Can teachers utilise the strategies, skills and contexts developed as part of social literate practice in the academic writing of the classroom?

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Abstract

This article details findings of the logbook data collection phase of a broader enquiry exploring ways to strengthen literacy alliances between the social literacy worlds of young adolescents and the more academic notions of literacy found in the classroom setting. The purpose of the logbook was to detail the visible elements, referred to by Hamilton (2000) as literacy events, and context-specific behaviours engaged in by ten 11–13 year old study participants. It was proposed that by examining these events, insights might be gained into the contexts and motivators for engagement in social literacy practices that could be utilised by classroom teachers. Despite perceptions that social literacy practices embedded in popular culture are at a ‘lower level’ to classroom literacy, this study data indicates that favoured online activities required reading levels that were at least commensurate with age-related reading levels. In addition, an array of complex skills and knowledge was required with which to search the Internet (Pratt, 2009). A website’s multimodal environment can provide opportunities for literacy competency complementary to those of traditional literacy. As Alvermann and Heron (2001) contend, understanding the content and context of popular culture helps inform teachers of mutual links between the often competing contexts of social and academic literacy practices.
Introduction

Many teachers are familiar with the difficulty faced when trying to motivate reluctant young writers and readers to engage in the literacies of the classroom. Students unwilling or unable to participate in this textual practice, however, are often enthusiastic and successful in the out-of-school technology mediated literacies associated with popular culture. Understanding ways in which children make meaning in their out-of-school literacy world requires an awareness of popular culture, its role and connections to the literacy of the classroom.

The world of popular culture

Popular culture is proposed as being those traditions associated with ‘everyday culture’ (Alvermann, Xu, & Carpenter, 2003) or the multimodal ways of making meaning negotiated every day (Franzak, 2006) that permeate the ‘discretionary lives’ (Eidman-Aadal, 2002) of young people (see Figure 1).

Research indicates (Dyson, 1994, 1997, 1998; Marsh & Millard, 2000; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, & Collazo, 2004) that popular culture and social literacies are an important medium for meaning-making with adolescents. Moje et al. (2004) go so far as to suggest that “Popular cultural funds of knowledge and Discourse [sic]” (p. 60) are the primary funds of knowledge they observed students employing in both their everyday interactions and in classrooms. Yet, this and other research (Alvermann et al., 2003; Dyson, 1997; Green, Reid, & Bigum, 1998; Mahiri, 2000/2001) indicates reluctance to use popular culture in classroom literacy instruction.

Black (2005), Dowdall (2006), and Merchant (2001) researched student contributions to websites, web logs and chat rooms, and concluded that while the texts themselves within these contexts may appear different, the acts of composing them and the tools of literate practice used in their composition were similar to those of the classroom. These researchers do not suggest these sites of literate practice be incorporated into the classroom curriculum or used as a pedagogical model, but rather that by investigating
such sites and practices, valuable insights may be gained into adolescent social literate practice that teachers may harness to support classroom literacies. The act of composing text rather than the results of that composing share commonalities across contexts.

Figure 1: An example of some of the popular cultural domains of the young adolescent (adapted from Marsh, 2003. p. 114).

Millard (2003) and Nixon (2003) documented the connection between popular culture and adolescent relationships, identities and sense of wellbeing and concur with Luke and Elkins (2000) in encouraging teachers to develop better understandings about adolescent literacy practice including motivations for engagement. As Millard (2003) suggests, “This kind of social participation is integrally bound up with the ways in which symbolic meanings are made, negotiated and contested and is, therefore, of central concern to literacy research” (pp. 407–408).
Popular culture is pervasive in the lives of adolescent learners. The affordances of new technologies present many real and virtual opportunities, both globally and locally, to engage in this medium for making meaning. While they initially may seem to adults to be ‘low level literacy’, popular literacies can involve complex meaning-making strategies. A deeper understanding of the connection between adolescent engagement with popular culture and the need young adolescents have to form personal identities, to construct meaning and to pursue their own interests, can lead to teachers to link the contexts more effectively (Alvermann & Heron, 2001) and be responsive to the needs of their students. Effective teaching and learning occurs when there is a merging of the “…needs and interests of youth as persons with the needs and interests of youth as learners of new concepts, practices and skills” (p. 322). As Luke (2000) suggests, “The pedagogical key for learners of all ages is to start with student resources: their skills, interests and contexts” (pp.88-89). Teachers are the critical resource for bridging the out-of-school literacy lives of adolescents with schooled literacy. They need to show and recognise success in multiple forms, foster a classroom environment that is collaborative and ‘relational’ (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, 1993) and have pedagogy and content knowledge based on relevant curriculum and appropriate role modelling.

**Method**

The logbook phase of data collection was the second stage of a study that was conducted in three parts. The study sought to answer the question: Does writing, as part of adolescent engagement with popular culture and the tools of literate practice, provide and produce specific ideas and skills applicable to academic writing of the classroom? The particular aims of the project were: to identify specific thinking and learning that happens when students engage in literacy functions in their out-of-school world of literacy practices, particularly those associated with popular culture; and to identify strategies, skills and contexts that foster engagement and success in out-of-school literate practices that could be utilised by classroom teachers.
Initially a focus group discussion with ten students was held. During the discussions, participants were asked to identify specific resources, prerequisite and existing levels of knowledge and skills, and the thinking and learning that happens when engaged in their out-of-school world of literacy practices, particularly those associated with popular culture. Discussions with the participants were over approximately eight hours as they described exactly what they did and how they constructed themselves in their social literacy practices.

To learn more about what young adolescents do in their ‘downtime’, the ten students from the focus group were further asked to detail their social literacy practices and sites in the form of a logbook. In order to make completion of the logbook data as straightforward as possible for the participants, a design was needed that was efficient and easy to use. Such a structure was provided by a grid format, with horizontal and vertical axes, labelled with suggested activities and a selection of possible online and offline sites. Participants were to indicate on the grid both where they were and what they were doing by ticking the appropriate box. There were also opportunities for students to provide further comment on their interactions online, and many students did this. To capture the transient and often diverse nature of many interactions in cyberspace, each sheet provided a snapshot of interactions over 15 minutes. As such, for each hour spent in cyberspace, each participant filled out four log sheets. Participants were asked to log at least four hours of their social literacy time. The time frame over which the logbooks were completed was seven to ten days for four hours in total. The logbook entries were made on three to four separate occasions. Data collection took place in the participants’ homes in after-school and weekend time.

For the purposes of this study, Hamilton’s (2000) definition of literacy practices and a literacy event was used. She defines events as observable occurrences that evolved out of a particular socially situated practice, and describes literacy practices as a mixture of four basic elements. These are (i) participants, that is the people who can be seen to be interacting with the texts; (ii) the settings, that is the immediate physical circumstances in which the interaction takes place; (iii) the artefacts, that is the material tools and accessories that are involved in the interaction; and (iv) the activities, the actions
performed by participants in the literacy event. In this case the activities were the multimodal functions and processes, including such things as downloading and uploading pictures, accomplished in the literacy event.

A tick indicated each literacy event, cross-referenced in terms of indicating both activities (the actions performed) and artefacts (the resources that mediated the action like a particular website). So, for example, if pictures were uploaded onto a website, this was indicated by a tick in the ‘uploading pictures’ (activities) line, cross-referenced to the artefacts (materials, tools and accessories involved in the interaction) which, in this case, was the Internet sites these pictures were uploaded to. This enabled a detailed picture to be built up of how this group of adolescents makes meaning in their social literacy world. Extra space was available to add extra activities and artefacts. For the participants, this was referred to as ‘other sites you visit and other stuff you do’.

**Results and discussion**

The results will be discussed in two stages. The first is in terms of the types of artefacts participants used to facilitate interaction with their social literacies. Then, the way these artefacts were used is detailed as the literacy activities. Data will also be examined and discussed relating to the readability of the websites visited by the participants. This enriches understandings of the participants and their reading abilities and also helps to create a picture of the context of the artefacts.

*Artefacts used to facilitate interaction*

As shown by the data presented in Figure 2, participants used a variety of artefacts to facilitate interaction in social literacy activities. Primarily, these were interactive websites but also included reference to the use of traditional artefacts such as pen and paper. Texting and the use of the mobile telephone were allocated a separate category, although it is acknowledged that some mobile telephones are Internet capable and activities on these telephones could be web-based. Some categories encompassed collective artefacts such as those detailed as ‘game sites’, ‘varied websites’ and ‘special
interest online communities’. This was done for ease of data collection and examination, as it would have been impractical to detail every single artefact.

The unit of analysis used in Figure 2 is the number of ‘unique visits’ to these web-related sites expressed as a percentage of total ‘hits’. As participants often visited the same site more than once, a ‘unique visit’ accounted for each individual visit to a particular site. The percentage was calculated by counting the number of hits per site as a proportion of the total hits over all sites. This indicated the relative popularity of each site. The majority of these sites are interactive. The range of websites was a combination of those initially suggested by the researcher based on comments from the focus group participants, in addition to those actually visited by the participants. The log form had space to add the names of other websites visited by the participants.

**Key:**

- MSN
- Yahoo
- Bebo
- Varied Websites
- Game Sites
- Email/Hotmail
- Media Player
- Chatrooms
- KNet
- ITunes
- Microsoft Suite
- Special Interest Online Communities
- YouTube
- Pen and Paper
- Buy/Sell Sites
- Cell Phone

**Figure 2: Social literacy artefacts: Proportioned use in social literacies**

In all, 464 hits (unique visits) were recorded, with the most hits (22%) attributed to the social networking site Bebo. The fact that this was the most visited site is borne out by figures for July from Internet analyst comScore (New Zealand Herald Staff, 2007). The popularity of Bebo is demonstrated by this comment made by Amber, who alludes to
the importance of other groups of people she encounters when enacting her literacy practice – groups that are not necessarily physically present. Hamilton (2000), when discussing literacy practices, identifies this as an example of the non-visible or hidden participants who can also regulate interaction with text.

Amber  
*Look at my log and you can see that Bebo appears ticked in almost EVERY sheet – interacting and chatting are most common with me*

The shared practices and mutual engagement that constitutes the nature of the Bebo community is highly motivating to these participants. Research supports this contention (Dowdall, 2006), and further, that the textual practices enacted in social networking communities are related to the formation and embedding of social identities. Dowdall suggests that the Bebo community offers far more scope for identity construction than classroom textual practices offer. This has implications for teaching and learning in classrooms for students who cannot construct an identity within the classroom literacy community, and have significant engagement difficulties within that community. As stated in the introduction, many teachers are familiar with those students who just do not seem to engage with classroom literacies but are enthusiastic participants in their socially mediated out-of-school literacies.

The next most popular site, at 14% of the total, is a varied set of websites that collectively enact the practice of ‘surfing the net’, including websites associated with popular culture such as television programmes, films, videos and personal interest websites. The extensive and varied nature of these websites reflects the expanse of the World Wide Web itself. A typical comment made about this practice was as follows:

Julia  
*I found a new website which I thought was pretty cool. It’s www.MyHeritage.com. My sister and I discovered it on her friend’s Bebo page. You upload photos of yourself and your friends onto the computer. The computer then analyses your faces and tells you which celebrities you look the most like.* 😊
Admittedly, Julia’s example of the social literate practice of ‘surfing the net’ doesn’t translate into a conventional literate practice to some, however, a deeper understanding of the connection between adolescent engagement with popular culture and the need young adolescents have to form personal identities, to construct meaning, and to pursue their own interests, can lead to teachers bridging the contexts more effectively (Alvermann & Heron, 2001).

Another participant, Brittany, used her ‘surfing the net’ time to participate in online communities related to her interest in horses. On one site in particular, http://www.howrse.com, she created a virtual identity as a horse breeder. Her main purpose for participating and authoring within this community was to construct her identity as a horse lover and horse-breeding enthusiast.

The next site of significance (at 9% of the total number of hits expressed as a percentage) is the MSN instant messaging site, which is part of the MSN Internet portal. The popularity of this site is also reported by the Pew Internet and American Life Survey (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), where it is noted that instant messaging is preferred over email for young adolescents and that half of this group instant message every day. Sending and receiving messages on a number of different sites was a very popular activity. This is a notion that is expanded upon when analysing results from the next set of data, which are considered literacy activities.

**Literacy activities**

Figure 3 contains information, expressed as a percentage of the total activities that were indicated in the logbook data, about the literacy activities provided by the ten student participants. Literacy activities are what participants do when they participate in a literacy event (Hamilton, 2000).

The most common literacy activity performed by these participants is replying to chat. This accounted for 15% of time spent in social literacy activities. The next most common activity (at 14 % of the total) is website surfing and downloading of
information or resources, followed by posting pictures, comments, video clips or information onto a website (at 13% of the total). This mirrors the data presented in Figure 2, which details the corresponding artefacts, in this case the websites. The data were further aggregated into core activities interpreted and expressed as follows in Figure 4.

**Key**
1. Listening to music
2. Research
3. Posting pictures/comments/video clips/information onto a website
4. Texting
5. Website surfing/downloading
6. Homework requirements mainly using Microsoft documents
7. Writing/reading email
8. Replying to chat using instant messaging
9. Viewing pictures and videos
10. Writing on a blog site
11. Playing interactive online games

![Figure 3: Literacy activities](image)

**Key:**
1. Establishing and maintaining social contacts.
2. Entertainment
3. Information gathering/reporting and presenting

![Figure 4: Core literacy activities](image)
The three most popular artefacts indicated by the participants were MSN messenger, Bebo and a collection of assorted websites expressed in the action of ‘surfing the net’. Predictably, there was a correlation between the information that indicated the most popular artefacts, and the most popular activities of replying to chat using instant messaging, website surfing and downloading of information and resources; and posting pictures, comments, video clips or information onto a website. The activities were further clarified to reflect more consciously the broad themes that emerged and to reflect the literature that examines the social literacies of young adolescents. The three resulting themes were:

1. establishing and maintaining social contacts
2. entertainment
3. information gathering/reporting and presenting.

As can be noted in Figure 4, the main focus of literacy activities was establishing and maintaining social contacts. That social contact is the main focus of literate activities is supported by the literature (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Nixon, 2003). The social contacts include a combination of the individual literate activities of posting on a website, texting, reading/writing email, replying to chat and writing on a blog site. Penrod (2005) suggests that interactions in cyberspace are still largely enacted in text-based literacies within a context that is “alive and genuine” (p. 1). She further comments that, arguably because of its potential audience, technology transforms the act of writing into an act of communication more effectively than, for example, writing with pen and paper in a classroom environment does. However, both textual practices, sharing similar content and processes, fit within a broad notion of literacy and could be more closely aligned by supporting student learning needs with a more responsive curriculum.

Information gathering/reporting and presenting is the theme of 36% of literacy activities. This included ‘surfing the net’, research, homework requirements and related viewing of pictures and videos. It is interesting to note that this rated as the second most popular set of literacy activities, being three times more popular than entertainment. The
motivating activity of researching and sharing information, “…across the globe rather than across a teacher’s desk” (Penrod, 2005. p. 123) is an area that Pratt (2009) noted as one of the commonest uses of information and communication technology. She further commented that students were not very successful at locating information within a particular website and that there is a need for further development of this particular skill. Other research (Frechette, 2002) has indicated the need for better research skills online but also the development of critical literacy skills or an empowerment approach in teaching literacy: one that encourages students to view what is published in cyberspace with caution. The relationship between sourcing information in cyberspace and a critical approach to screening that information is an important one for all who surf the net, particularly the young. Arguably, there is scope for information and critical literacy skills to be further supported in the classroom.

Homework requirements were included in the arena of ‘social’ literacy practices, although it could be argued that because of their accountability requirements they could not be classed as volitional. However, for this group of participants, the majority of their homework tasks were related to their school intranet. Within this framework were opportunities for social mediation via forums; identity construction via personal web pages; information sharing; and most of the volitional literate functions and processes identified by the participants. The opportunity within this system to provide sites for social mediation, identity construction and information sharing – which tend to be associated with choices in social literacy settings – could provide a useful bridge between the two contexts that are often in tension.

The literacy activity of entertainment included listening to music and playing interactive computer games. This represented 11% of the total. This result seems low considering the results of the Pew Internet and American Life survey (Lenhart et al., 2005), which indicated an 81% teen Internet user participation in playing games online. This may relate to age or gender differences in the two sets of data – or maybe games, at certain stages of adolescence, are displaced by more ‘social endeavours’ as the possibilities of technology change.
Readability level of websites

To enhance the data and develop understandings about social literacy events and web literacy of this group of students, further data interpretation was carried out. It is often considered that students are reading ‘lower level’ material online. This analysis explored the level of the websites named by participants. To give an indication of the readability of the website text, reading levels of the websites were calculated using the following tests designed specifically to assess the readability of a website:

1. The Gunning FOG index
2. The Flesch Reading Ease Scale, and
3. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade

Each of these tools provides information about the readability of text from different angles, and the correlation between all three gives a reliable measure. These tests are available from [http://www.juicystudio.com/fog](http://www.juicystudio.com/fog). The Gunning FOG index gives an approximate measure of how many years of schooling it would take for someone to understand the content; The Flesch-Kincaid Grade level test gives an approximate grade level (USA) at which the average reader would just cope with the text; and the Flesch Reading Ease Scale provides a score out of 100. The higher the score, the easier the text should be to read. Most authors of content area material aim for a score of between 60 and 70 to ensure a text that is easily read. Table 1 indicates a selection of the websites visited by the participants and their corresponding readability levels.

The data contained in Table 1 included information about websites the participants went to for both social and research purposes. The data reveals a wide range of levels of readability from 14.98 years of schooling to 6.02 years, using the Gunning FOG scale. The Gunning FOG score indicates that the average number of years of schooling required to understand the content of the websites these students visited was 9.2. The participants in this study were all in their eighth year of schooling at the time the study took place and this result would indicate that they are reading at or above their expected reading levels for their age. This indication is in keeping with the reading age of this
group as reported by the classroom teacher (Reading Groups: Room 2, 2007, personal correspondence), which place the participants between stanine 5 and 9 on the reading Progressive Achievement Tests.

Table 1: Readability of sample websites from logbook data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>URL</th>
<th>Gunning FOG (years of schooling)</th>
<th>Flesch Reading Ease (higher = easier)</th>
<th>Flesch-Kincaid Grade</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.Myjellybean.com">www.Myjellybean.com</a></td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>53.43</td>
<td>6.45</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.Gurl.com">www.Gurl.com</a></td>
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<td>70.88</td>
<td>3.91</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.Bebo.com">www.Bebo.com</a></td>
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<td>62.07</td>
<td>5.57</td>
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<td>70.71</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.habbo.com">www.habbo.com</a></td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>77.03</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
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<td><a href="http://www.pimpmyspace.org">www.pimpmyspace.org</a></td>
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<td>63.02</td>
<td>5.01</td>
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<td>61.41</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.Howrse.com">www.Howrse.com</a></td>
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<td>73.03</td>
<td>4.17</td>
</tr>
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<td>49.49</td>
<td>7.26</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.Freewebs.com">www.Freewebs.com</a></td>
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<td><a href="http://www.nzherald.co.nz">www.nzherald.co.nz</a></td>
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<td>57.44</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Average  
9.2  
60.02  
5.81
The multimodal environment of a website with pictures, audio, video and hyperlinks provides different opportunities for literacy competency than traditional literacy. The readability of electronic text has been investigated by Pope (2005), who comments that in achieving literacy online, students play a more active role in constructing meaning, and additional skills are needed within this demanding multimedia environment. This would suggest that the demands of reading electronic text are different from reading traditional print text. Despite this, participants in this study have shown similar levels of reading ability to those of traditional print text.

It is noted here that the site where participants spent most time (i.e. the social networking site Bebo) requires a reading ability at or below that of the participants in terms of years of schooling. Arguably, the inclusion of some sites with a higher reading level of say, Wikipedia (at 14.98 years of schooling), where less time was spent by the participants, may have distorted the results. As stated, the information given in Table 1 included websites the participants went to for both social and research purposes. A range of commensurate reading abilities would be expected in order to engage with a number of different websites. A comprehensive examination of the results is aimed at further contextualising and enriching understandings of the participants and their reading abilities, thus creating a picture of the context of the artefacts. It is suggested that the study results indicate, at the very least, that the notion of ‘dumbing down’ (which is often applied to computer-based literacy activities) does not apply to this group of participants.

Summary

The logbook data detailed the literacy events (Hamilton, 2000) participants in the study engaged in by describing ‘what kids do’ as these participants enacted their social literacies. Data indicated that the range of popular culture activities and artefacts engaged in by the participants related to three main themes of socialisation, entertainment and information gathering. Specific influences included interplay between the participants and their friends, and identity formation, both virtual and real. ‘Real identities’ were observed being enacted on for example, social networking sites, where
participants discussed and enacted their lives, while ‘virtual identities’ were observed when participants could choose to ‘build’ a character from a range of characteristics including physical, social and personal, to enact membership in a particular online community – as noted with Brittany and her membership of the online community relating to horse breeding. The opportunities a ‘virtual’ identity provided made it possible for her to take an active part in a community with others who are like minded that would have been impossible in ‘real life’. Research supports these findings (Dyson, 1994, 1997, 1998; Moje et al., 2004): that popular culture is an important medium for meaning making and identity construction for young adolescents, but further evidence (Alvermann et al., 2003; Dyson, 1997; Green et al., 1998; Mahiri, 2000/2001) suggests a lack of its widespread use in the classroom.

The most popular social literacy events (Hamilton, 2000) were related to creating and maintaining social relationships and networks within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Results indicated that this adolescent group preferred making meaning with groups of others as evidenced in their participation in many communities, particularly the social networking sites. This understanding of situated learning within a community of learners is supported by research conducted in the field of sociocultural understandings of learning by Lev Vygotsky (Kozulin et al., 2003), and articulated as ‘communities of practice’ (see Brown, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003; Shulman, 1997; Wenger, 1998). Further, the acts of seeking a wide range of information and participating in activities for enjoyment and entertainment indicated significant opportunities for literacy engagement. Relevant literature supports these findings also (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Nixon, 2003).

The practice of searching the World Wide Web or surfing the net was popular, ranking third in the participants’ most preferred activities. One of the main types of learning that happened as part of this practice was the development of the skills and knowledge to be able to use a search engine. However to develop and integrate this knowledge critically, and to gauge the credibility of some information could be an area for enhancement.
The readability test demonstrated the average reading age for websites visited as being at or above the reading ages of the participants as identified by the classroom teacher. This challenges assumptions from some quarters that social literacies, particularly web-based, are somehow inferior or ‘low level’ compared to traditional text-based literacies.

**Conclusion**

The incentive for engagement in social literacy practices for the participants was the desire to explore their environment, both real and virtual and, by so doing, construct their place in it. The ideas and skills developed and enhanced as part of engagement with popular culture and the tools of literate practice can be applicable to the academic writing of the classroom. These ideas and skills take the form of alliances that manifest in the way literacy learning is constructed in a social literacy setting, rather than the literacy events enacted. These alliances don’t fit within traditional notions of literacy learning, but rather within a much broader notion of literacy. Naturally there are no guarantees of success in attempting to take what is successful in a social learning environment characterised by autonomy, high levels of motivation, multimodality and a sense of being part of a community of learners and transplanting this success into a school classroom with established hierarchies and boundaries. However, potential exists for this type of learning culture to be managed effectively by teachers who have apposite pedagogical understandings and who are willing to adapt curriculum demands to match student needs and school hierarchies. For the classroom teacher this means incorporating in classroom programmes how learning in the classroom sits alongside learning for ‘lifeworlds’. Simply put, it is making classroom learning relevant.
References


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