

# Digital Literacies in the Lives of Undergraduate Students: Exploring Personal and Curricular Spheres of Practice

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on the initial findings from a project which offers a complementary perspective to much of the research on e-learning and student learning in a digital age. Rather than foregrounding technological applications and their associated affordances, its focus is on texts and practices and textual engagements in digital environments. Drawing on previous research into academic literacies (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Stierer 2000; Lillis, 2001; Thesen & Van Pletzen 2006), it takes a textual lens to the experience of undergraduate students' learning in a digital age. The project contributes to our understanding of a changing environment in exploring the nature of literacies, learning and technologies and how these intersect in students' lives as learners.

The research has been carried out in three very different institutions of higher education in the UK, using qualitative, text-based methods. Forty-five undergraduates participated in the project and were interviewed on three occasions over a six month period. The interviews included discussions around their use of digital texts and technologies in their lives as students. In discussion with the research team, participants in the project accessed websites across a range of personal and curricular spheres, including social networking sites and resources directly or indirectly linked to their studies. They also showed examples of their work for assessment and guidance from tutors. This has provided a rich base from which to examine the nature of digital literacies for today's undergraduates and the implications of engagement in a range of texts and practices around technologies for learning.

**Keywords:** digital literacies; social networking; personal and curricular sphere, texts and technologies; learning

## 1. Introduction

In this article, we report upon some early findings from an Economic and Social Research Council, UK, funded project 'Digital Literacies in Higher Education'. Located at the intersection of literacies and e-learning, the research is an in depth study of students' digital literacy practices. It is examining the nature of literacies for today's undergraduates who, familiar with digital communication and online social networking, are also often engaging in e-learning as an integral part of their studies. Rather than just documenting students' reported uses of various technologies and applications, the research is focused upon the purposes and meanings students ascribe to their practices when generating texts as they go about their studies and communicate for social purposes. How, when and why they generate these texts, how they search, read and write and communicate using digital technology is enabling us to show that engagement with technology is not a neutral, individually motivated action. It is often closely associated with the requirements of the institution in which students study as well as being shaped by the wider social contexts of their lives.

The research has been set against the increasing utilisation of e-learning in higher education in many countries and the rapid growth in the use of digital technologies in communication, in particular, amongst a generation who have grown up with these technologies in their day to day lives. Indeed, today's university students are engaging with digital texts (texting, online chat, web browsing, social networking sites, blogging) in ways that may seem far removed from the more conventional literacy demands of university study. These changes are recognised by initiatives such as the U.K. Higher Education Funding Council for England's 2005 E-learning Strategy which has set out a 10-year strategy to integrate e-learning into higher education with the intention to transform the learning experiences of students. In addition, considerable investment in e-learning is being driven by governmental funding bodies. This project contributes to our understanding of this changing environment in exploring the nature of literacies, learning and technologies and how these intersect in students' lives as learners, across and at the boundaries of the formal HE curriculum.

## 2. Literacies, learning and technologies

The project is building on an established field of enquiry offered by academic literacies research, which has been concerned with literacies and learning in higher and further education (Lea & Street 1998; Lea & Stierer 2000; Ivanič 1998; Lillis 2001; Walton & Archer 2004; Ivanič 2005; Thesen 2006). This has provided evidence for the ways in which literacy practices, reading and writing texts, are contextualized social and cultural practices and central to the process of learning in the academy. This contrasts with a description of literacy as a decontextualised cognitive skill. Although originally concerned with more conventional contexts

of student writing and tutor feedback on assessed work, recently researchers in the field have begun turning their attention to online and e-learning environments. This has resulted in examination of, for example, the relationship between the texts of students' online conference discussion and their written assignments (Lea 2000; 2001; Goodfellow et al 2004), argumentation in online learning (Coffin & Hewings 2005), meaning making through the use of hypertext (Mc Kenna 2006), power, authority and institutional practice in online message postings (Goodfellow 2005; Lea, 2007). These studies provide evidence for the relationship between writing, reading and meaning making in the process of knowledge construction in digitally mediated environments. However, whereas this prior research has focused specifically on digital practices within the university curriculum, the present project is developing these principles further in exploring a range of practices both within and at the boundaries of defined curriculum spaces for learning and assessment.

In focusing on hybridity and fluidity in digital texts, the project is building on a research tradition which foregrounds issues of meaning making in text production, and in particular how meanings are negotiated and contested through engagement with a range of literacy practices. It is exploring the practices of writing and reading and

the production and negotiation of digital texts that are involved in the day to day business of being a student, both in the curricular and personal sphere and, therefore, will add further to developing methodological principles for exploring the relationship between literacies, learning and technologies.

Research on literacies as social practice in higher education takes its theoretical and methodological framing from the New Literacy Studies (Barton 1994; Street 1984). This body of work argues that reading and writing texts is concerned with issues of meaning making in specific social and cultural contexts and that this has particular significance for understanding issues of learning in educational settings. It draws on methodological and theoretical principles, which are informed primarily by applied critical linguistics and social anthropology, in examining the nature of different participants' expectations, interpretations and understanding in any textual encounter. In order to empirically access these, researchers use a mix of research methods, most frequently qualitative, which include interviews with participants about their writing and reading practices in context and textual analysis of the texts being discussed. The use of the term 'literacies' in the plural signals a view of literacy as engagement in a range of different social practices around texts, depending on the specific context, rather than just individual cognitive activity. The literacies of new literacy studies foregrounds the relationship between written texts and learning from the perspectives of the different participants involved, and in so doing pays particular attention to the broader institutional context of text production.

We suggest that this focus on literacies is particularly generative in debates around learning and technologies for the following reasons.

- It offers a robust theoretical and methodological frame which has already made a significant contribution to understanding learning in a range of educational contexts.
- It foregrounds issues of meaning making in textual production in learning environments. This is particularly significant since so much of students' digital engagement involves the reading and writing of texts; both their own and those of others.
- It provides the framing for asking critical questions about learning and technologies both in and outside the formal curriculum, and where these obviously overlap, since its focus is on detailed textual encounters and their particular significance for those involved. This contrasts with approaches which are concerned with students' use of technological applications, with little attention to the texts and practices associated with their use or the contexts in which meanings are made.
- It foregrounds the importance of the institutional context and the part that universities and colleges play in reinforcing historically significant ways of making meaning in a digital age.

The literacies perspective offered in this paper also complements research in the field of e-learning, which generally takes the technologies as its starting point (Conole et al 2006). Although there have been some attempts to take a more theorized approach to research in this field (Conole & Oliver 2007), these pay little attention to textual practices in the construction of knowledge in digital environments. However, Crook (2005) argues that there is a need for more research at the intersection of academic literacies and technologies, in particular with respect to reading texts within the broader contexts of institutional, technical and interpersonal practice. Our research has responded to this call in taking a textual, rather than technological, lens to digital practices and considering how meanings are produced, negotiated and contested. Texts produced in association with digital technologies are hybrid, fluid and multimodal and offer innovative spaces for the integration of a range of texts in different modes. Our research is illuminating students' practices of reading

and writing multiple and hybrid texts across a range of contexts. Axiomatic is a recognition of the central nature of texts, both in the construction of knowledge and the practice of learning, which is largely absent from e-learning research to date. (For fuller discussion see Goodfellow & Lea 2007).

### 3. Research methods

Our research methods have been framed against the background of a lack of fine-grained, ethnographic-style (Green & Bloome 1997) research of literacies, learning and technologies in higher education. In order to address the diverse contexts of higher education, the research was carried out in three very different kinds of institutions offering tertiary level provision in the UK. These were: a post 1992 university (post-1992 universities were formerly polytechnics given university status in 1992); a further education (FE) college, offering foundation degree courses in addition to vocational certificates and diplomas; an established traditional university, offering primarily academic subjects at undergraduate and post-graduate level. By selecting participants from these three contrasting institutions, the study was attempting to go some way towards representing the broad spectrum of students in higher education in our research findings. This meant that our participants had very different experiences of being a student. They were engaged in different kinds of course offerings, from vocational courses with a fairly rigidly prescribed and delivered content, through professionally oriented study, to - at the other extreme - conventional academic disciplines.

Forty-five undergraduates were recruited to the research, studying across a range of subject areas including academic (single subject and interdisciplinary courses), professional and vocational contexts. We interviewed each participant three or four times at their institutions over a six month period. These interviews were normally carried out in small groups of three or four but some students were interviewed individually. In addition to these interviews we carried out a process of 'shadowing' by keeping in close contact via short e mail exchanges, chat and text messages. We also observed students during their interviews using a range of texts and technologies both specifically for their university work and in their lives more broadly. Our intention was to build up a picture of students' literacy practices as they read and write, produced and negotiated digital texts, in different contexts and across modes. In addition, we also collected hard copy and electronic examples of a range of students' texts both within and outside the curriculum. A rich data-base was therefore assembled, consisting of interview transcripts, electronic field notes reflecting on observation of practices, texts from social networking sites, curriculum sources, personal development plans (PDP), evidence of student engagement with a variety of digital texts and practices, written, visual, multi-modal and web-based.

This process has enabled us to gather rich descriptions of the contexts in which text production occurs. Interviewing students repeatedly over a six month period meant that we spent some considerable time in the three institutions with the result that we were able to observe and interact with participants in the contexts in which they spent much of their life as students. We observed them as they interacted with tutors and moved around the building. We also had opportunities to talk to their tutors<sup>1</sup> who discussed with us aspects of their course and teaching approaches and sometimes made available related paper and digital course material. These discussions with tutors informed us of teacher expectations around uses of electronic and other resources and the kinds of texts students were expected to produce. This helped us to understand more about the attitudes and practices that constituted the different cultures of the institutions, enabling us to make some comparisons between the different contexts. In our ongoing contact with the students we were able to uncover descriptions of the personal not just the institutional contexts of their textual engagement. Our data is not just concerned with students' use of a particular form of digital communication or resource but how and why and for what purposes they were communicating in any particular context. We have also been able to observe the kinds of texts that students compose in contrasting contexts- in the curricular and personal spheres, both where these blur and overlap and where they remain discrete. This has enabled us to uncover instances where the personal practices of the participants do not always align comfortably with institutionally mandated practices. Our position as researchers, 'outsiders' in the institution, rather than being members of staff, has enabled these contrasts to emerge during discussions with our participants

Whilst being an 'outsider' may have resulted in important issues being made visible that may not have done so if we were members of the teaching staff, being an outside researcher has also resulted in limitations in our data collection. Paramount amongst these has been our access to students. Without an obvious institutional base, maintaining contact with students was sometimes difficult, despite all the different forms of communication available, and finding suitable venues for interviews depended on the good will of individual

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the word 'tutor' in its UK sense to refer to any academic member of staff taking a teaching role.

members of staff in the institutions concerned. In addition many students worked part-time and did not spend much time over and above the formal teaching time at the institution.

#### **4. Some initial findings**

In this section of the paper, we introduce some of our initial findings about digital literacies. We describe the participants' engagement with digital texts and discuss how these may provide insight into the factors that shape literacy practices. Participants in the study were found to interact with multiple and hybrid digital texts within and across both curricular and personal spheres. The digital environment in which the participants lived and studied included many forms of textual interaction, including texting, phoning, social networking, instant messaging and emailing, but not all participants took part in all of these. Evidence in the interviews reveals some of the contextual and cultural contexts that shape these textual choices and suggests that technology is only one of the factors implicated in the way our participants engaged in communicative practices.

In the interviews, when participants spoke about social networking and instant messaging it was often in the context of interacting with friends and family, in their personal sphere. Social networking 'is to see what people are up to and how they have been doing' (Anita); it is 'not really for work' (Douglas). Often participants mentioned engaging in these kinds of interactions at home 'At home, I log on and chat to a friend on MSN, then go to Facebook and look at silly photos' (Shaun). Some participants were convinced that everyone engaged in social networking or interacted constantly with Instant Messenger, 'Everyone in class is on Facebook', while other participants showed a reluctance to engage with these highly social forms of interactivity.

*Interviewer What about John, do you use it?*

*John I have got a Bebo one, my friends all use it but I just, I can't be bothered to just sit there and type to every friend saying hello and then a week later get a reply saying oh yeah how are you doing and then*

*Interviewer Is that because some of your friends are sort of mostly in [name of a town] or locally*

*John I think it is the other way round because my friends have all sort of split up now and people have gone everywhere if I start a conversation with one person it will just go on and on and on and I will learn about everything they have been doing and then I will talk to another one and I will be online for about 2 days*

Among those participants who embraced social networking, it became clear that they were engaged in multifaceted kinds of interactivity in which they took on different roles and constructed identities within the textual space of the interaction. The positioning that took place in the interactions enabled them to cultivate friendship and camaraderie whilst also doing work for university assignments. The extract below is an instance of this and shows intertwined identities at play. It is part of a longer interaction from a participant, Lisa's, Facebook page and the fragment reproduced below lasted from 5.27pm to 5.36pm. For the purposes of maintaining anonymity, we have summarised some of the contributions. It begins with a friend sending a message saying that she is about to start work on a new assignment. Lisa's response to her friend begins with the well known text messaging acronym *lol* (laugh out loud) transformed into capitals with the extra letter *LOOL* to signify her own strong feelings about doing the assignment.

*LOOL oh, you'll regret starting it, trust me I do...looooool.*

*I have to go and see Peter on Wednesday about this s..t Assignment....I really need help....arghhhh*

*How come you've left it till now? (Lisa)*

Lisa's friend responds by writing that she has procrastinated after finishing a previous essay and has been preoccupied with other things. Using very colloquial language, she expresses concern about the amount of work she has yet to do, then says she has to see the same tutor, Peter, on the same day of the week as Lisa. Lisa replies

*LOOL ... well done on finishing the MFP essay... I need to do some amendments to cut it down on word....I need to do some amendments to cut it down...proof read lol...revision piz dnt even mention that word Marketing...Hate that subject with so much passion...I don't get it...I'm going to fail this exam...I swear on Monday, after the exam, I'm going straight to Adam's room and I'm not moving till I get every single little thing about this assignment...he might as well do it for me....looooo*

*Good luck with everything*

Another friend, who has been following this conversation, sends a message

*Girls: if you read the module outline it's fairly simple...*

She then continues by explaining how to go about doing the assignment.

We suggest that the participants position themselves in this interaction in several ways: as a supportive fellow student; as a student in need of help; as a friend; as a voice momentarily taking on the role of teacher or older, wiser friend. The use of colloquial language, plus acronyms from texting language, constructs a camaraderie and openness between the interactants. This is further consolidated by being disrespectful about the course and tutors. Lisa positions herself as a worried and somewhat hopeless student, and this seems to engender help from another student. In this final contribution, the new contributor positions herself as confident bearer of knowledge. However, the humour is obvious when this contributor takes up a role as 'teacher' and positions the other participants as 'pupils' in the exchange by the use of the word 'Girls'. This seems to be a ploy that prevents the final contributor in the extract from being regarded as a 'know all' and hence she can be part of the friendship group and still pass on useful information. The positioning therefore constructs supportive friendship for the participants around the shared experience of studying the same course. The engagement is hence very much in the personal sphere, though their shared bond is the university course, the curricular sphere. There may be some evidence here of an intertwining of curricular and personal spheres, which we discuss in more detail below.

More evidence of the kinds of contextual and cultural factors that may shape textual interactions in the digital environment is supplied by the practices of participants contacting family and friends at home. Issues of identity and affiliation may also be at play in shaping the practices of these participants in this highly personal sphere. The extracts are from an interview with participants who all have family in Europe. Each of these students uses different applications to contact her family. One participant finds it easier to interact with her family by using an application that does not rely on written text but enables her to see and hear her family in highly interactive oral and visual modes.

*In this country sometimes but more is back home, I come from [name of country], I do use video all the time. I don't like reading, writing, I prefer talking and seeing. (Gillian)*

Another participant, Margaret, told us that her family circumstance is such that if she is unable to telephone her mother, her mother uses her brother's Instant Messenger. Margaret explained how she prefers to do college work, in the curricular sphere, with her Instant Messenger turned on all the time so she and her mother spend a lot of time sending short messages to each other, in the personal sphere. When in contact with her mother and brother, she engages in sessions of intermittent contact that result in interactive texts that have a lot of immediacy.

*Even if I'm writing an essay I always have it [Instant Messenger] on, because if I don't talk [by phone] to my mother, and my mother uses my brother's MSN so that's the way because we talk to each other daily, me and my mother, so either we have MSN or by phone. [Margaret]*

In the same conversation, Alice describes her way of communicating with her family. She engages in an entirely different textual practice, shaped partly by her own preference and also by the fact that 'usually people are busy, they are doing something else'. She contacts them only once a week and writes long email texts rather than short highly interactive ones.

*I don't use MSN... I prefer writing e-mails, cos using this MSN because usually people are busy, they are doing something else, so it's not like having a proper conversation, ...I prefer spending ½ an hour and writing a really long e-mail, saying everything what happened in the past week or so, rather than spending 3 hours just gossiping and chatting. (Alice)*

Unlike Margaret, in this instance Alice seems to be keeping the personal and curricular spheres of practice separate from one another. In addition, there are indications that these three participants are positioning themselves in relation to particular textual practices.

Issues of identity and affiliation also seem to influence the engagement and shape the practices of a first year student in her use of email. Like almost all of our participants, this student had her own personal email provider as well as access to a university email account. She spoke enthusiastically about this provider, which is a non-commercial company based in her home town.

*Well I've got that one because it's my personal email account and that is really really good, actually I'll sign into it and show you. So I've got that from my personal stuff and it's my favourite email account because it's got lots of features that I'm very fond of and it's where I get all my friends email me there and my family and me and my granddad have got quite a good email contact going on and things like that and then I've got my university account and that's completely separate. That's just university things (Carol)*

It emerged from the interview that 'all my friends' were in fact largely her friends from her home town. By using this personal email provider, she seems to be maintaining an allegiance to that group and makes a big distinction between her own provider and the university email system when she says of her university account 'That's just for university thing'. This student seems to be shaping her practices around affiliation to email providers in either the personal sphere (her home) or the curricular sphere (the university).

Other participants also appear to make discriminations based on similar notions of affiliation. These participants seem to prefer to use social networking and instant messaging for textual encounters with peers and email as different.

*if it is a person I know well you don't need to be formal you just type it, if you see the person is online and available you just type the message there ..... I use email actually for most of the official communication I would think or for something I want to last. (Olive)*

The highly interactive and ephemeral nature of Instant Messenger text is the way Olive chooses to engage with friends, but regards email text as more durable and more appropriate for other respondents. Other participants make a similar distinction. Lisa speaks of email as a more formal medium and specified her audience for this formal text as university tutors.

*Formal would be something like contacting an organisation, e-mails to lecturers for example (Lisa)*

Lesley uses email for university administrative affairs only.

*we've got university web mail and that's my only email account, I don't have one of my own...I don't really need one 'cos I don't send emails as such for personal use generally, most of my emails are to with erm, placement related things, (Lesley)*

So far, we have explored engagement with digital texts in the personal sphere and in contexts where students discriminate between personal and university contexts, between curricular and personal spheres. We suggest that many contextual issues pertaining to the participants' sense of identity and feelings of affiliation may shape their digital texts, for example, a tendency to separate personal textual interactions from those within the curricular sphere.

Within the curricular sphere, participants produced a range of texts using different applications to get the job of studying done. Barbara sends PDF files to her husband for them to be printed at his office; Margaret uses her email to store all her assignments and to transport her assignments from university to home. Some participants are required to use email to submit their essays for assessment. Perhaps a more significant digital interaction within the curricular sphere is that carried out using email between tutor and students. There are accounts by participants of interactions between tutors and students outside of face to face lectures that are constructed by email text. These are sometimes prompted by the tutor, as in the extract below, where students attending a lecture are invited by the tutor to email him and to ask questions about specific slides in his power point lecture.

*So he's got some sort of reference if you email him and say on slide 44 what did you mean by that. So it's more for asking questions and getting more out of it really (Carol)*

Email text is sometimes part of a lengthier interaction

*We have assignment questions then you can ask him through email or after the lecture and then sometimes he pose some questions and answers that people usually get asked on the web and we just go in and have a look (Yvonne)*

In this case, the email interaction is an element in a series of textual interactions which include the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). The frequency that participants mentioned emailing tutors in the interviews suggests that this is becoming an established institutional practice in which the curricular sphere is extended digitally beyond the lecture space.

In these instances of emailing tutors described so far, the impetus to use email within the curricular sphere seems to come from the students themselves. In other interviews, the impetus, or even mandate to write email texts seems to come from the institution. One example of this is when the email text becomes part of the institutional assessment system. Students out on placement are required to develop plans for managing clients and then they are required to email the plan to their tutor, using the email at the Centre where they are working. The management plan is used for assessment, though the actual supervision is carried out by a clinical supervisor based at the Centre.

*basically what would happen is we'd have a session that we'd have planned, the management for that client, which we email to the UCL tutor. But our clinical supervisor then does the session, talks about the session afterwards and then talks about just the general progress on the placement (Barbara)*

Whether this form of textual interaction is initiated by the student or by the institution, there seemed to be a preference among some participants to carry out this communication using their personal email provider and not to use the university system. The extract below recounts an episode when students' reluctance to access the university email system led to the institution directing messages to students' personal emails.

*They do forward it to e-mail [personal email] as well most of the time, because we had, I think in our first year, we had . . . or maybe within my foundation we had a problem that some people don't check Blackboard so then they decided to put it on Blackboard and also send it to our own emails. (Rosemary)*

The preference for personal email is also apparent in the following extract, in which the participant expresses frustration at not receiving a personal email about some room changes

*We are not checking Blackboard [the institutional Virtual Learning Environment] on a daily basis but we are probably checking email [personal] on a daily basis. (Catherine)*

Participants from another of the universities in the study are not offered a choice

*apparently the staff here are told they're not allowed to email people's private email, like a Hotmail account, it has to be the [institutional] one (Barbara)*

In this case, therefore, the institution has imposed a clear demarcation between institutional (curricular) and personal spheres. However, in the two other universities in the study, our participants, and by implication, other students, habitually used their own accounts. One third year participant we interviewed was unsure whether she had a university account, even though she frequently emailed the university. The preference shown by many of our participants to use their own email accounts may indicate that issues of identity and affiliation are operating in these choices, with participants showing some reluctance to change their practices around emailing and engage fully in the curricular sphere.

A further example of these different spheres of activity and textual practice is evident in some participants' discussions around group work. We found that collaboration, in which students are required to work together to produce an assessed piece of work, for example, a report or power-point presentation, was a frequent activity amongst the participants in our research. Taking part in group work requires students to use digital texts for the purposes of collaboration and to produce written products for assessment that meet institutionally stipulated criteria.

In most of the interviews in which participants talk about group work, the choice of technology to contact other students seems to be left to the participants. Some said they used 'whatever worked' including text messages and telephone calls. In one example, two participants collaborated using Instant Messenger because this was their usual way of interacting digitally. Below is an extract from their negotiation in Instant Messenger about a group project on leisure activities

*I can't think of anything interesting in these two sectors...maybe some park...?  
park??...erm i was thinking something like I dunno a library or a museum I dunno...that' all I can think of to be honest...but the truth is we need to figure something out (Rosemary)*

The colloquial nature of this exchange is very noticeable and exhibits similar features to the Facebook text discussed earlier. In another example, the choice is to use email because it is easier to use attachments

*Or you're more likely to use an attachment to do that  
Cos it's difficult to do that in Facebook. (Kathleen)*

When completing group work, participants have to engage with a range of literacy practices. Their communication can be as informal as the Instant Messenger communication suggests, but the group reports they produce have to comply with institutional and disciplinary conventions, engaging in a range of practices common to the production of academic texts. Participants described their textual activities as drafting, critiquing, developing further text, inserting diagrams and doing research.

*we just kept passing documents backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards...Different people were responsible for different parts so they were kind of cutting and pasting their bits into it, and then it was coming back to me and I was kind of tailoring it down then it was going back again. (Catherine)*

*my friends wrote some pieces of information printed out from the internet with some graphs and tables...while writing a group report we referenced it, so there is like the whole piece of the report referenced, so there are links to websites (Rosemary)*

*Yes, Josie was drawing these [diagrams] by 'hand' [into Word], I couldn't do them, and she was cutting and pasting. (Catherine)*



*I found this one, [on a BBC web site] the other two pie-charts, or tables are found by the other members of the group. (Alice)*

Two groups of participants expressed a strong preference for using their personal email accounts in their textual interactions while doing group work. This was despite the fact that these groups had been instructed to conduct their collaboration using the module VLE discussion forum. In the interviews, the participants told us that they developed practices that undermined this request, as they much preferred to interact via their personal emails.

*we were just putting notes there [on the VLE discussion board] just to show that we are doing something as a group, but actually we didn't place any discussions there. (Alice)*

*we were doing more by e-mail because we didn't actually want the tutors to see what we were talking about, and in a way we were protecting one another as well, we didn't want the group to be exposed. (Catherine)*

As in the examples of practices around e mail and the use of social networking sites, explored above, we suggest that issues of student identity and affiliation are implicated, in this instance in students' reluctance to use the institutionally sanctioned discussion boards within the university's VLE.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper provides some initial explorations into understanding students' digital literacy practices, offering a complementary perspective to the technological focus which has tended to dominate e-learning research to date. We are attempting to unpack what kinds of things students do with texts and technologies, both in and outside the curriculum and in those spheres where the personal and the curricula overlap. Early findings are suggesting that the intermingling of institutional and academic textual requirements and issues of student identity and personal affiliation come together to shape the textual interactions of students and their engagement in digital literacies. Evidence suggests that students actively discriminate between different contexts for writing and create conscious demarcations between personal and curricular spheres of activity and practice.

At present, universities worldwide are investing heavily in a new generation of technologies, social networking tools and the affordances offered by Web 2.0 technologies, aiming to mimic those used in students' wider worlds and bring these more centrally into institutional approaches to supporting teaching and learning. This appears to be based on an assumption that, because students are already operating successfully across digital contexts outside the curriculum - a perspective which the data from our project supports - universities will benefit from harnessing this expertise and aligning it more closely with the formal context of university learning. The findings emerging from our research, such as those discussed above, would suggest that students may be somewhat resistant to such moves, often making their own decisions about the texts they produce, where and how, and showing a lack of willingness to blur the boundaries between the personal and curricular spheres in any meaningful way in their learning.

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