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**TeenLit.com: A Virtual Community of Adolescent Writers, Study One**

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"Something big is afoot, and the final shape has not been determined."

--Howard Rheingold in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, 1993, p. 11

Amid the shifting literacy foci of our time, new problems continually emerge while the problems of the past continue to evade solution. It is no wonder that many educators are resistant to embrace technological mandates when they still are grappling with age-old issues such as authenticity and motivation and an onslaught of curricular add-ons. It is not uncommon for good classroom teachers to complain that their curriculum is constantly being added to, while little, if any, demands on their instruction are released. The integration of technology into today's schools is just one such addition. Yet, what if the recently touted innovations, access to the World Wide Web for example, could actually aid instruction in meeting standards and goals for students? Indeed, what if such Internet access, a goal for all US schools entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century (U.S. Department of Education, 1996) helped students and teachers to resolve age-old educational dilemmas, such as motivation and transfer?

One promising venue for providing literacy experiences that are motivating, authentic, and transfer to the real world is the World Wide Web. As a medium, it is growing daily and its influence on culture and literacy only beginning to be investigated. In terms of literacy, there is a considerable lag between the popularity of the Internet and published literacy research investigating its ramifications (Kamil, 1998). Certainly the promising possibilities of the World Wide Web as a literacy influence and medium should be sought as educators begin to venture into what will surely be decades of rapid change, much of it propelled by technology. One such promising venue immediately apparent to careful observers of the Internet is

the vast opportunities afforded by the World Wide Web for publishing and encouraging written interaction among young readers and writers.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study may best be described brings together research and questions from a variety of avenues within the neighborhood of literacy. Beginning with limitations in current practice, especially those yet lax even after the process writing movement, this research bases its work on a sociocultural view of learning, with a particular emphasis on genres and discourse communities. In addition, the primary goals of adolescence of finding their identity and fitting into the social realm remains critical. Bringing these constructs to bear on the intersection of technology and literacy, this study builds on and hopes to contribute to investigations into computer mediated communication and virtual communities created and sustained on the World Wide Web.

#### *Authentic Purpose and Audience in Writing*

Process writing proponents (e.g. Emig, 1971; Graves, 1984; Atwell, 1998;) have continually emphasized the importance of authenticity and publishing for young writers. Literacy advocates, in the wake of an apparent failure of the process writing movement to substantially improve student writing (Applebee, 1994; Campbell, 1997), continue to argue vehemently that for students to improve their writing, they must be engaged in a multitude of authentic writing tasks. Such authentic writing tasks would be characterized as those written for real purposes and specific audiences, and such writing would most notably be published, that is read by this audience for the said purpose.

Though teachers would certainly agree with this premise, the real world of schooling does not present many authentic writing opportunities for adolescents. Instead, today's middle and high school students do most of their writing in school for the teacher, and this writing is characterized as

infrequent, short, and used primarily for assessment (Applebee, 1984). Such writing fails in a number of ways to engage writers, let alone demonstrate publishing in the real world, where function, audience, and context are key issues to composition. In the end, even the best instructional practices result in only teaching school writing, a limited genre indeed (Freedman, 1993). In both process writing communities and more recently in genre theory, the importance of the function of writing and a conscious concept of audience has been emphasized, yet classrooms seem to lack these necessary ingredients. Clearly, other forums for students writing experiences need to be investigated.

*Writing as Social Activity within Discourse Communities*

While the writing process movement shed light on the importance of authenticity and publishing for young writers, these notions are being further emphasized by genre theorists. As a socio-cultural perspective which views all learning as stemming from social origins (Vygotsky, 1978), genre theory views writing as a means to achieve social ends, and this social action take place within a specific discourse community. In this line of reasoning, genre knowledge in action empowers learners to use writing to achieve social goals. This situatedness in a social context is a critical factor highlighted currently by genre theorists (e.g. Berkenkotter, 1993; Freedman, 1993; Miller, 1984). According to Halliday (1978), this context can best be summarized by field (what is happening), tenor (who is involved), and mode (what role language is playing). An emphasis on this situated context for writing should foster the awareness of critical lessons such as:

- writing is an act of communication for a specified audience within a specific community with its own history, expectations, and constraints; and,

- writing can serve many functions ranging from transactional to expressive or even poetic (Britton, 1982).

As exciting as this emphasis on the social nature of writing may be to literacy education, the classrooms of today may not be the ideal setting for students to learn writing in all of its above-mentioned complexities. Not only is it difficult for classroom teachers to extend writing to include authentic purposes and for such writing to be read by its intended audience, but school itself is a severely limited social environment. In acquiring new genres a lengthy period of immersion in the relevant contexts and enculturation are necessary conditions for learning (Berkenkotter, 1993). "The problems we [English teachers] pose for our students as an audience are far less complex than the problems they will encounter in writing in nonacademic settings" (Beaufort, 1992, p. 9). Whether in or out of school, "The aim of a genre-based approach to the teaching of language is for the student to start to appreciate how language works to mean" (Stainton, 1992, p. 118). In adding to our traditional notions of schooling, membership in other discourse communities may prove key to the learning of writing.

A discourse community is defined as a social network of participants who share some set of communicative purposes. Swales' (1990, p. 24-27) has established six criteria necessary and sufficient discourse community in that it:

- has a broadly agreed set of common public goals;
- has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members;
- uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback;
- utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims;
- in addition to owning genres, has acquired some specific lexis; and,

- has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discursal expertise.

The World Wide Web in its current state has all of the potential to be the medium of specific discourse communities. Though one may see the World Wide Web as a whole to be its own community, Swales criteria above apply more directly to the smaller and more specific communities that exist within the Internet. While the Internet as a whole may have its own lexis, genres, inter-communication and participatory mechanisms, it is only within smaller virtual communities that the level of members and sense of common purpose create discourse communities of the type literacy educators wish to study. Studies of such virtual communities include those by Hauben (1997) and Rheingold (1993). For example, Howard Rheingold's pioneering study of WELL, the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, was one of the first to document electronic discourse and he coined the term virtual communities to mean, "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (1993, p. 5). This notion of virtual community is the key focus on much that has been written about the social forces of the Internet, and it is within these smaller communities made possible by the World Wide Web that writing and individuals are transformed.

#### *Adolescents' Developmental Needs*

Adolescents are in a perpetual state of transformation themselves, and adolescence, as a distinctive life period, presents unique developmental needs. Among traits distinguishing adolescence are their pursuits of: competence, self-exploration and definition, positive interaction with peers and adults, physical activity, meaningful participation in school and community, structure and clear limits, and diversity (Lipsitz, 1984). Most notably, the quest for identity is often seen as the most important personality achievement of adolescence and pivotal in determining self-esteem

(Erikson, 1950). Taken together, these characteristics highlight the complex social needs of adolescents as they seek to define themselves, academically and otherwise.

Just as policymakers have already determined that technology, and thus the World Wide Web, will be a part of modern education, so, too, have our youth declared the World Wide Web as their stomping ground. Indeed, today's adolescents find themselves in a unique position of often being more learned than many of their elders about software, hardware and certainly the Internet. Again, the question at hand is not whether or not adolescents will use the World Wide Web, but how the Web is changing the literacy demands on these learners, or even how might the Web be advantageous to their learning, particularly their literacy.

In Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation (Tapscott, 1998), the author gives credence to much of the social work that children, and especially teens, do online, almost exclusively through writing. Rather than view youngsters use of technology as passive, this author witnesses the social and interactive nature of the Internet as critically beneficial for adolescents' developing sense of autonomy, self and values. "The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (Turkle, 1995, p.180). Of great interest to the literacy community is the fact that this experimenting is done almost exclusively through writing.

#### *Conclusion*

This study builds on the limitations of current school practices, a view of learning as a centrally social activity within specific discourse communities, and the unique developmental needs of adolescents especially in their question for identity. The technology in question pushes the boundaries of traditional literacy in its electronic forum, as well as the global nature of its accessibility, and the inherently interactive nature and

immediacy of this medium. Not only is the Web an exciting place to publish and be read by an ever-increasing audience, but the World Wide Web as a medium highlights the social context at the forefront of composition considerations. In closely examining adolescents use of this World Wide Web site, this investigation focused not only on how such a forum fills a void for publishing student writing but also how in this particular context participants form their own discourse community and through their participation deepen their understanding of writing as social action.

#### Method

##### *Context of the Study*

TeenLit.com is a World Wide Web site dedicated to publishing adolescent writing and providing a forum for interaction among teen writers. The web site consists of monthly pages of published teen writing, a bulletin board for participants to post, read and respond to messages, as well as other teacher and student resources. The web site's contents, primarily adolescent writing, are available instantly to anyone with Internet access, making this a powerful publication indeed. Although this web site includes a number of other resources and pages, for the purposes of this study the focus will be on the adolescents' published writing and their postings to the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board.

Publishing a piece of writing on TeenLit.com is a formal and adult-regulated process. In order for a piece of writing to be published, the writer must complete a submission form via electronic mail to the editor of TeenLit.com. Using established criteria, the editor makes the decision to accept the piece for publication or reject it for specific reasons. All submissions are responded to by electronic mail either congratulating the writer on having their writing accepted for publication, or rejecting the writing for specific reasons and with encouragement to revise, resubmit, and stay involved. The webmaster then posts accepted pieces of writing on that



months' teen writing page on TeenLit.com including the author's first name, grade level, location and any "About the Author" information included.

The Teen Writers Discussion, an online bulletin board provides a forum for adolescents writers, to post messages, read those of others and respond to each others' writing. A posting consists of a subject, from (first name only), category, and comments. Bulletin board messages may be posted from any computer hooked to the Internet by following simple on-screen directions and such postings are added to the contents of the bulletin board immediately.

#### *Participants*

The participants on TeenLit.com are primarily adolescents from thirteen- to nineteen-years-old. Visitors most often initially find the web site through the use of various search engines or from the recommendations of others and many visitors return regularly. It should be noted then that this population is unique in that it represents teens who have actively and independently sought web sites for or by teen writers. Though teachers constitute a significant portion of the visitors and make up just over 20% of the voluntary electronic mailing list, they rarely post messages to the bulletin board nor do they submit items for publication. Instead, teachers seem to mainly refer their students to the web site.

Because the level of involvement is significant to a person's identity on and participation within this discourse community, four definitions for participation levels have been identified. A "visitor" on this World Wide Web site defines anyone who accesses a web site or page for viewing. A "participant" is defined as anyone who interacts on the web site such as joining the electronic mailing list, submitting a piece of writing for publication, and/or posting to the bulletin board. An "author" on this web site is a person who not only participates but also has a piece of writing accepted by and published on TeenLit.com.

*Role of the Researcher*

Throughout the course of this research, the role of the researcher has remained that of participant observer. Besides being a primary investigator, this researcher is the co-founder, owner and webmaster of the web site under investigation. Another individual serves as the editor who receives all submissions, decides which will be published and which will not, and responds to each submission with one of two email message either accepting or rejecting the piece of writing for publication on the site. The other teacher, and primary researcher, serves as webmaster and is responsible for the publication of all the web site's content including published teen writing. These two adults work together to respond to all email communications and continually update and revise the site to meet visitor needs and improve its usability. Otherwise, both the researcher and editor remain relatively neutral in their roles. That is to say, they do not solicit any particular types of writing for submission or publication, rarely post to the bulletin board and try to let bulletin board discussions continue without interference.

*Data Collection*

In order to fully describe the participation in this case study, a wide net is cast in gathering data from a variety of sources. The timeline of data collection for this study encompasses the first six months of this web site's publication operation, from January to June of 1999. Again, for the purposes of this study, the primary data sources were the students' submitted and published writing and postings to the bulletin board.

Using a case study approach (Merriam, 1988), the site as a whole being the case, both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. All participation on TeenLit.com is documented, date stamped and stored in a database. Regarding audience and purposes within this context, descriptive statistics were utilized. However, in examining the discourse community and

identity issues, a constant comparative method of analysis (e.g. Glaser, 1978; Bogdan, 1998) was used. The qualitative data included:

- all postings on the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board;
- all electronic mail sent to and from TeenLit.com;
- all submission forms, including demographic information as well as the published form of the writing; and,
- all published pieces of adolescent writing, including author's first name, grade, location and "About the Author" and/or Comment text.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

Although this web site is an ongoing phenomenon currently entering its 2<sup>nd</sup> year online, this study concentrates in its first six months of operation. This study, the first in a series based in this context, focused primarily on the feasibility of this web site as an authentic publishing forum, a place where a discourse community of these adolescents would form, and a place to explore adolescents' expression of identity through their writing. Thus the research questions for this study can be summarized as:

1. In what ways does TeenLit.com provide or support an authentic audience and purpose(s) for publishing adolescent writing?
2. How does TeenLit.com function as a discourse community of adolescent writers?
3. How does TeenLit.com function serve to aid adolescents in constructing themselves as writers?

#### Results and Discussion

##### *Authentic audience and purposes for teens' writing on the World Wide Web*

In answering this first research question, particularly regarding audience, quantifiable counts of the following were considered:

- overall visitor traffic (how many visitors accessed the web site per week);

- primary roles (teen teacher, or other) of these participants by the self-reported roles of those voluntarily the electronic mailing list, and,
- demographics, including grade and location, via the information submitted by our published teen authors.

During the initial development phase and first six months of operation, preliminary results reveal much about usage of the web site and its audience. Web traffic, or a count of how many individuals visit the web site, has shown TeenLit.com receiving significant and growing attention with weekly visitors averaging 748 in the first half year of its existence. As a subset of this population, the voluntary electronic mailing list had elicited 201 subscribers, with 72% teens and 21% teachers, which may roughly represent the roles of the visitors to the site. In terms of age and location, published authors are relatively evenly distributed among grades seven through twelve and writing was submitted from students around the United States, Canada, and a few international locations.

In examining the purposes of writing supported within the context of TeenLit.com, categories for participants' writing have been continually refined. Both in submitting writing for publication and in posting comments to the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board, participants are asked to categorize their own writing, which serves to patterns of participation on the web site and the purposes of writing that participants considered their writing to serve.

In terms of published writing, for example, by far the most popular genre of writing submitted and published on the site was poetry, representing 83% of the published writings, whereas short stories and essays, the next most popular types, represented on 11% and 6% respectively. The publishing rate

of submitted work during this period was 44%, and there was no significant difference in the genres of writing accepted or rejected.

Still other authentic purposes for writing were evident on the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board. 30% of the writings posted here were categorized as "Feedback to writing published on TeenLit.com." The next three significant categories of posting included "Draft - want feedback" (9%) and "Random Thoughts" (13%). It is also very telling that a total of 28% of the postings were not categorized or categorized as "Other - Miscellaneous". Lastly, the stances that writers took in their postings, as seen in the next section, shows much about how they are using writing here.

Early data, as indicated by weekly visitor traffic, the voluntary electronic mailing list and published pieces of writing, indicates the site is well-received by teens and teachers alike, that is has a growing audience and supports a variety of writing purposes, and that this trend is likely to continue.

#### *Limitations of an Online Discourse Community*

From its very inception, the primary purpose of TeenLit.com was to support teen writers by both publishing adolescent writing on the web site and providing a forum for adolescent writers to interact online. Although the public Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board did provide a place for Teen Writers to interact online, after seven months online, the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board failed to resemble a virtual community wherein, "enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). As a bulletin board service, the Teen Writers Discussion did live up to its name in allowing messages to be posted and sometimes read by their intended audience. However, a number of significant patterns emerged that may explain why this bulletin board forum for interaction failed to develop a sense of community.

As a feedback forum for writing published on the site, the bulletin board was popular but inefficient. In other words, giving feedback to writers was the most popular use of the bulletin board, accounting for 30% of the total postings, yet most writings published on the web site received no feedback whatsoever in the Teen Writers Discussion board. Of all published writings, less than 10% received any feedback on the bulletin board.

The question of audience, or who would be reading the postings, seemed unclear to participants, or at least unreliable. In fact, of the first 83 postings, 35% received no reply whatsoever. Though all postings are still available for response, patterns of usage indicate that replies are usually given within a week of the original posting. And so, in many of these cases, it appears that the intended audience never read the message. In these cases, a question or praise was posted as feedback to a published work, and the author never responded, whereas typically such postings seemed to elicit at least an acknowledgement or "thank you" from the author when read. This lack of consistency in response further complicates the posting-reply cycle by making it difficult for participants to anticipate audience, and this may ultimately stifle communication.

During this initial phase, the stances (Dyson, 1993) students took in their postings had great effect in setting the tone and purpose of the site overall. These stances also reflect the real world functions of writing utilized in this context. The most positive and popular stances for participants to take in their posting to this bulletin board were Needy (such as asking for help or feedback on a draft), Appreciative (most often praising a published piece of writing on the site, and Presentational (a neutral statement of fact or opinion, "I think), accounting for 53% of the total. Yet, there was another largely significant portion of statements that were negative in nature, made up of stances such as Critical, Oppositional, and Protestant and accounting for 24% of the total; these sorts of postings

seemed to denigrate rather than encourage community building. Unfortunately, the stances that may have had the most potential in creating a sense of community, such as Collaborative (3%), Cooperative (6%), Helpful (2%), Directive (5%), and Inquisitive (7%), were used much less often in this setting.

Because the bulletin board service is broad, public, and anonymous, it was difficult for participants to develop personal relationships. Specifically in Study One, structures to maintain anonymity were carefully maintained. In working with minors online, privacy remains a primary goal in ensuring the safety of participants. While this privacy is important, it constrains participants' abilities to convey their own identity and contexts in which they live, and reduces the opportunities to get to know other participants. Having a known membership, or threshold level of members, does indeed seem necessary for formulating a true discourse community.

On the few occasions when participants were able to make connections with others and get a sense of their identity, there was a refreshing betterment of tone, collegiality, and ultimately the opportunity for relationship and community building. For example, on two separate instances the webmaster contacted participants who had been quite disparaging on the public Teen Writers Discussion board. Both times, the participants responded apologetically and changed their tones dramatically both privately in email response and in all of their public postings thereafter. So, too, did the tone of some threads change when participants were able to connect a posting to a person via their published writing or other postings. For example, there was a clear retreat from criticism when one participant noted, "Thank you for your apology, but I owe you one as well. After responding to your message I went to your website and was completely and utterly amazed by what I saw. The depth and power of your writing took my breath away and woke me up (it was lam). Thank you for sharing your talent, and making us think." At

this point, the ability to identify other participants and make connections across writing seems to have a large impact on both the tone and efficacy of online interactions.

The anonymous nature of posting to the discussion board and resulting lack of identity and personal relationships also paved the way for some inappropriate postings. A number of studies of Computer Mediated Communication (e.g. Howard, 1996; Turkle, 1995) have noted the increase in flaming and other negative interactions when participants remain anonymous. Inappropriate postings fell into three categories: Rude comments (13%), posting personal identifying information (8%), and dangerous or extremely inappropriate (2.5%). Regarding rude comments, on a few occasions discussions rapidly degraded into personal attacks, exchanging insults, or flaming. When these instances first emerged on TeenLit.com, the adult monitors made a decision to not interfere immediately to allow the participants a chance to work out the challenges to the site. In fact, the participants did respond in ways that resolved these conflicts. When personal identifiable information was posted (i.e. the participants last name, email address, or home page address), this information was taken out of the posting as soon as possible by the webmaster simply to protect the privacy of the individuals, most of whom are minors. There were also two dangerous or extremely threads of postings. One involved an instance of exchanging of pornographic statements and the other linked to a web site boasting illicit drugs and instructions for making explosives. Although such dangerously inappropriate problems accounted for less than 3% of the total postings, the seriousness of these made adult regulation and monitoring a crucial aspect of the web site's operation. Thus, one of the researchers' primary daily tasks remains monitoring the Teen Writers Discussion bulletin board to be sure that nothing is posted that is inappropriate, whether in terms of potential danger or loss of privacy. Since this bulletin board is



anonymous and accessible to any visitor on the World Wide Web and inappropriate postings are removed at their earliest discovery.

*Adolescent Writers' Identity on the Internet*

Most obviously, TeenLit.com, allows adolescents to define themselves as writers by publishing writing of their choice and creation on the site. Already we have seen that these teens' predominant genre of choice is poetry, when they aren't writing for school. In describing their reasons for writing, here they write mostly for themselves and to share with intimate others. Eventually they try getting published on TeenLit, though this is not usually their initial reason for writing.

But it is the content of the teen's writing that paints a truly enlightening picture of teen life, as expressed through their writing. By far, the most popular topic of their writing is love, whether it be found, lost, or just confusing. The next wave of popular topics include violence and war, feelings, and "paradox." This last category was meant to capture the bulk of writing that seemed to wade through the gray areas of life with topics as abstract as ethics and reincarnation, but these writings were all characterized by the authors obvious struggle between two possibilities with no clear answers. But TeenLit's adolescent writers can not be pigeon-holed by these categories alone, since many others wrote of death, dreams, spirituality, nature, narrative, friendship, the forming of self, and more. Overall, these adolescents' writing reinforces much of what we know about their lives, such as their new-found love dilemmas and abstract thinking abilities. Yet, the variety, depth, and power of their writings overall must give us pause as to their vast potential.

In an even more purposeful way, adolescent writers were allowed to submit an "About the Author" statement that will be published along with their written piece, if accepted. In examining students self-reported "About the Author" statements, there were some clear patterns yet interesting

derivations in their descriptions. Here, the most popular description mentioned was the writers "Other interests" as if to be sure to convey that they were multi-faceted and not just cloistered writers. They also frequently mentioned their age or grade, and location, though both would be automatically included with their writing, perhaps indicating that this convention was unclear when they submitted their work. And finally, these authors talked a lot about their writing in a number of ways. For example, they would give their writing history (i.e. how long they've been writing, where they've been published), list their favorite topics or genres, or explain the origins of a particular piece. While some authors mentioned their writing aspirations (hoping to be a poet, a playwright, etc.), still others made pre-emptive excuses as to why this was not their best work. While granted, this is a unique population of teens who want to and like to write, their own self-analysis and descriptions again must call into question the sterility of many classrooms that are potentially filled with such insightful, talented, and complex individuals.

#### Implications

This study has only begun to describe the seemingly untapped potential of the World Wide Web as a publishing forum, discourse community, and identity laboratory for adolescent writers. And while it has provided promise, possibility and caution, perhaps more importantly it has opened new paths of questions. For instance, how might a discourse community have formed differently on a limited or more private place on the Internet? And if virtual discourse communities are possible and powerful literacy settings, how do they develop and evolve?

What are the applications that the average classroom teacher might take advantage of in providing such publishing and interactive opportunities? What training and resources would be needed to enable a teacher to do so?

And would the power of this publishing and interaction have similar effects for all writers from a classroom setting?

If we have encouraged 44% of our submitted writers by publishing their work, what effect have we had on the 56% who were rejected? And what can be done about that?

Lastly, as researchers, we are faced with a whole new series of limitations, methodologies, possibilities, and somewhat disturbing questions. For example, how do we avoid posing and flaming and account for lurking while keeping the Internet as free and open as it was originally intended? How do we study identity in a place that thrives on anonymity? How do we encourage interaction yet protect privacy? How do we obtain informed consent from virtual beings? How do we go about studying these and other questions in this vastly new and different place called cyberspace?

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