

LITERACY & IDENTITY

Girl power in a digital world: Considering the complexity of gender, literacy, and technology

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In my more cynical moments I have often envisioned culture and its influence on our construction of identities as a giant wave. Try as we might to resist, the wave is going to pick everyone up and carry us all along in the same direction. Swimming against it ends in exhaustion. The only choice is to swim with the wave and try to land somewhere safe.

This aquatic metaphor seems particularly apt when thinking about questions of gender and identity. I've lost track of the number of children I have seen, or have been told about by their parents, who when very young seemed to transcend gender roles, only to be swept up in the dominant culture's gender expectations as they proceeded through primary and secondary school. Boys who as toddlers had given teddy bear tea parties eventually picked up sticks and pretended to shoot laser beams at one another, and girls who had pretended to be pirates became more and more curious about makeup and fashion magazines. All of this happened much to the chagrin and concern of progressively minded parents, including myself, who thought that they could raise their children

to not be bound by such conventional gender roles.

I know that my depiction of children being swept along in conventional gender roles is a generalization that does not reflect all the choices and activities of individual children. Many parents and teachers can point to ways in which adolescents have defied dominant gender roles and ways in which those roles have changed. Yet looking at how the culture at large constructs expectations of gender identity is important for examining and understanding the forces at work on individual girls and boys and how they adapt or oppose such forces. I also would never make the argument that gender identities are connected to immutable biological traits. Still, with those disclaimers in mind, the cultural power of conventional gender roles often seems inexorable. Like a postmodern King Canute, I am acutely aware of my inability to turn back the relentless waves of culture.

The power of culture to shape gender identities becomes particularly crucial for adolescents making the transition from child to adult. As

young people build their adult identities they look constantly to the culture around them, from family to peers and to popular media, for guidance and hints. They seek assurance that they are becoming insiders—people who will be accepted by the dominant culture—and not those who will be shut out and shunned. Yet as adults we offer little coherent, direct instruction in such matters. Of course, we give the intermittent words of wisdom, lectures, admonishments, or encouragement—all of which may or may not be attended to by any given adolescent. But the reality is that most adolescents spend a great deal of time and energy observing adults, popular culture, and their peers and then obsessing about how to interpret and incorporate what they see into their values and actions.

In school, then, this means that adolescents are working nonstop to shape their gender identities in ways that fit the expectations of the institution, the larger culture's perception of the institution, and their peers—and not necessarily in that order. Although the institution of school is a powerful instrument in reproducing the ideology of the dominant culture, it is not the only instrument, and the values of the classroom often run counter to the values of the rest of the society.

In terms of literacy and identity, this means that the adolescent students in our classes are often balancing the identity demands of the institution against those from outside. At the same time we, as their teachers, are balancing our responses to students between the expectations of the institution and what we perceive as the necessities of the adult culture and our empathy for the pressures on students from their peers, families, and the world outside the classroom door. Sometimes all this balancing goes well; other times...well, we all know what it feels like when it comes crashing down.

The paradox of doing well

As I discussed in a previous column (Williams, 2004), for adolescent boys, the conflict between the expectations of school and the gender identity

expectations of the larger culture often manifests itself in literacy classrooms over issues of narrative violence and resistance to reading and writing that focuses on emotion and fiction over plot and action.

The situation for adolescent girls, as one might expect, manifests itself in different behaviors but raises concerns just the same. There has been increasing attention in the last decade to the way gender socialization affects girls in school. One of the best known reports is *How Schools Shortchange Girls* (American Association of University Women, 1992), which included these findings: Girls received less attention in the classroom than boys and less encouragement for their efforts, and they suffered sexual harassment from boys. In addition, the study showed that many classrooms created an atmosphere of competition among the students. Such an atmosphere played to the strengths of boys, who were socialized to compete, but often intimidated girls, who were more often socialized to collaborate. These findings and other subsequent research (Sadker & Sadker, 1994) have made teachers more aware of how gender identities influence student behavior as well as teacher responses to such behavior.

It is worth noting, however, that much of the concern of *How Schools Shortchange Girls* was focused on girls being discouraged from pursuing study in math and science. Literacy education seemed to be one area where the news was good for girls in the classroom, because they seemed to be doing well with reading and writing. In terms of both literacy testing and anecdotes from teachers, girls in general were regarded as more successful and willing readers and writers than boys. Girls more often gave teachers what they were looking for in assignments in literacy classes—character-driven, nonviolent, open, and reflective interpretations of readings and writing—and assignments were usually neater than boys' work. The general success of girls in literacy classes, and the struggle of boys with the same work, has led some educators to rethink how boys are social-

ized and where this might conflict with teacher and institutional expectations.

What some scholars argue has been overlooked in framing the discussion of gender roles in these terms is that the very success of girls in literacy classes may create a cultural paradox for girls as readers and writers in general. If girls follow the assignments and rules in class, they will receive good grades and learn how to produce the kind of work the institution of school values. A number of studies over the years have found that girls tend to read and write more about relationships with family and friends, romance, shopping, and other subjects that do not challenge the order or values of school as an institution (Finders, 1997; Hunt, 1995; MacGillivray & Martinez, 1998; Sanford, 2005).

Even as some teachers and researchers have worried about the action-laden narratives of boys, they have worried about the traditional romance or consumer-focused narratives of girls. Of particular concern are the narratives from girls that portray females as passive characters, waiting for the male hero to save the day or complete the story by completing the romance. If boys seem to be often rewriting the traditional dragon-slaying narrative, the concern is that girls, from a very early age, are reading about and rewriting the traditional marriage plot, which depends on a male hero. Such narratives do not disrupt the classroom or the institutional goals of the school, but they do reinforce a set of values whereby males are problem solvers and dominant and girls are comforters and subsumed into the male story.

At the same time, if girls follow assignments and class rules they may become successful rule followers and test takers but be less willing to take risks or experiment with reading and writing. By quietly doing their work well, girls also may find that they do not receive as much of the teacher's time and consideration (Sanford, 2005). If teachers are not worried about girls, they may not pay as much attention to them either. Sanford found that teachers perceived that girls did better as a

group but produced fewer exceptional, risk-taking readers and writers than did boys. Sanford and others also raised the question of whether girls' success with the traditional print-based literacies that continue to dominate literacy education in most schools puts them at a disadvantage in regard to the literacy practices that are most prevalent outside the school walls. As girls succeed in traditional school-sanctioned literacy practices

they are gaining the skills required for admission to post-secondary education, but as they "gain" on the boys in formal educational success (identified through grades and awards) they lose ground in other ways, particularly development of skills in alternative and computer-based literacies. (p. 305)

Girls may be mastering certain kinds of literacies, according to this argument, but not the ones that are connected to their daily lives or that are truly valued in the culture (Haas, Tulley, & Blair, 2002). By succeeding in outdated school-sanctioned print literacies, girls limit their expectations and perceptions of what they believe literacy can be (Marsh, 2003).

Girls' online worlds

The troubling aspect of any discussion of cultural constructions of identity is that we must inevitably engage in generalizations that, if we are not careful, can become calcified ways of perceiving individuals and result in rigid equations about behavior. For example, adolescent girls prefer to write about relationships; this student is an adolescent girl; ergo, she will want to write about relationships. When such rigid expectations result in institutionally unimaginative or personally inflexible responses, no student benefits. What is more useful is to reflect on the complexities of such generalizations and then look for ways to think about culture and identity in the classroom in a way that connects the insights gleaned from such reflections with the flexibility demanded by a humane response to individual students.

As an example of how we might approach such issues, let's pursue one concern about how gender identity affects girls' literacy practices: Girls' literacy practices are less connected to computer and online technology, which puts them at a disadvantage with boys who are more comfortable with the digital world. Certainly this is a concern in a world where much of the communication takes place through digital media. If girls are not comfortable writing with a computer, let alone reading and writing in the developing genres that mark computer-mediated literacy, they will find themselves at an increasing disadvantage in school, the workplace, and society in general.

The degree to which males continue to dominate fields of computer programming and design contributes to the concern that some have over how much girls are involved in digital literacies. The astonishing growth of the computer and video game industry as a dominant force in popular culture has reinforced the sense that boys are dominating computer use in terms of interest and abilities. Put together the phrase "adolescent and computer," and the image for many will be that of a boy looking at the screen. Such perceptions are a perpetuation of cultural traditions that construct the active use of electronic technology as the domain of men.

Yet as we observe the first generation of girls growing up with computers and online access as a part of daily life, research and experiences indicate that the girls' literacy practices with computers complicate the vision of the digital world as relentlessly intimidating and unwelcoming to adolescent girls. The number of studies indicating that many girls engage in a variety of online literacy practices with enthusiasm and confidence grows each year. Research has shown how girls are creating webpages (Haas et al., 2002; Selfe & Hawisher, 2004), writing blogs (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005), reading websites (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), and chatting online (Jacobs, 2004), among other activities. All indications are that these are not isolated cases, but that adolescent girls are actively involved in on-

line literacy practices in large numbers and with little anxiety or uncertainty about writing and reading with computer technology. Even computer games, once considered almost the sole province of boys, have begun to appeal to a large number of girls. Although girls are still in the minority playing some of the more violent computer games, for some of the popular role-playing games, such as *The Sims*, they are now in the majority (Schiesel, 2006).

In my experience with talking to adolescent girls in school and observing their online literacy practices, I see young people who are comfortable reading and writing with technology. They are involved in instant messaging, visiting popular culture websites for the movies and television shows they watch, listening to and downloading music, and designing webpages and visiting them almost daily to tinker with the page and communicate with friends. They seem to undertake all these activities with the same lack of self-consciousness or intimidation that they probably show when turning on the television set. The adolescent boys also seem not to regard girls' use of computers as in any way unusual. Computers and online communication are an unremarkable but ubiquitous part of these girls' lives.

If we are challenging the old conventional wisdom that girls are not comfortable using computers, we still need to maintain an awareness of how dominant cultural gender roles are being transferred to these new literacy practices. The current research would indicate that, as with print literacy practices, adolescent girls tend to focus their online literacy practices on building and sustaining social relationships. The utopian ideal that accompanied the early days of computer-mediated communication—that it would liberate individuals from the limits of culturally constructed identities—looks almost laughably naive as we see how dominant cultural ideologies shape technology uses.

Technology is part of culture and does shape it. But technology does not escape being shaped by culture at the same time. The construction of

MySpace pages, for example, may be little different from the traditional decorations inside school lockers, and the messages that get traded electronically echo those passed as paper notes in my long-ago adolescence. Although the uses girls put computers to seem less directly competitive than what boys do with technology, girls often use computers for highly literate practices in ways that boys sometimes do not. A role-playing computer game favored by girls, such as *The Sims*, may involve more reading and writing than a first-person shooter, such as *Half-Life*, which is popular with boys.

The question is this: If adolescent girls use computer-mediated literacy practices (like other traditional literacy practices) toward relationship building and social interactions, is that a bad thing? Do such uses, as Sanford (2005) and Marsh (2003) claimed, put girls at a disadvantage in the world outside of school? If writing about relationships requires thinking about audience, tone, and the effect of words and images on others, how can teachers build on such abilities? The more pressing question may come from a more traditionally feminist perspective: Rather than trying to find ways to help girls use computers in the same ways boys do, how do we help them build on their strengths to find new, creative, and feminist ways of designing and using computers? For example, if girls have been less interested in learning computer programming and software design, including literacy-connected software, perhaps this can be traced to a perception that such work is not relevant to their interests. But when interests such as the desire to build relationships or engage in more character-driven narratives are foregrounded as the goal, girls may be more intrigued. As Caitlin Kelleher (in Schiesel, 2006), a doctoral student conducting research with girls and technology, noted,

If you walk into a room full of girls and ask them, "Who wants to learn to program computers?" you don't get very many hands.... But if you ask them, "Who wants to learn how to make a movie like Pixar [Animation Studios] or perhaps something like *The Sims*?" you get a

very different response. And fundamentally those two activities can be the same thing. (p. 1)

Conversations about culture

Clearly, it's not enough to say that more girls are reading and writing online, so everything is rosy. If adolescent girls, through their social relationships with boys, limit their ambitions and perceptions of what they can achieve or regard competition with boys as unseemly, that is a cultural construction and no more positive online than in traditional relationships. Dominant cultural ideology lives with us online as it does in the rest of our lives, for both good and ill.

One way this situation is particularly and sharply defined for girls in their online literacy practices is in terms of sexuality. If violence from adolescent boys is the fear in U.S. culture—fear sharpened after highly publicized school shootings and the source of much concern about violent computer games—sexuality is the concern about girls, both in the culture at large and in the virtual world. Sexuality (either in terms of sexual purity or sexual power) is a traditional concern about adolescent girls in our culture. In the United States we struggle over the competing concerns of either girls' sexual vulnerability or the perceived capacity for seduction. In the same way that school shootings heightened concerns about violence and boys, well-publicized stories in the popular media about online predators have raised concerns about what girls are doing on the Internet. Certainly adolescent girls are bombarded with enough popular culture images and general cultural messages that they should be interested, if not obsessed, with their physical appearance, fashion, relationships with boys, and their sexual lives and power. For many girls this leads to real problems—not just with self-esteem but with life-threatening issues such as eating disorders. And no one would discount the threat of violence against girls.

Yet just as most boys who play violent computer games do not shoot fellow students, most girls do not end up victims of sexual assault. If we

let our discomfort with the explicit violence and sexuality available online or through computer games frighten us into hysterical responses, in the way that these issues often get discussed on cable talk shows and in other popular media, then we miss the reality that most girls find ways to develop a critical distance of some kind from many of these online texts. They develop ways of distinguishing fantasy from reality in the same way that boys do about violent games. They sometimes even engage in rather cutting parodies or ironic comments about popular culture that, although not critiques in themselves, reveal openings for more thoughtful analysis or reflection.

Just because there is an opening for analysis, however, does not necessarily mean that students will walk through it. That's where we come in as teachers. Helping adolescent students, girls and boys, develop a critical perspective on how gender expectations influence their literacy practices is part of the ongoing conversation we should be having in the classroom. Like most people's, students' conception of literacy is usually as a stand-alone set of skills. Students believe that certain people can be taught to master these skills, others cannot, and some small select few are gifted artists who possess innate abilities to read and write well. If we begin to help students see how definitions and practices of literacy are culturally situated, we not only show them how they can learn to read and write well and with pleasure but also how the same culture that influences their choice of clothing or music influences what and how they read and write. Writing about relationships for girls is not a matter of either biology or individual tastes. The more students understand this, the more control they have over their literacy choices.

I'm not calling for a one-time lecture, nor am I in favor of badgering students with a reductive form of cultural studies jargon that tells them they are only puppets in the larger culture. Done correctly, however, a continuing conversation about how culture shapes our reading and writ-

ing can help students see more options because they are not being limited by biology or taste.

When students understand that their values and assumptions are constructed by the culture, they then have the power to connect with those values or to explore alternatives. Either way they have a choice to make, and in making choices they are learning to think critically. The questions we can start with in class are not complex, and we should not expect students' initial answers to be sophisticated. But we should help students to start recognizing these questions as important: How does the world around them, from family to friends and from popular culture to school, shape their desires and fears? How do they respond? What are the values described in a piece of writing? Who do they assume the audience for a text is, and what are that audience's values? How do values influence the assumptions of what we expect to happen when we write or read? What effect do students want to have with a piece of writing? What are the implications in terms of identity of each authorial choice? What would happen if the author of a work decided to reflect different values and assumptions?

In terms of gender, more specific questions are in order. If we ask boys to think about the effects of violent narratives on characters and on their readers and to think about distinctions between gratuitous violence and action that serves a narrative, then we can ask girls about who seems to have power in their writing about relationships, what the roles of girls are supposed to be, and what other words might be used to describe female characters that might not be concerned first with physical attractiveness.

Digital Girls and zines

There are many examples of teachers and scholars exploring ways to help girls explore more complex and empowering literacy practices, particularly in online situations. One exciting example, the Digital Girls project (2006), is described as a collaborative effort among "an international team

of researchers, techno-geeks, tweens and teens, ethnographers, teachers, filmmakers and more.” Through research, teaching, and outreach to girls, project members explore

the knowledge of digital technology that Canadian, British, and South African pre-teen and teenage girls are acquiring through computer play on and off the Internet. We consider—and contest—the “digital gender divide” that is said to exist and examine girls’ voluntary engagement with technology. We are interested in mapping out the emergence of a particular digital literacy that includes technical knowledge, social uses of technology, and moral and ethical decision-making.

Another example is a study by Guzzetti and Gamboa (2004) of adolescent girls creating their own zines outside the classroom. The authors found that the girls writing these zines produced work that promoted social justice and challenged dominant ideas of gender identity. Although not advocating the introduction of zines to the classroom as a school assignment, they argued that teachers can tap into and promote the critical ethos found in zines in school-based reading and writing. The study illustrated that girls can respond well when encouraged “to be resistant readers and writers and to critically analyze texts for issues of social justice” (p. 433). Such approaches to literacy education connect students’ lives and cultural knowledge and expectations with their reading and writing in ways that then promote critique and creativity.

We should not regard questions of gender socialization and literacy as a zero-sum game where if girls do well in school boys must be doing poorly, or vice versa. Instead, we need to understand the complexity and shifting nature of the cultural assumptions and values that exist and offer possibilities and critiques for both boys and girls. As Newkirk (2002) argued, discussions of gender and literacy in school often focus on setting up binaries between girls’ and boys’ interests instead of examining the culturally constructed difficulties schools present to both genders in different ways at different times.

Perhaps I have been wrong all these years, and culture is not so much a wave as it is a river. Yes, we are all moving along in the water. And, yes, there are currents that move generally in one direction and often make it easiest to go with the flow. Although the currents are not always predictable, the surroundings often change, and the river can change course, it is still possible to travel the river under control and chart your own course. What we need to teach students is how to recognize the challenges of the river; how to navigate it to get to where they want to go; and, when necessary, how to turn the boat around and—slowly and with great effort—move upstream against the current.

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