

**WAL06500**

## **Disrupting girls in virtual communities of practice: Discursive performativity as agency**

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### **Abstract**

In line with the work of feminists 'post-linguists' (Threadgold, 1997; Poynton, 1989; Lee, 1994) who seek to produce readings of texts which indicate the ways individuals are positioned to take up positions within discourses and thus come to constitute themselves as subjects of those discourses, this paper reports on how adolescent girls' hypermedia design works to alter the conceptual repertoire of the individual and in doing so alters the individual's subjectivity. By examining girls hypermedia design that challenges/resists male domination, I discuss their acts of uploading and hypermedia design in terms of Butler's theorization of discursive performativity. I believe the adolescent girls employ a form of "linguistic agency" or "discursive agency" (Butler, 1997) that allows them to make use of a wide range of discursive practices that are non-linguistic or not entirely linguistic. Because the girls were involved in a set of relationships over time, both inside and outside of school in both virtual and real time, within their communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), they engage with particular areas of curricular knowledge—differently than boys—by showcasing their re-representations online. Consequently, this presents the possibility they may possess a joint enterprise and similar sense of identity. This paper puts forth the idea that within virtual communities of practice, new contexts emerge when disrupting girls/women can work in transgressive modes.

Background

### **Introduction**

This study stems from a larger study exploring (Walsh, 2006) the significance of adolescents' engagement with digital technologies and new literacy practices that challenged progressive reading and writing practices, particularly *balanced literacy*, arguing they are out of touch with postmodern life and adolescents' life worlds in post-typographic societies. A major ambition of this work was to engage students in critical reading/writing and design that was disruptive and interrupted binary knowledge constructions. Curriculum aims, rather than "normalizing" students, were often pushing them to question how the texts they were reading supported particular conceptions/beliefs about the world that they could accept, contest or attempt to transform. This idea is well aligned with the work of academic educators (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1999a; Grace 2004; Spurlin, 2002; Summara, 2003) who use queer theory as a tool for deconstruction, "primarily for teaching students a method of textual and social-cultural analysis to understand identities and intersections of power, beliefs, and choices" (Ford, 2004, p. 1).

My work with adolescents was an attempt to interrupt the idea of personal voice or "the imperative to give space to student voice...founded on the assumption that to do so will improve things and contribute to universal goals of liberation and social transformation" (Kamler, 2001, p. 46). Like Kamler (2001), who argues for a more situated, localized understanding of the transformative power of writing—still grounded in ideas of social change but relocated outside metaphors of voice—I want to argue that the notion of hypermedia design or more precisely the notion of *student as designer* offers adolescents new ways to represent their personal experiences. In New Times, the idea of the student as designer:

opens up the personal to change (a less grand, more provisional term than transformation). It allows us to imagine the possibility of rewriting the multiple and contradictory subject positions we occupy and/or bringing into new positions to sit alongside the old. It allows 'the possibilities of stories of resistance, not determinism, and of new, transformed selves.' (p. 48)

Drawing on Weedon (1987) who describes the subject in poststructuralism as socially constructed in

discursive practices and existing as thinking, feeling subject and social agent capable of resistance and innovations as a result of the conflict between contradictory subject positions and practices Kamler (2001) writes:

This notion that subjectivities are discursively constructed and can therefore be reconstructed seems to me a productive ground for rethinking a pedagogy of the personal that promotes agency. Pinar (1997) argues, in a similar vein, that because we live in a discursive world, ‘the process of education requires narrative voices which disclose the political character of language and the rhetorical feature of social change. “There must be some way outta here” and the passage is discursive.’ (1997, p. 48)

In this paper I explore the transformative possibilities when adolescent girls engage in hypermedia design with the discursive worlds of their communities of practice to explicate the ways the notion of student as designer can also be seen as a design for identity, subjectivity and text (Kamler, 2001).

## Theoretical Frameworks

Attempting to thwart the recolonizing theoretical masculinist potential inherent in this reflective study, I drew on queer theory to analyse students’ creative design. Moreover, I was mindful of my own curricular participation in critical pedagogy—that generally tended to construct a masculinist subject—which “renders the emancipatory agenda for ‘gender’ theoretically and practically problematic” (Luke, 1992, p. 25). In this process I attempted to understand where students’ design work represented what I consider to be practices emerging within the framework of a queer pedagogy I was employing in my classroom as an eighth grade humanities teacher. Inherent in this was the value I placed on queer knowledges:

Queer knowledges can proffer a location where identities grow. They enable learners to challenge heterosexualizing discourses and heteronormative ways of being, doing, becoming, and belonging. In doing so they situate queer performance as an alternative pedagogy that often forms new directions for personal development as it cuts across themes of postmodernity such as diversity, identity, representation, audience, textuality, body image/consciousness, and self-definition. (Grace, 2004, p. 2)

Student literacy practices I identified include, but were not limited to interrupting binaries, being disruptive and transgressive by promoting multiplicities of (new) meaning through hypermedia design. I also believed my “queer pedagogy” asked students to engage in design practices where they were refashioning their representations of the world—and as a result—also transforming their identities and subjectivities in the process.

I drew on Bernstein’s (1996) work on “pedagogical discourse” that looks at how knowledge is framed; that is, how the social interaction of teacher/student discourse and behavior (or in this case “design”) created a mediating environment for working with ideas, knowledge and texts incorporating a range of semiotic tools. To understand how the queered classroom and curriculum become a discourse site for the construction of not just semiotic artifacts—but knowledge and identity—I also employed Bernstein’s (1996) notion of the classification of knowledge that focuses specifically on the representation and scaffolding of knowledge. In doing this, I looked across students’ online portfolio sites for examples of students’ depth of disciplinary concepts and discourse, knowledge reproduction and construction, and importantly—their levels of critique on different subject matter and themes taken up in the curriculum.

I also drew heavily on Kamler (2001) who utilizes Kress’ social semiotic theory of representation to describe how the making of writing, essentially a making of signs, is seen as an action that can be explained in terms of social structures and cultural systems:

Within this conception the writer is seen as an experienced maker of signs who produces and transforms signs. An intimate and reciprocal relationship is posited between the forms of representation—the signs the writer uses—and the forms of subjectivity produced. With regard to the sign itself, Kress argues there is a motivated conjunction of form (signifier) and meaning (signified). Makers of signs use the most apt forms of expression for their meaning, rather than simply arbitrary ones...selecting sign from available resources involves a remaking, however slight that may be. That is, the activity

of using the resources can be viewed as transformative activity, not simply as imitation or repetition but as remaking. In this conception, Kress differs from linguistics who treat language systems as independent of the writer and the role of the writer as a fairly mechanical, inert one. (Kamler, 2001, pp. 51-52)

Along the same lines, adolescent designers were using the language of print as well as visual, audio, moving images (through HTML and DHTML) and essentially remaking or redesigning those systems of representation as a result of their individual (and group) experiences and subjectivities. Kress (1996) furthers this idea in reference to the writer:

The systems of representation of any social and cultural group are the effects of the collective actions of individual makers of signs. Social and individual semiotic, communicative, and representational activities are thus linked in a complex but tightly integrated mesh. (p. 237)

In much the same way Kress sees the act of writing as not only a transformative practice that involves a transformation of the writer/signmaker's subjectivity—I believe through design—adolescents' actions of producing/designing new signs out of existing representational resources continually works to alter the conceptual repertoire of the individual and, in doing so, alters the individual's subjectivity. The student who designed a multimodal webpage or site using her shape-shifting repertoire of skills is no longer the same student she was before. The student changed as her propensity to design new meaning increased. This changed who she was and who she can be as well as the multiple meanings inherent and possible in any text she designs or redesigns.

### **Online portfolios**

Because students demonstrated how easy it was to build websites, I required online portfolios which allowed me to digitize certain aspects of the curriculum allowing them to showcase their hypermedia design skills. In doing this, I moved our eighth grade portfolio assessment, criteria and what were earlier offline student portfolios, into new online spaces. The Internet and ideas of student design—central to the Multiliteracies argument—and the surprising reality that almost all of the students had online access at home made this task possible. Students were very competitive in designing their sites and this shifted many students' literacy practices as they worked quickly to acquire new design skills that they shared or traded with each other. This kind of collaboration and sharing were often "forced" upon students in the workshop classroom. But with the design of their websites, they were resourceful and acquired design skills on their own by learning web-authoring software such as Microsoft's Front Page, Dreamweaver or Yahoo's Geocities' PageBuilder or visiting different HTML code sites or copying codes from the source pages of sites they liked.

The students' online portfolios are examples of adolescents using the affordances of ICTs to serve several communicational and representational requirements necessary to engage in a "full system of communication" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996) through their presentational, interpersonal and textual choices that transcend the affordances of plain text, often in the form of multiplicative hybrid imagetexts. At the time of this analysis, forty-two of the original fifty-eight sites designed by students in both my eighth grade classes were available online. There were seventeen sites designed by female students and twenty-five by male students. Both classes had twenty-eight female and thirty male students. Table 1 provides an overview of the portfolio websites analyzed in their entirety.

In analyzing/assessing students' online portfolios, I noticed a gap in the number of males and females who chose to include work around advertising. This was disquieting because the advertising unit included many assignments that fulfilled portfolio requirements. Eighty-nine percent of the female students chose to include their curricular work around advertisements in contrast to only sixteen percent of the males. I felt this large discrepancy needed to be problematized because it related to my attempts to disrupt what I viewed as

42 portfolio websites (1,519 Pages Total)

All designed in the academic year 2002-2003

<p>All assignments uploaded were required classroom assignments, but not required portfolio components<sup>1</sup> All portfolios were accessible from the class web hub <a href="http://www.nychumanities.com">www.nychumanities.com</a></p> <p>Average length of portfolio websites: 36 pages per portfolio site Average graphics per portfolio website: 49 graphics/images per site Average graphics per page: 1.4 Maximum graphics per page: 27</p> <p>Percentage of sites with single color backgrounds: 29% (on the index or introduction pages) Percentage of sites with image backgrounds: 71% (on the index or introduction pages) Percentage of sites with moving images: 77% Percentage sites with typographical conventions (boldface/italics/moving text): 98% Percentage of sites with sound/audio/mp3s: 17%</p> <p>Total Number of Links for all Websites: 7007 Average links per website: 166 Average interior links per website: 134 (the links take you to student-designed web pages) Average outside links per website: 48 (the links take you to non-student designed web pages) Average of academic outside links per website: 43 (usually in the form of a bibliography) Average of non-academic outside links per website: 2</p>
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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Online Portfolios

heteronormative, sexist, and masculinist discourses prevalent in advertising. In the unit we looked at gender stereotyping and portrayals of male violence, nutrition, smoking and alcohol in advertisements as well as global corporate media control. Ninety percent of the work uploaded by female students dealt specifically with violent female gender stereotypes or ads promoting male violence while the other ten percent dealt with nutrition and smoking. None of the work uploaded by the males dealt specifically with either violent female gender stereotypes or male violence, rather they commented on how ads work to persuade individuals to desire certain products/bodies or engage in unhealthy activities around smoking and consumption. I was curious to understand why so many girls chose to upload their work and why boys did not.

### Uploading as a form of discursive performativity

The idea of what is uploaded and what is not, is significant for three reasons; (1) computing has a masculine history and is male dominated/biased (Harris & Willikinson, 2004; Luckman, 1999; Rakow, 1988), (2) a stereotypical male culture has developed around computer use most evident in the marketing of and participation in computer-based games (Ditmarr, Long, & Meek, 2004; Luke, 1996; Morahan-Martin, 1998) and, (3) in much the same way socialization processes turn women away from math and science—there is growing consensus—that the perceptual social constructions of technology are also keeping women from realizing successful careers with computers and other ICTs (Leonardi, 2002; Margolis & Fischer, 2001; Warnick, 1999). Furthermore, while much has been written on the theory and practice of critical literacy (Gee, 1996; Muspratt, Freebody & Luke, 1996; The New London Group, 1996) and critical media literacy (Alvaro & Boyd-Barrett 1992; Buckingham 1990, 1993, 2003; Hammet, 1999; Luke 1994, 1996b; Lusted, 1991; Myers, Hammett, & McKillop, 1998) very little is written about critical literacy in cyberspace.

In analyzing the girls' work uploading their critical advertising work, I make the argument here they not only understand principles of critical literacy covered across the curriculum—but can apply them to their hypermedia design—drawing on ideas of intertextuality with an understanding of how meanings shift across media, genres and cultural frames of reference to construct new forms of identity and disrupt normative and heteronormative genres they come across in the texts of their everyday lives. The adolescent girls, as a result of their multiple literacies and participation in the attention economy (Lankshear & Noble, 2002), may indeed have insight into the political and material consequences of technological change in New Times. By this, I am drawing on theoretical concept of Cyberfeminism which is largely based on the idea that, in conjunction with technology it's possible to construct your identity, your sexuality, even your gender, just as you please. My students have not read any of the vast literature on Cyberfeminism—but considerable parts

<sup>1</sup> Students were encouraged to personalize their portfolio websites by having the freedom to upload any academic work that was not included in the portfolio requirements.

of their lives are lived in online spaces. Unlike many of the established women who publish articles and books on Cyberfeminism or postfeminism, my students have the skills needed to live, work and design/write online. I think the adolescent girls in class viewed the Internet and online portfolio sites as places where they could talk back to totalizing, normalizing and male dominating discourses without being directed to do so from the teacher. This does not mean they don't also often uncritically recirculate and re-present sexist and stereotyped images of women (Albright, Purohit & Walsh, 2002) in their vast online lives (cyber-identities, cyber-representations and participation in online communities, etc.). Paramount here is the gap between what the girls have uploaded and why—in relation to what the boys have not uploaded—as well as what it *means* to upload.

The Internet is open to my female students unlike their experiences with other closed school and community activities including sports (Lesko, 2001) and some exclusively male only community and church youth groups in their immigrant neighborhood. Perhaps like other women, the girls in my two classes “see cyberspace as a place to be heard, for free speech, and as a means to share information and gain support” (C. Luke, 2000, p. 87). Looking at the titles of their work; “Why is it Important to Study Male Violence in Advertising?,” “Talking Back to an Ad,” “How is Living Up to Gender Stereotypes Harmful to Us?,” “Argument on an Ad that is Offensive to Me”, and “Male Violence Being Promoted in Media!!!” point to the fact they may view uploading this work as a way of disrupting certain gendered practices they encounter in school and online. I believe this example works well with an emerging educational theory called *enactivism* which is based on the ideas of Maturana and Varela (1987). Enactivism, instead of seeing learning as “coming to know,” one envisages learners and the learned, the knower and the known, the self and the other, as co-evolving and being co-implicated. Thus, context is neither the setting for a learning activity, nor the place where the student is, meaning the student is literally part of the context. With enactivism the complexity of learning is emphasized:

learning should not be understood in terms of a sequence of actions, but in terms of an ongoing structural dance—a complex choreography—of events, which in retrospect, cannot be fully disentangled and understood, let alone reproduced (Davis, Sumara & Kieren, 1996, p. 153).

Enactivism works well with ideas of queer theory because it contrasts constructivism and progressive literacy practices by emphasizing knowing rather than knowledge. With constructivism, knowledge is viewed as constructed and evaluated in terms of whether it fits with the experience of the knower. The representation students construct of their realities can be viewed as a process of redefinition which occurs when ideas are transformed in a social setting so that they can be stabilized, inspected, edited, and shared by others. With enactivism, collective action is not for individual sense-making but as a location for shared meanings and understandings (Davis, 1996). This seems to be the case with the adolescent girls in this study, as their cognition is not in their minds, rather in their shared action of uploading, implying that knowledge is not apart from the world, but embedded in complex systems (school, community, affinity groups, etc.). The lack of boys uploading is perhaps not a question of their lack of interest in communicating and using ICTs, but their refusal to partake in what is seen as an affront to their power and subjectivity and not wanting to enact a different, less powerful self.

Important to the above ideas is the fact that the book and the page are no longer the central medium of communication; the screen has now taken over. Kress (2003) notes:

This is leading to an inversion in semiotic power. The book and the page were the site of writing. The screen is the site of the image—it is the contemporary canvas. The book and the page were ordered by the logic of writing; the screen is ordered by the logic of image. A new constellation of resources for meaning is taking shape. The former constellation of *medium of book plus mode of writing* is giving way to the new constellation of *medium of screen plus mode of image*. (p. 67)

The idea for a new constellation of meaning is significant when coupled with new technologies because they offer students a chance to “write-back” (Kress, 2003). This idea is significant because ICTs have changed the flow of communication and knowledge in one direction—from books—to bi-directionality where authorship is no longer rare. Although it could be argued that a change in power of the author brings with it a consequent devaluing of the texts authority if you're a recognized author, the reverse is more likely true if you're an adolescent female living in New York City. Each one of the students' portfolios was linked to the [www.nychumanities.com](http://www.nychumanities.com) webpage. In May of 2003, when the students were uploading their work to their

portfolios, the counter read 41,596 visitors. Unlike the reading and writing workshop where at most a handful of peers would read their writing, their online portfolios were websites that offered potentially more readers. In addition, ninety-one percent of the female student's portfolio websites were linked from their online blogs at [www.xanga.com](http://www.xanga.com) which also increased their potential audience of readers<sup>2</sup>.

Queer analyses using post-structural theorizations of power, discourse and subject have made significant contributions to understandings of inequities and exclusions in which identities and sexualities are pivotal markers. In considering the adolescent girls uploading of work that challenges/resists male domination, I want to discuss those acts of uploading and designing in terms of Butler's (1993) theorization of discursive performativity in which the "performative functions to produce that which it declares" (p. 13). Understood in this way, discursive practices that describe pre-existing subjects are considered productive. These performatives are citational because they cite prior discursive practices. In the case of the adolescent girls, they are citing their earlier discursive practices of writing an essay. The essays are steeped in historicity and their meanings become sediment because they exist in an isolated largely outdated print-mode. As a part of the progressive reading and writing workshop, they are blurred; their meanings are non-necessary and cut off. Existing only in print, they are also subject to "misfire" (Derrida, 1988, p. 72), they can have unexpected, or unwanted effects or in this case, as I am arguing, no effects whatsoever.

Interestingly, Butler's more recent revisions and rethinking of this work around the performatively constituted subject take up Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). Youdell (2004) furthers this idea:

Taking bodily activity to be formed by and formative of ritual and convention, she argues that the bodily habitus can be seen as "a citational chain lived and believed at the level of the body" (Butler, 1997a, p. 155). She suggests that this might be understood as "tacit performative" which gives the body "a practical sense" (Butler, 1997 a, pp. 159-160), a tacit awareness of its potential performative force as well as its limits. Butler also makes use of Althusser's notion of interpellation (Althusser, 1971) suggesting that being interpellated—named—is a prerequisite for being "recognizable" (Butler, 1997a, p. 5. original emphasis) as a subject. Reflecting Althusser's notion of subjection and Foucault's understanding of subjectivation, Butler suggests that such naming may well be injurious, it may wound, but in so doing it also constitutes an intelligible subject (Butler, 1997b).

The subject who has been named in this case—dominated females—named in advertising, is also able to name another—the dominating and violent male. These adolescent girls have what Butler calls "linguistic agency" (Butler, 1997a, p. 15) or "discursive agency" (Butler, 1997a, p. 127) allowing them to make use of the range of discursive practices (or affordances of ICTs) that are non-linguistic or not entirely linguistic—for instance hypermedia designs or performative habitus—thus, challenging them through their discursive agency.

When students have this understanding of discursive agency (either outright or intuitively), as performatively constituted subjects, they retain intent and can seek to realize this through the deployment of discursive design practices. Butler suggests that such a subject might practice resistance through a politics of performative resignification. The act of so many girls uploading their work dealing with male violence is a form of performative resignification. This compliments ideas from Walkerdine (1997) who, in her critique of progressive pedagogy and the progressive classroom and the extent to which the validation of violence among boys is widespread, points out how "girls are often held up as lacking: they seem to demonstrate either deviant activity or a passivity which means that they must be found lacking in reason and compensated for this lack" (p. 21). These adolescent girls and their work online around design are powerful because it is not lacking, rather it is performative and opens up possibilities for resisting the hierarchy of patriarchal power found in advertising, society, school and even their classroom.

## Conclusions

In analyzing the adolescent girls' literacy events and multimodal practices, I was forced to think about identity development within communities of practice. Turning to Wenger (1998), I shifted my lens to understand the students' participation in communities of practice:

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<sup>2</sup> At xanga.com, bloggers join different blog rings where they are connected through different affinity groups. Many students I taught, were members of xanga.com and connected to over 10,000 users through their membership in different blog rings.

community of practice is characterized by the mutual engagement of its participants, implying participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities. Each participant finds a unique place and gains a unique identity, which is further integrated, and further defined in the course of engagement in practice. (p. 86)

The adolescent girls were involved in a set of relationships over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and their community, separate from the boys, that developed around ideas important to them. The fact they are engaging with a particular area of curricular knowledge and activity by posting their re-representations of this knowledge on their websites, presents the very real possibility that they possess a joint enterprise and similar sense of identity. For a community of practice to operate, it must generate and appropriate a shared repertoire of ideas, practices and loyalty. The adolescent girls in this study illustrate how with a certain community of practice, adolescents can develop various resources and practices—through design—thereby sustaining and preserving the accumulated knowledge of the community. In this example, the girls' ways of doing, approaching and sharing ideas about male violence were shared to some significant extent due to their membership in the community of practice. Turning to Lave (1988) as reported in Gee (2000), I believe the girls' learning is best measured in this instance by their participation in a changing practice; uploading work important to them. Lave (1996) states that learning is more than a change in practice, but also a change in identity:

Rather than particular tools and techniques for learning as such, there are ways of becoming a participant, ways of participating, and ways in which participants and practices change. In any event, the learning of specific ways of participating differs in particular situated practices. The term 'learning mechanism' diminishes in importance, in fact it may fall out all together, as 'mechanisms' disappear into practice. Mainly, people are becoming kinds of persons. (p. 157).

Lave's perspective fits nicely with the idea of communities of practice and I want to put forth that it is important for educators to acknowledge these new spaces where the disrupting woman may be emerging and working in transgressive modes. New online communities of practice offer spaces for resistance and unlike Foucault, who pays little attention to forms of resistance and their expression in prisons, schools, welfare, etc. Educators should not preclude an analysis that can give important insights into the ways in which femininities and masculinities are constructed, reconstructed and sometimes contested in new spaces in New Times.

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