

# Girls and digital texts

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## disrupting deficit discourses



## Introduction

In this paper I describe a productive and transformative view of girls' engagement with new technologies within a literacy education framework. I will examine some of the taken-for-granted assumptions made in descriptions of the gendered digital divide, and the connections between these assumptions and discourses of deficit that have for so long been a significant feature of descriptions of students who do not 'do schooling' in ways that are acceptable by educators. Then I describe the literacy work that girls do in digital spaces and raise some issues around the ways in which that work can be used in literacy classrooms.

## Deficit discourses

It has been more than 20 years since Shirley Brice Heath's landmark text, *Ways with Words* (1983), alerted educators to the operation of 'deficit discourses' in classrooms where students from low socio-economic backgrounds attempt to learn literacy. Heath's anthropological study showed that students in diverse homes grew up learning rich and complex uses for language and literacy. However, when these children arrived at school, only those from middle-class backgrounds were seen to be successful literacy learners. The ways in which these children learned and used language at home were almost identical to the practices and usages in the classroom. Those children, from poor, black and working-class homes, whose 'ways with words' were not recognised as valid in the classroom struggled to achieve success.

In any literacy classroom, decisions are made by teachers and by students, about what counts as literacy, what counts as reading, and writing. These decisions help to construct a version of the ideal student, one who performs these versions of reading and writing with accomplishment. Generally, research over the last 30 years has shown that it is mostly girls who take up these positions of ideal students (Alloway et al., 2002; Davies & Banks, 1992; Gilbert with Rowe, 1989).

What I believe is happening within the discourses about girls' uses of new technologies however, is the operation of these discourses of deficit, so that the ideal student in classrooms using digital texts is male, and the work that girls do in relation to digital texts is identified as not valuable, not educational, and not productive.

## Creative workers – cultural intermediaries

The context in which I want to place this talk about girls' use of new technologies is concerned with the kinds of work that our young students will be engaged in over the next 50 years. A US economist, Robert Reich, wrote in 1992 about the development of new categories of work in new world economies. The three

categories described by Reich are symbolic-analysts, routine production workers, and personal service workers. A small core "of relatively well-paid knowledge leaders and workers supplemented by a bevy of people 'servicing' them for the least possible price so that their ideas can be translated into the highest quality, most competitive products possible" (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996, p. 47).

Within the symbolic analysts category of new workers there are those creative workers or "the 'new cultural intermediaries' of the knowledge economy, those involved in the production, marketing, and dissemination of symbolic goods" (Bullen et al., 2004, p. 13). Bullen and her colleagues point out "how those working in the creative arts and humanities might respond to and shape the knowledge economy by situating themselves as critical cultural intermediaries" (p. 18) through the development of their abilities to be critically reflexive. I would argue that the development of these critically reflexive skills should be part of a literacy agenda in any classroom. I would also argue that focusing on the work done in the creative arts and humanities arena allows us to rethink the role of girls and women in the new work order.

## Operational, cultural and critical dimensions of literacies and new technologies

One way in which to think about the ways in which we as teachers and students engage with new technologies in literacy classrooms is through the 3D model first developed by Bill Green (1988). In the late 90s I was involved in a large-scale research project (Bigum et al., 1997) investigating the connections between new literacies and new technologies in Australian schools. We used this 3D model to help us frame our findings and even though that report was published in 1997, the model still helps to make sense of what is happening in schools and classrooms.

- **Operational dimension: or turning it on!** How to operate the language system and how to operate the technology system – handwriting and keyboarding, spelling skills and saving skills.
- **Cultural dimension: or what are you using it for?** The ability to operate language and technology systems is always in the service of participating in authentic forms of social practice and meaning.
- **Critical dimension: informed skepticism.** Assessing and evaluating software, websites etc., critique them, to read and use them against the grain, to appropriate and even re-design them, contributing to the transformation of social practices (from Lankshear & Snyder, 2000, pp. 45–46).

I think that we can use this model to help understand the ways in



which girls and boys are constituted as ideal users of new technologies in literacy classrooms.

## Assumptions about girls' access and usage of new technologies

So what are the taken-for-granted assumptions made about girls when academics and educators write about access and usage of new technologies? The main generalisation can be simply described as 'girls don't use computers'. This assumption was a significant feature of literature in the 1980s and 1990s and drove many initiatives and programs in Australia and across the English-speaking world. So for example, in a significant Commonwealth funded project in the 1990s these kinds of comments were made:

➡ "Boys have more of the advanced skill range than girls do, although their basic skills are on a par. They are also more confident about their ability to use computers."

(Meredyth et al., 1999, p. xxvii)

➡ "Girls are falling behind boys in the advanced information technology skills, despite showing considerable interest and skill in other applications. Girls tend to develop basic skills at school. However, many of the advanced skills are not taught in some schools. Where girls do not learn advanced computer skills at home, they tend not to acquire them at all."

(Meredyth et al., 1999, p. xxix)

This kind of deficit view of girls' usage of the Internet and computers has thankfully been challenged by more recent data. For example a report called *Safe & Smart* in the US claims that in 2000:

- Overall, 48% of 9—12 year old boys and girls are online, while 71% of 13—17 year old boys and girls are online.
- Girls are just as likely to use the Internet as their male counterparts; 50% of 9—12 year old girls use the Internet, compared to 46% of boys in this age group.
- In the 13—17 year old age bracket, 73% of girls use the Internet, compared to 70% of boys.
- Overall, there is no statistical

difference between the proportion of girls and boys who are online.

(National School Boards Foundation, 2000)

What is interesting here is that despite the lack of statistical significance in the results, the raw figures show slightly more girls than boys use the Internet. The *Safe & Smart* report refers specifically to using the Internet while a UK report refers more generally to digital technologies. The *OfCom* report found that:

- Amongst older children aged 12—15, girls are significantly more likely than boys to use a mobile phone (77% compared to 61%), use the Internet (63% compared to 54%), listen to the radio (54% compared to 40%), and read newspapers or magazines (49% compared to 36%).
- Boys aged 12—15 only exceed girls in this age group for one activity: playing console/computer games (66% compared to 51%).

(Office of Communications, 2006)

Certainly these and other similar surveys from the US and from the UK can provide evidence that there is no gender difference in access to the Internet. Both surveys, and other research found however, that there is a difference in the usage of the Internet and computers. The next collection of reports focus on use of the Internet only, rather than general use of new technologies.

## What are they using it for?

So here we have girls using the internet more for schoolwork:

- Girls aged 9—17 report using the Internet more for education than boys in the same age range (57% compared to 39%).
- Girls in this age group also report using the Internet for schoolwork more often than boys do: 88% of girls (compared to 71% of boys) report using it at least once a month for schoolwork.

(National School Boards Foundation, 2000)

This is a UK report that has similar findings to the US report,



pointing to girls' use for schoolwork and for social purposes:

- For both age groups, girls are significantly more likely than boys to say they use the Internet for school work, whilst boys are significantly more likely than girls to say they use the Internet for sports news.
- 12—15 year old girls are significantly more likely than boys in this age group to use internet for emails, Instant Messaging (IM), TV programme websites and celebrity/showbiz news.

(Office of Communications, 2006)

Here we have data showing that girls use the Internet for social purposes – email, chat rooms etc. with boys using the Internet more often for entertainment and playing games:

- 68% of girls use email at least once a week, compared to only 50% of boys.
- 30% of boys *never* use email.
- Girls also appear more likely than boys to use chat rooms on the Internet: 36% of girls and 27% of boys use chat rooms at least once a week, according to their parents.

Boys, on the other hand, report using the Internet more often for entertainment than do girls.

- 61% of boys and 45% of girls aged 9—17 report using the Internet for entertainment at least once a week.
- In the same age group, 54% of boys and 26% of girls report using the Internet for games at least once a week.

(National School Boards Foundation, 2000)

So what does this data tell us? That girls are more likely to use the Internet for schoolwork or educational purposes, and girls are more likely to use the Internet as a social space. In the next section of this paper I want to have a closer look at how schools use digital texts. To keep consistency with the reported data I will only be discussing the uses of the Internet rather than other digital technologies. I will then discuss girls' uses of the Internet as a social space and the relationship to the work done in literacy classrooms.

## School usage of digital texts

So we know that girls are more likely to use the Internet for educational purposes than boys are. So what are these 'educational purposes'? There is very little in the literature about these educational tasks. The *PEW Report* (Lenhart & Madden, 2005) referred to earlier specifically mentions the number of girls who use the Internet to find out information about prospective colleges in the US, but apart from that, the studies refer to 'school

work', or 'homework'. Given the focus in curriculum documents, and in websites devoted to lesson-plans for teachers, and what has been reported to me by teachers in my research on digital texts, I would suggest that this homework focuses on one particular aspect of using the Internet and that is for information retrieval. So students are taught how to undertake an Internet search, using *Google*, or other search engines, how to evaluate the quality of information found, note-taking skills, skimming and scanning skills etc. They are usually then asked to practise these skills at home, either as specific homework tasks, or as part of their research for a larger project. The very successful use of *Webquests* in many schools is a good example of this type of educational work. I'm not saying that this work has no educational value, or that it is not important, but I would like to question the emphasis on this consumerist type of activity, where students are taught to see the Internet as a source of information, rather than being encouraged to see the productive possibilities when one constructs and produces texts.

So if we are teaching girls to use the Internet for information retrieval only, and we know that girls tend to use the Internet mostly for educational purposes, it would seem that we are teaching them how to be passive consumers of the technology, rather than agentic producers. This may be of significance when we think about the ways in which girls can become leaders in cultural intermediary spaces, where productive and creative work is highly valued.

To return to the idea of the 3D model for examining the uses of literacies and new technologies in classrooms, there are some important points to be made about each of these dimensions and girls' participation with digital texts.

### Operational dimension

Over and over again, research shows that literacy classrooms over-emphasise this dimension. The current panic about phonics-based instruction for the teaching of reading, and the general emphasis in the popular media on spelling and punctuation as key indicators of success in writing, adds to teachers' anxieties whenever they attempt to move away from this operational dimension. It is difficult for teachers to see spaces within their current literacy programs in which to engage with work that could be placed within the cultural or critical dimensions.

Within the boys and literacy debate there has been some indication to teachers as well that this kind of operational work suits boys in literacy classrooms. So for example, teachers have been encouraged to focus on linguistic grammatical constructions of language because boys like patterns and systems.

In terms of using new technologies, the emphasis on the operational dimension can seem to favour boys in literacy classrooms. The focus on how the machine works, the attention to technical details such as learning how to save a text, how to import images, how to connect printer or digital camera to computer; these are all activities used by teachers in literacy classrooms.

When academics decry girls' lack of interest in computer science or programming classes, I think that it is this operational dimension of the uses of digital technologies that is being over-emphasised. Margolis' despair that "boys make things and girls use things that boys make" is based on the over-emphasis on the operational dimension. I would suggest that learning skills within the operational dimension will make boys (and some girls) expert technicians, system analysts, and network operators, that is, forming part of the service industry that Reich reminds us will make up three-fifths of the work economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What it won't do however is help our young people become those cultural intermediaries and creative workers that we need in an innovative work economy.

### Cultural dimension

Within this dimension is the work that teachers do to help students see the connections between the texts they use and create in literacy classrooms and those texts that surround them in the outside world. In particular, over the last 20 years or so, this has meant paying attention to the writing in particular genres in writing classrooms. Pam Gilbert in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gilbert, 1989; 1994) drew our attention to the predominance of narrative writing in classrooms, and the relationship between this particular genre and girls' literacy success. Unfortunately, the success in writing narratives in primary classrooms did not translate to success in after-school careers. It was taken for granted in feminist circles that this over-reliance on narratives in schools was not allowing girls to master those powerful genres that they would need to succeed in powerful careers. The attention to genres also helped the boys and literacy cause, as teachers were told that boys who were interested in reading non-fiction would also be interested in writing in factual genres.

I think that these assumptions about the gendered divide between

fiction and factual texts need to be rethought in these times of online gaming, anime cartoon series, and *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. Even those console-based games that appear on the surface to be basic shoot-em-up styles are based on strong narrative themes. The universal use of the quest theme throughout most of the more popular mmorpgs, as well as the explosion in boys' interest in fantasy series such as *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series, reveal an increasing relevance of narrative in the consumption of digital texts. As well the growing attraction of morphing and machinima emphasise how important knowledge of narrative structures are in the production of new digital texts.

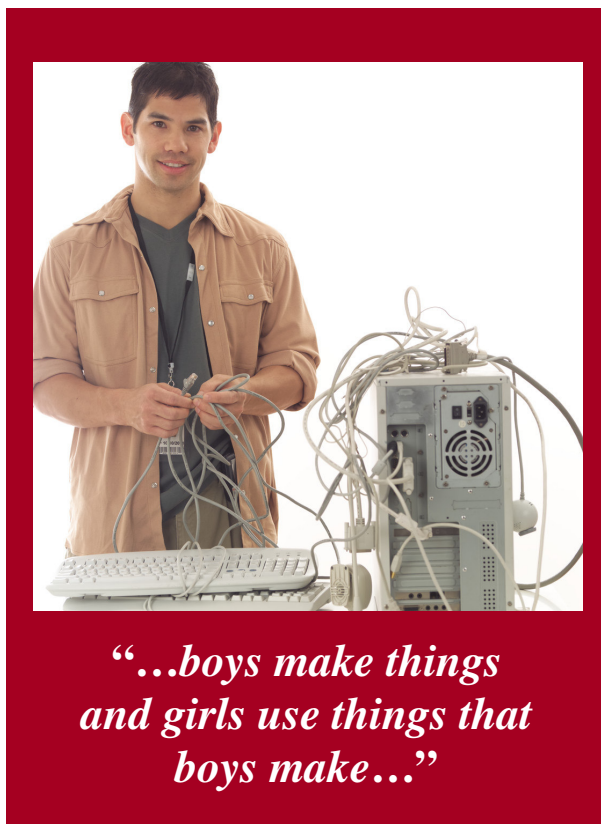
The devaluing of narratives in classrooms as 'girls' work' has missed the essential connection between this genre and the construction of creative and entrepreneurial work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is the work of the humanities, the creative arts industries, the artistic communities that will generate the creative ideas that will lead to economic success.

Of course, when we think about narratives we need to think about the traditional, stereotypic themes that have constituted the stories that our young people read and write in literacy classrooms. The critical analysis of these themes and the

transformation of the narrative genre is part of the work done within the critical dimension.

### Critical dimension

Unfortunately, critical literacy practices in classrooms have predominantly focused on the deconstruction and critique of existing texts rather than the transformative possibilities of constructing new types of texts that go beyond traditional assumptions and stereotypes about gender, race or social class. Our attention has focused on decrying the violence and attitudes to girls expressed in narratives written by boys, like the one collected by Pam Gilbert on *Efa Bunnies* (Gilbert with Rowe, 1989, pp. 77). It is not surprising that the young boys who wrote these narratives are also now the young men playing *Tomb Raider* and admiring not Lara Croft's agentic female status but her ability to wear leather bikinis and shoot villains without her large bust getting in the way of her gun-wielding expertise.





It is also then not surprising that a cursory analysis of websites for girls reveal the same construction of a teenage girls' identity that Angela McRobbie identified within UK's teen girl magazine *Jackie* in the early 1990s. McRobbie identified four codes of romantic individualism present in these texts: romance; beauty and fashion; personal and emotional life; and pop-stars and music (Scodari, 2005, p. 106). Sites such as those named as *Smart girls* (<http://www.smartgirl.org/index.html>) or *Empowering girls world wide* (<http://www.girl.com.au/index.htm>) merely re-present these versions of identity within 21<sup>st</sup> Century contexts.

The literacy classroom is the site where young girls can be taught how to construct narratives that go beyond these constructions of what it means to be young and female. Cultural knowledge workers who know how to produce these transformative texts are those who will have an impact on the production of a knowledge economy that is based on a transformation of social practices. The development of girls' skills in the production of these transformative texts can take place in literacy classrooms where digital texts are used and produced in ways that are more like real-life practices than doing school as usual.

## Authentic uses of digital texts

Earlier I alluded to the predominance of girls' use of the Internet as a social space. Girls use the Internet for the self-reflexive journaling that has been a long-term feature of young girls' practices as they explore what it means to be a young woman. The secretly hidden and locked diaries of my adolescence have been replaced by the blogs and interactive sites such as *Myspace*, and *Youtube*. Rather than writing secretly about our curious and anxious questions about our changing adolescent bodies, sexual identities and relationships with boys, today's young girls are letting it all hang out! So sites like *gURL.com* grow around communities of young girls who ask and answer each others questions about sex (Grisso and Weiss, 2005); *Myspace* and *Xanga* sites are constructed by young girls with expressions of self-doubt and anxiety the focus of the text; and *Youtube* contains images of young girls acting out their dreams to be models, or pop-stars. For example, *gURL.com* has a section devoted to questions.

As well as the journal being a common feature of young girls' lives, it has also been a common feature in literacy classrooms. But how is this self-reflexive and anxious exploration of new identities related to the kinds of journal writing accepted in classrooms? The writing in journals in literacy classrooms is a good example of the overt practices of 'good girls', where girls subject themselves to the transformation of a genre that they find genuinely rewarding and exhilarating, to one that is stilted, prosaic and mundane. This raises an important issue related to the connection between home and school texts – digital or print-based. What often happens unfortunately is that texts brought into schools take on the appearance of school – what was interesting, exciting, and engaging becomes mundane, safe and structured. This is why a leading multi-national games developer has apparently banned the use of the word 'educational'. Think about the difference between the *skill 'n drill* games used on many school computers and the battles waged in *World of Warcraft*, the strategies used in *Civilisation*, or the role-playing skills used in *The Sims*.

## Concluding thoughts

I began this paper with an explanation of the ways in which deficit discourses can affect students' literacy achievements. I have drawn attention to the 3D literacy model and the issues related to each dimension with regards to girls' uses of digital texts in literacy classrooms. I have explored girls' uses of the Internet as a social space and discussed the implications for this in thinking about engaging with digital texts in classrooms in authentic ways that are connected to girls' home practices.

I have stressed the importance of engaging with digital texts in



literacy classrooms in ways that are authentic and meaningful and closely connected to real world practices. I believe that if literacy teachers engage with digital texts in these ways then we can teach our female students to be critical cultural intermediaries. It is these young women who will have an important role in transforming societal attitudes and expectations about the ways they themselves and other girls and women live their lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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