

Shaping the Digital Pen: Media Literacy, Youth Culture, and MySpace

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With the rise of new technologies and online social communities, youth media educators face new and interesting questions about what constitutes media literacy today. Has our understanding of media literacy and media literacy instruction shifted concomitantly with shifts in (youth) culture and technology? Do youth media educators understand and utilize the ways in which youth employ technology to critically compose media texts? How can such understandings of youth, their media literacy practices, and new technologies challenge deficit assumptions about youth literacy practices and contemporary literacy pedagogies? Ellen Cushman's¹ assessment that mainstream² literacy classrooms have grown out of the immediate need to socialize the untamed, unrefined writer into the habits of the elite gives such questions credence. For Cushman, literacy classrooms detached from the lives and perspectives of everyday people are more-or-less sites for the production and reproduction of social, economic, political, and educational oppression. Maisha Fisher³ has further suggested that literacy educators of all stripes stand to gain much by deeply investigating the communities in which youth participate and practice literacy.

It is in this vein that I offer the example of Derrick,⁴ a student who participated in an "ethnography of literacy"⁵ that I conducted from 2003 to 2006. Importantly, the data that I use is taken from that larger ethnographic study of literacy in the lives of six adolescent Black males.⁶ To limit the scope of my analysis, I analyze in this article three

¹ Cushman, 1996 and 1997.

² I use the adjective "mainstream" to distinguish between the eclectic pedagogical practices of youth media educators and more traditional uses of media common in American classroom.

³ Fisher, 2007a.

⁴ The name Derrick is a pseudonym, used to protect the identity of the young man who participated in the study.

⁵ Dyson, 2003; Heath, 1983.

⁶ Kirkland, 2006.

texts that prominently appeared on Derrick's MySpace⁷ page using, among other approaches, methods adopted from literary and composition studies⁸

My knowledge of Derrick's writing comes from at least two places: from informal conversation with him and from informal conversations with his twelfth grade English teacher. According to his teacher, Derrick "could not write" well and "did not [like to] write." His English teacher viewed her job as to help Derrick "learn the basics of writing," which more or less meant silencing his voice while imposing on him the grammar and locution of "edited American English."⁹ However, Derrick saw himself as a writer, a description of himself that became quite evident after reading his *MySpace* page.

Having read Derrick's *MySpace* page, I argue that Derrick's teacher's assumptions about his literacy abilities were frighteningly premature and dangerously narrow. With echoes of Paulo Freire's¹⁰ "banking" notion of education, the teacher's sentiments suggest somehow that Derrick was a blank slate to be imbued with the graces of literacy.

In this article, I juxtapose Derrick's teacher's view of him with Derrick's view of himself by examining his media literacy products from a critical perspective. In doing so, I reflect upon what I see as a set of dichotomies in views (e.g., the student as receiver versus the student as received, media literacy as official product versus media literacy as unofficial practice). My goal in this article, then, is to complicate Derrick's teacher's assumptions by examining the writings that Derrick features on his *MySpace* page. In this way, I also seek to broaden notions of literacy, situating them in the current culture of technology where youth media literacies thrive.¹¹

Hoping to offer an *emic* view of media literacy, Derrick's writings, usually presented in verse, are all the more powerful because of his commentary on them. Therefore, using his writings and his voice, I not only entertain a counter perspective on

⁷ *MySpace* is a social networking website, which offers an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos internationally. According to Alexa Internet (<http://www.alexa.com>), *MySpace* is currently the world's sixth most popular English-language website and the sixth most popular website in any language, and the third most popular website in the United States. It is the most popular social networking website in the world.

⁸ Augustyn, 1977-1978; Ball, 1997; Kolodny, 1985; Lamb, 1991; McDowell, 1985; Richardson, 2003.

⁹ Delpit, 1988; Meacham, 2002.

¹⁰ Freire, 1995.

¹¹ Alvermann & Heron, 2001; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Kress, 2003; Newell, 2005.

youth and media literacy, I also attempt to address a larger question of what Derrick's example means for literacy education. In addressing this question, I argue that by examining literacy in online social communities such as *MySpace*, literacy educators in general and youth media educators in specific will gain access to an exciting new textual universe that, by its very nature, challenges deficit assumptions about students and narrow ideas about literacy and its processes.

Media Literacy Practices: Writing Beyond the Classroom

I frame this chapter in the belief that youth compose texts using a variety of cultural and technological tools that are made available to them. I contend that such texts are almost by nature “critical,” in the Freirian sense of the term in that they offer 1) a particular reading of the world,¹² 2) a critique/counter-story to dominant social narratives,¹³ and 3) an authentic youth voice that demonstrates youth agency.¹⁴ I use the term *critical* to mean the ways that youth rewrite their identities and reinvent their worlds through their practices of literacy. Further, I define literacy in the critical literacy tradition of Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo,¹⁵ who suggest critical literacy centers on the development of students' collective, democratic voices and demands social action. Hence, students are never just learning skills, such as decoding/encoding print, but are always, by definition, learning to read/write the world in order to live in it and transform it.¹⁶ Critical literacy, thus, pushes the idea that literacy is itself a transformative act, always altering “the word and the world.”

I extend my understanding of critical literacy, here, beyond the traditional trajectory of decoding/encoding words in order to accommodate our changing societal landscape. Literacy in this technological age must necessarily incorporate an acknowledgment of the digital media that has come to define our daily conversations, our online social interactions, our new reading and writing practices, and our digitized social comments and commitments. It is within such shifts in culture and communication that—from a critical perspective—I situate media literacy.

¹² Freire & Macedo, 1995; Souto-Manning, 2007.

¹³ Delgado, 1989; Duncan, 2002.

¹⁴ DeBlase, 2002.

¹⁵ Freire & Macedo, 1995.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Further, by extending our understanding of what counts as literacy, I offer a view of media literacy that emanates from Derrick, who—not unlike students studied by other literacy scholars such as Maisha Fisher,¹⁷ Ernest Morrell and Jeff Duncan-Andrade,¹⁸ and Jabari Mahiri¹⁹—employs and remixes words and worlds frequently in his raps and in his poetry. Such texts get positioned squarely outside classroom contexts, saturating Derrick’s *MySpace* page. Acknowledging this, I have grown to respect the online rhetorical spaces of youth, like Derrick, as lush sites for understanding literacy more complexly. Here, I treat Derrick’s physical and virtual worlds as richly textured scenes for investigating the features and motives of his literacy work. While much of my analysis of his literacy practices consist of an examination of three texts that Derrick composed and published on his *MySpace* page, conversations with Derrick have helped me to make sense of the larger value of these texts with respect to literacy, youth identity, and Derrick’s subjectivity within an online environment.

An Online Odyssey: Examining Derrick’s Media Literacy Practices in *MySpace*

On his *MySpace* page, Derrick told stories and constructed counter-narratives that seemed to give him agency over how he would be written and received in this digital world. His textual artifacts suggest the production of not only new knowledges, but also of a new self told beyond print and upon and against the very symbolic fabric that instigates the current existing social order. It is in this light that Derrick confessed to me:

I started using *MySpace* to keep in touch with my friends. Everybody I knew had a *MySpace* page, except for me. So I had to get one. When I got one, it was like a new world. There wasn’t that many rules. There was no teacher telling you what to do, telling you what you could and could not do. You were free to be creative. I mean . . . you could do and even be anything you wanted. So *MySpace* changed the game for me. You know I’m a rapper. So *MySpace* gave me a place to showcase my talent. I am also a poet, and I was like . . . I can even post my poems on *MySpace* too. The more I played around with it, the more I wrote because I had somewhere to put my writing that made me feel good about it, you know.

Based on this confession, I have come to see *MySpace* as not only giving Derrick a place to “feel good about” his writing, but also as a space to liberate his story. Under the

¹⁷ Fisher, 2007b.

¹⁸ Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004.

¹⁹ Mahiri, 2004.

backdrop of his story, Derrick's confession reveals to literacy educators in general the ways that, according to him, "*MySpace* lets [youth] tell [their] story to anybody who will listen." More specifically, Derrick's confession allows youth media educators who work tirelessly and in radical ways to support youth voice, creativity, and visibility to enter Derrick's world and hear a voice that is not only authentic but also critical.

On *MySpace* youth like Derrick are free to express themselves, writing about everything and anything:

I be writing about my life mainly. It's like to say something really important, I got to get my story out there. It says a lot about our world—stuff that's fucked up and stuff that's not so fucked up. But it's my view. . . I don't usually tell my view by writing an essay. That's not my style. I can write like that, but I don't always want to write like that because I feel like I can get my point across better in a poem or in a rap. I can say the same stuff, but I feel like I can say it better [in a poem or rap than in an essay].

Spoken word poetry and rap helped Derrick present his message. These genres—often omitted from formal classroom study—offered him a language and style to communicate with his *MySpace* peers. Significantly, each genre is culturally-influenced.²⁰ Black and hip-hop. Beyond this, the genres express the social languages of Derrick's technological present. The texts that Derrick produced also included specific linguistic and design elements that were clearly technologically-influenced. These complex sets of influence—cultural and technological—are profoundly captured in three pieces. These texts include Derrick's poem "U Turn" and two of his raps, "That's Me" and "Guardian Angel." I explore each of these texts throughout this article.

"U Turn"

Derrick explained to me that the object of his writing was almost always toward understanding—conveying what is understood, attempting to understand something, or both. His sentiment is best appreciated in the Bakhtinian²¹ idea that writing (as in "utterance") is joined with the collective *utterances* of others, deeply indebted (but not beholden) to how others have made sense of the world through them. In this process, there are *appropriations*—cultural and otherwise—that give writers like Derrick entry

²⁰ Fisher, 2007a; Hagood, 2004; Moje, 2002.

²¹ Bakhtin, 1986.

into a perspective, thought, or idea. Yet, writers like Derrick *reaccentuate* what they have appropriated for their own purposes to make meanings in/of their own situations. Derrick considered this meaning-making process “flippin the script,” or “playing with it [e.g. language, technology, etc.] so that your work stands out.”

In his poem “U Turn,” Derrick “plays with it,” blending the utilities of language, culture, and technology complexly to put forth a critical message that is all the more powerful because of his agency over the design. Derrick’s subjectivity—his sense of self within the utterance and his sense of possibilities related to the composing act—is uniquely revealed in the poem. We can begin to sense Derrick’s cultural and social location through his words as we examine his poem:

U turn
left b Hind
Legs sprawl ing on top of Black back
Mountains
Rivers that Run Deep
Like Sheba’s Queens and she Loves
Open pours
inside empty cups that run over
hope like Escalades
that phaint in Darkness
that phreeze in Night
That phuck in morning, morning
Uprising
Lite skin white men
Blues is my brothers
Black is my Berry
Sweet is my juice
So U turn back to me
I re turn back to U
I die daily 4 U

Opening his poem with the letter “U” as oppose to the word “you,” Derrick signals something that is not uncommon among youth in his generation. Derrick’s use of “U” as opposed to “you” is not an error in spelling or a sign of cognitive underdevelopment. Rather, it signals a set of relationships between him and his texts, between his texts and what Lewis and Fabos calls “invisible technology.”²² According to them, “the social subject that develops in relation to this invisible technology is one who expects access, to

²² Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 470.

be connected to friends at the stroke of a key, and to read and write *in particular ways* that lead to fulfilling connections with those friends.”²³ What makes this particular way of writing different from traditional writing practices is the immediate access to it given in a digital world. Based on Lewis and Fabos understanding of the role of technology in what they consider a new generation of writing, one must re-imagine the standard conventions of reading and writing as getting fully repositioned in texts like Derrick’s. Language and, therefore, literacy are subject to change. Ideas are under constant revision, and what we know is dramatically made malleable.

In a similar way, Kress²⁴ has argued that youth “writing in particular ways” exemplifies less complex linguistic elements and more centrally visual ones. According to Kress, this particular way of writing shifts the focus from linguistic features to elements of design. Yet, Lewis and Fabos have acknowledged that young people use “language in complex ways in order to negotiate multiple messages and interweave these conversations into larger, overarching story lines.”²⁵ Hence, Derrick’s use of “U” as opposed to “you” can be viewed as a critical media literacy practice, undertaken to free himself of the constraints of convention and ally himself with a generation of writers who are making sense of the world “in particular ways,” chiefly by revising its rules.²⁶

There are other examples of Derrick’s linguistic and cultural complexity richly woven throughout his poem. For example, Derrick boasts an interesting sprawl of cultural and linguistic markers, such as the line “Blues . . . brothers,” which at least alludes to well-known pop cultural characters. The lines “Black is my Berry/Sweet is my juice,” can have connections to the popular digital devices, the Blackberry, or to African American folklore.²⁷ Embedded in the poem are also literary allusions from sacred texts such as the Bible (e.g., “Sheba’s Queen” and “cups that run over”) to classical Black literature such as Langston Hughes’s poem “the Negro Speaks of Rivers” (e.g., “Rivers that run Deep”).

²³ Ibid, p. 470.

²⁴ Kress, 2003.

²⁵ Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 484.

²⁶ Alvermann, 2002; Hagood, Stevens, & Reinking, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002; Leander & McKim, 2003; Lewis & Finders, 2002.

²⁷ See: Smitherman, 1999.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Derrick's poem is his use of linguistic conventions that have been reshaped by technologies that interface with African American Language,²⁸ such as the creative spelling of words—for example *you* (U) and *for* (4) mixed in the hip accent of sounds such as /f/ (spelled “ph”). While these examples point to how Derrick's poem exists under hybrid cultural conditions, deeper analysis suggests that it also extends those conditions. Derrick explained his use of “ph” in the words “phaint,” “phreeze,” and “phuck” as giving old words new meaning. For him, this “newness” is signified, critically, through a liberatory act of “owning” his words.²⁹

Smitherman³⁰ explains that liberties with language are common features of hip-hop and an emerging feature of popular media. They are also common features of youth culture and an emerging feature of urban cyberspaces.³¹ This is important because hip-hop, Black culture, and cyberspace greatly influenced Derrick's media literacy practices—in this case the composition of his poem. Where cyberspace and hip-hop pushed the cultural envelope, situating themselves in his work, technology, or the instant message (IM) linguistic code and African American Language (AAL) offered Derrick language to *semantically invert* it. According to Smitherman,

One of the least understood communicative practices in AAL is the manipulation of EAL's [i.e., “European American English”] semantic structure. Often inappropriately dismissed as “Black slang,” this rhetorical maneuvering amounts to linguistic appropriation, what late linguist Grace Holt (1972) called “semantic inversion.” . . . It is a process whereby AAL speakers take words and concepts from EAL lexicon and either reverse their meanings or impose entirely different meanings.³²

Using Smitherman's explanation of *semantic inversion* to explain Derrick's writing, we see that there is an explicit link among AAL and youth language “manipulation” and Derrick's use of “ph” to (re) spell terms traditionally spelled with “f.” Derrick explained his manipulation of the terms *freeze* and *fail* in the following manner,

These words ain't new. But they is new when I use them like this because, to me, they can mean different things. It's like the difference between fat and phat. Fat spelled with an “f” means big like out of shape. Phat spelled with a “ph” means

²⁸ Smitherman, 2006.

²⁹ Alim, 2006; Meacham, 2001.

³⁰ Smitherman, 1999.

³¹ Merchant, 2001.

³² Smitherman, 1999, (pp. 279, 280).

it's nice like that phat watch you got on. It aint out of shape. It's nice. So I use the "ph" in the poem to make old words mean new things. "Phaint" don't mean to fall out; it means to get away from—to fall below the radar screen of everybody. But you still operating correctly. Yo game is still on point, but you just ain't putting it out there for everybody to know [be]cause everybody ain't got [your] back. "Phreeze" don't mean to be cold; it means to get free, to move quietly away from what haunts you.

Derrick played with meaning in the African American tradition, using language and conventions developed and proliferated in the IM generation. He played with spellings to create a unique voice, which liberated him from the limits of dominant discourses (and by extension dominant vocabularies and letter limits). He expanded the technology of writing in such a way that perspectives, which seldom find place in public transcripts—in this case *MySpace*—gained voice, valor, and value.

There were several comments posted beneath Derrick's poem, one of which applauded Derrick "for making it plain." Hence, as he played with language and symbols, Derrick was also planting cultural seeds, mapping onto old possibilities found in dated technologies—new intentions and perspectives, that grew outwardly in new technologies and technology-influenced vocabularies, a fertile "landscape of voices." This is reminiscent of mixing media and new media literacies. For many of us youth media educators who teach writing, it should be clear that the culture of technology—the practices, behaviors, and ideas that has helped to shape the digital age—influenced Derrick's literacy practices, at least at the linguistic level.

"That's Me"

This culture of technology has also influenced Derrick's sense of himself and his possibilities for transformative action through critical media literacy. Derrick saw himself as a poet and rapper of what he called the "*MySpace* Generation." The raps he wrote, while not explicitly written on his *MySpace* page, showed up dramatically and multimodally in bold sound bites, streaming audio clips, and video. In this space, the spoken and written debate over literacy is transformed,³³ for in the raps that Derrick features on his *MySpace* page, the spoken becomes one with the written; the lines between sound and symbol seem to blur. According to Derrick,

³³ Dyson, 2005.

I write all of my raps first. Of course, I freestyle. That's how you build your skills [chuckles], but any real rapper gon keep a pen in a hand. But even though I write my raps on paper, I don't put them out there on paper. You see what I'm sayin. You got to say it. It is meant to be said. With MySpace, I can "publish" my raps in the way they [are] meant to be published—in sound. . . I think my voice is part of the rap too; it adds to the lyrics.

Acknowledging his presence in the text, Derrick provides us with an interesting insight into what I see as a *super linguistic* feature of literacy, which is perhaps underscored in print but *overscored* in sound. Hence, part of writing on *MySpace* permits the unique opportunity that one has to shape one's self beyond words using audio and visuals portals—blending portraits and print, speech and sound. Further, one senses an evolution not only in the function of literacy, but also in its form. The "identity kit," which Gee³⁴ suggests is expressed through literacy, gains something new in *MySpace*. With audio (and even visual) technologies, Derrick was able to tell stories on his page, position and reposition the genres of biography and autobiography, and take agency over how he was represented. These stories are not just the product of written raps. For Derrick, "*MySpace* gives me a new way to tell my story."

David: How does *MySpace* help you tell your story?

Derrick: Everybody who uses *MySpace* is essentially writing an autobiography. They [users' "autobiographies"] change a lot, but that's because people are always changing. And you can learn a lot about people on here [*MySpace*]. It's like you create an identity.

David: Is that all you do? Why do you need *MySpace* to create an identity?

Derrick: Well, *MySpace* is all about having something to say about who you are. I think it's good because people ain't defining you. You are defining you for yourself. I think it's deep too, though, [because] you are also talking about stuff that's important to you. Like my boy [who is] into grills,³⁵ he put an article up on his page about somebody swallowing grills. . . I learned something about him. He likes grills. But I also learned about how grills can be dangerous.

Of course a conversation about "grill"-safety is not likely to penetrate the national political agenda. However, Derrick's comment suggests that the literacy choices

³⁴ Gee, 1996.

³⁵ A *grill* is hip-hop terminology for a set of metallic covers for the teeth. It is also, but rarely, spelled "grille" by hip-hoppers.

undertaken by youth to construct a *MySpace* page certainly informs youth identity and key issues common to a collective youth network. Derrick explained, “I put a rap up [on *MySpace*] called ‘That’s Me’ so people can know who I am, where I’m coming from.” What I find interesting about his rap is that it illustrates the symmetry between writing and speaking, which is, as we speak, evolving online. It also highlights the larger value of writing identities and subjectivities that youth compose with/in online environments like *MySpace*. Below is Derrick’s rap, “That’s me”:

That’s Me (3x)/Yeah, Yeah

(Chorus)

Pimp walk/ill talk/Yeah that’s me . . .
Swagga still swingin/Yeah, Yeah/That’s me
You gotta know that hunga is key/That’s me

(Verse)

I’m a monsta/Poetic scholar/Stay propa
Steady on my grind about them dollars
100 grand/That’s me
Bangin beats/blue heat flames
John Doe, that’s his name
Ain’t nothing changin
Gotta live by any means necessary
Or get buried six feet/Man/yeah/that’s me
Still a hustla step out of the pocket and I’ll crush you
If need be/the flow is easy
Follow me and I’ll take you to the top
Count that number one spot and a yacht/yeah
Man/that’s a dream/sign sealed and delivered
Better believe/that’s me/get that through your thin skulls
I ain’t playin with you boy
You can keep them games/you can keep that fame
As long as you keep that cream flowing
You know I’m a fiend for it
But cash don’t rule everything around me
And you know/that’s me
(Chorus)

Like poetry set to music, the rap is meant to be heard and not read. By reading it raw, the rap loses something, or someone, powerful—the presence of Derrick. However, there is a lurking presence in Derrick’s words that is consistent with the identity politics

of language that scholars like H. Samy Alim³⁶ and Geneva Smitherman³⁷ refer to when they comment on the rhythmic inflections that accompany hip-hop verse. Further, Fisher refers to youth writers like Derrick in the musical sense as “singers” who “cocreate traditions around words, sounds, and power.”³⁸

This is a compelling new way to look at literacy, acknowledging the multiple ways in which it can be practiced and further acknowledging that it has music or, *is music*. As such, presence and persuasion are achieved not only through printed words, but also through spoken words and other accoutrements. Accompanied by sound, the rap introduces us to Derrick, “a monster, poetic scholar.” Wrapped in sound, the rap’s content—much like the content of youth on *MySpace*—is surprising, energetic, and spectacular. Derrick’s voice in his rap allows it to speak, and even while speaking in a genre that sometimes effortlessly glorifies “bling,” the message voiced in Derrick’s rap moves not only mechanically but critically away from compliance to the status quo.

Beyond the social critique embedded in his rap—a form of “talkin and testifyin,”³⁹ perhaps the most critical aspect of the text is its presentation of a greater technology, which gives Derrick greater agency over his iDentity (i.e., digital identity). To foster his iDentity, Derrick hones a variety of multimedia technologies to place himself squarely in words, to make himself present, both pushing and posturing the limits of identity achieved in texts. In the rap “That’s Me,” Derrick used digital audio technology and (of course) the Internet to make this presence known. Yet, in other raps featured on his MySpace page, Derrick used digital audio and video technologies to bring forth what can be considered his most compelling message.

“Guardian Angel”

I spoke with Derrick about the messages he wanted to send through his *MySpace* page. His page featured a sprawl of things—arguments and descriptions, portraits and poetics. But beyond a conversation about the content composed on his page, we shared an equally important conversation about the process of composing his page. Derrick reminded me

³⁶ Alim, 2006.

³⁷ Smitherman, 2006.

³⁸ Fisher, 2007b, p. 4.

³⁹ Smitherman, 1977.

that he—in his words—“did not learn to do this in school.” While I think it is important to acknowledge that Derrick has learned incredible skills (e.g., reading and writing) in the classroom that unmistakably helped him compose his *MySpace* page, I find Derrick’s point to be significant. According to him, he never learned in school how to translate texts into digital sounds or embedded video. “I learned how to record my raps digitally,” Derrick explained, “by playing with digital recorders in my basement. I wanted my work out there [on *MySpace*], and I knew it would not be complete without my voice over it. I knew [in order] to get it there I needed to know how to use this technology.” Making his case, Derrick asked me to watch his rap video, “Guardian Angel,” which was embedded onto his *MySpace* page. With a click of the “play” icon, the chorus begins:

(Chorus)

I wonder why life’s so hard
A light through God
I pray this life be guarded
When this life is scarred
Why does light look dark
Death do we, Life we part

(Verse)

What rap of life/I’ll begin from the tears
You let it in from the first place/Wipe the tears from my hurt face
Say a prayer for my birth this day/Before I lay my head down . . .
The unpleasant nightmare/and you need to be aware
Of the worst that can happen to me/I feel like I’ve been blind folded
And led through deserts making me a deserted legend in his own time
Reminded of the quiet thoughts I breathe like/with my arms through feeling so hurt
It’s like being lost inside/the mind of a motherless child
But do I hide deep inside/closer to the spiritual super side . . .
Watch me/a grown man cry
Time after time/I believe/I see reflections of you and me
To indeed/it was you living in me
And when I walk late at night/whose walking with me
And when I talk late nights/whose talking with me
And when I stand in the light of the light/when the rain falls so heavy
Every ounce and every step/through eternal mazes
When does it end/it’s like it never begins . . .
I wonder why life’s so hard . . .

(Chorus)

The rap video ends. The small video box set in the middle of Derrick's *MySpace* page pauses, signals by a vertical *equals* sign. Beyond producing rich content in his rap—which again was poetic and autobiographical, Derrick was able to accomplish a text that not even many literacy educators could compose.

Derrick: I put this video together in my kitchen and my backyard, using my friend's camcorder and my computer. See, we . . . us kids . . . we share technology and techniques. My boy taught me how to produce my music. We were in his basement . . . you know . . . hittin and missin. We took whatever we got and got whatever we needed and make that video. We learned by doing, and what we were doing meant something to us.

David: So . . . where did you get the technology? Where did your friend get his technology?

Derrick: We worked for it. Hustled. Because in order to be relevant in this game, you need the tools. And you need to know how to use them. If we could not get the money to buy stuff, we borrowed what we needed from somebody else we knew. If we didn't know how to do something, we asked somebody.

When asked if he was passionate about “writing,” Derrick said simply: “Yes.” When asked why, he reiterated to me: “I got something to say.” He explained, “I think the way we [youth] write makes sense to a lot of people. I wish we could learn this stuff in school, then school would be a lot more relevant.” The sentiment that Derrick seems to be expressing deals with two things. First, Derrick seems to be addressing the critical aspects of his media literacy practices, or what Freire⁴⁰ considers “empowering” the individual voice. The sense of urgency that Derrick expressed amplifies this critical aspect of his media literacy practice. Derrick feels that he has something to say (e.g., perhaps an answer to the question of “why life's so hard”).

At the same time, he feels that mainstream literacy instruction has not been very beneficial in helping him to express his ideas. According to Derrick, “I could have [written] an essay about my life . . . you know. It would have been about some guiding presence—God, angels, something watching over me. But it would have gotten no play [on *MySpace*].” Understanding the politics of audience in media literacy, Derrick implied that he also understood the need for new forms of delivery for his message, which he found important. Perhaps most striking, Derrick did not believe that his literacy

⁴⁰ Freire, 1995.

classroom was preparing him to write in a way that could tap his audience or most effectively help him make his points. To gain what he felt were skills to write beyond the word—to write the world, Derrick looked beyond the classroom.

Lewis and Fabos view youth like Derrick as “‘remakers’ of the textual and technological resources available to them.”⁴¹ They use a “profit” (as opposed to deficit) view of youth to bring to light a significant schism between students and schools. For them, “If we mourn the loss of print literacy as we think we once knew it, then we may find ourselves schooling young people in literacy practices that disregard the vitality of their literate and social futures at home, at work, and in their communities.”⁴² Derrick’s work underscores this point. Derrick sat among peers in unofficial learning spaces to write in a new way using new tools not taught in literacy classrooms. As in Lewis and Fabos’s study, technology implied a significant shift in literacy. This shift is implied in out-of-school spaces and seems to distance tech savvy students from their less tech savvy teachers. But it also suggests an important question about the place of not just new technology in helping youth master media literacies, but of the place of media literacies in helping youth master the new technologies instrumental in creating the new world.

A Digital Dialogue: Implications for Youth Media Educators

The goal of this article has not just been to analyze the content of Derrick’s *MySpace* page, but also to understand, from his perspective, media literacy as a critical and complex activity significantly influencing and influenced by new technologies. Derrick’s *MySpace* page gives us just one insight into the complex ways in which youth forge literacy in the digital underground of computer screens, cell phones, PDA devices, iPods, and others. Derrick’s *MySpace* page gives us artifacts rich with the content of critique—the critical media literacy that has long been a central goal of media literacy instruction.⁴³

In Derrick’s case, composing in MySpace was indeed a critical media literacy exercise, an act of forging words and training technologies to tell stories of a permissive past that promises to point youth media educators in new directions. For example, the

⁴¹ Lewis & Fabos, 2005, p. 496.

⁴² Ibid, p. 498.

⁴³ Berlin, 1992; DeBlase, 2002; Flynn, 1988; Richardson, 2003; Roberts-Miller, 2003; Shor, 2000; Trainor, 2002.

case of Derrick, who is highly motivated to produce poems, rap songs, and make musical videos, reveals how youth media educators of all stripes might incorporate social networking sites in their work with youth. By incorporating such sites, youth, like Derrick, will be given access to the means of producing and distributing their works. Moreover, educators and experts who work with youth using media as a form of social empowerment will be able to begin making room for new forms of youth expression, such as those found in hip-hop, *MySpace*, and other new media forums.

Further, youth media educators working with schools and literacy teachers will be able to suggest ways to motivate students to read and write if allowed more creative channels (not just essays and not just Standard English). If allowed to use social networking sites to produce and distribute their work to a real audience, youth media educators could also help youth (and their teachers) develop their critical consciousness about social networking sites, which are multi-media formats themselves that require greater examination and critical interrogation.⁴⁴

On a more practical note, I have learned from my colleagues and several youth media educators working in public schools that students are not always allowed to access social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *YouTube*. For reasons of security and to filter content considered inappropriate and indecent for minors according to some community standards, many schools have set up firewalls. Given that outside school doors young people with means and access can encounter these same “non-secure and inappropriate” materials not just online, but certainly via popular media of all kinds, there seems to be irony in this practice. Notwithstanding, in school contexts youth media educators would be well-poised to provide some critical dialogue about these security and content issues in ways that can be mindful of the concerns of adults but also the interests and motivations of youth.

To confront this problem, youth media educators can use real student examples like Derrick to engage all stakeholders (teachers, administrators, parents, and of course students) in some serious discussion about critical media literacy and problem-solving about the digital challenge we now and shall continue to encounter. This issue is also relevant for youth media organizations that need to be responsive to their community

⁴⁴ Alvermann, 2002; Brass, 2008; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2002.

cultures as well, who might have very reasonable and legitimate concerns about their young people's use of social networks and engagement with popular culture that go against, for example, family and/or religious norms.

Helping youth develop critical media literacy must be considered of paramount importance. Hence, youth media educators should seek to move the current conversation around media and technologies in more equitable directions. Unfortunately, the discourse surrounding youth media literacy too often fails to complexly consider the media literacy practices that youth bring with them to class. As suggested earlier, such conversations tend to promote two common deficit categories: youth as struggling readers/writers or youth as disinterested reader/writers. However, when one examines youth beyond classroom contexts, there are questions about *how* youth practice media literacy.

Answering such questions can help us begin a conversation about new technologies and their relevance to designing a *new education* for all youth. Such conversations are long overdue, for it is as Dyson⁴⁵ notes: technology and writing have long been employed by urban youth to reconcile the social and political strivings of self—to articulate more clearly the various dimensions of struggle that shape the digital pen.

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⁴⁵ Dyson, 2003.

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