

‘I’m Dylan and I’m not going to say my last name’: some thoughts on childhood, text and new technologies

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Discussions of text and the literate practices of the young have always taken place against larger backdrops painted in particular historical, cultural and ideological patterns. In the contemporary era, the emergence of weblogs (blogs) and their rapid uptake by young people all over the world provides an interesting insight into the tensions that emerge as views of children, technology and textual practice intersect in a particular historical, cultural and ideological moment. This article suggests that the emergence of new technologies and new textual practices poses a significant challenge to traditional views of literacy and childhood. It undertakes a textual analysis of samples of the ways in which blogging and bloggers are represented in the media and contrasts these discourses with the production, dissemination and use of blogs created by two young people. This small slice across blogging serves to highlight the deeply rooted tensions between some models of childhood and some contemporary practices around text, technology and information.

Introduction—broad change and the risk society

Early descriptions of the impact of changes associated with contemporary globalization paid scant attention to broad social and cultural outcomes, let alone to the ways in which these larger scale processes trickle down to become sites of tension and struggle in the everyday. One of the first and most influential theorizations of the impact on individuals and societies developed out of the work of Ulrich Beck (1992, 1995, 2000), who conceptualized the emergence of what he termed ‘risk society’ in which life pathways are increasingly individualized and, as a consequence, reflexive. This process of ‘individualization’ means that we each *individually* experience risks of various types as we follow our social and spatial histories. As a result, we are each increasingly *reflexive* as we make conscious choices

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in every area of our lives, both accepting and taking more risks in the process. Like Beck, Anthony Giddens (1986, 1991a, b) has suggested that we are now living in a *post-traditional* time where individuals are increasingly adrift from the kinds of narratives and traditions around gender, family and state that once predetermined life pathways. We have moved, instead, to a time when each of us actively builds a narrative of our lives—what he calls the ‘reflexive project of the self’. It is through these self-narratives that we depict ourselves to those around us. These narratives of self take up the spaces left as institutions and traditional social roles recede.

The tensions created by these changes continue to play out in a range of ways, but of most interest to this article are those associated with perceptions of childhood (Postman, 1994; Holloway & Valentine, 2003) and the associated debates about the nature of literacy and text (Lankshear, 1997; Bearne, 2003; Kress, 2003; Carrington, 2005). While providing a context for these debates, these frameworks for understanding ‘self’ in the emerging post-traditional society suggest that the ways in which we should understand the uses of a range of texts and the practices associated with their production, dissemination and use might usefully take account of the growing importance of reflexive self-narratives. This movement in the relationship between textual practices, understandings of childhood, and identity has implications for the ways in which we understand and teach literacy in our classrooms. It is at this point that the growing trend towards blogging and the way it has been represented, particularly in relation to children, becomes of interest.

Blogs and blogging

As many of us are aware by now, weblogs (commonly called ‘blogs’) are a diverse and expanding range of online sites that have in common the technology that supports them, but often little else. The online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* described a blog as:

A website for which an individual or group generates text, photographs, video, audio files, and/or links, typically but not always on a daily or otherwise regular basis ... Authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called ‘blogging’. Individual articles on a blog are called ‘blog posts’, ‘posts’, or ‘entries’. The person who posts these entries is called a ‘blogger’. (wikipedia.org)

In essence, a blog is an online site with a range of dynamic and interactive features. It can be updated frequently with links to an archiving function; it can be set up to allow interaction between a blogger and his/her audience; it allows posting of text, audio, video and photos in various combinations. And, while each blog is set up via a relatively generic software package, each can be individualized or customized. Some blogs are online journals or diaries where people, old and young, describe their lives, experiences and thoughts (see, for example, ‘Time goes by: what it’s really like to get older’ at <http://www.timegoesby.net/>; ‘BusyMom.net’ at <http://busymom.net/>). Other blogs are more journalistic in nature, giving alternative perspectives on politics, news items and world affairs (see, for example, ‘MotherJones’ at <http://www.motherjones.com> and ‘Adbusters’ at <http://adbusters.org>) while others

aggregate and disseminate other online sites and news (e.g. <http://boingboing.net>). Blogs can be produced by individuals or by groups and there are as many topics and purposes as there are bloggers. All make use of blogging software, which allows archiving of entries over time, high levels of interactivity between author/publisher and audience, and links to any number of other online sites in a range of ways. In essence, blogs allow anyone with access to the necessary technology to produce and publish multimodal texts to a local and/or international audience who, in turn, may comment and interact with each other and the blog's creator. It may be that no one ever reads your blog entry; on the other hand, some of the more popular blogs, such as 'Mother Jones' and 'Boing Boing', attract over 100,000 visits each day.

As the latest form of text to (i) require access to, and mastery of a new form of technology and (ii) enable expanded participation in public forums, blogs are in the (un)enviable position of being a nodal point for a range of concerns related to technology, youth, literacy and change. This article therefore seeks to access and engage with what are clearly complex issues by making use of textual analysis to examine the blogs created by two children (aged 11 and 13), contrasting these with examples of media texts that report on young people and blogging. The blog sites were identified via an extensive online search using the key terms '11 years', '12 years', '13 years' + 'blog', while the newspapers were the top two results of a Google search of the combined terms 'kids' + 'children' + 'blogs'. While my selection of these particular new items was based entirely on their being at the top of the list of search returns, it should be noted that there are many news articles that represent quite different perspectives on the topic of children and blogs and, further, that their position at the top of the Google search engine results indicates that these have been the sites most often visited within those particular search parameters. That is, their listing on Google is not random. This same caveat applies to the location of the children's blogs—while much more difficult to locate, their 'visibility' to the search engine is due to their relative popularity. There are many hundreds of thousands of blogs that are never cited on Google or other search engines. These samples are therefore not representative, nor are they intended to be. Instead, they are presented as markers of broader issues I would suggest require consideration and discussion.

About kids and blogs

In the following sections, I examine two articles selected from the first page of a range displayed as the result of the Google search noted earlier. Separately and together, the articles shed light on some of the key (but not the only) concerns associated with blogs and young people. Following this, I introduce blogs by two young girls from quite different parts of the world. The juxtaposition of articles *about* young people's use of blogs and actual blogs *by* young people raises some interesting points about childhood, technology and text that I believe must be addressed before we can move forward with any agenda for literacy reform.

Article 1

Kids, blogs and too much information

Children reveal more online than parents know

By Bob Sullivan

Technology correspondent

MSNBC

Updated: 11:42 a.m. ET April 29, 2005

Marcy's 13-year-old daughter has a knack for switching computer screens or shutting the laptop when mum walks in the room. Like in many families, the two often argue about whether mom has the right to see what her daughter is doing online. The conversation is never really resolved.

But a few months ago, Marcy's need to keep up with her daughter's Internet travels took on a new urgency when she found an unfinished message on the screen urging a friend to check out her daughter's picture on a special Web page her daughter had set up.

With that, Marcy made a discovery thousands of parents around the country are making—teenagers are among the most active internet bloggers, and many are posting pictures, names, addresses, schools, even phone numbers, almost always without their parent's knowledge.

'It blew me away,' said Marcy, who requested her full name not be used, 'and I just lost it. I sat my daughter down and said, "Do you realize how inappropriate and how dangerous this is? Here's your face. Here's the town you come from. Do you realize how many sick people are out there?"'

To see her daughter's site, Marcy had to sign up with a service named myspace.com. When she did, she found her daughter's page, personal information, and pictures. But she also found a list of her daughter's friends, and made another discovery—almost all of her 8th-grade classmates at George Washington Middle School in suburban Ridgewood, N.J. had pages on MySpace.

...

Blogs and their technology cousins, social networking sites, are all the rage among young Internet users. About half of all blogs are authored by teenagers, according to a 2003 study by Perseus Development Corp.; and according to comScore Media Metrix, a majority of the top 15 sites visited by teens 17 and under in January 2005 were either blogs or social networking sites.

But it's what's on the sites that concerns Handy and other experts. A study of teenagers' blogs published this year by the Children's Digital Media Center at Georgetown University revealed that kids volunteer far too much information.

Two-thirds provide their age and at least their first name; 60 per cent offer their location and contact information. One in five offer up their full name.

'I wonder if a lot of the bloggers are ... really cognizant that the whole world can read their blog?' said David Huffaker, who authored the study.

Experts interviewed for this article could not cite a single case of a child predator hunting for and finding a child through a blog ...

The first key theme that emerges from Article 1 is that of 'rights'. There is a clear tension between the right of privacy and the right to communicate with others ('a knack for switching computer screens or shutting the laptop'), and the rights of parents to control their children's activities ('the two often argue about whether mom has the right to see what her daughter is doing online'; 'without their parent's knowledge'). In this instance, the child's concern that her mother will violate what she considers to be her right to online privacy proved correct as Marcy tracked down the sites where her daughter was active ('she found an unfinished message on the screen').

A second theme is risk. It is clear that although the article also reports that 'experts ... could not cite a single case of a child predator hunting for and finding a child through a blog', Marcy views the Internet as a risk and that her daughter is at risk from all 'the sick people out there'. Marcy believes that her daughter has secretly displayed too much personal information that may put her welfare at risk from predators. Here, information is understood as something personal and static that children and young people distribute, often unwisely. These two themes—rights and risk—come together as 'Marcy made a discovery thousands of parents around the country are making', that is, that their children have active social lives and identities online that are unknown to, and unauthorized by, their parents. There is some sense of betrayal here. It is as though these children are actively and secretly keeping information from parents, which in some way appears to justify Marcy's view that her daughter cannot be trusted.

Another key theme is the social nature of online activity. Older stereotypes of the solitary, nerdy nature of Internet activity have broken down. The Internet, like mobile phone technologies, is a key avenue to important forms of social interaction and identity formation for young people (and old) (Ito, 2003). While this particular newspaper article depicts this social activity in a negative light, it is increasingly clear that children and young people, along with many adults, do not differentiate between online and offline social activities and use various forms of technologies to facilitate a range of social and emotional work (Ito & Okabe, 2003). Both online and offline worlds present a range of risks which young and old navigate.

The other notable theme from Article 1 is the positioning of Marcy's daughter. The young woman's point of view is not presented nor is she given a name, even a false one. The article's author apparently did not think it necessary. In fact, the daughter remains nameless and virtually invisible, situated and understood through a range of possessives sourced from Marcy—'her' (daughter), 'my' (daughter). Her age, and perhaps her gender, is identified to position her in relation to parental

authority and Internet use but there is nothing more—the article is clearly *about* her. While the daughter remains unnamed, the mother is so important her name is hidden behind a pseudonym and used in each of the first seven paragraphs. Unlike Marcy's daughter, in the course of the article, the school, year level and web-hosting site are all named.

Article 2

Blogging 'a paedophile's dream'

BBC News Online 26th January 2005

Lucy Sherriff

Online journals and camera phones are a 'paedophiles' dream' which have increased the risk to children, the Scottish Parliament has been warned.

The Justice 1 Committee is examining a bill to create the specific offence of 'grooming' and bringing in 10-year jail terms for meeting children for sex.

A forensic psychologist spoke about the dangers of line journals, or blogs, and pictures posted directly online.

Rachel O'Connell said adults could use weblogs to learn about children.

Dr. O'Connell said that the emergence of moblogs—mobile weblogs—allowed even faster transfer of pictures to the internet using mobile telephones with cameras.

She said: 'This is just a paedophile's dream because you have children uploading pictures, giving out details of their everyday life because it's an online journal'.

...

She described a scenario where a group of paedophiles could exchange information on a child's movement, potentially leading to an abduction.

The central theme of Article 2 is risk. Article 2 makes a direct claim that blogs are linked to paedophile activity, and are in fact, a 'paedophile's dream'. The message is that children who travel online and who post information about themselves are at direct and imminent risk from sexual predators and, importantly, are unaware that their actions are putting them at risk. There is a clear positioning of children as innocent and gullible and the construction of a gulf between adult and child in terms of awareness of risk and victim–predator status. Both articles make a causal link between the Internet and increased activity by paedophiles—a spurious link at best. This article builds hysteria around risk using highly emotive terms:

- paedophile's dream;
- increased the risk;

- warned (the Scottish Parliament);
- grooming;
- dangers of online journals;
- (adults can) learn about children;
- paedophile's dream (repeated);
- abduction.

The Internet is used by paedophiles (again, with a subtext that the Internet has led to an increasing prevalence of paedophilia) and therefore children are putting themselves at additional risk by (i) going online and (ii) posting personal information to blogs. Unlike Article 1, there is no mediating information except for the use of modalities such as 'potentially' (leading to an abduction). The sense of children 'at risk' of harm, particularly sexual harm, in online contexts is strong and reflects quite strong currents in the media in relation to online 'stranger-danger'.

As the articles cited here demonstrate, there are inherent tensions evident in relation to trust and rights; battles over who 'owns' children and their activities; uncertainty over how the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are formed and enacted. As the technological gap between some adults and children continues to open, there will be increasing amounts of discomfort over young people's use of technologies and the public spaces they make accessible. As in these particular articles, the media often depicts children as both *at risk* and *a risk* in online contexts, reflecting the ways in which much older genealogies about children and childhood are being mobilized (Jenks, 1996). Oswell (1998) outlined the construction of the 'dangerous' child (who may use his/her technological skills in socially unacceptable ways) and the child 'in danger' (whose innocence may be corrupted by exposure to the adult online world) to highlight the ways in which children's use of online technologies is being positioned and to link these views with older discourses of childhood.

While the articles outlined here are clearly linked to these long-standing points of view, Holloway and Valentine (2003) point to a newer, but equally problematic view that children are naturally attuned to develop easy mastery of new forms of technology. They suggest instead that, like other technologies, use and mastery are dependent on a range of factors ranging from access to location to cultural context. However, one of the most fascinating aspects of these articles is not the positioning of blogs and blogging as a threat. This is not unexpected. Nor is it the absence of the more recent essentialist view of children's proclivity towards new technologies. The really interesting aspect is the absolute invisibility of children and young people's views. They are talked *about* rather than talked to or with.

Blogs by children

As noted, these are articles *about* children's use of blogs. Below are blog entries *by* children, by quite different young girls, Dylan and Raghda. While Dylan lives in the USA, Raghda lives in post-war Iraq: two young people from vastly different social,

cultural, political and economic contexts, both using the affordances of blogs as a powerful avenue for engaging with the world.

Raghda's blog

I am Raghda Zaid. I am 13 years old. I live in Baghdad and I love cats, Raghda is my real name but I can't show you my picture. (Raghda, 13, blogger)

What follows are excerpts from Raghda's blog and a range of the comments she receives from around the world. The two main themes that characterize the blog entries are cats and Raghda's life in Baghdad since the commencement of the Iraq War in 2003. School, parents and other family members are mentioned within these themes. Her blog is full of cat pictures, some taken by Raghda and others collected elsewhere. There are animations, cartoon cats and photographs all accompanied by a small commentary. Readers are left in no doubt that cats are one of Raghda's passions. Noting that her picture cannot be shown indicates that she knows of the safety issues related to Internet use generally and in Iraq in particular. Already, some of the fears outlined in the earlier reports about children's blogging are dealt with. Raghda knows the boundaries of personal information. She also *creates* her own information for distribution.

Raghda's first posts, in early 2004, were in Arabic. However the comments she received were in English. The very first comment submitted to the site was:

Hey wut does that language mean?? Well I juss wanted to say hey and wussup??? Well right now I'm in the computer lab at shool and I gotta go!! Be fore I get into trouble!!

Very quickly, Raghda switched to English and has continued to receive comments from people around the world to postings, whether they are about cats or life in Iraq.

At the beginning of 2005, Raghda demonstrated mastery of a new skill by adding slideshows of cats to her posts. Large numbers of people from around the world watched and commented. Phil in Michigan wrote:

Thank you, Queen of Cats! One of my kittens was having her morning treat next to my keyboard, and she watched it with me. I liked the Goldfish kitten.

I hope you have fun in school. Be safe.

The reference to 'be safe' was tacit recognition of the everyday danger in which Raghda and her family live and indicates that this particular blogger had been actively reading other posts. Those who comment on her blog do not shy away from the issue of the war in Iraq. There are many questions, and there are comments about the role of the United States. One of Raghda's entries about life in contemporary Baghdad focused on the lack of security and peace and the impact this has had on her life.

Sunday, July 25, 2004

Hear in Baghdad

Before two years, when there was peace and security, the life was nice, I was waiting for the summer holiday to play and go out to the public garden with mom and dad and my family and have fun but now there is no peace and security, so we rarely go out, now I just sit and work on the computer and work on my blog.

Posted by Raghda Zaid @ 3:01 AM

One of the 25 respondents wrote:

Thank you Raghda for telling us about your life in Baghdad. In America, we don't hear much about how life is for Iraqi people right now. I am sorry that Iraq does not have security. I wish that I could tell you that things would get better soon, but I don't know that. Please keep writing in your blog. Writing about difficult times sometimes helps you to feel better.

Raghda clearly notes that her contact with the world outside the house and her family is diminished as a result of the ongoing war. Her link to this outside world now comes via her blog. The blog enables her to comment on the tensions and unfairness of what is going on (lack of electricity, security sweeps, bombs, isolation) but also to develop a network around a positive theme of her choice—her love of cats. At the same time, it is easy to watch Raghda's English writing change as she uses it more frequently, moving from photo captions to commentary of daily life in Iraq, and she continues to post about her interest in cats. Her sense of audience and purpose is clear to all. Recently, she has added a public opinion poll to her site, asking for a range of responses about the quality and interest level of her blog. Her understanding of the scope of the Internet and its ability to transcend particular configurations of space and time is also apparent.

Dylan's blog

I'm Dylan and I'm not going to say my last name (Dylan, 11, blogger)

While Raghda and Dylan both share access to technology that serves to demonstrate a degree of privilege and affluence, there are differences linked to the distinct cultural, social and economic landscapes in which they operate. Dylan lives in the United States and at one time was known as the world's youngest videoblogger, featuring as one of ABC Network's 'People of the Year' in 2004. Wikipedia defines a vlog as 'a blog which uses video as the primary content; the video is linked to within a videoblog post and usually accompanied by supporting text, image, and additional meta data to provide context' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlog>). She posted her first vblog (videoblog) in December 2004 and since then has regularly created and posted small movies in addition to using scanned-in graphics and text and writing content herself. Her very first vlog entry included a video featuring the comment 'I'm Dylan and I'm not going to say my last name'. Reflecting Holloway and Valentine's (2003) arguments that young people's positioning in relation to technology is mediated by a range of social, economic and geographical factors, Dylan demonstrated acute awareness

of issues of personal safety online and acted accordingly. Her online anonymity was challenged, of course, when she became the face of young bloggers everywhere with massive exposure on television and at a range of US-based information technology conferences. This vlog post is an interesting example of her awareness of audience:

Click here to watch the movie [video of flashing neon light display outside San Antonio Chinese restaurant]

Ok, here's a movie that I shot the other night, of probably the most attention seeking Chinese restaurant. It's obnoxious, the lights. I can't imagine their electricity bill ... Oh, and don't get me wrong. I love Chinese food. Just ... This place is insane.

Hey, and also, I've got something to ask you all. So, Vloggercon is comin' up in two weeks or so in New York City, and I'd love to go. Click here to help me get to Vloggercon. =D

Chuck wrote back:

Funky music + funky Chinese restaurant = happy smile time.

nice glasses!

I just gave you a meager donation and am going to post something on my blog to get more people to help out ... gotta get you to NYC with dad!

Zadi wrote back:

okay—so I posted about getting you to NY on my vlog also. Cross your fingers.

Dylan has successfully tapped into the online blogging community, evidenced by both the range of comments and the cross-referencing to her site made by other bloggers. This is an important marker of credibility. She demonstrates high levels of technological prowess and risk-taking around textual practice. Her blog incorporates print, graphics, videos and interactive commentary with her audience. It has recently begun to offer an RSS syndication feed, allowing her audience to be updated whenever a new post is added. More than this, it chronicles the evolution of her skills with various new forms of text and technology. When we recall the purpose of being literate—to participate effectively with text in a range of social and economic contexts—it is clear that Dylan displays mastery of literate practices well suited to a technology-rich risk society. Her vlog of the outside of a Chinese restaurant in San Antonio was, in fact, a critique of the cheesy neon lighting. Her other blog entries chronicle her life and her views and analyses of a range of issues and events which range from what happened at school to an international blogging conference. It may be that we choose to categorize Dylan and Raghda as highly privileged children who must be supported and encouraged by technologically literate and relatively affluent families. While this may indeed be the case, it does not diminish the importance of blogs and blogging as textual and social practices that are enabled by new forms of technology and are increasingly accessible to young people as well as adults.

Children and technology in a post-traditional world

Blog usage has been attached to larger issues around changing childhoods and youth and is seen by many as emblematic of this 'crisis'. Underpinning all of this, I believe, are broader instabilities in what we understand childhood to be as we move further into Beck and Giddens's post-traditional risk society. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary unease around the nature of childhood and youth. The fears and tensions identified in Articles 1 and 2 are not freestanding. Many of the fears about changing childhoods reflected in these articles bubble to the surface around issues other than blogging. Elsewhere (Carrington, 2005), I have reported on the anxiety surrounding the use of texting by school-aged students and its seepage into their school-based literacy practices. In these reports, a range of institutional representatives positioned the movement of a new textual practice into classrooms as a threat to standard English and school-sanctioned practices, arguing that texting was a threat both to students and to the curriculum itself. Articles 1 and 2 are part of this pattern of concern over changing childhoods and youth, changing technologies and changed literacies.

Giddens (1999) argues that we are experiencing the emergence of what he calls a 'post-traditional social order' where traditional practices and social forms are no longer fixed or continue to enjoy taken-for-granted status. This applies as much to traditional beliefs around the nature of childhood as it does to age and gender patterns and the relationships between individual, employers and the state. This shift away from age-worn pathways means that that we now each construct and continually reflect upon a narrative of self—the story of who we are and why. The affordances of online technologies have made available a new form of public display of self-narrative and a way of 'regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world'—blogs and other online journal forms. Raghda and Dylan are creating self-narratives to account for themselves and the world in which they operate, using the latest technologies available to them; technologies which both girls find unremarkable.

This is a view of technological use and of practices around text that has not, in the past, been strongly associated with children. Many constructions of childhood, particularly those embedded across institutional education and curricula, are premised on a view of children that oscillates between being innocent and therefore at risk, and dangerous and therefore a risk. The kinds of practices around technology and text that are emerging out of the convergence of technological change and new forms of identity construction around self-narrative present a new model of the child that does not find a comfortable fit with many of the more traditional discourses. Schools are modernist institutions par excellence. They are premised upon segmented roles, spaces and timings and upon particular developmentally hierarchical understandings about children and childhood. These views and the accompanying institutional practices have contributed to the exclusion of children from direct participation in civic life (Postman, 1994; Holloway & Valentine, 2003). School-based literacy instruction was born and raised in this context of strict delineation of time, activity and purpose—an era that pre-dates digital

communications and the kinds of practices, texts and activities which accompany them. Much of this instruction has pivoted around control of the flow of information to children (Postman, 1994) and the notion that ‘real’ life would start with adulthood.

Interestingly, children’s increasing access to and mastery of new texts and literacies such as blogs, e-zines, computer games and texting gives them unprecedented access to the same pool of information as adults and often independent of adult mediation. As Lumby (1997) points out, increasing access to information has challenged the hierarchical, incremental process of making information available to children through schooling and print. This, of course challenges deeply embedded notions of emotional and physical maturity that underpin curricula and adult–child social hierarchies. As Lumby (1997, p. 45) notes:

Concerns about children and the Internet point to broad cultural anxieties about the way the labile world of the Internet and the possibilities of virtual life are changing traditional social hierarchies, including the boundaries between adults, adolescents and children ... The Internet represents the apotheosis of this undermining of the graduate and hierarchical world of print media.

Providing an additional layer of complexity, as the weblogs profiled here demonstrate, these texts and technologies allow children to be producers and disseminators of information as they construct reflexive self-narratives. This is a significant shift from being positioned as receivers of the information contained in printed texts and made available via adult mediation and authority.

The widening reach of digital technologies and their rapid dissemination into everyday life has also changed what a text is and what it can do. In fact, this is so altered that I would venture that we would be better served to understand ‘text’ as an active word rather than artefact. The relationship of children to text is thus also altered—as Kenway and Bullen (2001) argue, children’s increasing ability to produce, use and receive information has implications for the ways in which they see themselves and, it would follow, their relationship with institutional discourses around print literacy. Traditional text practices in classrooms are centred on mastery and correct rendition of pre-set heritage models such as recounts, fiction narratives, reports, poetry rather than celebrating the ability, or more importantly, the right, to produce, disseminate and comment on information. Pruitt (2005) noted that the ‘blogging mind is one that synthesizes information and reflects upon the meaning and relevance it holds’. Both Dylan and Raghda embody this. They are each gathering information from a range of sources and across a multiplicity of modes, reflecting, analyzing and synthesizing. Further, they are remixing and distributing this information using the forms of text and technology at their disposal. This is an engagement in ‘active’ text rather than a reproduction of already existing practices. At the same time, they both demonstrate explicit awareness of potential risk online (from a variety of sources): Raghda by not posting a photograph of herself, Dylan by not saying her surname. Both young girls are growing up in different zones of what Ulrich Beck describes as the ‘risk society’ and, as a consequence, their view of personal responsibility and risk is shaped accordingly. Each is carving out a

self-narrative and the individualized pathways and skill sets argued by Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991a, b). Without making the case that young people have 'natural' tendencies towards mastery of new technologies, I suggest that each girl's habitus is attuning to the possibilities and challenges of new technological and social scapes. These are young people who feel a legitimate right to comment on the world around them in a variety of ways and who are enabled, and even perhaps encouraged, by the technologies available to them, to do this. As these blogs evidence, children do, in fact, take part in the same world(s) as adults. The acceptance of the young in 'adult' realms is evidenced quite clearly by the responses that both Raghda and Dylan receive to their blogs on a daily basis. Importantly, and quite distinct from earlier models of childhood and literacy, they see the evidence of their connectivity and impact on people in a diverse set of domains.

Back to the beginning

This is a different model of childhood from the one depicted in Articles 1 and 2. It is my strong belief that these views, along with those more commonly found outside the discourses of traditional institutions that assume the young have innate technological skill sets, must be problematized and challenged if school-based literacy education is to have any hope of providing young people with the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully participate in their communities.

A first step in rethinking literacy education appropriate for children growing up in Beck's risk society is the understanding that children do not sit outside these processes of individualization. Reflexivity begins early in contemporary society. Unlike earlier models of childhood, any view that hopes to account for contemporary society, and the needs of children in that society, must position children as active players in a range of social fields and with a range of effective skills. It must also be recognized that for contemporary children, the range of online and offline textual and social practices in which they engage are not novel. Children who have no life history before the Internet and other digital technologies do not consider them alien or exceptional. The huge issue that teachers, parents, politicians and school administrators make about digital technology is for their own benefit. Children do not necessarily share this view, nor do they necessarily differentiate between the practices and skills they develop online and those they use in other places. Literate habitus is more fluid than this. Leander (2005) notes the overlap between the different spaces of home and school as children use digital literacy practices across both. Understanding that literacy practices are embodied and that bodies move across complex time-space coordinates, he traces the way in which children's practices around various textual forms move back and forth between social fields. However, as a social field, the school is more resistant to new forms of textual practice than some others. This view of children's complex lives and the sophisticated textual practices in which they engage is more in keeping with the emerging view of risk society and individualization argued by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens. Both Raghda and Dylan demonstrate reflexivity and

constructions of self-narrative through their control of information about themselves and through the ways in which they present and comment upon the world around them. On the other hand, both articles about the young and blogs represent a view of childhood that is at odds with this new-found sense of participation and self-narrative. Articles 1 and 2 transmit moral disquiet and fear at the new forms of engagement and textual practices in which children are increasingly engaged.

It is self-evident that young people in our society increasingly require literacy skills that encompass texts produced and disseminated via digital technologies as well as those associated with print-based technologies. However, acknowledging that the nature of text has expanded is not enough. The United Kingdom has recently been engaged in a process of examining what literacy education might usefully look like in another 10 years (the *English21* consultations taking place in 2005). Where I would once have argued that children need skills and attitudes fashioned around digital and multimodal texts, as if that wasn't a big enough request, I now find that I am in the position of arguing for much deeper reform at the institutional level. It is of little use to attempt curriculum or pedagogic reform within a system whose centripetal pull is toward modernist social functions and patterns. For literacy education to make a real difference in the lives and futures of the young people who move in and out of complex social fields and who are growing up in a post-traditional risk society, it is necessary to acknowledge that childhood is not what it used to be and that curricula, school hierarchies and classrooms cannot, therefore, continue to be what they used to be.

The kinds of institutional changes that would enable significant and lasting reform might usefully be embedded in what Alan Reid (2004) called a 'culture of inquiry' where educational bureaucracies adopt inquiry and evidence-based practice as their underlying philosophy. Reid's inquiry culture requires a shift away from a top-down hierarchy to a highly interconnected matrix where information production and decision making take place at all levels. Institutional patterns of this type are potentially well placed to encourage the conditions where new practices can be supported and validated. As reformed institutional principles are translated into classroom practice, they may be characterized by what Lingard *et al.* (2001) called 'productive pedagogies'—classroom practices with first principles that revolve around substantive conversation, recognition of diversity, connectedness and intellectual challenge.

These are broad principles which must be, I would argue, in place before substantive and lasting change can be made to the processes or outcomes of school-based literacy education. The recognition of literacy and text production as active social practices that flow across multiple sites and contexts must be reflected in classroom practice and its underlying principles. Following on from this, contemporary literacy instruction needs to position children as active players in a range of social fields with a range of effective skills developed across multiple, multimodal contexts. As argued earlier in relation to the work of Beck and Giddens, a key aspect of life in a post-traditional culture will be the ability to construct and

maintain an effective 'self-narrative'. Developing the textual skills associated with this narrative should be a key pivot for literacy instruction. More specifically, literacy education designed for the risk society should be about the production and use of texts across fluid contexts. This requires a view of text as 'active' rather than as an artefact and an acceptance that children's lives are lived across multiple sites that require sophisticated blending and use of a variety of literate practices. All young people should develop sophisticated understandings of information and take on principled roles as producers and disseminators in their own right—this is surely a key purpose of literacy in the post-traditional society. In addition, new avenues for access to local and global audiences require that literacy education addresses issues of audience and the implications, both negative and positive, of participation in large communities of practice.

Because young people are born into a world saturated in digital technologies (and regardless of arguments about the need for 'basic' skills before children can move onto online texts, ours is a digitally oriented society and children are attuning to its affordances, both positive and negative) they require literacy practices and skills oriented to multimodality. To focus on print as an a priori requirement is increasingly a disservice, particularly to those students most at risk of poor outcomes from schooling. This, of course, requires a commitment to embed digital technologies into daily classroom pedagogy and contexts and a concerted effort to ensure that all children in our school systems are provided with opportunities to engage in these new forms of textual and social practice. There is a lot written and spoken about the need for reform, particularly in relation to literacy education. However, without commitment to reform across a range of levels of the type described here and a shift in views of childhood, I fear that little will change in the shape, priorities or outcomes of literacy education.

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