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# CRIMINAL [DIGITAL] LITERACY

A Response to Jonathan Rosa

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## INTRODUCTION

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In his paper “*That Doesn’t Count as a Book, That’s Real Life*”: *Criminal Literacies, Orthographic Polyphony, and Latin@ Identities in a Chicago High School* Jonathan Rosa suggests that positive literacy-related practices are criminalized on an institutional level in New Northwest High School (NNHS), a Chicagoland school with a predominantly Mexican and Puerto population. While students showcase writing skills in burn books, graffiti and through use of ICT’s much of what they do is discounted, or worse, outright condemned. He suggests that this is a reflection of social norms and institutionalized values; traditional and dominant-class visions of literacy and writing have become integrated into policies like No Child Left Behind and ultimately penalize students and the institutions tasked with educating them, like NNHS. Rosa’s claim is further enhanced by the recent PEW report “Writing, Technology and Teens” (Lenhart et al. 2008), which suggests that neither teens nor adults see informal writing practices, such as those that take place on cell phones or blogs as real writing. The PEW findings tell us something we already know can be readily seen in the NNHS dynamic: teens are more motivated to write about topics relevant to their life (gossip, gangs, etc), if others hold high expectations for them (but they must respect and admire those who hold the expectations), have interested audiences (the teacher is a much less important audience than peers), and creative outlet opportunities (tagging, innovative or deviant use of online communities).

I would like to take Rosa’s position further to suggest that criminalized and discursive literacy practice takes place as much online as it does offline. The two arenas, often mistakenly conceptualized as isolated, actually intersect and inform one another a great deal. In fact, views of literacy as a normative or elitist project notwithstanding, it is helpful to resolve what youth know (or need to know) about the internet in terms of progressive critical literacy (Livingstone 2008). Student behaviors portrayed in Rosa’s talk exemplify an assemblage of literacy practices that are informed not only by their local cultural community context but by broader internet-based cultural rituals. Indeed, the internet may pose new demands or complications with regards to literacy, encapsulated here as *Digital Literacy*.

In essence, these students grow up being taught that what they write informally in school is not acceptable or worthwhile. Likewise a lot of what they do on the internet is seen in the same way, they wrestle with performing and constructing their identities in a complex of colliding spaces, communities and identities. As educators who believe in critical (transformative) pedagogy we need to fully understand and guide the ways youth become literate and make sense of their identities, both on and offline.

This paper explores two literacy-related practices exhibited in New Northwest High School as they relate to their digital counterparts: digressive communication techniques as seen in the orthographic oddity of *leet speak* and counter-hegemonic (deviant) artistic expression evident in graffiti and use of **MySpace**. Both of these topics tie into identity, as they include membership in different communities or lifestyles and reflect struggle with larger social norms and institutional forces. In other words, youth perform and construct their identities by reusing, repurposing and reclaiming systems of communication and to make them their own.

Much of what these youth are doing is representative of skills and competencies that constitute the ability to take part in participatory culture (a signifier of digital literacy) and plant the seeds which can make for positive social change, explained in this paper as *critical access*.

## EXPLAINING !337\$P34|<

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To date there has not been much of any formal research on leet (short for elite) speak, a sort of dialect of English that has emerged on the internet. In general it is manifested as a combination of ASCII characters (letters, numbers, and symbols) that are employed to replace traditional Latin letters (Wikipedia 2009). Sources on the internet do not completely rectify the origins of the 'elite' qualifier, but general consensus seems to be that the term came about as a way to refer to particularly efficacious computer users, often hackers. In all likelihood the technique of 'coding' normal English words into letters and symbols probably started as a way to subvert filters and create unique expressions but as it has evolved over time is more representative of deviant cultural affiliations. Leet cannot be translated in an automated fashion easily, as the main strategy for writing words is to swap out letters for homoglyphs (symbols that resemble them) in a potentially random fashion. However, Leet does include a number of regularized suffixes and vocabulary words that share meaning across instances, such as the ending 'xor' (which used in combination with other modifiers can change a noun to a verb) or the word n00b (newbie, a newcomer or inexperienced person). Grammar in leet is potentially representative of orthographic polyphony; writers will rearrange grammar as they see fit to place emphasis on particular parts of a sentence or word, but in order to do so they must have at least an intuitive (if not formal or overt) understanding of traditional English grammar. Similarly, additional words or punctuation may be inserted to convey emotion or tone.

Leet, like so many aspects of internet culture taken up by youth, is often misunderstood by those who are significantly outside of the practitioner community. The [first item on the search return](#) of a "Leet Speak" query to YouTube reveals a video from 2006 in which Leet Speak is characterized as "part of a complicated, and experts warn, potentially dangerous code, designed to keep parents in the dark," the report goes further to explain how to "crack the code, to protect your children." Though the news media has often sensationalized and fetishized on fear of internet cultural phenomena in the past (Bennett et al. 2008) this report is still pretty representative of leet's reception. Use of leet by students in NNHS is motivated by a number of factors, to criminalize or censure the use of a dialect without understanding the content and meaning of what participants are using it to conveying is to make a grave mistake.

The orthographic polyphony present in leet is comparable to the contextual tone and alternative language constructions seen on the popular social networking website (and representation of participatory culture!) Black Planet, as referenced by Adam Banks (2006) in his chapter *Taking Back Technology Use Seriously: African American Discursive Traditions in the Digital Underground*. Banks suggests (in referencing Smitherman 2000) that while AAVE (African American Vernacular English) is captured by "grammatical, phonological, and semantic features... copula variation, distinctly African American lexical items, existential it, pronunciation variation, invariant be, the absence of third person singular" (79) it is also denoted by *tonal semantics* (emphasis on a particular part of a word, like **POlice**)

and *sermonic tone* (as if given from on-high, plain statements given exceptional gravity). Leet is also a lot like *code-switching*, the exploitation of vocabulary from different languages or dialects as a strategy to convey a richer or more powerful meaning, often best employed in poetry, spoken word or song. Such incarnations are sometimes negative, too, “Spanglish” has been given a connotation of Spanish-English learners who do not possess full command over one or both languages. The youth Rosa references have grown up bilingual and received cultural influences from both of these directions: they have learned to code-switch as well as to embody the values of a strong oral history tradition present in Puerto-Rican culture. This makes the use of leet natural and easy; youth have been employing language to manifest different identities in this way from day one, melding communication with ICT’s to their own uses only makes sense.

A simple example of NNHS student use of Leet Speak can be seen with the word ‘Latin@.’ In Spanish words are written with masculine or feminine endings but generally the masculine is used to refer to a group of people composed of both women and men (regardless of if it contains more women than men). Some feminists have felt this is an institutionalized form of patriarchy (language can certainly factor into oppressive social norms) and have reacted by adding an alternate modifier to the end of terms like Latino (which then creates Latino/a). A creative way to reconcile this conflict is through a leet speak technique: replacing the ‘o’ in Latino with the @ symbol (which appears like an O containing and A) to create a character that simultaneously represents masculine and feminine. It is through methods like this that youth can artfully construct new meanings to orchestrate their identities online—Puerto Rican, age, street, and more.

## REMIXING WITH MYSPEACE

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Barriers to entry to the media production world have transformed dramatically in recent years. Much like the advent of the printing press carried with it the potential for a new era of a democratized and informed public (Finn 1999, 2005), easy access to production technologies, venues for sharing and other related information opportunities have driven a revolution in the worlds of art and design and news media. For years systems had been put in place in part to create standards for effective communication and validation of information but these same systems have also overtly and covertly kept certain people and ways of thinking in a dominant position (Frank 2006, Benkler 2006). The upheaval is a complicated facet of the information revolution and it is not this paper’s purpose to discuss it, but instead call attention to two aspects of importance. First, the shifting barriers to entry have allowed for individuals to begin to broadcast their identities into cyberspace through use of social networking technologies like MySpace. Now virtually everyone can have their own personal web page, connected to hundreds of others—and they have a great deal of control over how it looks and what they present there. Second, as people have begun to experiment with new languages of media authorship they haven’t necessarily followed the rules, systems and standards of presentation and validation of media that have been in place in the past. In a sense this makes them powerful – they can more easily participate in the creation of culture and knowledge (Benkler 2006), but we as educators need to think about how we guide this process.

Rosa references outlawed uses of graffiti inside and outside of the school environment as examples of literacy practice among youth. For instance, one such given example was tagging blasted upon student artwork, a potential defacing or, alternatively viewed, a form of feedback. Others would make markings on postal stickers and attach them to trucks to think about how far they could travel to announce their name across the city. These deeds also extended online where kids would make collaborative use of MySpace pages named after their school to communicate informal knowledge (positive and negative) about events and individuals. Whether they know it or not, these youth are engaging in a revolutionary process. By taking part in mass experimentation and learning they help reshape norms of artistic expression and leverage the internet as an arena of identity development to showcase new ways of being. This is sometimes challenging, as evidenced by the student referenced in Rosa's talk who had someone call him a 'fucking Mexican' over the Xbox Live online gaming system but often identity sharing and development can happen on better terms. The internet is intrinsically oppressive or immediately emancipatory, it's a contested terrain that can be harnessed for activist and progressive means (Warf and Grimes 1997). These youth are already mitigating conflicts of identity expression in the classroom but online they can become critical creators of content (not just recipients) in ways that would not be sanctioned (or even happen at all) in schools, and this is absolutely key to literacy (Livingstone 2008).

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

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At least three additional perspectives add a great deal of value to this analysis.

Literacy can make you dangerous, just gotta motivate it right (Finn). Gotta be able to use digital tools critically and recreate them to be their own (Banks). These kids show evidence of being able to do this – opportunity for critical pedagogy (Jenkins).

Patrick Finn (1997) gives an eloquent illustration of the power and possibilities of literacy throughout history and in the contemporary with in his book *Making Literacy Dangerous Again*. Many of the youth in NNHS are learning fundamental literacy skills in informal ways outside of standard classroom activity. We as educators have to teach them within the fold of critical pedagogy—transformative literacy—not just train them how to be an effective worker-cog in the system (school kid) or a aimless rebel (street kid) but a powerful blend of the two. They are already mitigating these identities, they must be motivated in what Finn terms is a Machiavellian (Freirean) manner (not intrinsic or extrinsic) and focused (that is to say, properly guided by people who understand). Freirean motivation is simple: motivation to help the poor and disenfranchised “better able to exercise their social, civil, and political rights and to organize, demand and negotiate a decent standard of medical care, housing, and education plus better working conditions and a livable minimum wage” (Finn 2005). In a phrase, this is critical pedagogy, it is a classroom agenda that entails relevant real-world issues as motivation, something we as educators should seek to embrace. Our task, as Finn puts it, is to move onwards from domesticative literacy to again making it a dangerous, potent aspect of an activist or progressive education.

Accessing the work by Adam Banks (2006) as well as DiMagio and Hargittai (2001) helps us to think about access to digital media production tools (the workplaces of literacy online) in an insightful manner. Collectively they address many layers of the digital divide: achieving access to technology in

terms of hardware, software and web connection (material access), having a social surrounding where learners can find support and autonomy (experiential access), possessing the training and skills on an essential level (how-to-use digital technologies in a ritualistic manner as well as critical trouble-shooting strategies, known also as functional access), commanding the experience to really engage deeply over time with technology (experiential access), and finally, most importantly, critical access. Students need to interact with digital media production in such a manner that they can “understand the benefits and problems of those technologies well enough to be able to critique them when necessary and use them when necessary. We must know how to be intelligent users, producers and even transformers of technologies if access is to mean anything in our individuals lives, the lives of our students, or those of the communities we live, work, and play in.” (Banks 2006: 138). Creation and recreation is a key component to successfully developing literacy (Livingstone 2008) and if we are to motivate students to make them dangerous and recognizable players we need to be cognizant of the way they should think about and connect with technology. In short, we need to get them to think about the ways they’re using MySpace, or see the relation between their tagging and the collaborative artistic practices rampant on the web. Instead of just unleashing brutal formalized grammar in the classroom we can encourage them to write in a plurality of ways, adjusted by audience more than rules, and with writing constructed in a peer review fashion (Finn 1997).

Finally, there is evidence that the students of NNHS are already taking part in a number of activities related to digital literacy. We can see this and more potential through what Henry Jenkins (2006) dubs as participatory culture. Participatory cultures are hybrid virtual communities marked by low barriers to access, support mechanisms (informal mentorship) centered on the creation and sharing of ideas. They are marked by affiliations (memberships), expressions (creations), collaborative problem-solving (generally purposed in its form) and circulations (shaping flow of media). Members feel their contributions matter and feel connected to one another (that is, they are relevant!). Besides closely matching the PEW findings for relevancy and motivation fragments and effects of participatory culture behaviors are seen amongst NNHS students, such as their participation in gaming communities or denying affiliation with gangs, creative use of MySpace, and synthesis of languages and identity through use of leet. The reality is that these affiliations, expressions, problem-solving, and circulations simply take place in their lives, they manage to happen online as well as off. As Jenkins notes there are challenges in this, such as the aforementioned participation gap (digital divide) as well as issues of transparency (youth don’t understand their power!), and a challenge of ethics (when is graffiti response collaborative production and feedback and when is it desecration). Jenkins also outlines a variety of flexible but tangible set of skills and experiences that factor into digital literacy, which will not be fully explained in this paper. Instead, it can be noted that the youth are showing evidence of them, but need to be guided in their development. They perform various identities in different environments, some simulated. They appropriate art and messages to and from different media, digital and real, work together with one another to create collective pools of knowledge (unfortunately seen in burn books), shift between many modes of expression and communication (code-switching, use of many expression tools and styles), and negotiate their identities and affiliations through the different ways they represent themselves. Jenkins suggests that “participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement” and while this seems to be true in the case of Paseo

Boricua we need to give consideration to which communities the youth are most involved in and why. Guiding their actions online and teaching aspects of digital literacy (some of the items mentioned above, like critical judgment on the internet) explicitly in the classroom should be part of our agenda. We can “build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research skills, technical skills, and critical analysis skills taught in the classroom” (Jenkins 2006) to help ensure youth become analytic conscious users, remixers and creators of technology and follow their Freirean motivations for it to see to it that the process is empowering.

## IN CONCLUSION

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Rosa concludes by stating that the students at NNHS “were faced with the complex task of configuring identities that would allow them to signal multiple, frequently contradictory allegiances simultaneously” (Rosa 2009). In the face of many influences and pressures these youth have learned to cope both online and off, and with use of ICT’s and associated cultures. Critical pedagogy holds promise for recognizing students’ skills and concerns; educators must recognize new and effective ways to engage students on the grounds of shrewd digital literacy by ensuring classroom environments and technology use that feed into core competencies and positive experiences that lead to rigorous critical study and effective, thoughtful creation.

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