do students see between their computing for various purposes?" though I considered that questions in relation to other data as well.

Another primary research question asks, “What motivates the ways students use computers to read and write?” As I looked over the data coded “Motive” I began to feel the data reflected motive in two ways—motive to do something, and motive *not* to do something. For example, Erin was motivated to visit feminist blogs because she enjoyed the content. She was motivated *not* to post content at those sites because she felt sometimes the comments were unproductive. Both motives provided important information about the kinds of reading and writing she did online. To analyze motive in a way that reflected these two types of “Motive” data, I created another document with another two-column chart for “Motive.” The chart had a (+) column for data that reflected motivation to do something and a (-) column for data that reflected motivation *not* to do something, and I organized the data accordingly.

Graphic organizers didn’t seem as useful as a means of analyzing the various data I’d coded for “Position as Reader/Writer” and “Evaluative.” For each of these codes I created another set of documents (one document per participant, per code), cut and pasted the data for the code into the appropriate document, and made reflective notes in the margins.

During the process of analysis I also spent time at websites frequented by participants, reviewing what participants had said about the sites, and coming to my own assessments of the intended audiences and purposes of each site. Some of that time included tracking down existing portions of two sites that went offline during the process of my research project, and also a day-long process of creating an

account and avatar at the site Gaia Online, exploring stores and communities, and completing tasks to earn site currency.

Next, I took the data and notes from the various documents and condensed them even further into yet another set of documents (again, one for each participant), this one named "Research Questions." In that document I summarized how the data for each participant seemed to answer each research question.

During this analysis process I sometimes felt frustrated. What was I doing with all of this data I was sifting through? I felt at times like I wasn't analyzing, but that I was continuing to code instead, simply in more complex ways with the goal of condensing rather than analyzing. However, as I wrote in a research memo near the end of the most intense phase of analysis, the process began to make sense:

I was going through what had turned out to be seven pages of data reflecting how Will positions himself as a Reader/Writer, feeling frustrated about paring down seven pages to one page and then planning to reduce it even more, when I finally started to feel like what I was doing made sense. As I pare down and pare down and pare down [...] by reducing (and reducing and reducing) the details of the data from that participant, [I'm] working not to lose data but to come to the tightest, best summary I can. I reduce down to these true-to-the-individual-participant summaries, so that I have a place to work from in my paper. I reduce them down so I can build them back up in the paper through explanation and discussion of significance.

In the lengthy process of coding and analysis, I have come to know these data very well. One of the last steps of analysis was to create four one-page documents that provided brief but accurate portraits of each participant. The summary I mention in the excerpt from my research memo above is a summary based on what I believe is the best possible understanding I could achieve from the data participants provided (given the natural limitations created by my position as researcher

learning about participant experiences from outside those experiences and contexts). I used each one-page document as a starting point from which to build the much more extensive portraits that follow here. In my close attention to the words and online practices of each of my participants, I have worked to build what I feel is the most accurate picture possible of each participant and their online reading and writing practices during their first year at college.

One of the most important goals of case study research is to provide rich description of the case studied—to understand the “particulars” of the case (Stake 8, Dyson and Genishi 113). Through my process of data analysis, I sifted, sorted, analyzed, resifted, resorted, and reanalyzed my data as a means of coming to the detailed descriptions of each participant and the particulars of their Internet use that I present in the next two chapters.

CHAPTER 3

ERIN AND WILL

For participants Erin and Will, the Internet was a significant and daily part of their lives during their first year of college. They turned to the Internet for information, for homework, and as a means of keeping up with the relationships and responsibilities of their offline lives.

In the realm of academics, nearly all of their courses at SWU required Internet use to some degree, with requirements ranging from research, to online homework submission sites, to YouTube videos and a class blog. While the Internet frequently played a role in their recreational and social activities and lives, both Erin and Will positioned the Internet as secondary to their offline lives. Their recreational uses of the Internet were most likely to include browsing through various sites, reading articles that spoke to their personal interests, watching videos or television online, or casual game playing on an iPod Touch. Social interactions always involved relationships formed offline

The Internet's potential as a space for public writing has received significant attention in the field of composition (Alexander; Comstock; Hawisher and Sullivan; Rhodes). Despite that potential, neither Erin or Will added content to the majority of the sites they visited for social and recreational purposes. Any non-academic writing they did online took place almost exclusively at the social networking site Facebook. Even e-mail, though they checked it routinely, didn't play a significant role in their online lives. In fact, throughout this research project, Erin and Will

were often easiest to reach through the private messaging function of Facebook rather than through traditional e-mail.¹

Both saw social networking as a fact of modern life, and both were frequent Facebook users during the course of their first year at college. They used social networking to maintain relationships and a feeling of connection to the campus community despite their hectic academic, extracurricular, and work schedules. Even with their frequent Facebook use, Will and Erin both also expressed hesitation in their interviews about the nature of social interaction online, questioning what might be lost in online interactions but also pointing out what they saw as new, and not necessarily negative, ways of building social connections.

While Erin saw herself as more computer savvy than Will, both have a long history with the Internet and a great deal of comfort in the online spaces they used academically, socially, and recreationally. Their comfort with the Internet was reflected, in part, through their ability to discuss their histories and experiences as Internet users in some of the thoughtful, articulate ways that follow.

Portrait One: Erin

In the fall of 2009, Erin was an eighteen-year-old white woman attending her first year of college at SWU. Born in 1991, Erin was the second of four children whose parents worked as professionals in the fields of education and engineering. She lived on campus in the “Scholars Wing” of one of the dormitories, a section of that dorm reserved for students enrolled in the SWU Honors Program. Over the

¹ Communication through Facebook was usually limited to setting up times for phone calls or alerting the participants that I’d sent them a more detailed message regarding the research project via e-mail.

course of the school year, Erin's major fluctuated. She began the year planning to major in English with an emphasis in pre-law. In February, she intended to declare a double major in English and Biology with a pre-med emphasis. By June, she called her pre-med plan "ridiculous" and seemed comfortably settled into a major in English. During her first semester at SWU, Erin did not have a job outside of school. During the second semester, she began working retail at a local shopping mall, and she had been hired as a Residence Hall Assistant for her sophomore year.

Erin's earliest memories of using the Internet occurred when she was about six years old. She recalls an online game based on a book which students were allowed to play as a reward for good behavior. At the time, her family was living in a different state, and her classroom had a computer, which she described in the following way, "I think it was an Apple because it had a little apple and it was huge and ridiculous." Her earliest use of the Internet was as a reward for good behavior, but she doesn't remember being required to use the Internet for several more years: "I can't pinpoint a specific instance that I had to use [the Internet], but I remember it was like a big deal that I had to do a book report on a tiger and I had to research it." Her father worked both at home and at a workplace office and, because he needed the Internet for his job, Erin stated her family "had the Internet from early on." Erin considered herself good with computers because she felt comfortable with the programs and applications she used on her own computer:

I know how to use all the functions and programs on my computer. Also I have been relying on computers for so long I have simply learned by personal experience how to use them. But when it comes to fixing computers or understanding the logistics of computers I would be lost.

By the time Erin reached college, her immediate family owned four computers, including laptops that her parents used for work. Erin most often accessed the Internet from her own laptop, a Mac that she received as a gift for her high school graduation. She relied mostly on campus wireless in her dorm room, using an Ethernet cable for applications that required higher speeds such as the video chat program Skype or watching videos online. While Erin owned an iPod touch, she didn't generally use it to access the Internet because she found her computer easier to use, adding, "[The iPod Touch] does come in handy if you need to look something up in class, but that's rare, so I don't do that too much." She did not report accessing the Internet on any other handheld device.

On a typical day, Erin reported using the Internet to check e-mail, to monitor grades, and to scroll through her Facebook account checking friends' status updates and commenting on those she found interesting and sometimes checking notifications from various Facebook groups to which she belonged. She also used the Internet to read news if she had time, "randomly Google" information, and "window shop" at online retail sites. Erin read several different blogs over the course of the school year, including a grant-funded blog her sister kept to detail her study abroad experience in England. A self-proclaimed feminist with a liberal political stance, Erin also read sites that reflected her interest in politics and feminism, including the online news source Current.com and the message board StilettoREVOLT, spending anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours a day reading various news sites during the weeks she logged her Internet use for this project.

The Internet for Academic Purposes: Grades, Blogs, and WebAssign

Erin was enrolled in fifteen credit hours during her first semester at SWU. Her course load included 100 level sociology and philosophy classes, Calculus, an Honors Seminar entitled “Legacy of Power,” and a 200 level English course called “Analyzing Literature.” Because of her SAT verbal score, Erin was exempt from the SWU first-year writing courses, and moved directly into 200 level English courses to fulfill her writing and speaking credit requirements for graduation. First semester, all of Erin’s classes required that she use the Internet “to get information,” but she reported that none required her to complete or turn assignments in online. All of her courses except her Honors Seminar had a WebCT page where students could access grades, the course syllabus, and assignments. Her English course required that students download a seventy page packet containing the poems they would read throughout the semester, and student were often asked to use the subscription service Project MUSE to access additional readings for the course. For the Project MUSE readings, students printed various journal articles, read them, and then brought them to class for discussion. Erin also reported using the Internet to look up information for assignments even when it wasn’t required by instructors. She generally found that information through Wikipedia or “wherever Google takes me.”

Second semester, Erin was enrolled in a 200 level expository writing class, a 400 level prose style course, a chemistry lecture class with a related lab, Yoga, and another Honors Seminar, this one entitled “Questioning Authority.” In her expository writing class, all reading assignments were posted on WebCT for students to download. Assignments for her prose style course were also posted

online. She completed and submitted all homework for her Chemistry lecture class through the online homework site WebAssign, and, for her Chemistry lab section, used WebCT to watch step-by-step videos of labs for pre-lab reports. Her Honors Seminar had a course-specific blog to which students were required to contribute weekly. In explaining the Internet requirements for her second semester classes, Erin wrote, “Even for yoga I had to access the syllabus through email.”

The class blog attached to her Honors Seminar became a significant part of Erin’s academic life during her second semester at SWU, and she mentioned it frequently in the two interviews we conducted together that semester. Sometimes the blog came up in answer to questions I asked, but she also brought it up on her own as a means of comparison for Internet requirements in other courses. The Honors Seminar, a small, discussion-based course, examined cultural assumptions about power and authority as reflected in current and historic literature and film, and the blog was a major component of the course. Fashioned as a place to continue the kinds of discussions happening in class, each week a different student was responsible for posting a discussion-starting question. Class members then responded to that question or to posts generated by the question. Over the course of the semester, each student was required to post a total of twenty-five responses on the blog.

Erin felt there were several factors contributing to the blog’s effectiveness. In terms of interface, the set up of Blogger.com, where the blog was hosted, was more familiar to students than a site like WebCT, “WebCT it feels a little bit like a grade book and it’s not very user friendly. [Blogger] is almost like Facebook. You get

one post after another and you're used to typing into that and people are responding and it can go quick and it's like a normal blog where WebCT is just awkward."

Beyond the technical aspects of the blog, the instructor herself took time in class to emphasize the importance of the blog. Further, Erin felt the instructor, the course's seminar nature, and the overall nature of the Honors Program helped create an open atmosphere in the class. Students got to know each other in class and that made starting and continuing discussions online much easier. "The community in that class was much more open and friendly and I actually knew the people in that class opposed to [my] English class where I didn't know half the people's first names. So it was easier to, you know, just continue a conversation when you know people, obviously."

Erin didn't, however, feel the blog was perfect. Sometimes, according to Erin, because of the number of posts required, students posted simply to meet the requirement and such posts could be less than inspired. Erin also felt the class was rather politically conservative which she found, at times, "frustrating." Still, she was an advocate of her Honors blog and found it to be an effective Internet requirement overall.

Some of the Internet requirements for other classes were less successful in Erin's view. While she wasn't critical of the assignments themselves for her Chemistry class, the WebAssign site was new to the Chemistry department the semester she was enrolled in the class, and some of the assignments had technical difficulties. For example, a glitch in the multiple choice questions meant points were

docked when the instructor hadn't intended a loss of points. The instructor informed students via e-mail that their grades would be corrected, but Erin was apprehensive, saying, "It was like 'Oh we'll fix it.' Like maybe I didn't trust them to fix it because it was like calculating all these obscure [assignment points]." Erin followed up on her grade, and was satisfied with the corrections.

Erin was most critical of the Internet-based activities and requirements for her expository writing class. In one activity, students used the English department's mobile computer lab to post to a message board in class. Erin elaborated on the assignment, saying,

We were in class but we were just talking on this message board [...] it was, like, about learning audience and we had to write a note saying you can't make an appointment to a professor, and to a friend and a parent, and like see how they were all different. So then we, I guess, responded back to them as if you were that person.

When asked why she thought the instructor might have chosen to use the message board for this activity, Erin had no clear answer, "Umm, I don't—I mean I guess because most of the time you do that through e-mail so that's how you'd be doing it anyways. Or just maybe to get us famil—well it was at the end of the semester so it wasn't to get us familiar with the website." Erin's lack of clarity stretched to other moments in the class connected to Internet use as well. She felt some of the online assignments were "busy work."

The Internet for Social and Recreational Purposes: Politics, Feminism, Blogs, and Cyberstalking.

News and Politics

Erin followed news and politics at two primary sites, the *New York Times* online, and Current.com. In her initial questionnaire, Erin described her attraction to both sites:

I visit the New York Times website to read the news. I have it set as my homepage so that if there is any breaking news I know right away. I don't watch TV or read the newspaper so the internet is the primary outlet through which I get the news [...] I use this site because I like the fact that it is on the liberal side of the spectrum without being too biased.

I visit Current also as a news source. It is the website affiliated with Current TV, an alternative news channel that is geared towards young adults. I read content there and I also watch a lot of short film clips. They produce shows and also air work submitted by viewers. I use this site so frequently because the information within it is relative [sic] and interesting to me. It provides a more unique perspective than many news websites and it [is] very liberal in its content.

Erin initially began watching the television version of *Current*, but switched to the online version when her family ended their cable TV service. She was drawn to the user-generated nature of the site as well as the young, self-motivated reporters. "They're just like regular people with cell phone cameras who'd make their own videos and submit them, so it was entirely viewer created content. I really liked it because they would like categorize [the videos]...and it's like young adults."

In addition, she was also a frequent visitor to the now defunct message board StilettoREVOLT². When active, the site provided links to various articles, online

² While the site StilettoREVOLT.com, originally hosted at wordpress, is no longer available, as of July 2011, partial posts could be found at

news videos, and some original pieces, as well as commentary and discussion, often witty, about those pieces. Articles included “Virgins for Sale,” a 2009 story on two young women who put their virginity up for sale at online auction sites, accompanied by a discussion of virginity as a commodity in American media; “Women of Tribeca, 2009” featuring some of the women-directed movies playing at the Tribeca Film festival that year; and “Miss Land Mine: Empathetic or Exploitive,” a feature on beauty pageants for victims of landmines held in Cambodia and Angola.

Erin called StilettoREVOLT both “informative and entertaining,” and she visited the site frequently, scrolling through stories, and clicking on those that looked interesting to her. When we visited the site together in October of 2009, she showed me a feature she’d read in the past few days on teen pregnancy rates, including the rate for the state she lived in, as well as commentary on a *Huffington Post* slideshow of “Inappropriate Products for Children.”

All of these sites included discussion forums that readers could take part in, but Erin chose not to. She didn’t contribute to political discussions online because she felt such discussions often turned into “petty, dumb arguments. Like people typing in all caps and you don’t really get anywhere.” She continued, “At the same time, I don’t have any desire to contribute to message boards when it’s just random strangers. And I know people do meet online, but I think it’s just weird to have these discussions with people you don’t know.”

While she didn’t contribute to any of the news sites or message boards,

<http://eng.feministblogs.org/author/stilettoevolt/>. StilettoREVOLT’s YouTube channel is also still active as of September 7, 2014, and videos once linked from the site are available there at <http://www.youtube.com/user/StilettoREVOLT>.

themes from these sites came up in her classes. For example, though she said she never mentioned any specific article or feature from StilettoREVOLT in class, ideas she'd encountered on that site came up in her Honors Seminar, "Legacy of Power." The class read John Stewart Mills's "The Subjection of Women," and when some of Erin's classmates stated in discussion that they felt women and men were now equal, Erin talked about ways equality doesn't exist, and she felt her examples reflected (while not specifically mentioning) things she'd read at StilettoREVOLT.

Blogs

Throughout her first year as a college student, Erin was an avid blog reader although the specific blogs she visited and the genre of the blogs she was most drawn to shifted over the course of the year. In her initial survey at the beginning of my project, she reported visiting the *New York Times* health and wellness blog, *Well*, and also the blog *Zen Habits*. According to its author, Leo Babauta, *Zen Habits* is a blog intended to help its readers simplify their day-to-day lives through articles on "simplicity, health & fitness, motivation and inspiration, frugality, family life, happiness, goals, getting great things done, and living in the moment" (About July 2011).

Later in the first semester and into second semester, Erin's reading interests had shifted away from blogs based on health and holistic approaches to well being. In February she wrote, "Many of the blogs I like to read take the form of a journal or notebook with entries about anything and everything that interests the blogger." These blogs included *Bakerby* maintained by a young Danish woman, a blog that is

also no longer publicly available³. *Bakerby*, written almost entirely in English, included the author's photography and written thoughts. The author was an employee at a trendy retail chain in Denmark, and there was often an underlying fashion theme, an interest Erin shared with the author.

By summer, Erin had once again moved on to other blogs. While she reported using the blog *The Pioneer Woman* in her earliest interview, it was now one of the blogs she visited most frequently. *The Pioneer Woman* is a high-traffic blog kept by Ree Drummond, a.k.a "Pioneer Woman." Drummond moved from the city to a ranch where, in the author's own words, she blogs "daily about my long transition from spoiled city girl to domestic country wife" ("About Pioneer Woman"). Sections of Drummond's blog include, "Cooking," "Confessions," "Home & Garden," and "Homeschooling." In her interview, Erin was careful to position herself as very different from Drummond, holding little interest in Drummond's commitment to staying home with her children and, in Erin's words, "cooking for her husband all day," (though with several published books and a deal with *The Food Network*, Drummond's blog has become a full career in addition to the time she dedicates to her family and their ranch). Still, Erin's interest in the blog focused on recipes and the high quality photos of the various steps of each recipe.

She also followed the cooking blog, *Smitten Kitchen*. Another high profile blog, *Smitten Kitchen* is from the home kitchen of "Deb." Like *The Pioneer Woman*, *Smitten Kitchen* also includes photography with recipes, but the author focuses

³ Bakerby no longer maintains a public blog, though portions of her blog were still available as of September 2014 at <http://www.bloglovin.com/en/blog/371690/bakerby#>.

almost solely on her cooking (with related personal anecdotes included with the recipes). Like all of the blogs Erin read throughout the year, both *The Pioneer Woman*, and *Smitten Kitchen*, feature high quality, often humorous prose.

Erin's attitude toward blogs was at times complicated. In her initial interview she said, "It wasn't until recently that I started reading blogs. Not to hear people's weird emotions or whatever, but because they, I think they have a lot of valid information in them." She saw *Zen Habits*, for example, as a blog with "valid information."

Later in that same interview, she discussed the ways the Internet might better serve her academically. "I guess reading [...] work with merit on the Internet would be helping me academically instead of like blogs and Facebook." When pressed on her definition of merit, however, she included her sister's blog as an example of something with merit, saying, "My sister has a blog, and she's a really good writer. Does that have merit, per se? [...] I think it does." Up to that point in her history as a blog reader, good writing as well as a clear subject for the blog was important to her. When asked what would motivate her to start her own blog, Erin stated, "I think an objective because I'm not going to just write to write [...] But I don't think there's anything that I'm an authority on that I think people should read." *Zen Habits* discussed living a simple life. Her sister recounted and reflected on her life living abroad. For Erin, the clearly defined goals of these two blogs made them valid and helped to give them merit.

Her requirements for a quality blog changed when she began reading journal blogs later in the academic year, though she continued to be drawn to good writing.

For example, although she felt the author of the blog *Bakerby* was a skilled writer, *Bakerby* didn't have a clearly defined goal beyond sharing the author's photos and thoughts. While Erin never went as far as saying *Bakerby* included the author's "weird emotions," she did, however, seem to drift away from that blog because of its focus on the author's day-to-day life and opinions. When asked why she stopped reading *Bakerby* she said, "I didn't make a conscious decision. I just sort of stopped going there [...] There's, like, interesting commentary. [But] sometimes it's just her thoughts. Maybe that's why I stopped reading it. It's just this random Danish person talking about their life and I really don't care, so I stopped going."

While Erin did read them consistently, she was careful not to position herself as someone too immersed in blogs. Many of the blogs she read were blogs she heard of from her sister and, also, her sister's roommate. On finding *Bakerby* she explained,

I heard about it from my sister who heard about it from her roommate who are like blog junkies who just follow from one link to another [...] [my sister's roommate is] ridiculous. She's really funny, but she reads every single blog and I don't know how she accomplishes anything because she just sort of goes through them. That's what she does.

Of herself, Erin said, "I'm not like that. I get bored. Like I'll just start reading things and then I'm like, 'I don't care about your life that much,' and just stop."

Social Networking

When it comes to social interaction with others online, the majority of Erin's interactions occurred on Facebook. Her Internet Use Log from November indicated she spent about one and a half hours on Facebook during the week she logged her use. Erin used Facebook to post pictures, read and comment on friends' status

updates, and to post her own status. By later in the school year, she also belonged to Facebook groups connected to her dorm and other university-related activities, and she would check the notifications section to decide whether or not she would actually read those messages. Though she was an avid Facebook user during the Fall semester, at that time her evaluation of social networking's value as a way to maintain ties with others was matter of fact and even critical. She stated, "That's how we socialize now." Describing some of the downfalls of interacting through Facebook, she said,

I think we replace organic normal meetings with like a comment and that like that counts as, I don't know, we count that as socializing, we count that as interacting with people when it's really like so...it's really, really isolated. Like you're sitting in your room by yourself and there's really no human interaction there [...] I think it's a bad thing, but it's just a reality. It's more efficient and it's easier, so I do it.

In an interview via e-mail a few months after she made the above comments, Erin's reflections on social networking were well thought out, clearly formulated, and very different. Her schedule had become increasingly busy, and for that reason, social networking became even more important to her. With its increased importance in her life, she felt more positive about the process than she had in her first interview. She wrote:

I think that "social" networks, such as twitter and facebook, are replacing organic social interaction. I often communicate with people through these sites instead of talking in person. I do not think it is bad that we are replacing traditional socializing with a manufactured variety that we conduct on the internet because I have found that it is much easier to keep in touch with people on the internet when I am busy [...] now that I have started working, I think it is an extremely effective way to communicate with people.

Social networking also allowed Erin to maintain connections with people she either no longer saw face-to-face or, because of her busy schedule, saw less frequently.

“My sister is abroad this year and the only way we talk is through the internet and I love that I have the ability to do so. Also I am spending less time in my dorm but I still feel connected to that community because I am in the facebook community.”

Erin is also thoughtful and perceptive about social networking, Facebook specifically, as a space for deliberate representation of identity on the part of users. Discussing the sometimes constructed nature of Facebook, she stated of other Facebook users,

You’re socializing with this page they’ve created, not them[...] I like reading people’s book sections because they’re either like, “Eww, books,” or they put these really huge epic classic novels that they probably didn’t read. So I feel like it’s kind of fake. Like how you want to seem, not so much...realistic.

She didn’t separate herself from the users she describes above. When asked if her own profile contained the same sort of constructed “face,” she replied, “A little bit. I think everyone does [...] Like I’ll sit there for five minutes and try to think up how to word something.” The constructed nature of a user’s profile is tied up in Erin’s struggle to define social networking itself. Early in the research project she called Facebook a form of socially acceptable “cyberstalking,” saying, “I always kind of feel like a crazy person when I’m on there, but everyone else does it so it’s okay.”

She continued, however, by comparing Facebook to a site like eHarmony, a site with a similar set up but a very different, more focused objective. Reflecting on a relative’s eHarmony site and the less concrete objective of Facebook, she stated,

You have like your picture, you have your [information] about you, hobbies, books, movies. It was exactly the same. So there

it had a really concrete objective, but on Facebook they say social networking. So are you doing the same thing? Are you looking for people to date? Does it facilitate that or, I don't know, it's almost...I just think it's weird that, like how people love to talk about themselves. This just feeds that narcissism. It's like, "Here. Fill out all this." And people *will* go read it.

She was clearer, however, when she discussed the purpose of her own

Facebook page, a purpose she felt was more about the profiles of others:

I mean, it's in part my own personal page that I made to tell people about me but I haven't included that much personal information so I think it's more to learn things about other people and to communicate with them. So I don't think it's like creating a personal page as much as like seeing other people's.

Beyond Facebook for social networking, during the Spring semester Erin also reported starting a Twitter account. She seemed to have started her Twitter account that semester for reasons that were vague even to her, writing, "I have started a [T]witter account. I don't know exactly why I started it, I guess it just sounded interesting." Beyond her February interview, Erin never again mentioned her Twitter account.

Erin's increased use of Facebook during the Spring semester was in contrast to her decreased use of the Internet for other recreational uses. She even considered deleting her Facebook account at one point: "I guess I realized how much time I was spending just not accomplishing anything, just stumbling around. I guess I realized that it was a time constraint, especially this past semester. And I was just like, 'No more of that.' And I thought about deleting my Facebook, but I didn't do that."

Facebook also served as a point of overlap between her academic life and her social life. She was friends on Facebook with many of her dormmates and

classmates, and they used Facebook to discuss assignments or other course-related matters. The students from her second semester Honors Seminar tried to start a Facebook group based on the class blog, “but that didn’t really take off.” Many students from the class did, however, friend each other at Facebook and stayed in touch that way.

Portrait 2: Will

During the fall of 2009, eighteen-year-old Will was also in his first year at SWU where he was majoring in Biology and minoring in dance. He described his racial background as half African American, one-quarter Indian [Native American], and one-quarter Hispanic. Will was an only child and was adopted as an infant by a single, Italian American mother. Will always lived only with his mother, but was very close to his tightly knit extended family. His mother was a teacher most of Will’s life, though the subjects she taught varied over time. When he was born, she owned and taught at her own martial arts studio on the East Coast. Will and his mother later moved to the Southwest where she taught martial arts at a public school and later became a shop teacher. By the time Will reached high school, she had a license to teach Special Education and taught science for the Special Education department of a high school in a district neighboring the one where Will attended school. In addition to teaching she also worked part time as a home inspector.

Will lived at home with his mother during his first year at SWU. Their home was about a thirty-minute drive from campus, and Will made the commute daily. Beyond a rigorous academic schedule, Will had a busy dance schedule as well, spending approximately twenty hours per week in dance activities not related to

school. Some of those activities were paid. During the Fall semester, for example, Will was part of an annual production of the *Nutcracker* ballet staged by the city's ballet company. Will had been cast in the role of the Nutcracker, the first African American to dance the part for this particular company. Landing the role was an especially impressive feat since Will only began to formally study dance when he reached middle school. Beyond his role as the Nutcracker, for which he received a small stipend, Will also taught dance two hours a week. The studio where he taught was connected to an independent dance troupe he'd belonged to since his senior year in high school. While the teaching was paid, membership in the troupe itself—which performed at local venues and events and required several hours a week of his time—was not paid.

Will's earliest memories of using the Internet went back to about the third or fourth grade when he would use his cousin's computer as well as his cousin's AOL Instant Messenger account to chat online. He first had Internet access at school starting in 2002 when he was in the sixth grade, and at that time his mother also had Internet installed at home.

In general, Will saw himself as someone who wasn't good with technology, saying,

I'm not very technical. I don't know, I'm not very good with technology like with computers and stuff. I get confused too easily. Like I can do the basics and I can do probably more than like the older generations can do, like what my mom can do. I can help her with stuff but I'll still need help with stuff that I know my generation can do better.

Despite what he saw as a lower level of technical savvy when compared to his peers, Will added, "I'm fine where I'm at." When Will discussed technology, he often

brought up gaming as a reference point, and attributed some of his lack of knowledge about computers to his lack of experience with gaming, saying,

For me personally, I haven't been in touch with a lot of the technological advances because, one, I'm not like a gaming person [...]I had like a hand held game, like a Gameboy and a Nintendo DS, but none of the big systems they have. I think for the most part it wasn't that [my mom] didn't want me to have it as much as we didn't have the money to waste, like money can be spent for a better reason [...]So I think in that sense, I wasn't able to have the technology to hone my technological skills.

While she didn't value gaming, his mother encouraged his use of technology, and the Internet specifically, as a way to expand his knowledge. Not only did his mother bring the Internet into their home at the same time it became available in his school, she encouraged him to see the Internet as a useful academic resource, "I think she's encouraged [my Internet use] just from, I don't know, just using that source as a good informational highway. Like just to be able to find the information I need, and to do research, and to be successful."

At the time of our interviews, Will and his mother had three computers in their home. Will most often used his MacPro laptop, which he purchased to use for college. His mom had a laptop that wasn't working properly, but worked well enough that it was "still useful." And they also had the older desktop computer he had used growing up, a computer Will thought they bought in about 2000. His house had cable Internet, but no wireless. They were planning to purchase a wireless router eventually, possibly as a Christmas gift for Will. Will also used wireless access on campus and occasionally used a computer lab in the student union to print and another lab in the African American Students Services center to do homework. Will estimated he spent about three hours per week doing

homework on campus, which often required Internet access; the rest he did at home.

Will also had an iPod Touch, but he only occasionally used it to access the Internet, saying, “I tend not to use the iPod Touch as much for online use because it’s a lot harder because you have to type it in, and it takes a lot longer to do, and a lot longer to load.” He did use the Internet for his Touch to occasionally look something up on Google, to check for any e-mails he might be waiting for, or to go to the Apple Apps store to download free games. He did not report using any other handheld device to access the Internet.

On a typical day, Will used the Internet to check his Facebook account and, sometimes, his MySpace account; to check both his e-mail accounts—an MSN account and his SWU account; and to check in on or complete homework assignments. Because of his heavy dance schedule, Will elected not to complete an Internet Use Log first semester. The log he completed second semester indicated that he used the Internet anywhere from a few minutes to three hours in a day for the weeks he logged, with time fluctuating based on how busy he was with other responsibilities, particularly dance.

The Internet for Academic Purposes: Research, Repetition, and Understanding “Why.”

During his first semester at SWU, Will was enrolled in seventeen credit hours, which included English 101—an expository writing course, a 100 level College Algebra course, ballet, and aerobics. He was also enrolled in a public speaking course that paired up with a special interest discussion class entitled

“Black Living and Cultural Knowledge.” Will was required to use online course management sites for both his English and math classes. His English instructor posted assignments on WebCT, and students downloaded the assignments from there. His math class used an interactive course management site called MathXL, through which students completed and submitted homework and quizzes. He was also required to do Internet-based research for the speeches he wrote and delivered in his public speaking class. Will completed research for speeches mostly by using online research databases available through SWU’s library, but the instructor also allowed students to use online books, also sourced through the SWU library, and sites from the World Wide Web. For his “Black Living and Cultural Knowledge” class, students were required to find an article on a current event to bring to class for discussion. Most students in the class, Will included, drew those articles from the Internet.

Will also used the Internet for his Ballet 3 class. Students needed to watch videos of two specific ballets and then research information on the choreographer and composer along with other basic information to write a paper on those ballets. The teacher informed the class that she had only one DVD of the ballets available for students to use, but the videos were also available online. Finding the video online led to an interesting group effort centered on YouTube. Originally, the instructor informed students they could simply type in the name of the ballets to find the video. There was, however, a specific version of the ballets the teacher wanted students to watch. Will recounted how the class located the video they needed to see:

Well [the instructor] was saying originally the first day of class or whatever that we should be able to find it on YouTube and then closer to the time we had to get it done she said it was definitely on YouTube and other people were confirming it, too [...] No one had problems. They all did it. Some people had, cause there's different sources of where you can get it on YouTube, some people had different versions of it maybe. But there was the main version that they were talking about in class that, it would have four different video clips of it, four different sections of it. So if you found those then you got the right one.

In the Spring semester, Will was enrolled in fifteen credit hours, including General Chemistry with a lab, Psychology, English 102—a course in analytical and argumentative writing, Trigonometry, and Advanced Tumbling. All but his advanced tumbling class required Internet use to some degree. His English class, Psychology class, and Chemistry lab all relied on the course management system WebCT for Internet requirements. For English, Will downloaded readings from WebCT and was occasionally required to use WebCT to submit short answers for homework, specifically as a make up assignment if he'd missed class. His Psychology course relied more substantially on WebCT where students were required to take five quizzes per week. The quizzes could be taken multiple times before the due date, and students had to achieve a certain score on each quiz before they could move on to the next one. Students also had the option of watching Psychology lectures online instead of attending class. Will always, however, chose to attend class in person. He reported that part of his motivation for attending class was the instructor's use of i>Clicker, a student response system that enables students in a classroom to participate in question-and-answer polls and participate in activities through a small voting device. Students answered multiple-choice questions in class using i>Clicker devices, and received participation points for the activity. Students

could answer the same questions online, but Will felt doing so would be too confusing.

For his Chemistry course, Will used several different course management systems. For the lecture portion of the course, he completed and submitted homework and quizzes through the site WebAssign, and he used eReserves to access PowerPoint slides, which he could use to follow along with the lecture in class. Will also went to WebCT to watch procedural videos for his lab experiments and then to submit data for those labs. Here, however, he experienced some technical difficulties:

I found out halfway through the semester that the chem lab videos actually had sound to them. And that's why I always felt lost in class. They were explaining exactly what to do and how many drops to put into the vial. And I was just going off of the video [...]. So for the first part I didn't know that there was any voice to it because I had to download, I couldn't use the regular one because it was for Windows, not for a Mac and so then I ended up having to download it onto my computer into my iTunes account and then playing it from there and that was the only way I was able to get voice.

Will believed he was one of just a few students to encounter problems with sound for his videos. SWU's chemistry department produced the videos, and directions for watching the videos on a Mac were included at WebCT. Will said of the instructions, "I read [them] but I didn't really understand it." Despite his difficulties with the videos and even though he had three separate sites to visit, Will said he probably wouldn't make changes to the Internet requirements for his Chemistry course.

His Trigonometry instructor did not use WebCT, nor did he use MathXL as Will's College Algebra instructor had. According to Will, "He just e-mails the [at home quizzes] and we have to print it out." Will's use of the word "just" to describe

Internet requirements for Trigonometry provides a glimpse of his attitude toward the differences in Internet use for his first and second semester math classes.

First semester, Will was obviously extremely happy with his math class. The College Algebra course was a lecture course of about forty to fifty students. The class met twice a week, and in a typical course meeting, the instructor first explained how to complete certain problems while students took notes. Next, she would split the students into groups and they would work together on problems similar to those they would encounter in their upcoming homework assignment on MathXL, an activity Will seemed to appreciate, saying, “That way, we pretty much know how to do the homework before we actually get to the assignment.” The instructor also had a time set aside in class when students could ask questions on the previous MathXL homework assignment. All homework for the course was completed on MathXL, and Will estimated he spent about four to six hours a week doing homework for the course. Students had assignments due two to three times a week. For each due date, students first watched a video file explaining how to work the problems. The video was followed by fifteen homework problems and then a quiz. If students had difficulty with a specific problem, they could use what Will called a “Help Me Solve This button” which gave step-by-step assistance for that problem, followed by a similar problem for credit.

Will was successful in the class, and he acknowledged his own role in that success, saying of his classroom habits, “I tend to [sit] in the center, and I’m not one of the quiet ones and so I do get the attention that I need, and if I have a question, I’ll definitely be sure to ask her. I won’t be afraid to.” But he was also very positive in

his assessment of MathXL, praising its in-depth explanation, and saying, “it gives you repetition as well, so that way you just get more familiar with the problem.”

Will also pointed to the important role MathXL can play for teachers. “For classes that are really big in number, it’s really hard for teachers to split themselves to concentrate on each student’s personal success and problems [...] I feel like a teacher can’t and probably shouldn’t be able to do that.” Despite the large size of his math class, Will felt all students could get the individual help they needed because of the MathXL program.

The next semester, when his trigonometry teacher chose not to use MathXL, Will reflected even further on the positive attributes of MathXL, and, in fact, even seemed prepared to discuss MathXL in our final interview:

First semester when I was in the [College Algebra] class, Math 121, we were able to use the MathXL program that I talked about before. And that really helped me because it was really instructional and showed you how to do each problem step-by-step so that you actually knew how to do it instead of in the past class I just took for Trig [where] we just did everything on paper and he didn’t have any homework assignments and we just had to hand in quizzes every week. And so that was a lot harder because it was a hit or miss type thing, kind of, because you had to do it more on your own without any, like, rewards.

Will praised his College Algebra instructor’s decision to use MathXL and criticized his Trigonometry instructor’s decision not to use MathXL. While Will focused on the value of MathXL itself in his interview, his description of his College Algebra class also points to in-class steps his instructor took to make MathXL a success. Rather than using MathXL only as a vehicle for homework, by previewing the work they’d do and then reviewing the work after they’d completed it, she incorporated students’ MathXL assignments into the daily framework of the class.

By linking the course and the MathXL program so closely together, she made it both relevant and useful to her students.

Other classes had Internet-based assignments he found less relevant. In his Spring semester English class, for instance, he was critical of online work that didn't seem relevant to course content. For instance, he felt some of the questions his English 102 instructor posted at WebCT "didn't really help at all what we were doing." When asked for an example, Will responded, "For one of them we just had to list all of our courses. That was it." While his instructor may have had a legitimate reason for asking for the list (and, in fairness to her, may have stated that reason), Will was unaware of that reason and labeled the assignment unhelpful.

Will also took a critical view of some of his online research assignments for his first semester public speaking class. One speech in particular required that students use three separate sources, all of which could be drawn from online databases or the Internet. Will, however, felt two sources should have been sufficient,

I found it kind of pointless. Why would I need three when I can find all the information that I need on it in two? If you're able to do something with less struggle, I think you should be able to do it. I know that they're trying to teach you to look in multiple places and find multiple information [sic]. But if it's information that you know that it's concrete [...] If I can find all that I need to accomplish what my goal is, then I shouldn't need to find other sources to help.

When asked how giving his speech would be different from printing out one source and giving it to his instructor or classmates, Will had a ready, considered answer.

"Because I put it in my own words. And I put my perspective on it, so that I could analyze it. Because the website will give you the information, but you still need to

analyze it.” Will’s answer is, in some ways, valid. He can add his own analysis and interpretation to information from just one source. What he seems to have desired in the assignment he described is a more defined reason why one high quality source isn’t enough to meet the assignment’s goal.

Will is, by no means, opposed to using the Internet for research in general. He reported frequently using the Internet for research and additional resources even when it wasn’t required for his classes. For example, he often used the Internet for his chemistry class to find information on chemicals for his lab, to convert units of measurement, and as an aid to better understanding concepts. When he used the Internet on his own to find information for classes, he went to Google, Wikipedia, and “other less known websites.” He was careful to point out that he only researched “general facts that can be confirmed other places.” Of Wikipedia specifically, he stated,

And I will, truthfully, look at the Wikipedia stuff. Because it does have a lot of useful information, but I’ll make sure like on Wikipedia, they have information on where they got the information. So you can click on those links and see where they got that information [...] and see what information you can get from those because most people don’t want you to reference Wikipedia. So you can just reference the ones, the links that they have on there.

Will may have been careful to qualify his uses of Wikipedia for several reasons. He seemed to have instructors who didn’t allow him to use Wikipedia for research. He may also have been stepping lightly because, in high school—when I was his teacher—he was not allowed to directly reference Wikipedia. I believe it most likely, however, that Will, like his peers, was aware of the academic conversation that often surrounds the validity of user-created sites like Wikipedia. Rather than

avoiding what he saw as a useful resource, he looked for ways to verify and validate the information he gained from the site.

Wikipedia was also a space where Will's use of the Internet for academics and his use of the Internet for recreation intersected. Sometimes, when he was "bored," Will visited Wikipedia and chose the "Random Article" button from the Wikipedia menu, "And I'll click on it until I find something kind of interesting and I'll kind of educate myself on that." He also consults Wikipedia if he had a question about information he encountered in his daily life,

I'll listen to something or I'll hear something on the radio and I'll think "What is that?" and I'll inform myself of what it is, and maybe I'll get a little sidetracked and find some other information that'll lead me to some more stuff that I'll try to learn about [...] And so that could help me. Like sometimes in essays, you could use [that new knowledge] just to relate a message somehow to a different point that someone else made or something.

The Internet for Social and Recreational Purposes: Entertainment and Maintaining Relationships

Dance

Will's use of the Internet for dance is difficult to classify as strictly, or even primarily, either academic or social and recreational. Since dance was his minor, it might be argued that all of his dance activities were related to his academic life. Not all of his dance activities were recreational either, since he was paid, for example, to teach classes and to dance as part of *The Nutcracker*. Dance spanned many parts of his life, and Will often used the Internet to keep his various dance obligations and responsibilities organized.

During the Fall semester, his dance rehearsal schedule for *The Nutcracker*, a schedule that was often complicated and sometimes changed on short notice, was posted at a password protected page of the dance company's website. The independent dance troupe to which he belonged maintained a MySpace page intended to keep the public informed of upcoming performances. By the end of his first year of college the dance troupe also had a Facebook page and a committee had been formed within the troupe to build a website, though Will was not a member of that committee. He also joined the SWU dance department Facebook group and occasionally used the group to find information about events on campus.

TV Online

Will was also a fan of various television series and used the Internet to keep up on those shows. While Will and his mom had cable Internet, they didn't subscribe to cable television. After the nationwide switch from analog to digital television in 2009, they didn't purchase a converter box, and so had no television service at their house beyond what they accessed online. At the time of his first interview, Will was watching the series *Dexter* online. When he decided to start watching *Dexter*, Will says, "I just typed it [into] Google and found some sites that I could watch it on." At the time of his Fall semester interview, Will was using the site Cucirca to watch *Dexter*, and visited the NBC website weekly to watch new episodes of the series *Heroes*. Later in the school year, he reported watching the CW series *The Vampire Diaries* as well as the HBO series *True Blood* at Cucirca. He was also watching *Lost* at Hulu.com, admitting he'd become "addicted" to the series.

Although he'd heard of the site before, Will didn't begin using Cucirca until he came across the site when he Googled various television series he wanted to watch. Sometimes Cucirca came up first, but often he found it to simply be the most reliable, stating, "Sometimes [Cucirca] would be one of the last ones to show up but then the other ones would be, it wouldn't be like the real episode or it wouldn't let you watch it, like you'd have to have a membership or it would be in a different language or something."

Cucirca, whose author or authors are unidentifiable within the site, describes itself as a website "[b]orn from the passion for entertainment." Cucirca's "About" page continues on to state, "Our goal is to bring entertainment closer to fans [...]" This website exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a blog beyond just one person and to foster discussion among its members." At the time of this writing, Cucirca had links to thirty-seven shows at its site. The "About" page also makes the clever statement that "Intellectual property belongs to Cucirca. Matter belongs to God." However, the "Disclaimer" page (which is linked from the small navigation menu at the bottom of each page rather than the large navigation bar at the top) makes it very clear that "Cucirca.com brings entertainment closer to fans in a perfect [sic] legal way." Cucirca does not host or upload any media files on its servers, but functions instead through links to external sites. Because the shows on Cucirca are hosted at other websites, the site states, "**Cucirca.com is not responsible for the accuracy, decency, copyright, legality or any other aspect of the content of the linked sites**" (emphasis in the original). Cucirca then politely directs any questions or comments over issues of legality to those sites.

Viewer discussions at Cucirca are hosted by the external comments system DISCQUS. Users can create usernames and logins to join discussions about series and episodes. Comments in the discussion section are generally brief with most comments centering around episode or series content, although users sometimes leave comments about maintenance regarding links that have been removed or are broken.

Though Will regularly watched television online, and at Cucirca specifically, he did not take part in the discussion boards that often accompany such sites. He reported sometimes reading through the comments on a specific video if he was having technical difficulties and wanted to see if others were having the same problem. He didn't, however, like to read commentary on the content of the shows he was watching for two main reasons. First, some commentary contained spoilers that might give away information about an episode he was watching. Second, he wasn't inclined to read reviews and opinions from people he didn't know, especially since those opinions were likely to differ from his own:

I just don't really have any interest in hearing what other people think. Like I'll talk about it with my friends. Like my friend in Virginia, because we both watch the same shows pretty much so we'll talk about it, but then like, I don't know these people. It's kind of like going to, like going looking at the movie reviews or something because I know that I totally have a different outlook on movies than a lot of people so there's no point in me following someone else's [opinion].

At least one external site linked to by Cucirca imposed a seventy-two minute time limit on viewing videos. Users would then need to take a break before continuing to watch videos through that host (unless they followed directions on averting the time limit available in the "How To" archive and included in a link

below many of the episodes). By second semester, Will was using Cucirca less often because of the seventy-two minute limit it imposed on viewers, though he still went there for programs he couldn't find elsewhere.

Social Networking

Will called himself a "social person" and enjoyed using social networking as a way to interact with friends. First semester, Will used Facebook and, occasionally, MySpace. By second semester, however, he had stopped checking his MySpace account, saying, "No one really uses it anymore. I don't really use it at all." Later he stated, "I think I [stopped] using it because it was more inconvenient. It wasn't as easy as Facebook. It wasn't as simple." After he stopped using MySpace, he socialized online exclusively through Facebook. At Facebook, Will checked his friends' status updates as well as notifications of any messages he might have received or updates and activity on any Facebook applications he used. In general, he said, he used Facebook to "stay in contact with friends and be updated on what everyone is doing."

Will also used Facebook as a means of building and maintaining friendships across both distance and time. For example, in middle school he attended a performing arts charter school in a neighboring school district, but did not remain there for high school. Through other friends on Facebook a middle school friend from the performing arts academy located his account and they were back in contact, something Will felt wouldn't have happened without Facebook. He also kept in touch with a high school friend who moved to Virginia as well as another friend he made while visiting her.

Will labeled himself “addicted” to the Facebook application “Café World,” and played “Castle Age” as well. While he invited his whole Facebook friends list to play Castle World, he mostly did so to gain more points within that application. He mainly interacted with just one specific friend, Lilly, in “Castle Age.” He met Lilly while visiting his friend in Virginia, and he credits “Castle Age” with helping to build their friendship:

My best friend moved to Virginia a few years ago and so I visited her this year, this summer, and met her friend Lilly. And Lilly added Castle Age after I invited her, and there’s this thing where you can send gifts, and with those gifts you can unlock stuff [...] So sometimes she’ll [Instant Message] me and she’ll be like hey, send me a blahdy-blah and I’ll be like, okay, send me this or whatever. And so we’ll just keep on doing that [...] I probably think that we would have stayed in contact but it wouldn’t have been...like now that we have this other interest together it kind of makes it more of a beneficial relationship, I guess. I don’t know. Like we have something in common so now we can talk about more stuff instead of just like kind of something that was dwindling before.

In addition to the UNM dance group, Will also belonged to an SWU “Spirit” group. Interest groups, according to Will, are another positive part of social networking, along with speed of communication, and the ability to make friends:

I think [Facebook is] just a really good social network, like you can keep your long distance contacts that you’ve had and still remain close. And it’s a lot easier than using, like a long time ago, when you had to write letters. Well, not a long time ago [...] Like that takes a while. But like here you can instant message someone right now on that social network. So it’s a lot easier to keep in contact with friends. Also to make new friends in interests groups. Like I’m part of some of the SWU groups like [SWU] “Spirit” or something. And so you can always make friends that way if you need.

Despite his statement, Will didn’t seem to use the groups he belonged to as a means of making friends directly, though he did use groups very occasionally to find events on campus, where it’s possible he did meet new people.

While Will used Facebook as a way to maintain relationships, he also saw ways Facebook could interfere with offline relationships. He viewed Facebook and its various applications as something that, even though a user is interacting with others at the site, should be used alone:

I probably wouldn't use [Facebook] if like, well, actually most online stuff, I probably wouldn't do if other people were there. Just because, I feel like, you can use more time more wisely by communicating with people—because I almost find it a little disrespectful when you're like talking to someone and they're just like doing whatever on their computer or they're playing solitaire or something.

(Not) Writing Online

Beyond Facebook, Will tended not to add content to the sites he visited online. The questionnaire he completed early in the research project asked what sort of writing he did online that wasn't related to school or work. Will's reply was short, even terse, "I don't post things on websites. I feel that it is a waste of time." In his first interview he elaborated on that answer:

I guess I was kind of thinking [...] more of blogs. It's not that it's a waste of time, per se [...] I don't know. I feel like you can be using that time for a more productive use, instead of just—like a lot of people they just complain about their lives online on blogs. And instead of just writing it down online, why don't you be proactive about it and actually do something to change it instead of, yeah it's good to let your feelings out, but instead of just letting them out actually take control of your life and do something instead of just sitting there depressed.

For Will, that sort of proactive change would take place away from the computer.

Will had other, broader reasons not to add content online as well. When asked if he added anything to Cucirca.com, the site where he often watched television online, he stated, "I don't like to assert my presence [...] Because I feel that there's a lot of creepers on the Internet and like in the Internet world that can access

what you do.” Will’s concern for the safety of his own information and privacy of his actions didn’t, however, extend to Facebook, where Will felt more comfortable adding content. He admitted that there are also “creepers” monitoring people’s actions at Facebook, but adds,

I don’t know. It’s different, but not really. Because I know more about Facebook and it’s more legit just because it’s in the public eye and if something were to go wrong, there’s like really big controversies or like situations where someone gets, like, I don’t know, something happens because of Facebook, then it would become nationally known and like there’d be a whole scandal and Facebook would [go] underground or something. So it’s more legit just because it’s in the public eye more, I guess.

Conclusions

Erin and Will represent two of the first-year college students who may enter our first-year writing courses. During their first year at college, the Internet was required in nearly all of their classes in varying amounts and with what both participants saw as varying degrees of success. While both Erin and Will experienced Internet requirements that they criticized for being irrelevant or simply “busy work,” each was also enrolled in a course for which they found the Internet requirements to be an extremely successful part of the class, and approached those requirements with diligence, thoughtfulness, and even excitement. The participants’ commitment to the requirements they found successful was very likely a factor in the success of these requirements; however, both students also described their instructors’ roles in making the requirements a success either through incorporating the requirements into the daily structure of the class or through emphasizing and modeling for students the importance of the requirements.

Their Internet use often reflects their offline interests and activities, and while their uses of the Internet are similar in many ways, they are both distinct in their primary motives for using the Internet. Erin tends to use the Internet to browse various websites and blogs. She is drawn to well-crafted pros and often, though not exclusively, to authors who are close to her in age or share some of her interests and political or social values. Will, a self-proclaimed “social” person, uses the Internet to balance his hectic schedule and to maintain the friendships that are so important to him despite the constraints school and dance place on his time. He also uses the Internet to watch television, a pastime he enjoys but one that would otherwise be limited by his lack of access to cable television.

For Erin and Will, their mutual choices not to write online may serve, in part, as a reflection of the emphasis they placed on their online lives and the relationships they formed in that sphere. Neither Erin nor Will cared to enter into conversations—whether on politics or pop culture—with people they didn’t know personally. While both did interact with others at the social networking site Facebook, the primacy of their offline lives is again visible in the ways they used the site to stay connected with friends they knew offline but may not have been able to see on a regular basis.

Unlike Erin and Will, the two participants featured in the next chapter—Krista and Rachel—place a great deal of significance on their online social and recreational lives. Their online social ties and activities are more important to Krista and Rachel than many of those in their offline lives and serve as both a release from and, at times as a hindrance to, their academic lives.

CHAPTER 4

KRISTA AND RACHEL

Participants Rachel and Krista both spent considerable chunks of time using the Internet every day, building and maintaining active online social and recreational lives and working to meet academic requirements and responsibilities. Many of their academic Internet requirements echo those of Erin and Will detailed in the previous chapter. While more of Rachel's courses than Krista's required Internet use, both accessed the Internet for a variety of academic purposes. Krista and Rachel used the Internet to access course information, grades, and assignments; to submit and receive work via e-mail; to access additional readings not available in their textbooks; and to conduct required research.

For both Krista and Rachel, their online social and recreational activities took on great significance in their lives. Both were active participants in online communities where Krista interacted with friends she knew offline as well as people she only knew online and where Rachel had built a group of extremely close friends she knew only through the online role playing game they played together. Krista and Rachel attributed their online social lives in part to their disinterest in what they saw as the college "party" scene, but for both participants their membership in their respective online communities began while they were still in high school. Such rich online lives could sometimes interfere with their academic lives and both participants took steps at various points in the academic year to remedy this problem. Before her first year of college even began, Rachel decided not to download her favorite online role playing game onto the computer she used for

school. In response to her first semester grades, Krista attempted to use the Internet as a reward for completing certain amounts of schoolwork during her second semester at college.

The Internet based communities in which Rachel and Krista participated were central in their online lives. Neither wrote extensively for audiences beyond these communities, but both wrote in ways they felt helped to maintain or enhance the sites at which they wrote—Krista by commenting on maintenance issues at online video and game sites and Rachel by offering constructive criticism to the writing of other community members at the site FanFiction.Net.

Both Krista and Rachel felt comfortable navigating online spaces and both used computers and the Internet with ease. Neither, however, considered herself an expert with computers, saying their technical savvy was relative to the abilities of others. While both acknowledged that they could do more with computers than many other people they know, they viewed their skills in comparison to the abilities of others whom they felt had more experience and expertise. Krista, for example, saw her own abilities in relation to people who build and maintain their own sites, something she didn't know how to do but hoped to learn while in college. Rachel compared her own abilities with computers and the Internet to those of her father, a computer engineer who could solve almost any problem Rachel might encounter with her computer or the Internet. Like Erin and Will, Krista and Rachel were also thoughtful and articulate about their Internet uses and habits, some of which is reflected in what follows.

Portrait Three: Krista

In the fall of 2009, Krista was an eighteen-year-old white woman in her first year of classes at CCSW, a two-year community college in the same city as SWU. She was majoring in General Studies and planned to transfer those credits to a technical university in the same state as SWU after she finished her Associate degree. When she did enter the university, she hoped to major in a math or engineering-related field. Krista lived at home with her parents, older sister, and younger brother. Another older sister attended SWU, where she had transferred after finishing an Associate degree at the same community college Krista was attending. That sister lived in an apartment closer to school, though Krista saw her frequently and communicated with her regularly through the Internet. Krista's father was an employee in a city court system and her mother was an educational aid in an elementary school near their home. Her mother was also enrolled at CCSW where she was taking courses in a computer networking certification program.

CCSW has four separate campuses. Though it wasn't the closest campus to her house, Krista took most of her classes at the main CCSW campus (which is adjacent to SWU). Krista and her family lived a thirty-minute drive from the main CCSW campus, so she made the commute daily usually with her dad via a park and ride city bus. Krista had a job as a Girl Scout camp counselor during the summer, but did not work outside of school during the school year. She did, however, volunteer along with her mother and sister to lead the Girl Scout troop she belonged to in high school.

Krista reported first using the Internet in the sixth or seventh grade, but did not elaborate beyond that statement within the interviews or survey. She received a laptop as a high school graduation gift, and that is the primary computer she used to access the Internet. Her family owned two additional computers, but only one of them was connected to the Internet. Krista only rarely used her cell phone to connect to the Internet and then just to check e-mail. She did not own any other hand-held Internet-ready device.

On a scale of one to ten, Krista rated her interest in computers as a seven or eight. She credited that interest in computers to her experiences as a video gamer. She and her brother often played multiplayer video games together on the family's PlayStation 2, but Krista stated she didn't play any video games online. She did play games at Yahoo.com and, later in the school year, reported playing certain game applications at social networking sites she visited. While she saw a connection between her history playing offline video games and the games she played at places like Yahoo and Facebook (a connection discussed later in this chapter), she didn't classify those online games as "video games." Occasionally she used the Internet to look for information on codes and "cheats"—information that gave her an advantage or a special power within a video game—for the games she played ("Cheating in Video Games"). She also used the Internet to find release dates for new versions of certain games, and she sometimes read video game-related discussion boards online. Despite rating herself a seven or eight in terms of her interest in computers, she didn't yet see herself as a skilled computer user, stating, "I would not consider

myself good with computers, there is a lot I don't know how to do. I hope that taking college classes will help me learn more about computers."

In her initial survey, Krista estimated that she used the Internet about four hours a day during the summer (when she wasn't at Girl Scout camp, where access to the Internet was very limited). She estimated using the Internet two hours a day during the school year. According to her Internet Use Logs, during the weeks she tracked her Internet use during her first semester she was actually online anywhere from two and a half to six hours depending on the day. During her second semester, Krista began to make a conscious effort to use the Internet less, bringing her use more in line with the estimate she gave in her initial survey. At the beginning of the Spring semester, Krista wrote in an e-mail to me, "In a way the internet use logs are helping me manage my time better." With the logs, she could see just how much time she was spending at various sites and reassessed how much time she could afford to use in that way.

Krista was on campus most days of the week, spending anywhere from two hours to twelve hours there depending on the day. Because she often had downtime between classes, much of her computer use took place on campus. On a typical day, Krista used the Internet to check her e-mail, listen to music, chat and "just hang out" at the social networking site Gaia, watch Anime (Japanese animation), and read Manga (Japanese comic books and graphic novels). As the school year progressed, she also used the Internet to keep up on grades for her various classes and to check her Facebook account. She often had more than one site open at a time, particularly when she was using Gaia.

The Internet for Academic Purposes

Krista was enrolled in twelve credit hours during her first semester at CCSW, which included Advanced Algebra, Intro to Chemistry along with a chemistry lab, College Writing (a 100 level writing course emphasizing, according to the official course description, “text-based essay writing” as well as “critical reading, summary writing, and synthesis”), and a required one credit introductory course to Microsoft Outlook. Most of these classes required at least some Internet use. Her College Writing instructor had a personal website he’d built himself which included the class calendar, course readings, and a password protected message board. Students were also allowed to e-mail assignments to the instructor at his CCSW e-mail account if they were going to be absent. Her Chemistry instructor sent quizzes and assignments to the students via e-mail. On her own, Krista used Google to find a periodic table that she felt was more helpful than the one her instructor provided. The instructor-provided table didn’t give the full name of each element while the table she found on her own did. Her required Outlook class was conducted in a campus computer lab and used the course management program Blackboard. Advanced Algebra had no Internet requirements at all.

Krista’s College Writing class had a required textbook, but she reported that most of the readings for the semester came from the website. Students were required to download and print the readings and bring them to class. The instructor informed students that he chose to include assigned essays at his website as a way to expand beyond the scope of the textbook. She appreciated that he went beyond the textbook for readings, but she found the extra work required to access and print

the readings “sometimes annoying.” Despite that irritation, when asked what she might change about her Internet requirements for the class, she suggested a different approach to online readings on the instructor’s part rather than the elimination of extra reading and printing, saying, “If we could find our own stories on the Internet, that would have been helpful [...] We would have had more of a connection necessarily to the stories.” While an argument might be made against the ethics of using only a few readings out of a textbook students have been required to purchase, it is important to note that students could offset the cost of printing extra readings by using their on-campus printing privileges. Krista understood the print limit to be a fifteen page per day limit per students, but according to Krista, “They don’t actually monitor it, but they say preferably only fifteen pages.”⁴

During the Spring semester, Krista was again enrolled in twelve credit hours of classes, including Astronomy, Trigonometry, Biology, and College Success, a class designed to give students the organizational, time management, and study skills necessary to succeed at the college level. Only two of her courses during the Spring semester, Trigonometry and College Success, required students to use the Internet. Her Trigonometry instructor had a website where students could find lists of their missing assignments as well as homework and assignments students could print. Krista used the Internet on her own for a Trigonometry vocabulary assignment to look up definitions of math-related terms that she was unable to find in her

⁴ At the time of the research project, Krista’s school did not monitor students printing. According to the CCSW website, the school began a process of monitoring during the next academic year. At the time of this writing, no changes in printing policy were evident at the school’s website beyond active monitoring.

textbook. A Google search for definitions led her to the site Mathwords.com, which then became her primary resource for that assignment.

Internet requirements for her College Success course were more extensive. The course used a website that students accessed through the campus Internet portal, MyCCSW, and the last half of every class meeting was held in a computer lab. In an interview conducted over e-mail a few weeks into her second semester, Krista wrote,

My teacher posts link for the projects we do, like time management, memory techniques, comparing high school to college, etc. This class is to help us learn where our faults in learning are, like procrastination, and how to change those habits. This class has been helpful, I've learned some useful tips to help me get my homework in on time.

Many of the projects were group projects that required group members to do online research, and the students were given time to work on these projects during the portion of the class held in the computer lab. Students also had to give two individual presentations during the semester, also based on research done via the Internet.

During her final interview at the end of her first academic year at CCSW, Krista again made some positive reflections about her College Success course. She was particularly pleased with learning to do advanced Google searches that focused on academic sites ending in .edu, and learning how to find the information she needed for a course on her own rather than relying on the course's instructor to provide the information for her. Krista stated that she did sometimes find it difficult to locate the specific information the instructor seemed to want, but in one instance she and the members in her presentation group responded to the difficulty by

simply taking their presentation in a different direction based on the information they did find.

The Internet-intensive nature of the course brought to the surface the varying levels of comfort students in the class felt toward the Internet. Krista split the experience level in the class into two groups, saying, “There was a lot of it that was Internet based. A lot of the students didn’t like it because they weren’t good at using the Internet, but it was a lot easier for those of us who did know how to use the Internet.” She elaborated by explaining that the advanced Google searches “made sense” to her, while some of her classmates with what she perceived to be less experience with the Internet had difficulty understanding and executing those searches.

Krista’s interviews over the course of the school year raised some interesting points about the role research played in her first two semesters of college overall. In her first interview, conducted in October of her first semester at CCSW, one of the interview questions asked if she was required to do Internet-based research in any of her classes. She answered, “Not really. We don’t have a lot of research, even in my college writing class because [the instructor] provides most of the research we need for our class.” That semester, any minimal research she did, she conducted on her own and mostly through Google. Second semester she was required to do more research with requirements in both her Trigonometry course and, most especially, her College Success class. Still, in an interview that took place after the academic year had ended, Krista reflected on how she might change or improve the ways she was required to use the Internet during her first year as a college student, saying, “It

would be useful if they had databases, like when we did our senior thesis we had those databases, if they had those available to students in college, it would be useful.”

Krista is referring to a research project required of all graduating seniors at the high school she attended. In part, the project required that students learn to navigate and utilize subscription research databases hosted through the high school library. Krista completed her research project as part of the senior English class in which I was her teacher, and she and her classmates accessed databases including Academic Search Premier and Expanded Academic ASAP. Krista’s statement is significant for a few different reasons. First, CCSW did (and still does) have such databases. They’re accessible to the public from a link at the homepage of the CCSW library (though full access to database contents requires a password). There are many possible reasons Krista was unaware of the CCSW’s research databases. For example, it’s quite possible one of her instructors did discuss the databases, and Krista somehow missed or did not understand the information. Perhaps, because the second of the two required writing classes for all CCSW students is a research-intensive course and Krista planned to take that course in her second year of college, she would learn about it then. Whatever the reason, Krista made it through her first year of college level work, including a writing course and a course teaching the skills necessary for academic success, without knowledge of an important online learning resource available to her. Second, Krista’s knowledge that such databases exist underscores the importance of the prior academic knowledge students often bring to a first-year college classroom. Krista doesn’t seem to have attempted to use her

prior knowledge of academic research databases to seek them out on her own at her new school; however, according to her comment at least, none of her instructors encouraged her to use that prior knowledge during her first year at college.

The Internet for Social and Recreational Purposes

Anime, Manga and Fantasy

Krista used the Internet as a place to pursue her interest in fantasy novels and in anime and manga. She discussed fantasy novels at Gaia forums, and an original short story she once posted there was a work of fantasy. She also used the Barnes & Noble website as well as the homepage of the public library to access fantasy novels. She read some novels online through the public library website, and sometimes read the first chapter of fantasy books at the Barnes & Noble website to decide whether or not she wanted to purchase certain books.

The term manga comes from the Japanese word for comic books; manga in a broader sense can be thought of as Japanese (or Japanese manga-inspired) comic books and graphic novels. Anime, often derived from existing manga, are cartoons and movies of Japanese animation. Both anime and manga often involve fantasy or science fiction characters and plotlines. Krista depended heavily on the Internet as a place to pursue her interest in manga and anime. For example, “On certain [websites] I can read manga translated to English before the book has been released in the U.S.” She didn’t perceive a problem with copyright for manga she watched online, saying,

Like I know of three or four different manga websites and I know two of them are actually like they have permission from the authors to post the translated stuff on the Internet because they live in Japan not in America, so they don’t have to follow the American copyright rules.

But I know there's one website, MangaRun, that I'm not really sure if it's all legit or not. But other than that, I would say they're probably really legit.

She also did not seem to question the legitimacy of the anime she watched online.

While her interest in both manga and anime stayed consistent, the sites Krista used to access them shifted over the course of this research project. At the beginning of the project she watched anime primarily at the site AniLinkz.com. By second semester she was visiting that site much less, and watching anime at sites such as animeshippuuden.com and zomgamine.com instead. She often began using different sites based on the episodes and issues of anime and manga she could find at a particular site. She also sometimes stopped using sites, particularly manga sites such as mangafox.com because of an over abundance of advertisements, saying, “[T]hey have too many ads. Sometimes they take over the page and you have to go back.”

The problem of pop-up ads existed at some of the anime sites she visited as well. For example, we visited the site AniLinks together during our first interview, and suddenly a pop up ad took over the page and we had difficulty returning to the page we'd been reading. Krista commented that this kind of problem with pop up ads “happens all the time.” In a written interview conducted via e-mail in February, Krista reported that, despite the ads, she was still using AniLinks to view anime, though she was using another site, Animesippuden.com, more often. She writes, “I still use AniLinkz some [...] AniLinkz has many anime I like to watch although there are time limits on some of them.” Animeshippuuden allowed her to avoid some of those time limits:

I use animeshipudden more only because some anime websites have certain anime and some don't. Animeshipudden has an anime called Code Geass and I could only find it on that website. I then started using it more because the episodes load fast and there isn't a limit to the number you can watch in a given time.

The anime and manga sites Krista visited all contained some sort of discussion forum in which users could participate. Discussions generally appeared under a specific episode of anime or a chapter or issue of a specific manga. While Krista didn't often write at these boards, she did sometimes add a comment about an anime or manga she particularly liked or commented on a technical problem she discovered with a specific anime.

Sometimes if it's an anime that I really, really like, like *Black Cat*, I would comment on it. Or if there's something wrong with the video, I can't view it, or the quality is grainy I would comment so they could try to fix it [...] I would probably say, "I was watching this video and this time to this time is really fuzzy and you can't see what they're doing so you might want to try to find a new video to post."

Social Networking

When asked in the first interview how the Internet affected her social life, Krista answered, "Well, it creates a social life." She elaborated, saying,

Because you're in college you have so much time that you don't get to hang out with people that mostly your only friends are on the Internet. And when they're on the Internet, like normal people that you know everyday are on the Internet, it's easier to communicate with them even if you can't actually get together because of homework and stuff [...] I mean I like to hang out with my friends and go see a movie and stuff like that. It's just so much easier to access the Internet than go places now. It's a lot less expensive, too. So it makes it easier to have a social network without paying.

Krista's online social life included people she knew in her offline life as well as people she met online and knew only in an online context. She reported

interacting online with people from various places including Idaho, Connecticut, and Japan and probably beyond since many people she encountered online didn't reveal where they were from or it didn't come up in the conversations they were having.

Most of Krista's social interactions online occurred at the social networking site Gaia Online (or just "Gaia" as she called it). In both her initial questionnaire and her first interview, Krista discussed her use of the site Gaia Online at great length. At its "About" page, Gaia describes itself as "the worlds most active online community." The description continues by saying,

Gaia provides a fun, social environment that inspires individuality and creativity. With everything from art contests to discussion forums on poetry, politics, celebrities and more, to fully customizable profiles, digital characters and cars, Gaia is a place where teens can create their own space and express their individual style.

Such references to a specifically teen demographic are rare at Gaia, and Krista herself doesn't qualify that Gaia is intended for teens. In fact, she refers to users older than herself at one point, saying, "Some of the older people that you get to talk to are like, 'I don't really care if you know where I live,'" a statement implying that, while some of the users were her age, some of them were older.

Krista herself defined Gaia as "a chat site where people from all over the world can chat. It's also safer than places like [M]yspace and [F]acebook because you don't have to list any information or pictures if you don't wish to. I like to keep in touch with my friends and learn about other people's view using this website."

Users at Gaia create anime-inspired avatars that move through the site interacting with other users, visiting various stores and locations within the site, using a site-based currency called "Gold" to purchase clothing and accessories for

their avatars, participating in forums and completing “quests” (tasks such as taking polls, adding to forums, or registering an e-mail address) to earn more Gold to spend within the site. In short, the more a user participates at Gaia, the more Gold they can earn—Gold that increases their privileges within the site. Krista uses the Gold she earned by taking part in forums, polls, and quests to buy items for her Avatar or fish for her online aquarium within Gaia. While Gaia is a free site, users can purchase “Monthly Collectibles” for their avatars using real money, something Krista occasionally did. She saw these sales as something Gaia does to financially support the site. Gaia also features third party ads, which users can disable by spending a certain amount of real money on purchases at the site or by paying a monthly fee to permanently disable the ads. Krista did not report paying to disable such ads.

Krista primarily used Gaia for playing games, participating in discussion forums and online polls, and private messaging back and forth with friends she knew offline or that she met through Gaia. Her private messaging was often conversational in nature. Said Krista, “Its kind of like just like an update. ‘How is life right now?’ ‘How are you doing?’ Stuff like that.”

She even reported the potential for getting help on homework, but that help was offered within the context of casual conversation she discussed above, and Krista didn’t necessarily accept the offers: “I know people have offered to help when you’re like, ‘I’m having trouble with my homework.’ They’ve offered to help you solve it. I don’t know. I’ve gotten better at looking on Google for specifically what I’m looking for.”

Forums can cover any range of topics, though Krista was most interested in forums dealing with anime or with certain fantasy book series she followed. Some of the forums to which Krista belonged were invitation only and others were open to any member of Gaia. Invitations could sometimes come from participation in other forums. Krista, for example, participated in an invitation-only forum about a series of fantasy novels. The moderator of that forum invited Krista to participate because she'd read her comments in another forum and felt Krista would be a positive addition to the new forum. Members of Gaia can also request invitations for some forums. Krista stated, for example, "The 'Polls Galore' I actually requested to join because my sister was in it and I wanted to be in it too." Members can start their own forums, and Krista had personally started two forums, one of which she set up as a place for people to discuss a fantasy story she'd written herself.

Krista most often used the forums at Gaia to discuss her interests in gaming and various fantasy genres. She avoided discussions of potentially controversial topics because she saw little point in the conflict that often accompanies such topics.

I like to go into different Anime forums and gaming forums and look and see what different people are saying about different things, stuff like that... there's a lot of people who debate like religion and politics and stuff and I don't really think that's something you can debate over the Internet [...] Because it's really impersonal and it seems like nobody ever gets their point across [...] It's really more about the arguing than getting their point across. They just like to argue with people.

While at the beginning of this research project Krista was careful to point out that Gaia was a different, safer place than Facebook, by the end of her first semester, Krista reported in her Internet Use Log that she'd begun using Facebook, and her

use of the site increased steadily over the rest of the academic year. By our last interview, in fact, Facebook was one of the sites Krista visited most frequently.

In the written interview that took place via e-mail in February, Krista explained her increased use of Facebook, an increase that corresponded directly with a decreased use of Gaia Online, writing, "It's because I like to play the games that [Facebook has]. They're sort of never ending games, you can't lose and you can level up over time. I really like them so I end up spending more time playing them. And I've been finding more of my friends so I spend time chatting too." At the end of that year her use of Facebook far exceeded her use of Gaia, which she was visiting mostly to check other people's updates and then to link to Facebook games she could access through Gaia.⁵

In her final interview at the end of the academic year, Krista reported using Facebook on a very regular basis. She used it as a space to play games and as a means of keeping in contact with offline friends she wasn't able to see because of their differing schedules and lives. When she signed into Facebook on a typical day, she said, "I usually look through the wall posts to look for game updates and stuff and see what my friends have been up to." She preferred Facebook games like Café World and Farmville, which allowed her to master tasks and move up to new levels within the game.

I like Farmville and CaféWorld because you can master the different things. Like you go and plant crops and you master [that] and get this sign to put on your farm. And Cafeworld you can master different

⁵ About the same time this research project began, Gaia Online gave users the ability to link their Facebook accounts to their Gaia Account. While Krista never discussed this capability, by February she seemed to be using it since she was accessing some Facebook games through her Gaia Online account.

dishes that you cook [...] It gives you a goal and, well, multiple goals because there's like so many different things about them, [...] you can level up for infinity and you can get infinity amount of money for each specific goal you reach in Farmville and Café World.

Krista saw a definite link between her affinity for the games at Facebook and her history as a video gamer. The idea of mastery and advancing through various levels is what drew her to video gaming, and that same process attracted her to games available at Facebook.

Maintaining Community Content

Krista added to the sites she visited socially in a number of different ways. At Gaia, for example, she participated in forums and even started a forum based on a piece of fiction she herself had authored. At sites where she watched Anime and read manga, she occasionally commented on the pieces she liked the most. At sites like AniLinkz, users often add the links to anime available through the site. While Krista didn't add links herself, she still played a part in the community of users that help to create the content of the site by commenting on technical difficulties she encountered as an AniLinkz user. She didn't always benefit directly from those comments, but chose to make them anyway. When she commented on a broken link, she intended for the administration behind a site (whom she called the site's "authors") to make updates, but didn't go back to see if the problems had been fixed. "If it doesn't work I go to YouTube or [another anime site]." Krista also reported taking similar action for an online game she played through Facebook:

Well, like some of the people who make the apps on Facebook are the Zanga company and I've had a couple of problems with some of their games and so you can report the problem and the more people who report the problem they fix it. So I don't know if it was just me

specifically or if it was just the population of the people who play the game who reported the problem, but they fixed it.

Reporting the problem, in this case, was more difficult than simply leaving a comment on a message board. Krista had to navigate away from the site to comment on a technical difficulty. When the problem occurred, a dialogue box appeared on her screen. The button in the dialogue box took her away from Facebook, where she played the game, to the Zanga website. At Zanga, she had to choose yet another tab to report the problem. Krista was willing to follow all these steps to enhance the effectiveness of a game she enjoyed playing.

Of the four focal participants in this study, Krista added the greatest amount of content to the sites she visited for social and recreational purposes (beyond posting and commenting at Facebook, something all four focal participants reported doing at some point during the academic year). Krista, however, felt that trying to categorize the amount of content she added was relative, saying, “It depends on who you’re comparing it to. There’s people who run the websites and that’s usually how I compare. Compared to these people I don’t add a lot of content, but compared to my brother I add a lot. [Compared to] my sister too.” When asked if she would ever consider running her own website, Krista’s answer again reflected her use of the Internet as a means of accessing the sorts of writing she liked to read. “Maybe. If I was like an author or something I would want to run a website because then I can post my books and stuff for other people to look at and see a summary and stuff like that.”

The Internet and Academic Performance

The Internet consistently played a prominent role in Krista's daily life, taking up hours of her time each day. She spent time chatting, playing games, reading manga, watching anime, and listening to music daily. Early in the research project she characterized her use of Gaia as part of her weekly schedule saying, "Like on Wednesday because I have three or four hours between classes, I could spend all that time on Gaia and not even realize it." Even during the Spring semester when her use of Gaia decreased significantly, she still reported visiting Gaia at least once a day. This Internet use often interfered with her academic performance.

During her final interview at the end of the academic year, Krista reported that she had used the Internet for social and recreational purposes less over all during the Spring semester: "I didn't spend that much time on the computer this semester. I was trying to spend more time on my classes because I didn't do so well in one of my classes first semester because I wasn't focusing." During the fall semester, Krista's Internet Use Logs showed that she was sometimes online six or more hours a day, with almost all of that time dedicated to recreational uses. By second semester, she'd reduced that use to around two hours per day on a typical day. According to Krista spending less time online did help her grades during the Spring semester, "Well I mostly got As and Bs, so it was slightly better." Not only did Krista spend less time on the Internet, she also began to use the Internet as part of a reward system for herself:

[My grades improved] partly because I spent less time on the computer and partly because I was focusing more because I wanted to get better grades. So I was like setting the time so I would get my homework done [...] After I started using the timer to do my

homework it was like a rewards system. So once I worked on it for a certain time, I would reward myself by using the Internet for social purposes and then go back to doing my homework so it would motivate me more to get it done.

Krista admitted the system wasn't perfect, but she continued to use it as a way to help improve her academic focus, saying, "I would sometimes be distracted and reward myself for longer amounts of time than I was working on my homework. So then I would have to refocus again and come back to do it."

Portrait Four: Rachel

In the fall of 2009, Rachel was an eighteen-year-old white woman enrolled in her first year at SWU. In October, she planned to major in Anthropology and music, but in interviews conducted in February and then again in June, her major was undecided. During her first year in college, Rachel lived on campus in a dormitory. She did not have a job outside of school, but did participate actively in taikwondo. By June, she had also decided to take the next semester off. She planned to stay with her Grandmother in New York State while she decided what she'd like to do next.

Because Rachel's father was in the Air Force, she lived several places during her childhood, including the UK and Virginia. After retiring from the Air Force her father took a job as a computer programmer and the family settled in the southwest. Because of her father's job and because of his own interest in computers and the Internet, Rachel's family had Internet access at home from very early on. In fact, Rachel couldn't recall a time when her family didn't have Internet access. She did, however, have very specific memories of Internet-related milestones in her early life. For example, she remembered when she was around eight, in 1999 or 2000, trying to access the Cartoon Network online from her home computer. At

Thanksgiving in 2003, her cousin introduced her to her first piece of fanfiction; two years later, Rachel convinced her father to let her open her own account at FanFiction.Net. In 2006, she began playing “*Lord of the Rings Online*” (LotR Online or just “LotR” as she refers to it). Both the online fanfiction community FanFiction.Net, as well as her membership in the gaming community of LotR Online went on to play important roles in her life continuing up through the time of this research project.

Rachel’s father had a significant impact on her history as a computer user:

I cannot remember a time that we did not have a computer. And like the Internet came out and my dad always had to have like the Internet. [...] Also, I don’t now how to fix a lot of things, but I do know how to fix certain things that other people don’t know how to fix because my dad would show me how to do this. But also I didn’t take the time to learn a lot of things because my dad knew everything, so if I had a problem, I’d be like “Dad!”

While Rachel had vivid memories of using the Internet at home, she didn’t remember much about her Internet use at school while she was growing up. She reported that she didn’t use the Internet at school, but she did recall learning to type, and “playing one of the greatest games ever: Oregon Trail.”

At the start of her college career, Rachel’s immediate family owned several computers, including a desktop computer her father built. For most of her academic and recreational uses of the Internet, Rachel used one of her family’s laptops. Because her father recommended she not download LoTR Online on the laptop she was using for school, she used his desktop computer at home to play the game when she visited on weekends. Rachel did not use any handheld devices to access the Internet. She reported most often accessing the Internet in her dorm or in her

classes. When she accessed the Internet in class, she said, "I'm usually looking at WebCT or MySWU. Or like sometimes I'll know what the teacher's talking about so I'm just kind of [*pantomimes scrolling and clicking on her computer*]."

On a day-to-day basis, Rachel used the Internet for a variety of social, recreational, and academic purposes. She used the Internet to check e-mails, which often included numerous notifications and updates regarding her participation in FanFiction.Net. She visited WebCT to access readings and homework assignments for her classes and, second semester, a site called MHCentro to access the homework for her German class. She also used YouTube.com to watch videos and listen to music. She sometimes also visited the homepage for the American Taekwondo Association to find information on taekwondo tournaments, testing, and equipment. According to Rachel, the amount of time she spent online each day "varies drastically day by day. I could spend anywhere from half an hour to twelve hours online." For the two weeks she completed Internet Use Logs during the fall semester, most days she reported using the Internet anywhere from two to six hours per day. In one log, on a day when she reported being "swamped with homework, she was only online forty minutes. Another day, she reported spending a total of fourteen hours online watching episodes of the anime series *Dragon Ball Z* and playing LotR Online. The long hours she sometimes spent online reflect the way time could slip away from Rachel when she was using the Internet. Describing a typical day's use, for example, she stated, "I'll go on FanFiction.Net or deviantArt and I'll start looking at fanart and I'll start reading fanfiction. And I'll be like, I can only

do this for an hour, but then its like two hours, three hours later, ‘What happened? What happened to all the time?’”

Rachel used social networking sites least out of all four participants. While she had a Facebook account during her first year at college, she used it infrequently. She had two primary reasons for her relatively infrequent use of social networking sites. In part she avoided social networking sites like Facebook out of a regard for her own privacy.

I guess I can thank my dad for that too because my dad always is really, he’s a really private person. And he doesn’t like the idea of people knowing who you are, where you live, what your hobbies are. He thinks people can use that against you and he doesn’t like the idea of doing that and I don’t like the idea of doing that either.

She also avoided Facebook because she was unimpressed by the quality of most posts, “Its like I can only read, ‘Oh I have to work today,’ or whatever random comments people say about their lives so many times.”

The Internet for Academic Purposes

Rachel was enrolled in fifteen credit hours during her first semester as SWU, which included English 101—an expository writing course, 100 level Cultural Anthropology, History, and Math courses, and Dance Appreciation. Both her English and Cultural Anthropology course used WebCT. According to Rachel her Cultural Anthropology teacher, “posts everything at [WebCT],” including grades, PowerPoints, additional readings, exam reviews, and extra credit. Her English 101 instructor used WebCT to post additional readings, as well as writing prompts for assignments. Most of her classes, including her Dance Appreciation class, required Internet use for research purposes. She was also given an assignment to write a

paper on a movie she'd seen in her dance appreciation class, and on her own she visited YouTube to rewatch the movie before she did the assignment. Additionally, she used the Internet to learn more about topics covered in her classes. For this sort of independent research, Rachel used Wikipedia and cross-referenced the information she found with the list of search results that came up for the same search at Google.

During the Spring semester, Rachel was enrolled in twelve credit hours including English 102—a course in analytical and argumentative writing, and 100 level Earth and Planetary Science, German, and Western Civilization courses. Internet use was required in her Science, German and English classes. All homework was submitted on WebCT in her Science class. Her German instructor used WebCT to give assignments and also used the site MHCentro in a way Rachel explained as something “like a companion to the textbook,” which also included assignments and quizzes for each chapter. Her English 102 class, as defined by the instructor, was a “paperless classroom.” Readings beyond the required textbook could be found on the course WebCT site, and students turned in work via e-mail, which the instructor also returned, with a grade and comments, via e-mail. For that course, she was also required to do research papers for which at least one fourth of the research needed to come from the Internet or the online research databases available through the SWU library. Despite the “paperless” status, Rachel lightheartedly complained that her English 102 instructor distributed more handouts than any other instructor during her first year of college. Rachel also continued to use the Internet to learn more about topics covered in her classes, using Google,

Wikipedia and “some other sites whose names I don't recall because I visited them once.” In an interview via e-mail, Rachel described her research motives and process in the following way, “I just compile other opinions about what I’ve learned from a class and check it against what I’ve learned and if I’m not sure about certain things I’ve found on the Internet about the subject, I’ll ask my teacher.”

While Rachel frequently used the Internet to research for classes on her own, she was often critical of required Internet research, especially for research-based projects and papers. She felt that at times instructors and the university as a whole used the Internet in an unnecessary, even misguided, attempt to use technology to expand the academic horizons of SWU students:

You can just as easily just go to the library and have the whole book in your hands rather than just going to the Internet and like getting these little clips and only learning a piece of it. So really it takes away, sort of. The Internet does take away from the learning experience because it makes it so easy to find something specific that you want, but you don’t get it in context. Like, if you were reading *Catcher in the Rye*, and you want to know something specific about *Catcher in the Rye*, like who is the character and why is he like this? You could look it up on Wikipedia and it’ll say that, but you won’t know exactly why he’s like that because you haven’t read the book. So I think it takes away from the whole learning experience because you just don’t get the whole thing.

In Rachel’s view, Internet-based research not only led students to lose the benefit of original context, it took away from what Rachel saw as some of the “adventure” of traditional library research.

But I think, I think [traditional library research] also helps you not be so lazy. Because if you have to go out and get something then you’re physically doing something, you have to actually kind of work for it. I find [database research] kind of boring. I like adventures and I like adventuring into libraries and finding my things [...] I guess it just brings something more to it. “I spent five minutes looking for this

book.” It’s satisfying [...] Rather than the Internet, where you’re like, “Okay, I’ve gotta read this stuff [*sighs*].”

While she seemed to take an overall negative view of her history with required Internet research, she did make some concessions. For example, referencing research for a paper she wrote for English 102, she stated, “There [were] definitely magazine articles that I used in one of my previous essays regarding health care that I couldn’t have accessed just by searching for [physical copies]. Though she expresses frustration with another project for the same class, saying, “He wanted us to find stuff in the databases about dystopia and ideas pertaining to [Ayn Rand] and it was very, very annoying because there was like nothing on Ayn Rand in the databases except for book reviews or whatever.”

Rachel felt a reliance on the Internet for research wasn’t a problem specific to SWU and that it starts much earlier than college, saying, “And I think a lot of schools especially nowadays, like primary school, like elementary schools and high school are really starting to falter now because they’re really relying on the Internet. And I did not learn how to research outside of the Internet.”

Rachel was much less critical of WebCT requirements. She disliked some aspects of the WebCT interface, but held an overall positive view of its role in her classes. Many of Rachel’s teachers throughout both semesters used WebCT as a place for students to access additional readings, quizzes, assignments, and grades.

It’s a little tricky to do at first because you can’t do the back button. You have to like push on the scroll [buttons]. I don’t really like the site, but it’s convenient because I don’t have to be going up to my teacher saying, “What was the additional reading?” [...] I find it useful because I don’t have to worry about losing stuff.

The Internet for Social and Recreational Purposes

For Rachel, the Internet was one of her primary social and recreational outlets. Her discussion of her recreational activities as well as the friendships she had cultivated in online environments and communities was detailed and complex in each of her three interviews. The Internet provided her with an outlet from her academic life and gave her a social life apart from the “party” scene of her dormitory:

Umm, it keeps my sanity in check. If I did not have the Internet with me, I would be going insane right now, because there would be no outlet for me [...] it gives me something, it keeps my mind fresh and out of the academic pool. Because I can't stay steeped in one thing for too long [...] I'm at school all day. I live at school. I want to do something that's not school. So that's how it academically saves me. [And] people in my dorms, they party, they do the drugs, they drink. And I'm like, "I don't want to do that. I'll just go on the Internet."

Online Gaming

The online gaming community built around the game “*Lord of the Rings Online*” was the most important platform for Rachel’s online social life. Rachel began playing the game in the winter of 2006. LotR Online is a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) set in the land of Middle Earth as described in the *Lord of the Rings* book series as well as the Warner Brothers movies. The website gives the following description of the site:

Join millions of players in the world's largest fellowship of fans: a heroic force gathering on the edge of a blade to turn back the swelling shadow of the Dark Lord Sauron. Band together to fight, explore, forge your own legends, and make friends with the others who have heard the call of adventure and come to Middle-earth. A world of adventure, fellowship, and epic times is waiting for the best players around.

As players in the beta (or design phase) of the game, Rachel and her dad were active in giving feedback to the game's creators as they developed the site, "Me and my dad were on the first initial Beta of Lord of the Rings online so I gave a lot of feedback on the stuff that they needed. Like 'Does this work well? Does this work well?'" In the years she's been playing since that beta version, Rachel has continued to improve in skill and move up in rank. "I'm like a rank five [...] you rarely see anyone past rank four or five because it takes hours and hours [of play time]."

In part as a result of her investment in building the game and honing her skills, Rachel made a group of extremely close friends through LotR Online. She first met her friends while playing the game alone. Already playing together as a "kinship," Rachel's friends took notice of her skills at the game, "I was really skilled and apparently I had a really great sense of humor. I was like really witty and I was like smart and stuff. So they were like, 'Yeah, we want you in the kinship!'" She describes the evolution of her relationship after joining her kinship, saying

Then we just talked a lot to each other and blah blah blah and got to know each other like that. It's pretty much like anyone would get to know [someone]. You randomly meet them, randomly get to know each other. The only difference is you don't meet each other face to face.

Those players became some of her closest friends. Said Rachel, "We talk about everything. Everything."

She and her friends at LotR used the voice chat program Ventrilo to talk within the game. In an interview conducted via e-mail, Rachel wrote that through playing LotR Online, "I've made some of my closest friends. We talk through [Ventrilo] both in game and out of game. I talk to them about anything, politics,

school, baseball, the olympics, books, anything.” Her online friends helped her with both her academic work and with important life choices. For example, in high school her friend Bos, an English major attending a university on the East Coast, helped her with a homework assignment on the poem “Ode to a Grecian Urn.” Then, as she prepared for college, her friend Marine One helped her make a decision concerning ROTC:

I was seriously considering joining ROTC because I don't have a lot of money and I don't have a job and my dad—I'm a military brat. My dad is military. My whole family is military. We've been military since, literally, the first crusades. So it's something I'm familiar with. And I know I'd have a steady job. Steady pay. I'd have retirement. And through ROTC I'd be an officer [...] Everything's a benefit about it but I don't know if I'm ready to commit all that. [Marine One] really helped me with that decision. He said, “Maybe you should wait a year [...] It's a hard a decision. Maybe you should take your time with it.” So yeah it's the connections I've made that have helped me progress through school better than I would have.

Even during her first year at college, when per her dad's advice she wasn't playing LotR while on campus, Rachel kept in touch with her friends from the game, chatting with them through Ventrilo, e-mailing them, or calling them on the phone. Those continuing relationships were especially important to Rachel when she first arrived on campus. She recalled, “So that kind of gave me a little bit more of a social life until I started meeting people in my classes who I had a lot in common with.”

Fanfiction

Rachel described herself as an avid reader of fanfiction (writing produced by fans that is derived from popular cultural source texts, often novels, television shows or movies). She accessed fanfiction through the site FanFiction.Net and used the site deviantArt to view fanart (fan produced art derived from popular cultural source

texts). She most often read fanfiction at FanFiction.Net, the online community dedicated to the genre. The site has a list of “Rules and Guidelines” for publishing works of fanfiction or responses to the work of others. The section titled “Community Etiquette” includes recommended conduct at the site such as proofreading and spellchecking all submissions and showing respect for all members of the site. The “Community Etiquette” section reflects the site’s emphasis on carefully written and edited work and their value of responses to stories that are both constructive and respectful. According to the “Community Etiquette” guidelines, “Everyone here is an aspiring writer. Respect your fellow members and lend a helping hand when they need it. Like many things, the path to becoming a better writer is often a two way street.” The “Rules and Guidelines” section also includes a list of the kinds of posts that are and are not allowed, a description of the content rating system at the site, and the statement, “FanFiction.Net respects the expressed wishes of the following authors/publishers and will not archive entries based on their work” followed by a list that includes Anne Rice, the Archie Comics, Nora Roberts, and Robin McKinley.

Rachel stated that the site moderators were in charge of enforcing the rules and guidelines for the site. She did not know (nor, she said, did she care) who those moderators were. Users can post stories or art individually or create their own forums and communities within the site all based on specific source texts. The user who creates a forum or community can set their own rules of use within the parameters of the community guidelines, and are then responsible for moderating the works and discussions posted in the communities or forums they’ve created.

The sheer number of users at FanFiction.Net makes such user-driven moderation necessary. According to Rachel, the official site moderators “prefer that you submit edited stuff, but it’s not as if the moderators go through a million fanfictions to check every detail. They don’t go through thousands of millions of reviews to check that the rules are enforced. So it’s basically up to the authors and readers to keep up the rules, the unspoken and the written.”

Rachel also described a range of authors of varying skill writing at FanFiction.Net:

You can get anywhere from a 10-year-old who thinks they know about the birds and bees to a housewife who has three kids to a college student who’s major is creative writing, to professional writers. I’ve actually seen fanfiction written by professional writers. [...] I think the common misconception is that a lot of fanfiction users are just the dorky fifteen-year-olds.

Each user at FanFiction.Net has the option to create her or his own user profile, and Rachel chose to do so. Rachel’s profile began with a short biography and description of her own fanfiction works and preferences:

Some little factoids about myself is what should be here so I shall now proceed with them. I am a poor, independent, non-smoking, picean, first year college student living in the dorms [...] I am a musician and I play trombone. Musicals (disney and Broadway) are my guiltless pleasures. I love taekwondo and I am a second degree black belt. I have been reading fanfiction since 2003 and I have made attempts at writing only to fall horribly behind on updating and almost always encounter the dreaded writer's block within the first few chapters. I'm a hopeless romantic and almost never like any cannon pairings.

The description was followed by lists of hobbies, interests, likes, and dislikes categorized under clever headings such as “Things That Make Me Twitch,” “Happy Fanfiction Haunts,” and “Books I Heart.” As she stated in her biographical

paragraph, Rachel rarely posted stories at FanFiction.Net. She had a total of three stories posted under her author profile, and her carefully crafted bio page seemed more an introduction to Rachel's personality and her reading tastes rather than an introduction to her own writing. Because she rarely felt her stories were complete or of high enough quality, she tended not to post her own writing at the site. In her initial questionnaire for this project she wrote,

I usually get a thought and I would let it fester until it distracted me from doing anything else, I'll daydream about it all the time until I write it out. The subjects are usually adventure, romance and some hints of comedy, angst, and tragedy all rolled into one good IDEA for a story. It usually looks incomplete, rarely do I actually post things.

And in a later interview, she wrote that she didn't post "Because I'm a perfectionist like you know. And I'm like, 'That's such a bad idea, and it's already been done,' and I won't post it."

Though she didn't compose much of her own fanfiction, Rachel saw herself as an active member of the FanFiction.Net community. Rachel viewed her role as that of a reader and reviewer of stories, and felt many other community members primarily filled the same role.

I think I give a lot of good constructive criticism. And there are a lot of people that, through my comments, they have been like, "Oh, thanks a lot! That really encouraged me." And I was like, "Cool!" But umm that's how I'm part of the community. And that's how a lot of people are part of the community, through reviews. Because people like to see good reviews. And especially with constructive criticism because some people take it a little harder than others, but most people take it pretty well.

Much like she felt finding library-based research provided her with an adventure, Rachel found a similar kind of adventure within FanFiction.Net. When

she read, she had a few criteria she looked for: “Originality. The skill of writing. And I guess maybe a classic story [...] and it’s like an adventure because you have to find the ones that are good.” Later in the school year, in an interview conducted via e-mail, Rachel returned to the theme of adventure, writing, “I primarily read fanfiction because I enjoy reading things that will never be published otherwise and the adventure that comes with looking for awesome fanfiction.”

Rachel felt her experience reading fanfiction helped her academically by making her a more experienced and insightful reader:

I guess it made me analyze a little bit more because I would review stories and it gave me more to say about certain things and it gave me a broader experience than just a book that’s been published, like proofread, edited by some big wig company, “Okay, this is good for you to publish!” But for FanFiction.Net, it’s like everything’s pretty much a rough draft. It’s not perfect. And it kind of gives you an open door to give constructive criticism to people and by reading a whole bunch of stories, you start to understand the difference between a skilled writer and a not skilled writer and you get to understand inexperience vs. experience.

Online Video Sites

Rachel also frequently visited YouTube as well as the site Veoh to watch videos online. At YouTube, Rachel reported watching movies, various music videos and live performances, Japanese Rock (JRock) videos, comedy sketches, television shows not available in the US, the occasional political speech, and episodes of anime she found interesting. She described her viewing habits as moving from video to related video to related video:

I go to YouTube a lot. A lot. It starts off I’ll just like be looking at a music video and the I’ll see they have another music video that I haven’t seen and I’ll be like, “Oh I want to watch that one.” And that’s how I ran into a lot of stuff I really like. For example, I love *Naruto* [a Japanese anime] so I would watch the Japanese English subbed

episodes and I kept on seeing *Bleach* Episode 30 [listed as a related video] on there, and so I was like, “What’s up with that?”

Through moving from video to video in that manner, Rachel not only became an avid *Bleach* fan, she also discovered many new musicians to follow as well.

Rachel began to occasionally visit the site Veoh because she found that many anime that have been taken down due to copyright disputes were available at Veoh. At Veoh, she also began watching the Anime *Hetalia: Axis Powers*. An offline friend originally introduced Rachel to *Hetalia: Axis Powers*, and she watched it because that friend “wouldn’t stop talking about it.” *Hetalia* is an animated, often satirical and also often heavily stereotyped retelling of World War II in which various countries are personified by one (often stereotypical) character. After watching several episodes, Rachel also became interested in some of the controversy that surrounds the series, particularly centering around the anime’s depiction of the character Korea. She began researching the series more deeply, watching a panel discussion at YouTube and reading up on the series at Wikipedia and other sites. Her research, in turn, influenced a history paper she wrote early in her spring semester at college—a paper for which she received a high grade that she attributed directly to the series.

Evolving Use—an Update

In March of 2012, I received an update from Rachel on her Internet use and they ways it had changed and evolved since her first year of college in 2009.⁶ While she was playing LoTR Online less and interacting less with particular members of

⁶ I requested feedback on my working draft and updates from all four participants in March of 2012, but only received an update from Rachel. I discuss my request and the outcome in greater depth in Chapter 6.

her kinship, she had continued to maintain close friendships online with people from various parts of the country, though she pursued and maintained those relationships through Facebook. Her interest in anime and manga continued through her first year of college, though her primary interest shifted from actual anime and manga to a particular cosplay group.⁷ In the following excerpt from her response to the initial draft of the sections of this chapter that pertain to her, Rachel describes the cosplay group and its members and playfully references her current college career:

On Youtube and deviantArt I've been following a group of cosplayers who call themselves InnerMindTheater (this is the name of their youtube channel),⁸ [...] they are based in Michigan and Chicago and they are probably the most fantastic cosplayers I've ever seen, they are easily my favorite cosplay group ever. They are all around my age and most if not all of them are currently enrolled in college and most go to colleges with particular focus on animation or fashion design, they are also making me really wish I went to art school [...] rather than going to boring regular school and majoring in horribly tedious and dull foreign languages... WHAT WAS I THINKING?!

Conclusions

Representative of two more students who might enter our first-year writing classrooms, Krista and Rachel share interesting similarities in their various uses of the Internet. Both participated at sites where investment of time is rewarded whether through an accumulation of points and privileges or by gaining the attention and admiration of other members of a community. Both Krista's and

⁷ "Cosplay" is short for costume play. Jenkins describes cosplay as "the practice of anime fans dressing up as favorite characters" (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 152).

⁸ Members of InnerMindTheater, post short videos of themselves that include footage of conventions, lip-synced music videos, commentary on politics of race behind cosplay, and video blog entries. Many (though not all) of the videos are well-produced and extensively edited.

Rachel's active online social and recreational lives often revolved around consuming, interacting with, or discussing popular culture texts or their derivatives. Rachel even credited her reading of fanfiction with improving her overall academic reading abilities. And both wrote, sometimes at length, in online spaces. Though they are more prolific online as writers than Erin or Will, most of that writing took place within closed, often interest-based communities.

Academically, Krista and Rachel relied on the Internet as a resource and a requirement in many of their classes, and their views on Internet requirements were very positive in several instances. For example, Internet research and various online resources were a significant portion of College Success, a class Krista found extremely useful. Rachel especially appreciated the organization online course management systems offered her.

Their complicated attitudes toward and experiences with online research, on the other hand, raise questions for teachers of composition classes where research is often a significant component. Critical of the online research requirements she encountered in one of her first-year writing classes, Rachel none-the-less used the Internet frequently to research information related to her classes on her own. What important differences might exist for a student such as Rachel between research culled from online databases (rather than library shelves) and the information she finds as she peruses the Internet looking for information of her own accord? For Krista, a key online research tool went unused during her first year of college even though she already knew how to use that resource. How, as teachers can we ensure that we're drawing on such relevant prior knowledge in our writing classrooms?

Internet based research raises just one narrow set of questions related to our students' histories as readers and writers online. All four participants' online reading and writing habits socially, recreationally, and academically raise a broader set of questions. How, for example, might Krista's and Rachel's experiences writing—sometimes extensively—in online forums inform the writing they do in our classrooms? In what ways could Erin's extensive online reading shape her attitudes and positions as a readers and writer in her academic life? How might writing teachers harness the kind of enthusiasm Will felt for the online requirements in his college Algebra course? Addressing such questions in the chapters that follow will offer potential answers to the questions of motive, purpose, audience, and position as reader and writer that I raise in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 5

TRAITS OF A DISTINCT GENERATION: IDENTIFYING FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AND EMPHASIZING THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVE

Characterizing Themselves as Internet Users

Based on their questionnaires, three broad generalizations can be made across the focal participants in this study. First, the participants see themselves as part of a specific generation defined, at least in part, by its access to and use of the Internet. Second, they feel they depend on the Internet and, therefore, have developed a demand for instant access to the Internet and to the information they can find online. And third, the participants find it difficult to imagine life without the Internet. These generalizations reflect and support claims made by academics and cultural critics alike that American young adults are part of a generation oriented toward and shaped by access to the Internet (Tapscott, Ito et al., Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project).

As part of their final interviews, I presented each participant with a very brief definition of Don Tapscott's term "Net Generation" and a short series of accompanying questions. After scheduling their final interviews, I asked the following question of Will, Rachel, and Krista in a pre-interview e-mail: "Based on your age, you belong to what cultural critic Don Tapscott defines as the Net Generation, a generation of individuals born between 1977 and 1997 who will grow up having always known the Internet. What would you say are the defining

characteristics of the Net Generation? How well do those characteristics fit you? Why or why not?”⁹

Will had contemplated the characteristics of his own generation in relation to Internet use at some length before I broached the subject in our interviews. In our first interview, which took place in October of his first year at college, Will arrived at the interview prepared to discuss the topic. According to Will, he’s part of a new generation, the “technology generation,” that sets him apart from generations that came before.

I was wondering what generation I was [...] so I looked it up, and my generation is the technology generation because we’re the ones who have been raised, I think it starts within the mid-80s or mid to late 80s that my generation starts and it’s like, because there’s so much of a technological boom that happened then that we’ve almost hardwired our brain to think more technologically so that we’re more at a better advantage to use the new technology [...] Just because that’s the age that we grew up in.

In a later interview, Will continued his description of the Net Generation’s ability to adapt to technology, saying, “Personally I would say that we’re able to adapt a lot faster when it comes to technology. Like if we get a piece of technology right in front of us we’re able to dissect it and know how it works and the different systems and stuff like that just by kind of messing around with it.” Will’s use of the word “technology” here includes the Internet. Not only does his past exposure give him the ability to adapt to a new piece of technology, he can’t picture his life without modern technology. “I think just because I grew up with it and I’ve seen it

⁹ Because Erin’s and I were unable to connect to schedule our interview until shortly before the interview took place, I did not send her the e-mail ahead of time, and Krista’s pre-interview e-mail did not reach her. For both Krista and Erin, I presented Tapscott’s definition and my questions for the first time in their interviews.

everywhere I go I don't really have a perception of what something would be like without technology. Like I don't know how people survived without Google at all."

Krista also emphasizes her generation's ability to adjust to technology, though she focuses on the Internet specifically, saying, "We know a lot more about [the Internet] so it's a lot easier for us to use it." She also adds, "We reference the Internet a lot more. Like when people say, 'Go look it up in a book,' we generally say, 'Go look it up on Google.'"

Not only did participants feel like they belonged to a generation characterized by comfort with the Internet, they expected Internet access. That expectation included a demand for instant access to information in general. Because they are growing up in a culture of immediacy and speed, Tapscott has argued, they demand immediacy in their access to information (74). In defining and characterizing the Net Generation in her final interview, Erin emphasized her generation's dependency on the Internet because of their constant access to it, "Like I've never used a phone book before, sort of things like that. You just use the Internet for everything." According to Erin, constant access can lead to impatience when the Internet isn't available, "Like with instant access, if the Internet goes out it's like the end of the world and you have to call people and yell at them and it's a big deal. It's like a dependence on it." A dependence on the Internet extends into her academic life as well, and characterizes a mentality that sets her apart from her parents' generation. She states, "It would be silly to go to a library to do research when you can just do it on your computers, like that sort of mentality my parents criticize us for having."

In an e-mail she sent me prior to her final interview, Rachel gave her generation's dependence on Internet access a more negative spin stating that her generation is "defined by a sense of instant gratification and unparalleled self-centeredness." She continues, writing, "However they do have the tremendous ability to access information when they want and to communicate with ease to people around the world [...] I suppose a lot of the characteristics fit me, I prefer rewards when I want it [and] I don't like doing things unless it benefits me."

In their easy acceptance of the term "Net Generation" and their characterizations of its members, Will, Erin, Rachel, and Krista offer a glimpse of the influences the Internet will have had on many of the young people entering our first-year college writing classes. Early in their elementary school years, Tapscott made the argument that they would grow up surrounded by digital media, the Internet included. Even if they haven't always known the Internet, it is now woven deeply into the fabric of their every day lives. They feel not only comfortable with the Internet, but even dependent on its existence. Further, they demand instant access to information and are frustrated when that access is unavailable.

Participants' own comments above, academic tendencies to frame young people and their literacy practices in terms of their Internet use (Alexander; Comstock; Gee and Hayes; Ito et. al; Jenkins; Takayoshi, Huot, and Huot; etc.), and ongoing cultural discussions of "millennials," "the Net generation," or "generation Y" in terms of their use of the Internet all imply that we can anticipate a link between the Internet and our students' literacy practices. Will, Erin, Rachel, and Krista offer brief insights into their generation above; the surveys they completed,

the interviews they took part in, and the Internet Use Logs they constructed as part of this research project point to many other significant habits and characteristics in terms of their Internet use. What follows in this chapter is an overview of the trends that emerged among participants' uses of the Internet for various purposes. Participants, for example, were much more likely to consume than produce content online. Additionally, they were often aware of the other individuals reading or writing within those sites, but much less aware of the groups and individuals producing and maintaining the sites themselves—levels of awareness that I argue are linked clearly to participants' motives for visiting those sites. Finally, I argue that while participants themselves saw relatively few connections between their reading and writing online for academic and non-academic purposes, those connections do exist and merit discussion in a first-year writing classroom.

The Internet for Academic Purposes

Participants used the Internet for four primary purposes in their academic lives: as an organizational tool; as a place to access course readings, notes and videos; as a means of completing and turning in assignments; and as a research tool. Selber argues that, when thought of as tools, computers become “a kind of prosthetic device that increases efficiency...and spans temporal and spatial boundaries” (36). He further states that “[a] computer application that is well constructed allows users to focus on the assignment at hand or to explore activities and ideas appropriate to the application,” while the application itself becomes invisible (36). I argue that participants in this study played an especially active and important role in their own functional literacy in that the programs they used

weren't always well designed (or in the case of research they didn't necessarily yet know all the tools available to them or why those tools were important). Still they worked around such obstacles, using the Internet and online course management sites to organize, enhance, and extend their academic experiences during their first year of college

About half of the courses in which participants enrolled during their first year of college utilized one or more course managements systems such as WebCT (which was most common) or content-specific course management tools such as MHCentro and MathXL. At WebCT, instructors offered students information and organizational tools including course syllabi, copies of course handouts, due dates, and access to updated student grades. While participants sometimes found WebCT to be a clunky interface, they also tended to appreciate such easy access to course information.

Many courses also required that students access course materials through online sources—sometimes via WebCT, but through other sites as well. Lecture notes and PowerPoints, for example, were typically housed at WebCT. Other avenues included a department-specific site built and maintained by the SWU chemistry department where both Erin and Will reported watching pre-lab videos. Erin accessed readings not only through WebCT, but also through ProjectMuse, and Krista found many of the required readings for her writing class through her instructor's personal website. Participants also accessed and submitted assignments and quizzes through course management sites. Erin and Will both reported

submitting quizzes through WebAssign, Rachel and Will through WebCT, and Krista via e-mail. Will also accessed interactive practice problems through MathXL.

Nearly all of the work participants did through course management sites positioned students in what can be interpreted as very traditional student roles. Participants accessed the information individually, they read on their own, they individually submitted assignments, and their instructors served as their primary audience. Interactions with course material online mirrored the kinds of interactions that might have taken place pre-Internet in the form of course packets purchased at a bookstore or worksheets and pen-and-paper assignments. Their appreciation for the ease and convenience of accessing, at the very least, their online syllabus and grades, however, indicates something more to their Internet requirements—if only a more convenient college experience. In addition, online quizzes and practice problems offered, at minimum, immediate feedback as far as correct or incorrect answers as was the case for Rachel when she submitted language homework at MHCentro. Interactive problems such as those Will encountered at MathXL also directed him to similar problems based on those he missed, allowing him a level of timely feedback and practice that would have been difficult to achieve via pen and paper assignments.

In the scope of this project, the most notable characteristic of Internet requirements may be the types of writing assignments participants submitted online. When they used the Internet for writing assignments specifically, participants did so in the process of composing traditional written assignments. They used the Internet to research information for projects and to

submit assignments to instructors, but those assignments were comprised of written text only. The Internet creates a myriad of possibilities for non-traditional texts, including access to high quality image and video (Jenkins, Ito et. al), hypertext (LeCourt and Barnes, Sullivan), and online publication (Paster), but with the exception of the blog assigned in Erin's Honors Seminar, none of these possibilities were part of the assignments participants encountered. Even at the Honors Seminar blog (which I will address in greater depth later in this chapter), the primary purpose was to continue in-class discussions in writing outside of class. While it's possible students sometimes included links to outside sources, Erin did not report such instances in her interview.

This isolated, traditional approach to Internet requirements continued in participants' required uses of the Internet for research. Students were required to do research, but in all but two reported instances (for group projects in Krista's College Success course and research the instructor intended for students to share as part of class discussion in Will's Black Experience seminar), participants conducted their research alone and for individually produced assignments. In addition, none of these three participants were particularly happy with these research requirements, though each for different reasons. Rachel felt she was taught to do research online at the expense of knowing how to do valuable library-based research. Will felt a required number of sources was unnecessary when he could find the information he needed from a single source. And Krista was (erroneously) disappointed that she didn't have access to Internet databases for research like she'd had in high school. All three of these concerns might have been addressed by instructors had

instructors known about them. These questions and concerns may also have been alleviated had the students engaged in discussions (whether online or in the classroom) of the significance and purpose of each of these Internet requirements, an approach to such Internet requirements I'll discuss at greater length in Chapter 6.

In contrast to their qualms about assigned research requirements, their use of the Internet for research is also one place where students often went beyond the Internet requirements for their class, using the Web as a place to gather outside information about course material simply for their own benefit. Rachel, for example, frequently went to the Internet if she wanted to know more about something she'd studied in class, while Krista used the Internet to find a periodic table she felt was more helpful than the one provided in her course materials.

In viewing their academic uses of the Internet, a few missed opportunities do seem to exist in terms of composing multimodal texts or deepening participants' understandings of the purposes of research and the far-reaching possibilities of research online. Still, participants viewed their uses of the Internet for academic purposes in an overall positive light. By learning to quickly navigate a site such as WebCT, for example, despite some of its less-than-user-friendly aspects, and by furthering their knowledge of course subjects through research channels they already knew and appreciated, the participants demonstrated Selber's notion of "functional literacy" in very positive ways.

Social and Recreational Uses

Reading More Than Writing Online

Trends were also apparent across participants in their social and recreational uses of the Internet. Participants, for example, were much more likely to use the Internet socially and recreationally in the role of reader rather than writer. When they went online for entertainment or to pursue specific interests, they did so primarily to read the texts they encountered, not to create new ones. The amount of writing they did increased when it came to using the Internet to maintain social connections, though in those cases participants still tended to read more than they wrote. Their choices to read and write to varying degrees in different contexts and for different purposes often clearly reflected participants' motives for visiting the sites they did, and often, as I will show, that motivation was best served in the role of reader.

The texts participants encountered and "read" online were sometimes traditionally written texts with just a few (if any) accompanying pictures, such as those Erin read at sites like the *New York Times* online or the extensive fanfiction stories at a site like FanFiction.Net that Rachel visited. Often, however the texts were visually rich with much less written text and more (or even exclusively) visual content in the form of images or video. Manga, a primary source of online entertainment for Krista, is by its very nature dependent on illustrations. Images often accompany stories posted at the feminist websites Erin visited. Rachel not only read fanfiction, but also viewed the fanart at sites like FanFiction.Net and deviantART. And all participants, whether in the form of complete television shows,

music videos, anime, or news stories, watched videos online. These various forms of content show participants as experienced in reading multimodal texts that often required them to move back and forth between word and image—something all the participants were willing and able to do as they visited various online sites.

One common thread among all of these sites was their dependence on contributions of one kind or another from readers and viewers visiting the site. Whether users were writing the content and adding the videos or simply providing discussion and commentary, the sites participants visited for entertainment or to pursue specific interests all contained at least some user-generated content—content that participants, for the most part, were not contributing. Such user-generated sites opened exciting possibilities for participants in this study to create and post content at many of the public sites they visited. These possibilities reflect the kind of sites and forms of writing and creating that have been so attractive to scholars in composition and cultural studies as places where individuals aren't just consuming texts, they're producing them as well. User generated news pieces at Current.com, open discussion forums at sites such as the *New York Times* online, AniLinkz, and Cucirca, and stories and art posted at fansites such as FanFiction.Net are all examples of overtly public forms of writing. Though an account might be necessary to post content, the sites are not protected by passwords. Reading their content is not contingent on “friending” the writer. The material is accessible to anyone with knowledge of a site's existence or, in at least some cases, interest in the topic and simple access to a web browser (though, with the wealth of material available online, finding specific content often involves recommendations from

others). These are public sites with public writing meant for public audiences. For the most part, however, the participants in my study were not writing at these sites. Instead, their primary role in visiting such sites was that of reader, a role I see as both necessary to the purpose of the site and reflective of the intentional and rhetorically savvy literate practices of my participants.

To reach a more complete understanding of their sophisticated literacy practices online, it is helpful to look first at what participants *aren't* doing. First and foremost, they did not often write at public sites, even when the sites specifically invited them to do so. Though their reasons for not adding content varied, their choice not to add content sets participants distinctly apart from more active producers of online text highlighted by other scholars (Alexander, Bury, Comstock, Jenkins, Rhodes). Their decision not to write at such sites was intentional. Simply, they did not add content to the sites because writing at those sites was not part of their motivation for visiting them.

Erin, for example, is a self-described feminist with a taste for politically oriented content online. At least two of the sites where she pursued these interests, the discussion board StilettoREVOLT (discussed at greater length in Chapter 3) and also the feminist blogging community Feministing, invited contributions from users. Jacqueline Rhodes has highlighted feminist homepages, e-zines, and Web rings as moments of “collective action through textuality” (67) made by individual women coming together virtually to contribute to a particular online space. The potential Rhodes sees for collective textual action is directly reflected in the wording of Feministing’s “About” page: “Feministing is an online community for feminists and

their allies. The community aspect of Feministing – our community blog, campus blog, comment threads, and related social networking sites – exist to better connect feminists online and off, and to encourage activism.” Erin often visited the kinds of sites and encountered the online rhetorical moves Rhodes discusses when she went to sites such as StilettoREVOLT and Feministing. She did not, however, make such rhetorical moves herself, reporting that she did not make any contributions of feature content, comments, discussion or any other form at these two sites. When asked why she didn’t add content to StilettoREVOLT or Feministing specifically, she replied, “I don’t know. I guess I don’t have anything to add to them.”

Nor did Erin add content to political and news-based sites that she visited such as Current.com and the *New York Times* online. The *New York Times* allows reader comments on their news stories with the simple creation of an account requiring an e-mail address and a password, but Erin didn’t comment. Current.com was even more assertive in its solicitation of user contributions and participation, offering “badges” at the site—an achievement users were able to unlock by participating and adding content at the site. Still, Erin didn’t participate, citing the unproductive and often contentious nature of the debates that take place in online discussion forums and her own disinterest in interacting with strangers online.

Will watched popular television series through his computer according to his own interests and schedule as both Jenkins (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 136) and Tapscott (27) have predicted he might. This form of television consumption online also opened possibilities for Will to produce content at the sites he used. According to Jenkins, “new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate,

appropriate, and recirculate media content” (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 135). Will, with the time he spent watching television online, often at sites not directly (or even indirectly) connected to the television networks that produce the shows he watched, certainly benefited from recirculation of media. In terms of the other forms of content production or reproduction, however, Will did not take part. Because he held little interest in the opinions of strangers about the shows he watched or in “asserting his presence” online in discussion forums, he generally didn’t even read or contribute to the textual content within the television sites such as Cucirca that he visited.

This lack of writing does not, however, diminish the importance of their visits to such sites. The participants didn’t feel the need to contribute because it wasn’t relevant to their reasons for visiting the site or the information or entertainment they gleaned from those sites. Will enjoyed the television he watched at Cucirca and was unconcerned over the thoughts and opinions of strangers online. Erin was interested in the content at the sites she visited, and although she wasn’t adding to those sites, she *was* informing her own interests in politics and feminism in meaningful ways based on the reading she was doing. While they may not have been writing at the sites even when specifically invited by the site itself to do so, if we focus on the participants’ intentions and motivations for visiting such sites, their lack of writing at the site becomes less of a literacy shortcoming and more of an approach to the site tailored to their own purposes for visiting it.

Reading and Writing for Social Connections

While none of the participants were particularly prolific writers at traditionally public sites, all four were writers conversant at social media sites. Much like the link between motive and the choice not to contribute, when participants chose to write at social media sites that writing was also a product of their motives for visiting the sites. They chose to write when it met their rhetorical purpose, illustrating a complex sense of when reading was enough, or when writing—in what way or to what extent—was necessary not only to meet the norms and purposes of a particular sites, but to fulfill their motives for visiting that site. In the case of participating in social networking sites, it seems, participants saw some degree of writing as necessary for to their purposes for visiting a site.

Much of the writing Krista did online took place at the social networking site Gaia Online (discussed at greater length in Chapter 4). For Krista, the “public” nature of the writings she did at Gaia was complicated. The site itself is password protected, but many of the forums are open to all Gaia members. With what Gaia reports as “millions” of members, however, the potential exists for her writing to reach an expansive audience. The number of people actually reading Krista’s writing, and whether or not Krista pursued a readership beyond her friends and friends of friends is unclear, but the number of people reading her writing was not Krista’s focus. On posting her story at Gaia, Krista stated, “Some people commented on what they thought about it. Not a lot of people have really gone to it because it’s such a big website there’s like so many. It’s a forum Website and there’s so many forums that you can’t really go to all of them.”

When Krista discussed the forums about topics of interest to her in our interviews, her focus was always on the content being discussed rather than the number of readers her posts were garnering, indicating that her motivation for participating in forums was more about conversing with a group about a shared interest than how many people were reading her particular discussion posts or the story she posted at the site. Because I did not ask how many people she thought read her posts, I am unable to guess how much readership she might have had. Nor did she mention efforts to increase readership of her particular posts. She was, however, invited to a new forum because the moderator had read one of her comments in a different forum, so her contributions within discussion forums at Gaia had at least some readership. The readership Krista did have came from the members of a community she valued, and it seems likely that the value Krista found in writing for Gaia came, at least in part, from adding her work to the overall body of work within a space that was so important to her.

For Will and Erin, social networking through Facebook was a consistent part of their Internet use over the course of this entire research project. However, Krista's use of Facebook increased dramatically over the course of the academic year, and whether Rachel was using it consistently or not, she maintained an active account. It is significant that all four participants who used the Internet in such a wide variety of ways and who visited a diverse array of sites are also all members of one particular site. Beyond the obvious commercial success of Facebook as a place for people to gather and communicate with others, the site represents an interface with which all the participants were familiar and a genre in which the participants

in this study all wrote. They were accustomed to connecting with others via the Internet, composing and reading short, often quippy status updates, and building an abbreviated image of themselves through their profiles, friends lists, and updates.

At sites like Gaia and Facebook, participants joined a community of people they felt they knew (to one degree or another). When they joined those communities the amount of writing they did tended to increase. In such cases, members found a motivation based in social connection. In these contexts participants added writing to the sites because adding at least some content was necessary to being an active part of the communities that formed there. At Facebook specifically, participants not only found a motive for contributing to the site—social connection—they recognized and adopted the conventions of the site and incorporated them into their own writing.

Creating, Maintaining, and Participating in online Communities

Determining when and how they would contribute to an online community was especially important to Krista and Rachel. All the participants demonstrated an ability to adapt to the rhetorical conventions of Facebook, but Krista and Rachel demonstrated a nuanced desire and ability to determine when and how they might add content to sites beyond Facebook in order to create, maintain, and benefit the communities gathering and built around such online sites. Throughout the course of their first year in college, both invested significant energy in building and maintaining the online communities that were most important to them.

Because of their commitment to the quality of the community-focused sites they visited recreationally, both were more likely than Erin and Will to compose

content at those sites. The content they produced at such sites was aimed at maintaining the quality of the communities that gather around each site rather than in building the volume of the content at those sites. Jenkins has examined online fansites produced and maintained as a means of publishing and circulating fanfiction and fanart, but also simply as a space for fans to be in contact with one another (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 41 and 151). Additionally, Ito and Bittanti address the important social interactions that take place among members of online gaming (204-05, 208, 216). Such a sense of community is, indeed, a significant reason Krista and Rachel visit sites for fanfiction and fanart, anime, and gaming.

Rachel, for example was a frequent visitor to the site FanFiction.Net (discussed at greater length in Chapter 4). FanFiction.Net is a community that inspired Rachel to write in meaningful ways, though almost never in the form of stories that make up the focal texts at the site. Instead, Rachel's writing took place as she read and gave feedback to other authors writing at FanFiction.Net, feedback only visible to the authors themselves. Still, as Rachel demonstrates in Chapter 4, the role of offering feedback is a significant part of what goes on at FanFiction.Net and many members of the site (users need an account to post content or written response, but not to read the fanfiction pieces) take on the role of responders, offering feedback to authors that enhances the overall quality of writing at the site.

Krista frequently visited a variety of sites to read Japanese anime and manga. Jenkins has highlighted the potential these sites and communities hold for manga and anime fans as writers and creators, saying, "The Web enabled fans to start their own small-scale (and sometimes pirate) operations to help import, translate, and

distribute manga and anime” (*Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* 165). Krista was not part of the community of translators (something that wouldn’t be expected since she does not speak or read Japanese), nor did she post anime or manga to the sites she visited. Still, she did participate. Krista’s posts are significant because they enhanced the site on the level of technical quality as she pointed out technical difficulties for site moderators to fix. She navigated away from broken links or low quality content. By leaving a mark before she left, however, Krista hoped to prevent another reader at the site from encountering a need to look elsewhere.

Awareness of Site Creators and Moderators

Despite the significant amount of time they spent reading content online and—in less frequent but still significant cases—contributing such content, participants often showed a lack of interest in the identities of those responsible for the sites they frequented. From early in the interview process a trend began to immerge across all four participants as they spoke about the sites they visited recreationally. Though there was a range of awareness among participants of those moderating and maintaining the sites, Will, Rachel, Krista, and Erin all often used a vague, very general “they” when referencing such groups or individuals. While they often had a sense of the individuals creating content at the sites, for example members of the community at Gaia Online or individual fanfiction writers at FanFiction.Net, they were often much less clear on those who created, moderated, or maintained the sites. Even in their final interviews, when I pointedly asked them to be more specific in their characterization of the people creating or running the

sites, participants often didn't know, and more than that, they often didn't seem to care. The following is an excerpt from Will's final interview:

Casey: Who do you think is in charge of monitoring those sites, or responding to those complaints?

Will: Mmm, I don't know, I'm sure there's like a team of people who do it. Because they have to be the same people that are like the ones, because with this site with the shows that they have, they'll post it onto the site the day after it airs on TV. So there has to be some people, some team that does it, I'm guessing.

Rachel is more blatant about her lack of knowledge about those moderating the site FanFiction.Net:

Casey: Okay. So how do you know if you've broken a rule [at FanFiction.Net].

Rachel: Umm, if you get reported.

Casey: Okay. And who are you reported to? Who are these moderators?

Rachel: I don't know who the moderators are [...] I don't really care.

Rachel's disinterest in the identity of the moderators is particularly interesting because when she first began using FanFiction.Net she'd had direct interactions with the moderators. In middle school she posted a story in a format not allowed at the site; her story was reported by another user and the moderators removed it. It's possible this encounter led to Rachel's attitude toward the moderators at the site, though Rachel herself did not give that indication within the interview.

Krista mentioned the administrative team at Gaia Online in reference to photos and videos they posted of themselves at anime and manga conventions as well as announcements they made at the site. Beyond their collective actions as

administrators and the photos they posted, however, Krista knew little about who made up the team of administrators.

Casey: Who do you think makes up the admin?

Krista: Umm, well the people who created the website, they're all part of the admin team.

Casey: Do you know who those people are?

Krista: They post a lot of stuff on the website about all the themes and they have videos and stuff of their workplace, so it's like that. I haven't actually investigated any [...]

Casey: Why don't you think that you haven't investigated that?

Krista: Umm, probably because I've never had any real problems with people on Gaia, so it's never anything I've had to worry about.

Krista also actively read manga and watched anime at various online manga and anime sites. The same vagueness existed in her knowledge of those moderating and maintaining those sites as well. In what follows, Krista attempts to explain who is posting links to various episodes of anime at the site anilinks.com:

Krista: I don't actually know who the author is, but it would be the author of the website. Whoever was posting it.

Casey: So the author of AniLinks? Or the author of the link that's been put on AniLinks?

Krista: Probably both because the author of AniLinks would be the one to delete the video, but then they would also have to find someone else to post it. Because if like I found a video I could post it on AniLinks. But at the same time, I don't know if I would go back, so it would probably be the author of AniLinks because they go through that kind of stuff.

Casey: Do you think it's one person running it or do you think...

Krista: Probably not. A lot of Internet websites are run by more than one person nowadays.

Casey: Okay. Is it like privately owned or publicly maintained, or do

you know?

Krista: I don't know. I haven't really investigated.

Krista's lack of curiosity as well as Rachel's voiced disinterest toward the moderators and maintainers of the sites they visited is also interesting because both women not only consumed texts at those sites, they played an active role within some of the sites themselves. Krista frequently participated in forums at Gaia Online and has also posted an original story at the site. Gaia provides its users with a list of "Rules and Guidelines" regarding general behavior at the sites (as well as a more complicated list of "Terms of Service"). The "Rules and Guidelines" state that users at Gaia should be "courteous" and "constructive" in the comments they post. Further, "Users are encouraged to stay on topic and be relevant to the theme of where discussions are held," and "Trolling" defined as "Posting material that is inflammatory or intended solely to offend or provoke other members [...] is not permitted." Failure to adhere to the rules can result in a temporary or permanent "ban" on a user's account. Though Krista implicitly agreed to abide by those rules whenever she posted at Gaia, she was unaware of who implemented the rules. Because she didn't break those rules, she didn't see a reason for learning more about the people enforcing them.

Overall, Erin was less vague in her descriptions of the people or groups moderating some of the sites she visited regularly. After the feminist discussion board StilettoREVOLT ceased to exist, for example, she described the entity moderating and maintaining that site in the following way, "I don't think it was an individual. It was like an organization [...] Probably a nonprofit somewhere who

couldn't afford to keep this website going." She was also aware of Current.com's status as a direct affiliate of Al Gore's TV channel, although she wasn't exactly sure who ran the website. She believed that part of Current's draw was that the user-generated videos were monitored and only high quality, relevant videos made it up on the site, though she stated that she "do[esn't] know who runs [Current.com] officially."

Though these examples show instances where participants are often only marginally, if at all, aware of the individuals or entities running the sites where they spent so much of their online time, this issue is a complicated one. Both in my past experience as their teacher and in their interviews for this research project, all four participants have shown themselves to be quite adept at evaluating the legitimacy of the sources they use for academic purposes. Additionally, in the course of their interviews, Will and Rachel both mentioned cross-referencing information at Wikipedia for purposes of validity. While they were capable of identifying and evaluating the people and groups behind content they read online, they didn't feel compelled or even very interested in doing so.

Again, motive plays an important role in understanding participant literacy practices at the sites they visited. When it comes to sites they visited socially and recreationally, even though they generally weren't informed regarding the identity of those moderating and maintaining the overall sites, they were often (though not always, as in the case of Krista and the identity of people posting at manga and anime sites) much more attuned to the individuals contributing at the site. Both Rachel and Krista were very aware of the identities of the individuals writing for

FanFiction.Net and Gaia Online, at least as far as those individuals represented their identities at those sites. Erin was drawn to the individual contributors posting videos at Current.com because of their similarity to her in age and because of what she perceived to be their lack of financial motivation, stating, “There’s no like money or viewer objective so it’s really honest.” Some of Erin’s reading habits also often tended toward personal blogs, where the identity of the blogger was a crucial component of the blog, its objectives, and its intended audience.

Participants’ ability to evaluate the source behind information they found online for research purposes and their frequent interest in the identity of individuals writing within the sites they visited seems to indicate that the participants in the study didn’t consider the entities or individuals behind the sites not because they weren’t aware that the source of information can directly affect the content itself, but because knowing the source had nothing to do with their motivation for visiting those sites. Krista’s main concern at a site like AniLinks was accessing episodes of anime she wanted to watch, not assessing who posted the videos. In a similar vein, Will visited Cucirca for the shows he could find there. Rachel was more concerned with identifying quality writing at FanFiction.Net and interacting with individual writers and their work than she was with those moderating that work. And though Erin didn’t know who the specific moderators were at Current.com, she trusted their judgment that a video would be of high enough quality to watch, and she valued the lack of financial motivation and the personal perspective offered in the videos individuals were posting there. What each participant knew about the sites they visited was enough for that participant,

and with the knowledge they did have, they were able to interact with sites in ways they found meaningful and fulfilling.

Why Reading Matters

As the preceding examples illustrate, while participants did produce some content online, they were most likely to use the Internet in the role of reader. Further, participants were most likely to write in the context of networks of friends and acquaintances, often in abbreviated remarks aimed more at maintaining social relationships or the quality of a given community than in expressing ideas to a wider, more public audience. Still, the roles they took on in the more public, user-generated sites they visited are important. First, those roles served their individual motives for visiting the sites they did. Second, they may not have been participating as *writers* in the exciting possibilities the web has opened up for writing, but they *were* participating. While attention has been given to the sites at which our students might be writing, less has been given to their roles as *readers* at these sites. By reading and viewing the content at such sites, our students are demonstrating that the sites and their content matter.

Like Will, our students may not want to “assert their presence online,” like Krista or Erin they may not feel they have a purpose or expertise worth contributing to the writing that exists online, or like Rachel they may not share their writing because of a sense of perfectionism. Still, they are all drawn to the work of people who do write in public, online spaces, and often those people share similarities with the participants in their ages, beliefs, and interests. Drawing students’ attention to the user-generated nature of the sites they visit and to the similarities between

themselves and some of the writers and creators they encounter online may, even in some small way, help validate their own role as writers not only for academic purposes, but as writers with the potential to say something and share something in public contexts, adding to the voices writing and creating online—a possibility I will explore in more detail in the following chapter.

Beginning to Build Connections

During each of the interviews I conducted with students, I asked them in what ways they felt their social and recreational uses of the Internet affected their academic lives. The handful of instances Erin, Will, Krista, and Rachel pointed to occurred in some of their reading and writing practices in online communities like FanFiction.Net and through reading and gathering information at Wikipedia, blogs, and online news and political websites. For example, in their academic classes Will and Erin reported occasionally drawing on topics (if not always specific examples) they read about on sites they visited socially and recreationally. Rachel felt her avid reading of fanfiction made her a more analytical reader and enhanced her skills at responding and giving feedback to other writers. Both those skills would help her specifically in a first-year writing class, particularly a writing class that involves peer revision. Rachel also credits an anime about World War II for inspiring and even informing a very successful history paper. (See Chapters 3 and 4 for more detailed discussions of the above examples).

Beyond these few examples, participants saw relatively few connections between their Internet uses for academics and for social and recreational purposes. Their interviews, however, pointed to more potential links than the participants,

and our own future students, may initially recognize. The blog in Erin's Honors Seminar is one such point of connection in that the blog's success seemed tied to a sense of classroom community. The collegiality that existed within the classroom and the way the instructor, along with the Honors Program in general, worked to create an atmosphere that valued in-depth, respectful discussion within the seminar format was just as important to the blog's success. While not every exchange on the blog was meaningful or well developed, Erin and her classmates felt invested in the blog and in starting quality discussions there—an investment that directly reflected the successful in-class discussions already happening. In their social and recreational lives, all four participants were drawn to places where they felt community and connection online—even (as was the case for Erin and Will) if only on Facebook. A similar sense of community and connection created outside the blog and then carried over into the blog was one key to the blog's success.

Erin pointed to another possible connection between academic and social/recreational uses of the Internet in her discussion of the blog itself. According to Erin, the blog was easy to use in part because it was more like Facebook or the blogs she read offline in the way the content was structured by most recent post—something she didn't feel existed in WebCT. The structure of the blog and her familiarity with its format, however, was not something Erin explicitly pointed to when discussing connections she saw between her online and academic uses of the Internet.

Possible connections certainly do not end with classroom communities or online interfaces. Many, if not most, of our students enter our writing courses having

spent significant portions of their life online, and their expectations of easy access to the Internet and to information online stretches into their expectation that they will somehow use the Internet in their classes as well. Our cultural and academic focuses on the link between literacy and technology (the Internet in particular) rightly implies that our students' literacy practices will be intertwined with the Internet. I argue that as teachers we can draw from our students' experiences using the Internet in ways that may enhance their abilities as writers and readers in our classrooms and beyond. We can draw on the experiences with the Internet that our students bring to the classroom by pointing to direct connections they see as well as direct connections we see. We can also ask them to turn a more critical eye toward their online reading and writing experiences in a way that frames those experiences according to the kinds of questions about purpose, audience, and authorial intentions we're already asking in our first-year writing classes, whether in connection to the Internet or not. In the concluding chapter, I will examine some of those possibilities more closely.

CHAPTER 6

**PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSROOM AND
BEYOND**

This dissertation project, designed to provide insight into the ways traditional college age students use the Internet for both their academic and their social and recreational lives, followed the Internet use of four students as they moved through their first year at college. Chapters 3 and 4 describe the ways in which the four focal participants used the Internet, and Chapter 5 elaborates on the trends in Internet use that emerged from participant data—significant themes in their Internet uses for various purposes, the roles they take on as readers and writers, their motives for visiting various sites, and the connections they see (and don't see) in their Internet uses for various purposes.

In the opening chapters of this dissertation, I argue for the importance of understanding the perspectives of first-year writing students so that writing instructors might draw on their various experiences with reading and writing—particularly online—in ways that are at once useful and meaningful to the students themselves. By focusing on the perspectives of the first-year college students who took part in my study, I made several significant findings. First the data gathered from my participants demonstrate that they are avid Internet users who understand the conventions and expectations of the sites in which they participate, findings echoed in student-centered studies conducted by Buck, Kirtley, and Ito et. al. Despite their ability to navigate such spaces, however, my findings indicate that participants were much less aware of the people or organizations creating and maintaining the

sites, in part because they were unconcerned with such information. Additionally, my findings show participants who are much more likely to write within closed communities than public sites such as blogs; in addition, they consume exponentially more content online than they produce.

Finally, I found that the participants in my study tended not to see connections between the reading and writing they did online for social and recreational purposes and their online reading and writing for academic purposes. Student understanding of potential connections or lack there of between these forms of Internet use were not addressed in studies similar to my own that have been conducted in recent years (see Buck, Kirtley, Ruecker), underscoring the untapped potential for such discussion in first-year writing class.

In the next section of this chapter, I turn to the specific implications I believe my findings may have for the ways we as instructors approach our first-year writing classrooms.

Pedagogical Implications

Connecting to Standards and Statements of Outcome

The pedagogical implications of this study come at a time in education characterized by ever-present statements and lists of outcomes, expectations, and standards. As mentioned in the opening chapter of this dissertation, Selfe and Hawisher have argued that such expectations and standards often arise despite a lack of in-depth understanding of the online literacy skills of our students. This is not to say that the standards themselves are inappropriate. In fact, as teachers we have access to a group of standards and expectations relevant to the online reading

and writing our students will encounter in their academic and professional lives and beyond. However, without a developed sense of what our students already know and do, effectively meeting such standards in ways that are both relevant and meaningful for students becomes more difficult. The data I have gained from this study can add to our understanding of the online reading and writing practices of the students who may enter our classroom—an understanding that must continue to grow and expand as technology and the ways our students experience such technology also continue to grow and change.

Three particularly important lists of standards and statements of position are relevant to teachers and students in first-year writing classrooms—The Council of Writing Program Administrators’ Outcomes Statement, The National Council of Teachers of English Definition of 21st Century Literacies, and the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (the CCSS.ELA). All three contain not only standards and positions on reading and writing in general, but also reading and writing for online environments specifically. The WPA, for example, states, “By the end of first-year composition, students should [u]nderstand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts.” The NCTE contends that 21st century literacy requires individuals to “create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts.”¹⁰ Finally, the CCSS.ELA—a set of standards more and more of the students entering our classrooms will be familiar with and (hopefully) able to discuss in

¹⁰ Elsewhere, the NCTE defines “multimedia” as “the use of several different media to convey information (text, audio, graphics, animation, video, and interactivity)” (Conference of English Education).

critical, reflective ways—calls for students to “[u]se technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.”

The online reading and writing practices of the participants in this study demonstrate ways students are already meeting many of these standards. Critique and analysis of online texts, for example, are important key points within the standards listed above. Participants critiqued the ineffectiveness of discussing certain topics in public forums; they analyzed the nature of presenting oneself at sites such as Facebook as well as the depth of interactions that might take place there; and their discussions of management systems such as WebCT and MathXL indicate an ability to analyze some of the various ways information is presented online. In this way, students are beginning to meet some of these standards. As teachers, we can build off those small critical moves by pointing them out to students and helping them increase the quality and depth of such analysis.

Other scholars in composition and rhetoric have stressed the importance of similar analysis and critique. Williams points out that the incorporation of popular culture into the ways students present their identities at social networking sites reflects a change not only in their writing practices but also in the ways they read and analyze the texts they encounter in online spaces. The students themselves may not yet, for example, be able to fully articulate “what rhetorical patterns and genre expectations influence how they read and write texts such as a social networking page with more than fifty popular culture elements and references on it” (Williams 38), but I argue we can help them make such connections and apply the

sophistication of such online reading practices to texts they write and encounter in academic and other online settings.

Vie argues that while students are fluent in composing with and frequently immersed in reading online sites such as “social networking sites, podcasts, audio mash ups, blogs and wikis,” they don’t always read such sites critically (10).

According to Vie, as teachers we can help students read these sites more critically, and her article goes on to show instances where, when asked, students do critically discuss the content of such sites.

Bringing the analysis our students are beginning to do more fully to the level the standards of our field ask of them should be an important goal in our teaching. We can help students meet these standards by examining with them the kinds of texts participants began to critique in the context of this study. If we discuss and even view such texts with our students, we can ask them, for example, what specific elements of a site like WebCT make it less than easy to navigate at times and how such elements might change to better suit the purposes of the site. Or within social networking sites, we might ask students to interrogate further the nature of presentation of self at Facebook, the purposes and effect of pulling popular culture elements into their pages, or the purpose and potential audience members for memes, other pictures, or articles they or another user may have chosen to post.

Enhancing our students’ abilities to critically analyze the kinds of texts participants in this study discussed and that both Williams and Vie also point to is a clear step toward helping students meet the standards and outcomes listed above that inform their coursework. Such analysis also provides a clear starting point for

discussing the connections between reading and writing for various purposes that our students aren't always making on their own. As instructors, we can remind students of the importance of critically reading and evaluating the texts they encounter online and ask them to analyze the intentions behind rhetorical choices—choices that include the incorporation of traditional text with audio, image, animation and more—being made in a variety of both on and offline texts, including those they read in their social and recreational lives. We can also point out to students the similarities between such analysis and the ways in which we ask them to analyze texts they read in their academic lives. In doing so, we provide students another way to connect the reading and writing they do online for various purposes to standards and outcomes for composition studies. As their skills in analyzing and critiquing the online texts they read in both their non-academic and academic lives sharpen, we can also ask them to apply the same kind of analysis and critique to their own writing as they attempt to create rhetorically effective multimedia texts in our classrooms. Students' skills in understanding, analyzing, critiquing, and even producing online texts—whether alphabetic, visual, or multi-modal—in ways the standards of our profession call for can also be enhanced as we address other findings from this study in our classrooms as well.

Implications in a First-Year Writing Classroom

While an exhaustive list of the potential purposes and features of a first-year writing course beyond the WPA, NCTE, and even CCSS.ELA standards would be impractical (and likely impossible) in the context of this chapter, there are several elements I believe a first-year writing course should contain. Within a college and

university setting, a first-year writing course is positioned as a course meant to improve students' abilities as readers and writers both for their college career and in their professional lives beyond college, an attitude reflected in the course descriptions for the first year writing courses at both SWU and CCSW. First-year writing is also a course in which writers are sometimes asked to consider the forms of writing they already do on their own and the various roles writing might play in their academic, personal, and professional lives beyond the first-year writing classroom.¹¹ The online reading and writing practices of the participants in this study demonstrate that as students like Erin, Will, Rachel, and Krista enter our classrooms, they do so having read a wide variety of writing and creative production online. Students may not, as discussed above, always see the links between their various uses of the Internet for social and recreational purposes and their academic lives. Their online reading and writing experiences in their social and recreational lives, however, provide points of entrance for discussion and work that might bring students to a deeper understanding of their roles as readers and writers both inside and outside their academic lives, as well as the potential the Internet holds for them as participants in the creation and consumption of online texts.

Their decisions not to take part in the public discussion forums that were often connected to the sites participants visited, whether those discussions centered around popular culture texts or political ideas, offers one such point of entrance.

Participants held little interest in the opinions of strangers in such discussion

¹¹ Students in the first year writing program at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for example, are asked to consider their writing in this way (see Fleming, et. al's introduction to the current UMass, Amherst College Writing Textbook, *Other Words: A Writer's Reader*).

forums, or they felt debating issues online was unproductive. Roberts-Miller names such online spaces where discussion exists but is often one-sided or dismissive of opposition “the expressive public sphere.” She may be pointing to the kinds of online discussion or debate participants found so distasteful when she states, “argument does not necessarily prevent people from universalizing from their particular, ignoring different experiences, and remaining completely oblivious to what might be wrong with their generalizations.” De Pew draws on Romano to argue for developing rhetorical approaches students might use when “negotiating the multiple—and sometimes—hostile variables rhetors will experience” when working with “digital writing technologies” (107).

While De Pew’s article focuses more on the relationship between instructors and digital technology, I believe his call for a more clearly articulated rhetoric of writing technologies can apply to strategies more immediately useful to students and the classroom. For example, as instructors we might analyze with students the reasons why such debate in the “expressive public sphere” isn’t productive. The reasons likely include language choice, tone, and assumptions people taking part in the debate hold about one another, elements of rhetorical choice that matter in the work students read and produce in a writing classroom as well. Students could also questions the ways online debate might become more productive and why or even if such online discourse might matter to public thought, opinion, and policy. Finally, students can consider the role their voices might have in such discussion or the possibility of alternate spaces and means of more productive debate.

Participant attitudes toward the sources behind the sites they visited socially and recreationally offer another possible avenue of discussion. As I argued in Chapter 5, participants weren't concerned with the identity of those maintaining and moderating the sites because that knowledge didn't affect their motivations for visiting the sites. As instructors, we might discuss with students who they feel creates and maintains the sites they visit, and when and why they evaluate (or don't evaluate) those sources. Greater knowledge about the individuals maintaining a site like Cucirca or AniLinkz.com—for example who owns the site and what motivates the moderators to participate—might help students gain a clearer sense of the purposes of those sites, giving students concrete examples of how motive and purpose can function in the wider world of writing. A discussion of the entities maintaining the sites they visit might also lead to questions of the power dynamic between the overall sites and the individuals adding content to the site, writers whose identities and purposes for writing online are often much clearer to students. What questions of ownership, for example, arise for the users generating content at sites run by someone else? How much control should moderators have over the content at a given site? Does it matter whether or not a site like Gaia.com operates for profit if contributors starting forums and adding writing aren't profiting? Raising such questions for students may enhance their understanding that writing is often part of a complex system of context and power relations.

As students consider the user-generated nature of the sites they visit, we might also draw their attention to the similarities between themselves and some of the writers they encounter online, engaging them in a discussion of the relationships

between producers and consumers of online texts. As primarily consumers of online texts, the participants in this study proved an audience for other writers—those who keep personal journal blogs, contribute news or political stories to existing sites, create fanart, or upload episodes and issues to the wealth of anime and manga available online. As they consume such texts, students validate the act of composing online for an audience that is, to some extent or another, public. Often their consumption went beyond just validation of such writing. As Rachel critiqued fanfiction texts online, hoping to enhance and improve the texts at Fanfiction.net and as Krista worked to improve the technical quality of Anime sites she visited through the brief comments she left, they were attempting to enhance the quality of what they read online. As Erin sought out more political and feminists texts to read, and as she and Will shared ideas based on what they'd read online during in-class discussions, they were disseminating the ideas of those texts to a wider audience that may not have otherwise encountered the texts or their content. As teachers, we can ask students to consider the impact of such moves and the effect they themselves may or may not be achieving when they make those moves.

Further, we might ask students to consider the nature of a “public” audience itself. While all four participants expressed relatively little interest in interacting with an audience of strangers, within social networking sites they were, at times, writing for an audience that was potentially quite larger depending on the size of their friends list and the privacy setting of their posts. More specifically, when Krista wrote in discussion forums at Gaia, a space she defined as a social networking community, she opened up the possibility of reaching a wide audience of readers

she had only ever encountered online. While garnering such an audience wasn't her main motive at the site, it was still a distinct possibility and quite possibly the motive of other users at the site. As students consider who they want to reach online as well as who they might be reaching beyond that intended audience, we open the possibility of discussing the definition and complexity of what it means to write for a "public" or "private" audience online in more in-depth and critical ways.

While my own participants were not generally producing large quantities of online texts, the Stanford Study of Writing found something different among the participants in that study. That study, which began in 2001 and followed approximately 12% of the students entering Stanford University that year, found a much more substantial amount of writing participants were producing online outside of their academic lives (Lunsford 1). Clearly, some students are producing more text than others. We might draw students into a discussion of the range of writing practices that occur online and the motives, advantages, and pitfalls behind the various forms of participation they encounter and take part in through the Internet. What is gained through producing text online? Through acting primarily as a consumer? As students consider such questions along with the similarities between themselves and such writers and consider their position as audience for those writers, they may also begin to consider their own roles as writers with the potential to say something and share something in public contexts, adding to other voices writing and creating online.

Beyond First-Year Writing

Three general requirements for the successful incorporation of the Internet into any classroom, both first-year writing and beyond, also emerged from this study. First, instructors must clearly explain their expectations for any assignment as well as the purpose of the assignment. For example, participants in this study became frustrated if they didn't understand when an assignment could or could not be submitted via e-mail or WebCT, or if they felt they were completing Internet-based "busy work" (in other words, an assignment that didn't seem to benefit course content or goals). Second, instructors themselves must demonstrate their own investment in Internet requirements for the class, something both Erin and Will experienced in classes with successful Internet requirements. Finally, the most successful Internet requirements participants encountered occurred in classes where participants praised the in-class atmosphere and valued the interactions they had both with the instructors and with their classmates. These guidelines for successful Internet requirements echo arguments made by scholars including Lee, Herrington, McCarthy, and A. Young in the past and can be applied to both online and offline course activities and requirements. Despite their long-standing importance in the field of composition, the experiences and reflections of the participants in this study also warrant a reminder of such guidelines here.

Reflections on Project Design

Because the first year of college is often a time of great change and development for traditional college students, I designed this study to span the entirety of the focal participants' first academic year at college. I made my first

official call for participants for this research project in July of 2009. My first interviews took place in October of 2009, and I completed final interviews in June of 2010. For the focal participants, our interactions lasted nearly an entire calendar year, and our contact over the entire school year is one of this project's strengths. Had I not followed the participants over several months, I could not have seen the ways in which their Internet uses, the sites they visited, and the time they spent online developed and changed over that period of time. I would not, for example, have seen the changing nature of Erin's attitudes toward blogs. I would not have witnessed Krista's move from Gaia to Facebook as a way to maintain social connections, nor learned about the balance she attempted to create between her academic life and her online social life by using the Internet as a reward for time spent on schoolwork. While Will was already a fan of his first semester math instructor's use of MathXL by the time of our fall semester interview, had I not interviewed him again both during and after his spring semester math course (which didn't use the Internet at all) I could not have witnessed the full development of his conviction that MathXL contributed to a superior course experience.

Although I was able to keep in consistent touch with all four focal participants over the course of the school year and successfully complete three interviews with each of them, obtaining their feedback on the write up of my research findings was less successful. I wanted to elicit participant feedback and revise based on that response as a way to offer the most accurate picture possible of their Internet uses. I sent each participant a draft of the portions of my dissertation

that represented data they had provided me. Along with the draft, I sent an e-mail asking the following questions (see Appendix H for the full text of the e-mail):

1. Are there any inaccuracies in the background information I provide about you?
2. What thoughts, ideas, or questions arise as you read?
3. Do you disagree with any conclusions I've drawn or any statements I make?
4. Have there been any major changes in the ways you use the Internet since the time of the interviews?

In the end, I only received feedback from Rachel. The Information Rachel provided about her Internet use after her first year of college appears in Chapter 4. With Rachel's overall feedback, I was able to more accurately represent her experiences playing LoTR Online. For example, she clarified certain aspect of the game and offered pseudonyms for fellow players that she felt accurately represented their personalities. I included those changes into the information I provided through her "portrait" in Chapte 4. I feel her willingness to offer revisions and contributions reflect some sense of ownership on Rachel's part over the data she provided me and how I represent it. Because I was committed to portraying each participant as fairly and accurately as possible, I'm extremely satisfied by Rachel's own investment in my representation of her in the project. Rachel's update reaffirmed the conclusions I drew about her Internet use specifically in terms of her commitment to online social relationships and interactions. Her response also offers further support for my assertion that participants were often drawn to authors and creators similar to themselves in age and interest as they consumed texts online.

The lack of feedback from other participants may not have been a problem had I completed data analysis more quickly and therefore been able to send drafts to participants sooner than I did. However, I also feel establishing a system of maintaining regular contact with participants (perhaps the expectation of an e-mail from me updating them on the progress of my research project every semester until my dissertation was completed¹²) and building it into the original description of research as presented in their consent forms rather than simply presenting feedback as an option they would have at some date in the future might have been useful. Doing so may have made that feedback a more concrete part of the research process, increasing the likelihood that I might have heard from Erin, Will, and Krista in the context of my project after the interviews were completed.

Questions for Future Research

In this project, I have attempted to give an accurate portrayal of the Internet use of focal participants Erin, Will, Krista, and Rachel in their first year at college. I have discussed what their Internet uses may teach us about the online reading and writing practices of some of the students who enter our first-year writing classroom and how we might use that knowledge as teachers. My research also raises questions for future research in online reading and writing practices.

The writing Krista and Rachel did in online spaces, for example, raises interesting questions for further study. For writers like Krista and Rachel who write to maintain the quality of communities in which they participate (either by commenting on technical problems or offering feedback to the writers whose work

¹² I did send occasional updates via e-mail, but those e-mails were informal and nothing I had set participants up to expect.

they read) what sorts of changes emerge in content based on those comments? And how are other readers and writers within the community affected?

I believe one of my most significant findings was that outside of social networking sites, closed communities, or private messages, the participants in this study tended not to write online. The four participants were clear in their individual reasons for the lack of writing—mainly that they lacked a clear purpose for doing so. This study, however, was small and focused in nature. Further larger scale studies of the digital literacy practices of a broader range of students are necessary to learn more about the kinds of reading and writing they do online.

Participant motive was a key feature of my findings in this study, but it was limited to my four focal participants. Further research, especially with a wider participant base, might explore more broadly the range of motives that influence how and why students use the sites they do. Such research might reflect more fully on the link between motive and factors of cultural ecology including the amount and conditions of an individual's Internet access, their experiences with various other sites they've encountered, and their purposes (social, recreational, and academic, as well as professional or economic) for visiting such sites.

Finally, while they were not adding to the voices of those composing content for wide public contexts, participants' presence online mattered to such writing because they provided it with an audience. The roles participants took on as readers of such content raised interesting questions as well. What would be the outcome of asking students to see the similarities between themselves and others

writing online? Would they be more likely to write in such spaces themselves? And what significance would such writing hold for them?

By turning first to our students in our research into their online reading and writing practices, I believe that we can answer these kinds of research questions in the fullest, most accurate and insightful ways possible. The first-year writing students I interviewed as part of this dissertation proved to be reflective and insightful individuals with much to say about their Internet use. I feel many, many more of the students in our first-year writing classrooms can provide us with an even wider array of online experiences and interpretations of those experiences. Among the four focal participants in this study, I encountered a wide variety of forms of writing and especially reading they were engaged in. Continued examinations of our students' online writing practices in ways that focus on the perspectives of those students can only add to our knowledge of when and how they write in online spaces and in what ways we as teachers can help them find meaningful and useful connections between the writing they do across the many roles they inhabit in their lives.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INITIAL E-MAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

Initial e-mail

Hi _____. I hope you've enjoyed your summer and that you're looking forward to fall classes. I know my summer went very quickly.

I'm e-mailing to invite you to participate in a research study that I'm conducting as part of my PhD work. Attached you will find a letter called an "Informed Consent" form. This letter explains my research project and what your role would be if you decide to participate. Please read the letter carefully. If, after reading, you're interested in participating I'll either need to meet with you in person or go over the letter with you on the phone. That way I can explain any parts of the project that are unclear to you and answer any questions you have. If you would rather meet face to face to go over the form, we'll need to do so on or before July 30th. I leave for Idaho July 31st! (As you'll see from the Informed Consent form, I'll be coming back to [City] three times as part of the research project.) Even if we meet or talk over the phone, you can still decide NOT to do the study. Participation is, of course, voluntary.

If you have any questions whatsoever or if you'd like to participate, please call me at [xxx-xxx-xxxx](tel:xxx-xxx-xxxx) or e-mail me at xxxxxxxxxx@xxxxx.xxx. Also let me know if you have problems opening the document; it is saved in .pdf format. And whether you'd like to participate or not, I'd love to hear from you, so please keep in touch!

Sincerely,

Ms. Soto

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Principal Investigator: Casey Burton Soto
Study Title: The Role of Online Reading and Writing in the Literacy Practices of First Year College Students.

1. What is this form?

This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research study.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

You are being invited to participate because you are a 2009 graduate of Rio Rancho High School, and you are my former student in twelfth grade English. To participate, you must be currently enrolled in your first full semester of college at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque or at Central New Mexico Community College. You must currently be at least 18 years of age.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this study is to examine the roles reading and writing online play in the lives of first year college students. Through my research, I would like to come to a better understanding of the ways first year college students use the Internet to read and write for both social/recreational and academic purposes. My research will examine student motives for using computers to read and write, potential connections between personal and academic uses of the Internet, and how reading and writing online reflects student identities and interests.

This research study will be a part of my PhD dissertation in the field of Composition and Rhetoric.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

This study will take place over one year.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

There are two parts to the research study. In the first part you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire via e-mail that asks you about your online reading and writing practices and your access to various kinds of technology. The initial survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. It is possible I will contact you via e-mail for clarification on any of your answers on the survey.

20 participants will fill out an initial survey. Based on participant answers, I will ask four participants to complete the next part of the study. If you are asked and agree to participate as one of these four participants, you will be asked to keep a log of your Internet use at four separate points in the school year (at approximately the 4th and 8th week of each semester). Each log will record your computer use for one week, and each log should take about five minutes per day to complete. You will also be asked to meet with me for three separate 90-minute interviews—one during first semester, one during winter break, and one at the end of the academic year. In these interviews, we will discuss your questionnaire, any Internet use logs you have completed, and your use of the Internet for school, social, and recreational purposes. In these interviews I will ask about the sites you visit, what your role is at each site (reader, creator, or both), and your purpose for visiting. I will ask about your attitudes toward your various uses of the Internet. I may also ask you to show me some of the sites you visit and to explain some of the content or purposes of the site. I will make audio recordings of these interviews and after I have finished my initial analysis of the transcripts, I will give you the option to read and respond to my analysis.

For all participants, by agreeing to participate in this study you agree to allow me, Casey Soto, to quote from your questionnaire, any Internet use logs you complete, and any interviews you participate in, as well as any research related e-mails we may exchange during the course of the study. You also give me permission to quote from any online writing you share with me. If I quote from your work or provide a computer screenshot of your work, your name (or any username you may use) and any identifying information will be changed to protect your privacy.

6. What are my benefits of being in this study?

I believe participating in this study will enhance your own understanding of the reading and writing you do online. I believe such an enhanced understanding has the potential to make you more insightful about the content of the material you read and write online. You may also gain a better understanding of the rhetorical concepts of purpose and audience.

I also believe this study will benefit future first year college students by benefiting first year college writing teachers. I hope this study will help first year college writing teachers to better understand the abilities and needs of the students in their classes as

well as help such teachers incorporate technology into their writing classrooms in more effective ways.

7. WHAT ARE my RISKS OF being in THIS STUDY?

Because you may share with me websites on which you produce some of the content, it is possible (though unlikely) that someone who reads my research may also encounter said website and, therefore, be able to identify you. To protect your privacy, I will make every effort to change all identify information in any write up or presentation of my research.

I believe there are no other known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

8. how will my personal information be protected?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records and, if applicable, of audio tapes of our interview. I will keep all study records (including any codes to your data) in a locking file cabinet in my personal office. Research records will be labeled with a code. A master key that links names and codes will be maintained in a separate and secure location. The master key and audiotapes will be destroyed after three (3) years. All electronic files (e.g., database, spreadsheet, etc.) containing identifiable information will be password protected. Any computer hosting such files will also have password protection to prevent access by unauthorized users. At the conclusion of this study, I may publish some or all of my findings. You will be identified only by pseudonym and I will change all other identifying information.

Please be aware that I cannot guarantee confidentiality if your writing or interviews indicate that your health or safety may be in immediate danger.

9. WILL I RECEIVE ANY PAYMENT FOR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

Participation in the study is voluntary. You will not receive payment for taking part.

10. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me as the principal investigator: Casey Burton Soto at [omitted] or [omitted]. If you prefer to ask questions over the phone, simply e-mail me your phone number and I will call you as soon as possible. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

APPENDIX C

INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Responses to the following questions are both confidential and voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. You can elect not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

1. Do you own your own computer? How many computers does your immediate family own?
2. Which computer do you use most often to go online? Where is it? Who owns it?
3. How long have you been using the Internet?
4. How many hours per day do you spend online? (Please don't include time spent online using a smart phone or Internet-ready handheld device in this answer).
5. Do you own a smart phone or another handheld device (like an iPod Touch) with Internet access? Do you ever use it to access online content? What kind? How often?
6. Are you currently taking or have you ever taken any college credit courses that require you to do work online? What is(are) the course(s)? What are you required to do online? For example, do you read? Write? Create visual texts/content? Post word processed documents online or turn them in electronically?
7. Did any of your high school classes require you to do work online? What was the course? What were you required to do online? Read? Write? Create visual texts/content? Post word processed documents online or turn them in electronically?
8. Do you have a job that requires you to read or write online? If so, what are the requirements?
9. What 5-10 sites do you visit most often? Include any website, online community, social networking site, or blog you visit, as well as any online chat services you use (MSN Messenger, etc). If you have the web address, list it. If not, just the name of the site is fine.
10. Choose a few of the Websites you listed above and, for each one, tell me a little bit about why you visit that site. For example, do you read content there? Do you write it? Why at this site rather than some other site?
11. Describe any other non-school, non-work related reading you do online on both a regular and occasional basis. What kinds of sites do you visit? What kinds of content do you read?
12. Describe any other non-school, non-work related writing you do online. What kinds of sites do you add content to? What does that content include/typically look like?
13. Do you consider yourself good with computers? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D

INTERNET USE LOG

Internet Use Log: Please fill out the following log for 7 consecutive days during the assigned week. Use additional pages for each day if needed.

Date:		Week of Semester:
Website Title and URL	Approximate Time on Website (Report the amount of time site is open, even if you're navigating back and forth to other sites or doing other activities on your computer).	Brief Description of Activity at Site (For example, what do you read/view at site? What do you write/add to site? Do you visit the site exclusively then close the site or is it open while you're doing other activities?)

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol
Revised October 4, 2009

Read and Clarify for All Interviewees

"Responses to the following questions are both confidential and voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. You can elect not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering."

Background Questions

- Name:
- Age:
- Racial/Ethnic background:
- Where are you going to school?
- How many credit hours are you taking?
- Have you declared a major?
- Do you have a job outside of school?
- Where do you currently live (at home, in dorms, on your own off campus)?

Internet Access

1. Describe the computer you use most often to access the Internet. Are there other computers you use? Where and how often?
2. Describe the various ways you might use the Internet in a typical day.
 - Include time on a **computer**
 - on a **handheld device** connected to the Internet.

Academic Uses:

- 1-2. Tell me about the classes you're taking this semester.
 - Do any of them require you to use the Internet?
 - How often?
 - What are the requirements?
3. Are there times you use the Internet for schoolwork when research or other online work isn't *required*?
 - In those cases, **why/how** do you use the Internet?
 - **What sites** do you visit?
 - Do you **gather** information from those sites? What kind?
 - Do you **add** information to those sites? What kind?

Social/Recreational Uses

1. I see “social” activity as activity that involves some sort of interaction or communication with other people. How would you say the Internet affects your social life?
 - In what ways does it **add to or enhance** your social life?
 - **Hinder** your social life?
2. Are there any ways you use the Internet for recreation that is individual—meaning you see this type of use as something you do alone?

Academic and Rec/Soc Overlap

1. Are there any ways in which you feel your uses of or experiences with the Internet have improved your academic abilities?
 - Explain.
2. Hurt them?
 - Explain.

For Individual Interviews (will vary):

1. In the questionnaire you filled out at the beginning of the study, you say_____. Can you elaborate on that statement?
2. In your Internet Use Log, you report that _____. Clarify for me how/why_____.

Other Questions (if time during 90 minutes)

- How would you describe the role the Internet plays in your college education? How would you describe the role you feel the Internet *should* play?
- Do you ever discuss information you or your classmates or instructors have read online? What do you discuss?
- In your classes, do you ever discuss the process of using the Internet (or the Internet as a social phenomenon)? Do you ever discuss the act of reading online content or writing online content?
- Are there any sites you’ve started using this semester that you haven’t used before? Which sites? Why do you visit that site(s)?
- Are there sites you were using before this semester that you’re still using on a regular basis? Why do you return to that site?
- Are there sites you’ve stopped using this semester? Why did you stop?

APPENDIX F

E-MAIL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Overview of our e-mail interview (Read over phone to participants at start of e-mail Interview).

1. I will send you a set of questions via e-mail. Please use the reply to answer those questions.
2. When I receive your response, I will send you the next set of questions. Follow the same process for all remaining sets of questions
3. Each set of questions will have a suggested maximum time. This is to help us adhere to the time frame of the interview. Aim to make your answers complete, but to stay under the time limit. These are approximate times, so if you finish before the time limit simply e-mail me your answers.
4. I will send you approximately 6 sets of questions. The last set will be follow up questions to your answers to previous questions.
5. If at any point during our e-mailed interview you have questions, encounter problems, or feel like too much time has passed since you heard from me, don't hesitate to call me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx (Please note the my number is still a local number).
6. And remember, your responses to the following questions are both confidential and voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. You can elect not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

E-MAIL #1 PROTOCOL

5 minutes

Background Questions

- Where are you going to school?
- How many credit hours are you taking?
- What is your major? Minor (if you have one)?
- Do you have a job outside of school? If so, doing what and about how many hours?
- Where do you currently live (at home, in dorms, on your own off campus)?

E-MAIL #2 PROTOCOL

10 minutes

Internet Access

1. Have any of the computers you access in a typical day (at home, in the dorms, on campus) changed since last semester (for example, you got a new computer or started using a different one)?
2. Describe the various ways you might use the Internet in a typical day. Start in the morning and move through your day.

E-MAIL #3 PROTOCOL

20 minutes **For #2 and #3 try to limit your answers to no more than 5 minutes per class combined.

Academic Uses

1. What classes are you taking this semester?
2. For each class, tell me if the course has a WebCT or other type of home page and what purpose that page serves for the class.
3. Do any of your classes require you to use the Internet? What are the requirements?

E-MAIL #4

Academic Uses (Part II) (20 minutes)

1. Are there times you use the Internet for schoolwork when research or other online work isn't *required*?
 - In those cases, why/how do you use the Internet?
 - What sites do you visit?
 - Do you gather information from those sites? What kind?
 - Do you add information to those sites? What kind?
2. In your classes this semester, have you discussed any information you, your classmates or instructors have read online? What did you discuss?
3. In your classes this semester, have you ever discussed the process of using the Internet (or the Internet as a social phenomenon)? Do you ever discuss the act of reading online content or writing online content?

E-MAIL #5 PROTOCOL

15 minutes

Social/Recreational Uses

1. I see “social” activity as activity that involves some sort of interaction or communication with other people. How would you say the Internet affects your social life? What social activities do you take part in on the Internet?
2. Are there any ways you use the Internet for recreation that is individual—meaning you see this type of use as something you do alone?

E-MAIL #6 PROTOCOL

15 minutes

Other Questions

1. Are there any sites you’ve started using this semester that you haven’t used before? Or are there any sites you rarely used before this semester that you use more frequently this semester? Which sites? Why do you visit the site(s)?
2. Are there sites you were using before this semester that you’re still using on a regular basis? Why do you return to that site?
3. Are there sites you’ve stopped using this semester or use much less often? If so, why?

APPENDIX G

FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Responses to the following questions are both confidential and voluntary. There are no right or wrong answers. You can elect not to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

Is your major still _____?

Were you able to do the biography? If so, let's start there. If not, just send it to me via e-mail.

Questions on Academics:

Questions on English/Writing classes: What did you take this semester? How was the Internet required? Answer the following in regards to both classes:

- How was the Internet required in your composition classes this year?
- Was there a requirement that you found effective?
- One that was not effective.
- If you could add something new tech-wise to your composition classes, what would you add? Why?

Explain any technical difficulties you experienced when the Internet was required for your course work and explain how you reacted to those difficulties.

The following questions shift the focus of the interview to social/recreational uses of the Internet. The first three revisit questions from the first interview.

- Thinking back over your academic year, in what ways do you think your uses of the Internet for social purposes might have positively affected your academic life? Negatively? No effect at all?
- Are there any sites you've started using since we last talked that you haven't used before? Which sites? Why do you visit that site(s)?
- Are there sites you've stopped using since we last spoke? Why did you stop?

I'd like to look at a site you use socially or recreationally together. [Pre-specified site for each student]

- First of all, why do you like this site? How did you first hear about it?
- When you enter this site, show/tell me what you'd typically do.
- How would you describe a typical user of this site? In what ways does that description fit/not fit you?

- Are there accepted rules of behavior at this site? How do you know? What happens if someone break one of those rules? Or, if no rules, why not?
- Who do you think maintains this site?
- What do you do that adds to this site?

Let's discuss the idea of a Net Generation that I mentioned in my earlier e-mail. Based on your age, you belong to what the cultural critic Don Tapscott defines the Net Generation, a generation of individuals born between 1977 and 1997 who will grow up having always known the Internet. What would you say are the defining characteristics of the Net Generation? How well do those characteristics fit you? Why or why not?

Think back on what we've discussed in our interviews and what I know about you as a reader and writer of online content. How might that knowledge have helped your instructors better teach you this year?

Can I e-mail you some follow up questions in the coming weeks?

APPENDIX H

E-MAIL REQUESTING FEEDBACK

Dear [Participant Name],

When you first began your participation in my research project at the beginning of your first year in college, I mentioned that you would have the option to read and respond to the portions of my dissertation that pertain to you. I've reached a point in my writing process where I'd like to invite your feedback.

In my dissertation, I offer a written portrait of each of the four focal participants who took part in my project. Those portraits make up a significant portion of the paper itself and are the basis for the conclusions I will draw in the final chapter. Because the portrait I've written describing your Internet use during your first year of college is such an important part of my project, I want to do everything I can to provide an accurate picture. For that reason, I'd like to offer you the chance to read what I've written and give any responses, ideas, clarifications or corrections you might have. Your voice is an extremely important part of my dissertation. I'd love to hear what you have to say, and use those additional thoughts and ideas as I revise what I've written and then compose the remaining chapters.

If you choose to read and offer response to the writing I'm sending you, here are some questions to consider. Feel free to answer these questions directly in a separate Word document, or respond within the text of the draft itself. If you decide to respond within the text of my writing, you can use the "comment" function in Microsoft word or you can type your thoughts directly into the document using bolded font or all caps.

1. Are there any inaccuracies in the background information I provide about you?
2. What thoughts, ideas, or questions arise as you read?
3. Do you disagree with any conclusions I've drawn or any statements I make?
4. Have there been any major changes in the ways you use the Internet since the time of the interviews?

Your pseudonym in the draft is "[Omitted]" and I refer to [Omitted] as CCSW and [Omitted] as SWU. Any response you offer will be very important to me, and I will do my best to reflect your additional thoughts and suggestions within my dissertation. Feel free to contact me by e-mail or phone with any questions you might have.

Sincerely,
Casey

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