Theorizing Subjectivity, Agency and Learning for Women in New Digital Spaces

Dissertation

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By
Lauren A. Angelone, M.S.E.
Graduate Program in Education

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Patti Lather, Advisor
Dr. Jan Nespor
Dr. Rick Voithofer
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Abstract

This dissertation is the result of a small ethnographic study of the blogs of women in graduate school. As a virtual ethnography, this study brought together current blog posts, archival data, email interviews, email conversations, comments of third parties, online field notes and a plethora of missing data. Using a poststructural framework, it examines the ways in which learning, subjectivity and agency are both constructed for and produced by the participants in the space of the blog. At the same time, it explores the genre of virtual ethnography as a method well suited to poststructural epistemology, incorporating difficult data, missing data and data-analysis, such as art, nonfiction and fiction writing. This project presents conceptualizations of learning, subjectivity and agency in the virtual space for women as a reworking of discourses with possibilities for a different kind of being. Cyborg learning and the metaphor of the blog as clone are two of the possibilities explored in this dissertation.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Wayne R. Richards, my dad and my intellectual mentor, who dreamed for me much bigger than I could have dreamed for myself, who loved me unconditionally, who believed in me always, and who would have given anything to see a tam on my head. He wasn’t perfect, but his support from above has seen me through difficult days.

To my dear advisor, Patti Lather, who made me believe that I could be an academic.

And to my family and friends, who supported me from near and far.

To my mom and my siblings: We have weathered many a storm together and your pride in me means more than any degree. Dad would be proud of all of you and the lives that you live with integrity, honesty and love.

To my in-laws: Thank you for supporting me and Dan in our move and for raising a nice boy that takes care of me.

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I was on the right track. And, of course, to my family and friends, who cheered me on and to whom I dedicate this dissertation.
Vita

2003…………………………………….. B.S. Middle Childhood Education, Miami
University

2005…………………………………….. M.S.E. Technology-Enhanced Education,
University of Dayton

2003-2008………………………………. Middle School Science Teacher

2008-2011……………………………… Graduate Teaching Assistant, The Ohio State
University

Publications


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Fields of Study

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Chapter 1

Metablogging: A virtual ethnography

Introduction: About my Blog

I first want to introduce my blog. I, being a new doctoral student in 2008, began a blog to chronicle my experience for friends and family, mostly since I had moved away and was doing something that I considered exciting and worth documenting. But, this blog transformed in the three years since then. I have used it not only to write my story, but to write myself in different ways, to dialogue with others, to learn, to unlearn, to change, to resist change. Like Foucault (1991), I have come to believe that, “[w]hen I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (p. 27).

I study educational technology. Blogs, a type of web 2.0 technology, are sort of "hot" in educational technology and politics. Blogs are also becoming a source of ridicule. "Mommy blogs" are cropping up; talking heads are being replaced by a never-ending stream of thoughts and links, unconstrained (in some sense) by a popular news source; everyone and especially their mother, has a blog. One only needs to mention blogs in an academic setting (I know this first hand) in order to invoke an awkward silence. Web 2.0 is a bit more of an acceptable term that is being considered in educational technology; web 2.0, meaning the second, interactive, community-oriented, user-generated version of the web, as opposed to the text-based, unidirectional web 1.0.
Web 2.0 has potential. In some ways, it changes the way we function, communicate, represent ourselves, live, learn, etc. Of course, it also functions to normalize discourses (Foucault, 1980), but it has potential.

As these three years have progressed, I switched from my initial focus on video games and learning to studying the phenomenon of the blog. Not feeling capable or able to study the broad phenomenon of the blog, I chose to look at a very specific group of people using blogs in a specific way, women in graduate school (like Foucault, this interest is the result of personal experience). What I have learned thus far in a pilot study, could not, of course, be used in general ways, but could and will be used in ways that I perhaps cannot predict. However, I feel an affinity to a focused, localized look as I am not trying to find a law common to bloggers or a universal way to bring blogs to the classroom, rather I am interested in the blogs of these women as an object of study. How do these women use blogs? How are the women shaped by the blogs and discourses of the day? What sorts of work can blogs do? I am also not expecting to conduct a genealogical (Foucault, 1971) study of what sorts of knowledge made it possible for women to have blogs, or for this phenomenon to exist, though I do recognize and will explore the fact that conceptions of the feminine, technology, subjectivity, agency and other discourses have shaped the present day use and will impact my analysis. Blogs of women in graduate school are my object. What can I learn by looking closely?

The reason for this close look is important as the use of these new media become more and more pervasive and normalized. People have used these new media to represent themselves in certain ways. These representations are shaped by discourses, but they are also qualitatively and materially different representations than those that are
possible in “real life,” representations with possibilities for doing subjectivity and agency
differently. As such, I see a need to look closely with Foucault’s help, to pay attention,
remain aware and resist a normalized use of the medium for learning and producing
subjectivity. And further, I want to study and understand new networks of
power/knowledge that may be occurring and have the space to do work that perhaps does

Figure 1: Screenshot of Blog Post June 29, 2010
“less harm” to women, students, education and to work at the edges of our ideas of subjectivity, agency, learning and reality.

In the beginning of my coursework, and in the beginning of my initial study of blogs, I hoped for blogs to be emancipatory. I held close the idea of women having more of a voice in this new space on the internet. I was still sorting through and understanding (still am, as a matter of fact) structuralist notions of a more just, free and equal society and was enamored with thinkers like Michael Apple, Pierre Bordieu and Basil Bernstein. Bateson’s (1989) anthropological study of women in academia “improvising” and shaping their own lives out of the pieces and parts that fell in front of them made sense to me. But, as I learned of Foucault’s ideas about discourse and power, I became more skeptical that this improvisation was necessarily of a woman’s own accord. Are women with blogs able to “compose their lives” as Bateson suggested, or are the discourses in which they find themselves structuring those compositions more than they realize?

As I write my blog, read other blogs, study blogs, think and blog about blogging (metablogging), and as a result of my coursework, I think about discourses. Each blogger is situated in, created by and creating discourses in fits and starts, over and over, somewhat cyclical or palimpsestual with other agents and materialities. Even in the short blog post above, prompted by a brainstorming session just as I was beginning my first exam paper during my candidacy exam process, normative, resistant and transgressive discourses are present, but constantly shifting and changing by my day to day material and discursive reality and the constantly changing nature of the technology itself (post after post arises and ten days later disappears from the homepage, relegated to the archives, though not gone entirely). Would these discourses have appeared at all if I
didn’t have a blog? Would they appear in my speech, my actions? Would the words I use to write the discourses be the same if I were writing with a pencil in a private journal, rather than typing and publishing in an interactive space? Is the medium the message (McLuhan, 1962) or is that too technologically determinist?

These discourses appear here for a variety of reasons, they have shaped me; I shape them; I have learned to think against them while at the same time I cannot think without them (Butler, 1990). The normative discourses: I hug my husband, I wear my diamonds, have a camera, a laptop, a choice to be vegan. These shape “my” world and frame me. I notice them, I think about resisting, sometimes I try, sometimes I even try to be transgressive, but that’s where the normative becomes more powerful. It is more comfortable; it is agreeable; I get smiles and nods; it is not work. I resist and transgress in small ways. I tell my audience that I meditate, knowing that most of my audience is Christian, some, fundamentalists. They will hate the idea of meditation. I choose to include it because I want them to hate it and I want others to see that I resist praying.

Although, at the same time, I probably got the idea to meditate from Oprah and from popular books I have read. To a few, it is transgressive, but to many others, it is quite normative. In this particular post, I also resist normative grammar by writing in a stream-of-conscious format. It feels like poetry in a sense, but this is not the normative blog post. It’s not transgressive to the extreme, but it is breaking a rule. Although, even as I write about my transgressions in the blog space, I wonder, is this what I am looking for? Must a blog be transgressive by my definition in order to do work? What of the casual blogger, writing about daily life? Does she not count?
In this same post, there are also a few things that I wrote and deleted, decided against, that were probably more transgressive, that which I thought, but did not share. This is what makes studying a blog so curious, bloggers write, they don’t write and they delete. They provide data that I can collect and a host of missing data. They write for an audience that is both real and in their mind, both part of them and separate. The blogger doesn’t blog, she’s a line in a rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), always becoming part of the story, rather than writing her own.

I also think about subjectivity and agency, as I am immersed in the practices of blogging. Since poststructuralism has ripped me from my yearning for a singular subject capable of wielding agency and changing her world, I am left nostalgic for my lost agency and fascinated by the possibilities for miraculation (Massumi, 2002) in this no-space when I realize that my lost agency is less a loss than a non-naïve, thoughtful, multiplication of that agency. In my own blog, the “I” is still present for the most part (though literally absent from the post above), but the I is weaker, it is merely a signpost pointing to the one without another name, a sort of messy, webby, networked, I. But the collapse of the singular subject is not complete, it still holds in my writing, even as I realize that it doesn’t. It is repeated. It is a dominating structure that is often as forgotten and assumed as one’s agency. Studying a blog rather than a human body is an opportunity to observe subjectivity and agency showing themselves in familiar ways, but also in ways that allow for a different sort of embodiment, one that forces a more rhizomatic (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) understanding of the concepts. For example, blogs distort being and time in ways the human body cannot, they exist for moments in multiple places, just as the exist in perpetuity in one place.
Blogs are a new media with new possibilities for subjectivity and agency, especially for socially and historically marginalized groups such as women, particularly as women are also marginalized in the arena of technology (Halverson, 2009; Kafai, 2008; Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Spender, 1995; Wajcman, 1991). It is important, then, to take a look at the ways in which women are utilizing blogs in order to understand how this new media’s possibilities are coming to fruition and/or how these new media may be reinscribing the same sorts of inequalities that exist in other spaces.

Studies of blogs in a formal classroom environment typically focus on how students blog as a part of a course, where blogs are newly introduced and used solely for the course and the ways in which those blogs augment content or skill learning. Studies of blogs and their informal uses by women seem to focus on understanding the use of the medium culturally rather than the learning that is taking place by women within this new space. This is where my study can bridge a gap in the research literature. I would like to focus on women and the learning that takes place in the informal process of blogging. Most studies focus on two other areas: 1) blogs as a tool for formal or classroom learning and 2) women/girls blogging as a phenomenon to be explored. The former are mostly found in educational technology journals and the latter are mostly found in journals focused on the social studies of computing or politics and gender. My research bridges these two fields together as I study women learning while (or as) blogging within an informal context. This addresses what Clark et al. (2009) refer to as “digital dissonance” (p. 57) or the disconnect between formal and informal uses of web 2.0 technologies in the lived reality of learners and engages the “third space” theorized by Skerrett (2010) and others.
This study follows and was informed by a pilot study that was conducted in the summer of 2009 with IRB approval. I then analyzed the data during the fall/winter of 2009. That study posed the question, “How do female identified doctoral students compose their lives with blogs?” It used a virtual ethnographic approach to understand the ways in which a small group of women in graduate school used blogs in their daily lives: what they blogged about, who they blogged for, what they learned from blogging and other issues that might surround the practice of blogging. What I learned from this study was that this group of women blogged for connection and community, to think and try out ideas, and as a means of documentation. I also learned that they wrote about their academic and personal lives, stress, and less often, social issues. They also perceive drawbacks to blogging (though they continue to blog), such as the intersection of the “real world” with the “virtual world,” which creates a need to be guarded. They also learn about themselves as they blog, as well as various technology skills.

This pilot helped me to focus the current study as I am now interested in studying the blogs and bloggers with more of a focus on the possibilities and limits of the blog. For this study, I take “possibilities” and “limits” to mean specific instances of subject formation and agency made available by the blog format as it appears on the blog in daily posts and in the words of the women as I interview them. Further, I am also interested in exploring the potential of the blog with the women by experimenting with the medium of the blog, the standard practices of the blog, and then dialoguing about our experiences with that engagement.

Since conducting the pilot, I have analyzed the data further, revisited the literature and worked on publications. I have also continued to read the women’s blogs, engage
with them on the blogs and blog about my experiences. This fall (of 2010), I presented
my findings at a conference and made a few new contacts with women who blog or are
interested in blogging.

In this study, I use a virtual ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000) to explore a
small sample of the blogs of one subsection of women, one of which I am a part and with
whom I have experience, graduate students. This method was carefully selected to
explore subjectivity, agency and learning of women, as well as the implications for
qualitative research in a virtual environment following Hine’s principals, which include
investigating the remaking of space, exploring boundaries, strategic relevance over
faithful representation, among others. I interview these women via email, I observe their
virtual spaces, I invite and incite them to experiment with those spaces and dialogue
about these experiences. I sought to look carefully at a few of these types of blogs to
investigate how women work with/in this new media to experience the world and their
place in it. And so, my main research questions are:

• What subject positions are made available to and/or (co)constructed by these
women in graduate school through blogging? How do these subject positions
imagine different livable spaces of the feminine through the use of technology?
• What do these women learn (skills, content, subject positions, agency, etc.) as
they blog?

*Socio-Cultural Learning and the Possibilities for Critical Media Literacy*

Blogs are spaces for learning. I use Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of
legitimate peripheral participation to understand learning as situated in these new spaces.
In situated learning, "newcomers" move closer to legitimate peripheral participation with the help of the "old-timers." This involves the practice and use of tools by the newcomers. Community, however real or imagined, near or distant, is a major component of blogging. Bloggers read one another's blogs, leave comments and model for one another what is appropriate in the way of writing, being a woman, being a student, etc. New bloggers in the practice of creating and writing a blog, move toward legitimate peripheral participation in the practice of blogging. Sturken and Cartwright (2001) regard a representation as the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us (p. 10). This visual representation (the blog) is, in this case, part of the process and practice of learning how to create meaning, which is invariably social and cultural.

Blogs are an emerging technology. The spread of the internet and these emerging technologies, alongside of a changing political and economic climate, "alter conceptions of reading and writing" (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 1), which plays a role in changing notions of literacy. Critical media literacy, one in which users develop a "critical understanding of how all texts position them as readers and viewers within different social, cultural and historical contexts" (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000, p. 1), is one way to think a literacy that incorporates new types of literacies while remaining aware of the density of these discourses and new materialities. Rose (2007) calling for a critical visual methodology, describes this type of reading as having three attributes: 1) taking images seriously, 2) thinking about social conditions and effects of visual objects, and 3) considering one's own way of looking at images (p. 12). This type of critical look at media is consistent with a poststructural stance, looking at the ways in which power
flows through a society in multiple and diffuse ways, ways that both create subjectivities and are subverted by subjectivities.

The creation of media is an essential component to critical media literacy. In Van Heertum and Share's (2006) discussion of a new direction for multiple literacies, they discuss both teaching about and teaching through media (p. 256). By teaching "through" media, according to these authors, students (and people) can attain the skills not only of reading and interpreting, but of using the tools to deconstruct hegemonic texts as well as the potential for understanding the gaps that exist in that hegemony (p. 257). Spalter and van Dam (2008) discuss what they call digital visual literacy and they advocate for the creation of digital images as a part of this literacy, in order to make decisions on representations of data and ideas and to use computers to create effective visual communication (p. 94).

The importance of critical media literacy, particularly taking into consideration the creation of media, is highly relevant in looking at blogs. The blogs in this study are constructions of visuals created by these women. This visual should be looked at carefully in an effort to understand the ways in which it is constructed by an individual situated in certain discourses. I would like to consider the types of learning that are taking place in the space of the blog, particularly learning that is aligned with the goals of a critical media literacy. In what ways are women learning, critically and otherwise, with their blogs?

_Situating the Field_
The field of technology in education has largely taken a pedagogical/instructional
design approach rather than a cultural foundational approach. This approach has as its
goal the design of educational environments *with* technology in an effort to build content
skills and knowledge, rather than investigating the cultural issues wrapped up in the uses
of technology in education. This is evidenced by researchers such as Squire, Squire and
Jan, and Squire, DeVante, and Durga (Squire, 2006, 2008; Squire & Jan, 2007; Squire,
2008; Squire, DeVane, & Durga, 2008), who research how video games can be used for
learning in the classroom (communication and interaction), but not the ways in which that
participation with new technologies are changing power dynamics, subjectivity and
agency that unfolds in various and complex ways in a multitude of educational settings.
The design of e-learning and strategies of technology integration have also served as a
major foci in this area. One of the main journals in this field, *Computers & Education*,
focuses on the use of technology in the classroom setting to reach state-defined
educational goals. The hegemony of this type of approach is evidenced by this journal’s
impact factor (2.190) on the ISI Web of Knowledge database, and others like it. Several
journals, such as *Computers and Composition* and the *International Journal of
Qualitative Studies in Education*, seem to have begun to take up a more cultural
foundations approach to technology in education. They have featured studies on how not
only learning is changing, but how identity, subjectivity, communication, gender
performances are affected, as well as the effects of these changes. These journals are
not listed in the ISI Web of Knowledge database. What this shows is that knowledge is
being produced in a certain way around new media and education, one in which a
“practical” school-based approach will continue to dominate and one in which I would like to disrupt.

The field of educational technology, though, has also borrowed from the field of media studies, which has looked more closely at culture in various ways. Jenkins (Jenkins, 2006a; Jenkins & Cassell, 2008) is an example of a thinker in this field who studied what he called convergence culture, or the cultural changes that occur as new media are introduced and mingle with “old” systems. Gee (2003) is another example, who studied the ways in which video games could help the field of education rethink learning, teaching and identity. A new journal has recently been introduced titled *International Journal of Media and Learning*, which seems to be taking a more blended approach to both instruction and culture.

Technology studies and science studies could also have a greater impact in the field of educational technology. Thinkers such as Benjamin (1932/2008), Baudrillard (1983), Haraway (1991a), Barad (2003) and Massumi (2002), have discussed the implications and new ways of being that have resulted from a closer look at technology in culture. Wajcman (1991) and Spender (1995) have also rethought the history of technology and how it has been defined as masculine. Turkle (1984, 1995) and boyd (boyd, 2007, 2008) have conducted ethnographies of the current uses of technology and how they are changing the ways in which identity and communication are engaged by youth. More studies of this type would enhance our understanding of what technology means for (or what effects it is having on) learning and education more broadly defined.

Additionally, a poststructural approach to these ethnographies can help us as educational researchers, avoid finding the "right instructional approach,” which is always
productive and dense with power. And, a virtual ethnographic approach may help push us even further as types of data, data collection and data analysis, though similar in form and function to a traditional ethnography, are mediated differently in the context of the new materiality of a virtual environment. The issues surrounding how to conduct a virtual ethnography are not, I argue, in tension with what counts as ethnography, but a chance to rethink the underlying assumptions and ontology and epistemology that traditional ethnography has been afforded in the past. Technology in education as a field has an opportunity to create a constant, persistent dialogue that encourages the thinking of practice, or practice as curriculum, over a search for the ever-futile “best practice.” A critical, poststructural stance could facilitate the thinking through of various themes and issues that are becoming problematized as new technologies emerge.

These issues include space (What are the dimensions of virtual space? Is it a space at all? How is this space being constructed? How is this space changing notions of public/private? How does this space challenge "real" space?), subjectivity (How does technology change/enhance the way we see and represent ourselves? How does technology change the possibilities for subjectivity? How does technology help us play with/learn our subjectivity?), gender (How are the origins of technology gendered? How has the body been used/transformed/ignored as a result of new technologies? How are genders performed in multiple ways using new technologies?), agency (How does technology enhance/inhibit/change our sense of agency?), knowledge (How is technology creating new forms of knowledge? How is that knowledge creating new forms power?), education (What counts as teaching and learning in this environment? How does technology force us to rethink teaching and learning? How will this impact how schools
function in the future?), humanity (What counts as human? What is apart from and a part of the human body/mind?), technology (What counts as technology? How has technology been historically defined? How has/does the definition of technology silence others?), reality (How does technology change our material reality? Is a technology a part of or apart from our reality? Is reality expanding, being diminished or something else?), etc.

The danger of this sort of project, however, is a sort of technological determinism (Postman, 1992) and naïve belief that technology will transform our world. Sometimes this belief is a hope and sometimes it is a fear, but it is a danger to assume that for better or worse, technology alone will determine (rather than impact) the future of education. In addition, such focus on technology and its impacts silences those without access (in a variety of forms). These non-technology users get silenced by the discourse that is created surrounding these imagined (though not false) futures.

Pre-theorizing: Blogs as Postmodern Spaces of Agency

Modesti (2008), in an article on tattoo parlors, describes three different tattoo parlors and defines the elements that make these parlors “postmodern spaces of agency.” I find the term odd, if only because I’ve been schooled in the difficult definition of postmodernism itself, so to label a space as “postmodern,” seems problematic at best. I read on however, past her template of qualities that make a postmodern space and onto the elements of agency in such spaces. She uses literature in the field of rhetoric to explain that scholarship on rhetoric has also broadened in a similar way to that of literacy to include visual rhetoric as well as the rhetoric of the material, spaces and places.
Modesti uses de Certeau (1984) to argue that there is agency for individuals (via tactics) within everyday practices and spaces. I wonder if maybe the everyday practices of my bloggers also allow for some agency. Even as they are smothered by discourses, they must, in this new space, with this new materiality, shape, form, or transgress in some ways.

Modesti (2008) goes on to describe “postmodern space” of a tattoo parlor. She says that in this space there is a distaste for distinction for high and low culture; there is a variety of people, culture, taste; no ultimate truth; playfulness, fragmentation, eclecticism; blurring boundaries between art and everyday experience; the existence of multiple “presents” in a postmodern temporality (p. 200-201). In some ways I don’t understand how all of these happen in a tattoo parlor, but I can see how they are all occurring in a blog. I see the blog as a better example of her “postmodern space.” And I see blogs as a way to transfer this research into the field of new media and education.

To further this connection, Modesti (2008) discusses the fact that in a tattoo parlor, bodies physically undergo change (with a visual mark) as agency embodied. Blogs, in my mind, are a different type of body, both separate and a part of the bloggers physical body. The elements of agency in a tattoo parlor, as described by Modesti (2008) are control of the environment (the gun, the cleanliness), choice (flipbooks of tattoos, displace case, coloration, consumerism) and embodiment (performance of identity and tattoos as narrative performativity). Blogs are a different sort of body, but all of these elements of agency in a tattoo parlor seem even more relevant to blogs and the bloggers that create these spaces as rhetorical communication devices. Blogs are a form of visual communication to be sure, but more than that, they are exemplars of multimodality and
the changing discourse of literacy and learning. What comes about, then, if blogs are situated as postmodern spaces of agency, ones with implications for subjectivity, agency and learning, particularly the learning that subjectivity and agency, as well as of a critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000)?

**Significance**

The use of blogs is a timely issue in need of further study. Depending on how this new media is used, they may be a tool or space, particularly for women, to increase their sense of agency and to open up notions of subjectivity. Engaging with the phenomenon of women in graduate school using blogs, could help inform our understanding of the ways in which new media have possibilities for subjectivity, agency, and learning. My general hypothesis in regard to the main questions, “What subject positions are made available to and/or (co)constructed by these women in graduate school through blogging? How do these subject positions imagine different livable spaces of the feminine through the use of technology?” and “What do these women learn (skills, content, subject positions, agency, etc.) as they blog?” is that women are both reinscribing gender norms and opening up subjectivity and agency in new ways, ways that they may not even recognize. I think that they are learning these normative and transgressive ways of being as well as technology skills and content with the blog, their readers and the internet as a whole.

Blogs are potentially a “new” way to be. It is important to take a look at these new and increasingly normalized ways of being in order to remain critical of how they shape us and to remain open to possibilities as we create ourselves and the world through
them. By looking at and experimenting with the blogs of women, it is an opportunity to theorize subjectivity and agency for women in these new digital spaces. What is going on with blogs? And, what happens when I prod them with these ideas in mind? Are they possibility spaces or reinscriptions of the status quo particularly through the lens of education? Or, are they something else?

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to my blog and my study of the blogs of women in graduate school. The first chapter also situates the study and the leakage of preliminary analysis. The second chapter outlines the literature on subjectivity and agency, particularly subjectivity and agency as it is related to poststructuralism, technology and the post-individual network. Chapter two also outlines the literature on blogs, particularly blogs as they have been used in formal and informal learning environments, with a focus on women and girls. This chapter details the construct of learning as legitimate peripheral participation as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991). The third chapter presents a history and critique of my chosen method, which is a virtual ethnography. Chapter three then goes on to detail my methods in conducting this particular virtual ethnography. Chapter four presents my findings from my study and chapter five details how my findings support and refute the critical media literacy, blogging, and educational technology literature in chapter two, as well as theorizes how my findings investigate the relationship between technology and theories of subjectivity and agency particularly in qualitative research.
Chapter 2

(In)Formal Blogging, Socio-cultural Learning, and the Blogging Subject

Introduction

Theorizing the space of blogs and bloggers in terms of learning, subjectivity and agency requires an engagement with a seemingly incongruous body of literature that engages the “practical” and the “theoretical.” Within the “practical,” I begin this literature review by looking at the phenomena of the blog, paying particular attention to how gender has been studied and connected to the blogging phenomenon. I then go on to look at the connection that has been constructed in the literature between blogs and learning in formal and informal spaces. Socio-cultural theories of learning dominate this connection and I spend time in serious engagement with one of the dominant learning theories, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation.

In the second half of this literature review, I turn to the “theoretical” literature engaging poststructural theories of subjectivity and agency. I lay out a Foucauldian poststructural subjectivity that is shaped by discourses, but that allows for a radically conditioned agency espoused by Butler (1997). I also call upon poststructural theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin and Donna Haraway, that engage with technology to investigate onto-epistemological questions so that I may begin to think my way into the intersection of technology, women and being.
Blogs and Women

Though defined in multiple ways by multiple authors (Bell, 2007; boyd, 2008; Lovink, 2008; Penrod, 2007; Rettberg, 2008; Serfaty, 2004), blogs are essentially online journals that can be kept private, but for the most part are shared publicly with the implied or explicit assumption of an audience. The act of blogging began around 1996 or 1997 (Rettberg, 2008; Serfaty, 2004) and has exploded in recent years with the advent of user-friendly templates and free hosting. Though blogs have been used in a variety of contexts from journalism to technology (Rettberg, 2008; Sweetser, 2008), many have been a more traditional type of journal writing, transformed by new media and on which I have chosen to focus my study. Rather than private diaries kept under lock and key, blogs have an assumed audience, ones that can interact with the author, leaving comments or sending emails and always leaving the impression of a pageview in the blog’s site stats. The author also provides links to other sites of interests within the posts or lists the other blogs she reads. I use the term “she” purposefully in this context, as women have consistently outnumbered men in this type of blogging, though they appear in equal numbers overall (Nowson & Oberlander, 2006).

Teens have been studied more intensely than adult female bloggers (Bell, 2007; Bortree, 2005; boyd, 2008; D. A. Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Lenhart, Madden, & Smith, 2007; Penrod, 2007), but in these studies teenage girls are often blogging more than boys. In addition, other minority groups (Penrod, 2007) as well as lower income groups and teens from single-parent households (Lenhart et al., 2007) are entering the blogosphere in record numbers, which parallel adult female bloggers. There have also been studies of
adult bloggers (Guadagno, 2008; Nowson & Oberlander, 2006; Schler, Koppel, Argamon, & Pennebaker, 2006; Somolu, 2007) as well as adult female bloggers in a British context (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007), which the authors acknowledge mirrors the American context. These studies generally find that female bloggers tend to write more personal accounts of their lives and engage the social nature of the internet, whereas males stick to singular topics of interest, such as technology or business. Women of specific ethnic groups have also been studied (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Somolu, 2007) in places such as Iran and Africa, with an emphasis on empowerment, access and anonymity. These issues are tied in various ways to studies of American women and girls’ uses of blogs.

*Blogs and Learning*

Studies on computer use and the connection with learning go back to well-known studies of interactions with the “microcomputer” via programming (Papert, 1980) or gaming, MUDs, etc (Turkle, 1984, 1995). These groundbreaking studies, conceptualized learning and computers as informal and interactive, a natural pairing. As computers and the internet made their way into the formal world of schooling, however, educational research seemed to focus on the use of the computer as a word processing tool or an information and retrieval device (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009). Web 2.0, the second iteration of the web, is one that arose in the past ten years as the internet became more user-oriented, allowing for increased audience participation, blurring the line between consumer and producer, and leading to a call to refocus educational research surrounding learning and the internet-connected computer. Researchers like Gee (2003),
Jenkins (2006b) and boyd (boyd, 2007, 2008) have looked at informal interactions available via the internet and its applications through a cultural lens. This research supports a call to reconceptualize the computer from an information retrieval and presentation device, to a ubiquitous technology with great potential for “authentic” situated learning, if researchers can better understand how learning takes place informally in this very situated space (Greenhow et al., 2009).

Blogs, an example of a web 2.0 technology and the focus of this chapter, are used for a variety of reasons from the professional to the personal, including hybrid forms that push the binary between public and private. The definition of a blog seems to be very generally: a log kept on the web that is social in nature (Bell, 2007; Lovink, 2008; Rettberg, 2008). As conceptions of literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Horn, 2003; Livingstone, 2004) change and technologies develop, however, blogs may become more difficult to define.

**Blogs in Formal Learning Environments**

Blogs are being brought into classrooms (Clark et al., 2009; Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg, 2005; D. Huffaker, 2005; Kerawalla, Minocha, Kirkup, & Conole, 2009; Nicholas, 2009; Salen, 2007; Williams, 2004; Yang, 2009) and other areas of formal learning such as professional development and scholarly research (Bar-Ilan, 2007; Gregg, 2006; Instone, 2005; Luehmman & Tinelli, 2008). Blogs are selected for their ease of use and because they seem to be tools that, according to these studies, may allow for increased dialogue, empowerment, voice, motivation and reflection.

In formal learning environments where blogs have been studied, the learning that occurs is typically characterized as reflective/metacognitive with some influence on that
reflection and metacognition as a result of the sharing of information with others via this medium. For example, Salen (2007) finds a potential for reflective, collaborative learning within blogs.

Hence, I find reflection, articulation, interaction, collaboration, and confidence to intertwine similarly, and their interdisciplinary zeal to complement each other cleverly and logically. The activity of authoring and maintaining a weblog to attain deeper learning and higher order thinking skills emerge through the act of reflecting on issues related to the academic assignments, and while textually reflecting in blog posts and comments, our articulation skills are triggered helping students to write blog posts that are academically representative to their peers and scholars through meticulously articulating their reflections from countless chaotic although often brilliant train of thoughts. Our tutors during the thinking and writing process are the weblog actors with whom we communicate, interact and collaborate, and who trigger our curiosity and creativity far beyond our individual competence (p. 77).

In addition, Huffaker (2005) sees the potential of the blog for literacy learning as an individual and collaborative space. “The characteristics of Weblogs, such as the personal space it provides and the linkages with an online community, create an excellent computer mediated communication context for individual expressions and collaborative interactions in the form of storytelling and dialogue” (p. 96). And, Farmer and Bartlett-Bragg (2005) find a similar potential of blogs in higher education.

In addition to commenting on the advantages of using a tool that serves as an online journal encouraging personal reflection, and as a means of encouraging
collaboration through the sharing of links to resources and up to date information, Oravec (2002, p. 618) observes that the blog has many dimensions that are suited to students' 'unique voices', empowering them, and encouraging them to become more critically analytical in their thinking. The reason, simply, is that in order to develop and sustain a clear and confident voice of one's own, one has to carefully formulate and stand by one's opinions. Writing a blog assists here because it forces a student to confront their own opinions and contemplate how their views might be interpreted and reflected upon by others (Mortensen & Walker, 2002, cited in Lamshed, Berry & Armstrong, 2002) (p. 3).

Researchers are seeing the potential for learning via blogs in formal environments, but my research will focus first on what learning occurs when blogs are used informally in an effort to understand if blogs should be incorporated into formal learning environments at all.

Blogs in Informal Learning Environments

In the area of informal uses of this technology, I focus my discussion on women and girls, who dominate the informal, personal blogosphere. Greenhow et al. (2009) call for more research in the area of informal uses and the tie to “best practices.” There is a cultural interest in studying identity formation/subjectivity within informal online spaces such as blogs. These studies, from various fields including linguistics, women’s studies and gender studies, tend to focus on what is taking place in these new, mediated spaces concerning identity formation/subjectivity, particularly of women as they have often been “discoursed out” of technological fields (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Oudshoorn, Saetnan,
& Lie, 2002; Spender, 1995; Wajcman, 1991) along with other typically subjugated groups (Rak, 2005).

These studies include Karlsson’s (2007) work on the readership of blogs and how these readers seek sameness. This particular understanding of readership would support agency in identity formation/subjectivity according to Grafton and Maurer’s (2007) study of the ways in which bloggers create publics by their use of rhetoric. In the address of an audience, a reader is both solicited and discursively brought into being. Others, like Sveningsson Elm (2007) and McNeill (2003) are interested in the shift of private spaces (girls’ rooms, diaries) to public ones and what this then means for both identity/subjectivity and those spaces.

Socio-Cultural Theories of Learning Associated with Blogging

In those studies that focus on learning and formal contexts, and from which I will draw upon to frame my own study, there are several theories of learning often referenced to support the use of blogs in formal learning contexts. These theories are all socio-cultural theories of learning that include both constructivist and cognitive components. This is most likely because blogging is a socio-cultural activity that is predicated on community, interaction, and technology. Theories of socio-cultural activity, therefore, are well matched to the practice of blogging. The most often-cited theories are those of Vygotsky (1978), Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (2000), and Jonassen (2008). Other cited theorists include Piaget (1959), Bruner (1990), Engestrom (1999) and Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989). Most of these theories are social constructivist theories of learning, but these are often entangled in their cognitive roots. “It is difficult, if not impossible to strictly separate the cognitive and constructive learning theories since
constructivism is deeply embedded in cognitive psychology and the learning theories promulgated by Piaget and Vygotsky, and therefore share vast similarities” (Salen, 2007, p. 21). The next few paragraphs detail examples of the way in which the favored theories are utilized in studies of blogging in a formal setting.

Farmer and Bartlett-Bragg (2005) cite both Vygotsky and Lave and Wenger in their literature review of blogs implemented into school settings. They then suggest that blogs must be an activity “discretely embedded in the lifestyle of the learner” (p. 202) in order to reap the potential benefits of the situated learning afforded by this technology. This idea runs counter to current school practice of implementing technologies within the existing framework of schools in order to utilize technology to accomplish school-based goals such as increased test scores. Farmer and Bartlett-Bragg (2005) are suggesting that the tool of the blog be used as it is used in informal settings, a more situated approach to learning, within a formal setting.

Williams (2004) also cites Vygotsky in another literature review, this one focused on blogging and higher education. He discusses that blogs are a tool for active learning, higher order thinking and flexibility in teaching and learning. This, for him, is due to the discursive nature of knowledge construction in a blog, the opportunity for reflection, hypertext that encourages revising and controversial interactions inherent in blogging (p. 4). "[B]logs have the potential, at least, to be a truly transformational technology in that they provide students with a high level of autonomy while simultaneously providing opportunity for greater interaction with peers.” (p. 9).

Boulos et al. (2006) invoke Bruner, Jonassen, and Wenger in their own literature review of virtual collaboration in the education of health professionals. They refer to
Bruner and his notion of social and culturally immersive learning environments that are now occurring online. They discuss Jonassen’s concept of “mind tools” aiding the construction of meaning by the learner. Wenger’s concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) is also invoked as a way to conceptualize the virtual community of professional practice that was used with this group of future health professionals.

Yang (2009), in her study of the use of blogs among foreign language student teachers, uses Wenger’s concept of CoP as a way to conceptualize the space of the blog for learning.

This study indicates that the blog studied here demonstrates a community of practice in that it was used by the participants as a discussion space. It was a forum that prepared each of the student teachers to relate theories to practice by discussing beliefs, learning from each other, demonstrating to each other how they would act in their actual classrooms. The blog was a place for these student teachers to voice their doubts, struggles, discomforts, and successful and unhappy teaching and learning experiences because the participants shared very similar experiences of being EFL language teachers and learners. (p.18)

Though not mentioned, I would also apply situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) to analyze the interaction of learning on this blog. Students are situated in the practice of student teaching and blogging and they are practicing LPP in both arenas as well.

Thus far, each study only superficially discusses learning theory, as blogging and content seem to be their main interest. Salen (2007) provides the most comprehensive and broad analysis on her study of blogging in higher education for a constructivist
pedagogy. She surveys 17 different uses of blogs for learning in higher education and
she delineates several socio-cultural learning theories that could be applied to instances of
blogging, as well as the ways in which these theories mingle and collide. She cites
Vygotsky, Piaget, Jonassen, Engestrom and Brown, Collins and Duguid as different ways
to show how different sorts of activity in blogging apply to different socio-cultural
theories of learning.

*Legitimate Peripheral Participation or Blogging as Learning*

Of the studies of blogs and learning, socio-cultural theories of learning dominate.
And of those presented, I will be focusing on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of
situated learning which I find particularly appropriate and relevant to thinking about
learning in the practice of blogging. This theory also lends itself to understanding
informal contexts, which is important to my focus.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), situated learning is the idea that learning
is situated in practices of the social world. Learning, then, is not learning about
something or how to do something, it is a part of being; it is an integral, inseparable part
of living in a social reality (p. 19). Therefore, as long as the proper amount of
participation is allowed, “effective” (p. 76) learning will occur. This is where the concept
of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP) comes into play; that participation in the
social world must be legitimate and is always in some ways peripheral as the learner
moves toward full participation. This full participation (as opposed to some sort of
central or complete participation) is only as full as it can be when the center of
participation is a moving target because of the changing nature of the community and
roles within that community where sociality is concerned.
Lave and Wenger (1991) distinguish between situated learning and LPP, although situated learning does provide context for LPP. For them, there was a transition from apprenticeship as a model for learning to situated learning as the need for context to LPP as a way to understand that learning is practice.

In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world. The problem – and the central preoccupation of this monograph – is to translate this into a specific analytic approach to learning. Legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent (p. 35).

Lave and Wenger (1991) repeatedly insist that learning is not simply one kind of activity in a certain location, but a social practice “in which learning is viewed as an aspect of all activity” (p. 38). Essentially, sociality is learning and learning is sociality. They also insist on keeping schooling out of their analysis, at least in this text, to get a fresh look on learning, one not “soiled” by the learning that is most often associated and conflated with school. They put forth LPP, not as a pedagogical strategy, but an “analytic viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning” (p. 40). This is important to me, as a former teacher, trained in particular ways of understanding learning, and attempting to open up that view to seemingly “irrelevant” social practices such as blogging. On a final and important note, Lave and Wenger assert that learning takes place in a community of practice, but that CoP is “left largely as an intuitive notion” (p. 42) in which power
relations are embedded that shape access to LPP. CoP is a loose term in this text, but one which provides a greater context for LPP.

From this perspective, the role of the learner is one of participant; one that has gained legitimate peripherality and then, with intention (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29), participates in the CoP, attempts to use its tools, create its artifacts, speak its language and interact with its newcomers and old-timers. The learner is a newcomer in the CoP and so practices LPP as such. He/she participates in the most peripheral tasks as permitted by other newcomers and old-timers. He/she is usually given (or is able to participate in) less important tasks, but in the everyday practices of being part of the community, learning is intertwined and integral. A blogger is a learner in this sense, participating as much as possible depending on how well they understand the technology, little by little learning the practices, observing other bloggers and developing a community of their own.

The role of the community, in LPP is to grant the learner legitimate peripherality and allow for participation that moves the learner toward full participation. The community in LPP is the context within which participation and learning take place. This participation must be legitimate in that it must allow newcomers access to the real practices of the community that include the use of tools, artifacts and discourses. This participation must also be peripheral (in a positive sense) in that it must allow for a partial participation, a “dynamic concept” as it suggests “an opening, a way of gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Though a blogger is, in a sense, not restricted from participation from a community (they can visit any blog they know of), they will not be able to participate peripherally without
beginning to find a community that will read, comment, and provide a model for his/her own blogging practices. Without developing a community, the blogger’s learning will be stunted.

A community of practice is an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge, not least because it provides the interpretive support necessary for making sense of its heritage. Thus, participation in the cultural practice in which any knowledge exists is an epistemological principle of learning. The social structure of this practice, its power relations, and its conditions for legitimacy define possibilities for learning (i.e., for legitimate peripheral participation) (p. 98, italics added).

The role of the community then is to provide context and to open itself up, legitimately, to the learner.

Artifacts also support learning in that they are a part of the social world in which the learner and the community are situated. Once legitimate peripheral access is gained, interaction with and creation of artifacts allows the learner to participate in varying levels with the practices of the community. By understanding the history of artifacts, the learner not only learns to use the tools of the community, but understands how the community has changed and how the community thinks about being in the world via tools (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101). This is part of Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of the “person-in-the-world” (p. 52), as membership in a socio-cultural community, which includes the artifacts of that community not just as tools, but as part of practice, sociality, identity and community. This concept resonates with theorists who give agency to material objects (Barad, 2003; Law & Hassard, 1999; Massumi, 2002).
blog is itself a tool and an artifact, housed online. It not only provides a place for sociality to occur, but plays a role in that learning. So, as the blogger learns this tool and creates this artifact, he/she is learning.

Practices are another part of the “person-in-the-world.” Much like artifacts, practices are part of the community that must be permitted to the newcomer in order for “effective” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 76) learning to take place. Unlike artifacts, however, practice is learning. Whereas both artifacts and practices make up the community in which the learner must participate, it is the practices (with and without artifacts) that are imperative to effective learning because these practices incorporate all aspects of the social community, the people, the language, the artifacts, etc. “The notion of participation [in practice] thus dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity, between contemplation and involvement, between abstraction and experience: persons, actions, and the world are implicated in all thought, speech, knowing and learning” (p. 52). Practice replaces the notion of internalization of knowledge by an individual; practice is learning without end, creating knowledge while learning it, understanding the world while changing it. The practices of blogging are wrapped up in the tool, the artifact and the sociality that occurs within them. Practicing and becoming more proficient in this practice is learning.

In LPP, evidence of learning would be increased participation, toward a full participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37). Evidence could be any participation in the practices of the social world which allow the newcomer to legitimately and peripherally participate toward that end (less an end, but a moving goal). This could be taking on tasks of increasing complexity, being able to speak the language of the community with
more peers and old-timers and being able to use varying levels of tools to create varying levels of artifacts. In blogging, this might mean adding a twitter feed to the side of the blog homepage, linking to other bloggers in a blog post as a means of support and communication or creating an RSS feed. As long as access is kept open to allow newcomers to move toward full participation, all the activities of the learner is evidence of learning.

At the same time, however, it is important to keep in mind that even old-timers are not at the end-point of learning. As newcomers move into the community, participate, move closer to being an old-timer, the community itself and the notion of “old-timer” is shifting. “There is a fundamental contradiction in the meaning to newcomers and old-timers of increasing participation by the former; for the centripetal development of full participants, and with it the successful production of a community of practice, also implies the replacement of old-timers” (p. 57). So, evidence of learning is apparent in this centripetal motion, but the understanding of full participation (thought of as practices of old-timers) is constantly changing.

**LPP in Contrast and Comparison**

In order to distinguish Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of learning from other socio-cultural learning theories, it may be helpful to discuss how situated learning and LPP are similar and different from these theories. Let me begin with Piaget (1969) and Vygotsky (1978), whose cognitive/constructivist theories are at the heart of most socio-cultural notions of learning. Both Piaget and Vygotsky conceptualized learning as an active process of cognition, a significant change from behaviorist theories of learning that espoused positive and negative reinforcement as changing behavior, which had been
standard in early understandings of learning (Skinner, 1968; Thorndike, 1906). Piaget conceptualized the need for active learning as consistent with the child’s level of development (sensorimotor through formal) and pre-existing schema. Vygotsky, on the other hand, conceptualized active learning as a mainly social and cultural process (that included tools, language, and others). This includes Vygotsky’s famous concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which learners could learn more with the help of a more knowledgeable other than alone, and this relationship allowed for an increased level of mastery by learners (Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). Both theorists, however, conceptualized learning to acquire knowledge as taking place in the head of the individual; Piaget as individuals acted upon the world and Vygotsky as individuals interacted with others.

Lave and Wenger (1991) dismiss this sort of individualistic cognitive/constructivist approach as emphasizing internalization as a straightforward process that does not consider the changing nature of the world that is to be learned and the learners place in both learning and changing that world at the same time.

This focus on internalization does not just leave the nature of the learner, of the world, and of their relations unexplored; it can only reflect far-reaching assumptions concerning these issues. It establishes a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside, suggests that knowledge is largely cerebral, and takes the individual as the nonproblematic unit of analysis. Furthermore, learning as internalization is too easily construed as an unproblematic process of absorbing the given, as a matter of transmission and assimilation (p. 47).
They also critique the concept of ZPD, which has been taken up by different groups in different ways, as help for individual problem-solving, a boost for the cultural “lack” of the individual and also as a societal activity toward connecting everyday practice with social change (p. 48-49). Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as more relational and situated in the context of a shared practice among a variety of human and non-human agents than as a way to help individuals and societies learn or gain a piece of knowledge that it did not know before.

There are many cognitive/constructivist theories of learning that are attributed to the work of Piaget and Vygotsky, so many that the bulk are beyond the scope of this chapter. These theories have many nuanced variations, but are essentially theories that understand learning as constructed by the learner where the learner brings existing understandings of the world as he/she understands it thus far in order to construct new knowledge. Rather than a straightforward filling of the pail (a purely cognitive concept, if such a thing exists), this is a sort of building and correcting of knowledge by giving the learner experiences that allows perception to be changed. The pail is still filled, but the water that was in the pail to begin with is considered and the pail is filled by the learners and other participants in the learning process. Although taken further, other constructivist learning theories discuss the learning of a community as distributed rather than the learning of an individual.

Bruner (1990), Engestrom (1999), Jonassen (2008) and Brown et al. (1989) are all constructivist theorists in different ways and with particular interests in technology. These theorists will be briefly discussed as they were specifically mentioned in studies related to blogging and learning. Bruner promoted “discovery learning” as a systematic,
hands-on approach to allow learners to construct their own understandings of phenomena. Bruner leans heavily on the individualistic cognitive end of the spectrum. Engestrom is well known for a Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) in which the learning of a particular organization is dependent upon changes in tools, methods and active practices of that organization. Engestrom leans to the collective constructivist end of the cognitive constructivist perspective. Jonassen brought the importance of technology to a broad spectrum of cognitive/constructivist theories as he sees technology tools as a node in the way meaning is made and learning occurs from a broad variety of perspectives. Brown et al. called for a situated cognition (an offshoot of situated learning directed at pedagogy) in which “activity and perception are importantly and epistemologically prior – at a nonconceptual level – to conceptualization and that it is on them that more attention needs to be focused” (p. 41). Brown et al. understands learning as practice and experience as a bridge to more abstract learning. All of these theories and concepts are similar to situated learning in that they regard learning as a social process that takes place with tools in specific contexts, but all have different aims and foci.

Situated learning and LPP are concepts of learning as social practice. This means that learning is not the byproduct of a certain type of activity, nor the result of the activity, nor is it even the goal, it is simply a part of an ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of participation in a community as one moves toward full participation in that community. This is, I think, where Lave and Wenger (1991) see the benefit in removing (or attempting to remove) their concept of LPP from the context of schooling. The previous theories have been directly applied to the schooling context and so bring with them a certain amount of baggage in which learning is already pre-theorized (in a
way) as a purposeful activity with results. They are then translated into pedagogic
techniques that attempts to “school-ify” the highly contextualized nature of learning and
the somewhat goal-lessness necessary in a socio-cultural theory of learning as social
practice.

Situated learning has, though, been translated into pedagogy (or in support of
pedagogy), mostly as a way to attempt to make school learning “authentic” and to
transform classrooms or groups of teachers into communities of practice. Although this
theory points to school learning as decontextualized and as a sort of secondary
community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 40), educational researchers and theorists have
attempted to bridge authentic concepts into school (an “inauthentic” environment, at least
of the intended curriculum) by trying to treat classrooms as authentic communities of
practice in the domains most studied in schools (e.g., Math and Science). An example of
this is Brown et al.’s (1989) study of cognitive apprenticeship in a Math classroom in
which the classroom is taken as a community of practice and the practices of Math are
conceptualized as open to student interpretation and involvement in the community.

The field of educational technology has also vigorously taken up the concept of
situated learning because of the emphasis on tools and practices. The video game and
learning literature in particular is rich with mentions of situated learning as a video game
provides a context for a community of practice, tools are implicit in the practice and
learners are joining a new social group in which learning is implicit. Barab, Sadler,
Hickey and Zuiker (2007), for example, utilize the theory in their study of a video game
in a science classroom as a way to explain that students were not just learning content,
but were able to “use domain-related practices and resources to address important problems” (p. 61).

These are two examples of the ways in which situated learning has been taken up in educational literature, both I would argue, are not what Lave and Wenger (1991) intended in the formulation of their concepts of situated learning and LPP, not only because they explicitly avoid contexts of schooling, but because they see learning as social practice. In both of these examples, the social practice is not necessarily the practice of a domain like Math or Science, it is instead the social practice of schooling. This is not to say that either instantiation of situated learning is attempting to misuse the theory, rather it draws attention to the fact that Lave and Wenger’s conception of learning is incompatible with the culture of schooling as it currently stands (though they hope for reform, p. 41-42). While school learning strives to be “authentic,” ultimately the learning that goes on there can only mimic another social practice and so is always “inauthentic.” Indeed, Lave and Wenger cite both Marx and Bourdieu in their formulation of this theory. They do this in order to resist that learning is a way to simply reproduce the cultural status quo. If, instead, learning involves the “integration in practice of agent, world, and activity” (p. 50), then learners and communities are afforded agency as participation is learning and that participation renegotiates the historically contingent community of which it is a part. Perhaps then, Lave and Wenger (1991) would suggest that school learning be replaced by a situative learning among communities of practice in specific domains in order that mere reproduction of inequitable norms does not occur.

*A Critique of LPP*
The concept of situated learning and LPP is a promising theory in my opinion, though indeed there are places within the theory where I disagree with underlying assumptions. What is promising about situated learning and LPP is that it is focused on context and a “systems” sort of look at learning. Rather than looking at learning as an isolated activity that can be “done” and then tested, these concepts allow for a complex understanding of a complex phenomenon, not reducible to pedagogical techniques (though certainly it has been reduced by many). Situated learning and LPP also takes the individuals, tools and practices of a community seriously in that it sees each as an integral part of learning as a social practice. Often, the materiality of learning is thought of as only a “delivery truck” (Clark, 1983) for learning rather than a part of a system.

This understanding of materiality is consistent with my own ontology and epistemology borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the rhizome, Actor Network Theory (Law & Hassard, 1999), Barad’s (2003) concept of agential realism and Massumi’s (2002) understanding of emergence. The rhizome is a way of understanding being as a tangled knot of human and nonhuman actors, nearly indistinguishable from one another. ANT is also an ontological theory of being that includes the human and nonhuman. Agential realism, a phrase brought to bear in an article titled, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” reminds us that things are not inert objects waiting to be acted upon, but are active participants in a collective becoming. Further, Massumi uses concepts similar to these in order to make the case that the very real and material virtuality of modern technologies brings to light the need for a rethinking of concepts such affect and movement.
I take issue, then, with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) use of critical theory because of their humanist and structuralist notions of being and knowledge. To use Marx and Bourdieu is to imply that we as a society might be able to correct some sort of societal ills (such as schooling or the reproduction of inequality) to get nearer to a more perfect society. If we analyze learning in this way, we can grant agency for a positive change in society, one that promotes learning in context rather than in decontextualized schools. Although I would like to think that this is possible, my optimism is tempered by an understanding that as we attempt to make things right, we are only shifting power differentials and making other things wrong. I do not think that this type of work should cease, but I do think that it should be a more cautious optimism, one that recognizes that communities and our understanding of the world is historically contingent, a sort of accident (Foucault, 1971), and our agency, as such is a radically conditioned one (Butler, 1997).

Another potentially problematic aspect of situated learning and LPP is that they are, even as they deny pedagogy, concepts of learning. In creating, in the very identification of an analytic of learning, is the notion that this concept will be “used.” Indeed, concepts are “used,” are translated, are interpreted. Not that Lave and Wenger (1991) could do anything to stop this. Indeed, they did as much as they could by stating that these concepts are not meant to be a pedagogy, but these concepts were still translated and (mis)used by educational researchers in classrooms around the country and the world. As much as Lave and Wenger (1991) want to espouse a theory of learning that is social practice, one that hopefully does not contribute to cultural reproduction, by identifying a concept of learning, they are creating the conditions for this sort of thing to
happen. What were they to do? Not theorize? Not record their understandings? I suppose, or they could have presented their theories and understandings in some transgressive or bizarre format, unusable (in any traditional sense) by educational researchers, blowing the idea of learning apart and forcing a different sort of thinking around this topic. This is impractical and most likely would not be funded, but is one way that they could enable their work to inspire thinking differently regarding learning.

_Putting LPP to Work_

In my work of learner-initiated uses of blogs, situated learning and LPP certainly inform my study, though in conjunction with poststructural theories regarding the historically contingent nature of knowledge and a radically contingent agency. These two theories are in tension in that situated learning and LPP are hopeful that a learner can change the direction of a community for the better, or can at least disallow the mere reinscription that communities value ahistorically. Poststructural theories decenter the subject and realize that we are all situated in materialities and discourses that both create us and allow ourselves some semblance of agency. These two theories also work together, however, in that they are both consistent with the fact that knowledge is not objective nor static, and that agency for change is a (small) possibility.

As such, I use LPP as a construct to understand the ways my bloggers come to be bloggers. In LPP, identity/subjectivity formation and learning are the same process. So, while I observed these bloggers and their everyday practices, I paid attention to how they are utilized subject positions, opening up areas for different sorts of subjectivity as they participated in the practices of blogging, interacted with the tools and learned the
language of blogging. I also used these concepts to pay attention to the trajectory of bloggers from newcomers to old-timers.

Using LPP and situated learning as concepts to analyze the learning occurring in the practices of blogging is an opportunity to understand a type of learning typically ignored in the research literature on blogs. The informal learning that is social practice is often divided into informal practice or formal learning and LPP makes it important to study informal practices as learning. And the fact that I focus my study on women, has allowed for the analysis of differing relations of power in this particular community of practice, something that Lave and Wenger (1991) contend “must be included more systematically in our analysis” (p. 42).

I also see the use of LPP and situated learning as an analytic to study learning in blogging as a way to push the envelope in that this sort of community of practice is physically distant, a virtual community, with practices that exist without sensation and with tools that are materially real and materially virtual. This is very different than the practices analyzed by Lave and Wenger in their studies of midwives, taylors, quartermasters, butchers and nondrinking alcoholics. In addition, because technology is the medium through which bloggers participate in the blogging community, Lave and Wenger (1991) might be particularly interested in this phenomenon, as the technology of a community is important because of its history (p. 101). Because technology is so interwoven in this community, it may enable different sorts of practices, artifacts and language and this may be an interesting turn of events for learning and for thinking about blogging as learning.
Poststructural Subjectivity

Foucault’s early writings are important in my understanding of the subject. His later works are more relevant to my understanding of agency. In Foucault’s first major publication, *The Order of Things, An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (Foucault, 1971), he sets up the subject as a product of the discourses of a particular episteme, a subject with little autonomy or agency except as defined for her. In the introduction, Foucault (1971) describes the focus of this work: “I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them” (p.xiv). He does make a small caveat to say that he “doesn’t wish to deny the validity of intellectual biographies, or the possibility of a history of theories, concepts, or themes” and goes on to say that he just wonders “whether these descriptions are themselves enough, whether they do justice to the immense density of the discourse” (p. xiii). Foucault then, in this particular text makes something as familiar and factual as the sciences appear bizarre and fluid. We, the subjects of our episteme, cannot see the water in which we swim, but for Foucault, it is helpful to try to see the seemingly odd water of past times in an effort to get us to question our own.

In another famous text, *Discipline and Punish, the Birth of the Prison*, Foucault (1977) takes a closer look at these two concepts throughout several periods of history. The brutal opening scene of a man being tortured and dismembered, presents a visceral reminder that times have changed. Foucault explains the way in which agonizing,
physical punishment has been replaced with a self-discipline that may appear to have evolved, but instead is a different type of pain, one that now works on our souls.

Thanks to the techniques of surveillance, the ‘physics’ of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screens, beams, degrees and without recourse, in principle at least, to excess, force or violence. It is power that seems all the less ‘corporal’ in that it is more subtly ‘physical’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 170).

He does this in order to illustrate that, not only is there no underlying structure of culture available, there is also not an evolution of culture occurring where we are becoming more civilized or more advanced. Rather, the notions of civilized and advanced simply shift due to factors outside of our control, mostly by happenstance or a sort of swirling of circumstances.

In Foucault’s essay, “Technologies of the Self” (Foucault, 1988) (also called “care of the self” (Foucault, 1978a)), he takes a look at how there is a discourse of self control that changed in the first and second century AD from a care of the self to a knowledge of the self. This essay is particularly relevant to my understanding of blogging and bloggers as blogging would fit into Foucault’s definition of a technology of the self (indeed, journaling is mentioned in the essay). Foucault discusses that he is typically interested in studying four types of technologies: (1) production, (2) sign systems, (3) power, and (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or
immortality. These four types of technologies hardly ever function separately, although each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination. Each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes (p. 147).

It follows then, that though blogging may appear to be a practice of self discovery, it is a particular kind of self discovery, one that is shaped by the discourses of the day and one whose inquiry may only make it appear that the subject is being self-reflective as defined by current discourse.

Judith Butler (1990), a poststructural feminist, theorizes about the gendered subject, a construction all the way down to sex, in her understanding of it. This is important to me as my blogging participants are all women. She says that physical sex, anatomy, not just gender, is socially produced.

In either case, the body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But “the body” is itself a construction, as are the myriad “bodies” that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender, the question then emerges: To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will? (p. 12).

This notion takes Foucault’s understanding of the way that discourse shapes individuals a step further. Rather than shaping the actions and behaviors of their bodies, discourse also
shapes their bodies. The male/female binary breaks down under this logic and calls into question not just our cultural practices of gendered, but our gendered physical being.

St. Pierre (2008) also questions being itself as a result of her understanding of the decentered poststructural subject and her work in ethnographic inquiry. She begins by describing that the subject breaks down in such a way that she “no longer knew who either the researcher(s) or the participants in my studies were if, in fact, we could even be” (p. 320). When you start to see the world as discourses and humans (including yourself) as discursive subjects, it begins to be more difficult to do anything as you know that what you do is not what you do. And you know that what your research participants do is not really what they do. So, instead you begin to ask questions like, what are the conditions that caused the participants to do what they do? The decentering of the subject and the dismissal of absolutes requires different kinds of questions.

Poststructural Subjectivity and Technology

Since I’m interested in not only the subjectivity of bloggers, but also how technology plays a role in/becomes a part of subjectivity, I’ve taken a look at several different theorists who speak to the unique situation of technology in society. McLuhan (1962), a well-known thinker in the area of media studies, theorized that the “medium is the message” or that technologies of media carry messages that, through their viewing/use cause humans and society to come to be in new ways. He poses questions such as, “Does the interiorization of media such as letters alter the ratio among our senses and change mental processes?” (p. 34) and makes statements such as, “Schizophrenia may be a necessary consequence of literacy” (p. 32). Though much of McLuhan’s thinking is in fact aligned with the idea that discourses shape our subjectivity, we diverge
in that I don’t think that technologies or media are the determining factor in the ways in which humans are shaped. Indeed, humans shape technologies and the world shapes them both in a way that is much more interactive.

Baudrillard (1983) is famous for his book on simulations which brings insight into a society rife with technology, simulation and what he would call simulacra, or a copy of a “real” that “bears no relation to any reality,” a hyperreal (p.11-12). I tend to disagree in some ways with Baudrillard in that, even in his implication that the simulacra does not hide the truth, it is (or has become) truth, he still in seems to be saying that there used to be a much plainer, “easier,” discernable truth. I’m not quite sure if he’s saying that truth or what appears as truth is historically contingent (which I would agree with) or if that society has fundamentally shifted away from that truth or that real that used to exist (which I would resist). This is important to me as I think about the subject and subjectivity because if I and the other bloggers, as subjects, are living, participating and being shaped by a world that is composed of simulacra, what does this mean for our very being? Are we products of the simulacra? Are we creating it? Do we have agency in it? Does anything that we do “really” matter or we “just” navigating through a phony world like puppets in a play? Then again, maybe we can be nothing but puppets anyway and maybe this isn’t something to be feared or resisted?

Benjamin (1932/2008), I think, would agree with Baudrillard in some sense and would position technology as that which is causing a distancing from a real. In his piece, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin points to the easy replication of art, as that which causes the original to lose its aura and then allows for the mass reproduction of those images to be used as propaganda with a certain sort of
message. Again, I resist that there was some real or some place where art was art and things were as they seemed, but I can also understand that technology has changed the way humans perceive the world. Images are much more pervasive and these images (and the repetition of them) do influence the way we view the world. In addition, technologies such as photography and film appear more “real” than a painting might and this can cause an easier belief in a simulated real.

Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art (p. 234).

Benjamin also calls this “unconscious optics” (p. 237). Setting aside my issues regarding the nature of reality, Benjamin’s argument regarding the mass reproduction of images and the easy conflation of photography and video with reality, does have an impact on my own work. How are my bloggers affected by this image saturation, having also become, of their own accord (so it seems), a part of this culture? How do bloggers’ audiences take the bloggers’ lives as an unmediated reality and how does this affect the bloggers’ lives and the understanding of life in general?

Haraway (1991a) is more transgressive in her approach to thinking about technology. She sees gender through a technological lens in order to dismember the idea that gender is a clear or unifying category. Haraway uses the metaphor of the cyborg as a way to resist that gender is in anyway natural. Instead, we are all cyborgs, part human, part machine.
The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the oikos, the household. Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resources for appropriation or incorporation by the other (p. 426).

If we rethink ourselves as cyborgs, a blogger is a good example of the possibilities. A blogger exists partially in a space without a flesh and blood body. She puts out information of her choosing (albeit influenced mostly by discourses) and this information is able to be accessed instantly the world over and then may also be changed by readers in another place and time. What sort of gendered, but ungendered, extended and enhanced (or limited?) body is this? “So the cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work” (p. 428).

The Paradox of Poststructural Agency

In the beginning of my work and my thinking about blogging, I had high hopes for a very humanist sort of agency, one espoused perhaps, by Marx (2010), Freire (2000), McLaren (1989), Apple (2001), one in which women bloggers could have a voice, could speak their truth, could lead us toward a more just, free, and open world, a world where there is a solution to injustice. I took a shine to Bateson’s (1989) book, Composing a Life, in which she interviewed several of her female academic friends about their lives and then wrote beautifully about how they were in a unique position, as women, as academics (as are the bloggers I study), to improvise. Bateson paints these women as
artists of a sort who improvise because of societal constraints, because of situations beyond their control, but they all do it in a way that their life is written by these women, and their skills as improv artists, as a beautiful composition. I want to think of the women I study as skilled improvisers, navigating their lives as best as is possible under the current conditions. But, I have a harder time embracing this concept since Foucault’s concept of discourse is influential in my thinking about how the world works. As such, are these women bloggers improvising, navigating discourses and composing their lives? Or are their improvisations structured in a way that their lives are composed for them? A later Foucault, Butler and others help me sort through this conundrum.

In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, Foucault (1978b), through his study of sexuality begins to notice flows of power, which are not totally deterministic, but which allow for individuals and groups of individuals some agency to make shifts in those flows of power.

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist
different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy (p. 102).

As we operate within this web of discourses that forms us, we have some agency to shift the web. Power is not unidirectional.

This does not, however, mean that the discourses will be changed for solely for “good” or in some sort of evolutionary climb to perfection. The web can be shifted by agents, but it will also be in need of a constant shifting and reworking. In Remarks on Marx, a series of interviews conducted by Duccio Trombadori, Foucault (1991) articulates a less determinist subjectivity than was evident in The Order of Things.

And if I don’t ever say what must be done, it isn’t because I believe that there’s nothing to be done; on the contrary, it is because I think that there are a thousand things to do, to invent, to forge, on the part of those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they’re implicated, have decided to resist or escape them.

From this point of view all of my investigations rest on a postulate of absolute optimism. I do not conduct my analysis in order to say: this is how things are, look how trapped you are. I say certain things only to the extent to which I see them as capable of permitting the transformation of reality (p. 174).

Transformation of reality, not the fixing of reality or the perfection of reality, but a transformation can be put into motion and realized by subjects, who must then resist any sort of sedimentation, always aware of new injustices that appear and old injustices that reappear.
Butler (1997), in her book *The Psychic Life of Power*, also allows for agency within the discursive formation of the subject. She calls this a “radically conditioned form of agency” (p. 15), a phrase I’ve become rather fond of in my work. Rather than permitting myself to think of agency as a sort of no-holds-barred freedom, I think of it as a tiny opening, a crack in a great wall of well-entrenched discourses that have both formed me and continue to provide the conditions of my own existence. This allows me to take the paradox of poststructural agency, as well as the great difficulty that exists in attempting to exert some agency, seriously.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler (2005) discusses what sorts of challenges are entailed when an individual tries to give an account of herself, an act that would require a good amount of agency. “This struggle with the unchosen condition of one’s life, a struggle- an agency- is also made possible paradoxically, by the persistence of this primary condition of unfreedom” (p. 19). This is important to me as I think about agency when my bloggers are attempting to give an account of themselves day after day. How women reconstruct something that they can only partially understand under conditions of discourses that they can’t think without, is of interest to me. And then, women put their stories out to the world (Butler calls this exposure). They put their stories out there as realities, but this account of oneself, this blog, is never reality. Setting aside the fact that technology shifts the way we communicate and think about ourselves, telling anyone a story about yourself is always a fiction.

It (exposure) constitutes the way in which my story arrives belatedly, missing some of the constitutive beginnings and the preconditions of the life it seems to narrate. This means that my narrative begins *in media res*, when many things
have already taken place to make me and my story possible in language. I am always recuperating, reconstructing, and I am left to fictionalize and fabulate origins I cannot know (p. 39).

If I can allow the blog to be a fictionalization, a fabulation, of reality, I can understand the blog and the blogger in a way that I acknowledge that which presses upon them, while at the same time not being overly deterministic regarding their agency.

In qualitative inquiry, the issue of agency or the lack of agency, causes problems particularly as researchers attempt to study human subjects, who are mired in discourses, who may only ever be able to speak to those discourses (though there is hope of thinking otherwise). And, as researchers themselves are mired in those same (and other) discourses, qualitative inquiry becomes very difficult, at least in the traditional sense. Lather (2007) explains how she has tried to navigate this difficulty in research, not necessarily by trying to live up to a traditional notion of ethnography, but by attempting to let participants speak alongside the problem of the researcher. “Rather than seemingly unmediated recounting of participant narratives of unobtrusive chronicling of events as they occur, we “both get out of the way and in the way” (Lather and Smithies, 1997, p. xiv) in a manner that draws attention to the problematics of telling stories that belong to others” (p. 87). In this text aptly titled, *Getting Lost*, Lather examines her famous work, *Troubling the Angels*, a work that makes use of poststructural theory in qualitative inquiry, playing with notions of subjectivity, agency, theory, voice, and reality in a way that theorizes agency in a different sort of way. Rather than trying to force a person’s square lived reality into the round hole of a “real,” Lather instead allows room for messiness, trouble, and even… for angels.
Britzman (1995) in her work on poststructural ethnography also does not wish, nor thinks it is possible, to find “the truth.” “The problem is not one where the ethnographer authenticates a particular truth. Rather, the ethnographer traces, but not without argument, the circulation of competing regimes of truth” (p. 235). In this way, ethnography is no longer about sharing the story of the agency that a subject might have, nor about stripping away the agency of the subject by explaining away her existence. Rather, ethnography can be about acknowledging the agency of both the participant and the ethnographer, by tracing together the regimes of truth, or the discourses that ensare and create us all.

St. Pierre (2008) discusses and deconstructs the idea that voice gives ethnographers access to the real. This is a sort of stripping away of her subject’s agency, but in a manner that acknowledges that what a subject says is not simply “the truth.” “The fairly straight-forward interview described in qualitative textbooks become impossible to think or do. Voices no longer reliably secure the truth” (p. 321). There is more to the story of the subject and to the ability of the researcher to hear the subject than a voice that is recorded, transcribed and analyzed. As I study women bloggers in academia, I am hopeful that I can work with my participants in creative and transgressive ways that both help to illuminate the discourses that entrap us, the tiny cracks of agency we create or that appear and push us toward thinking otherwise.

Agency as a Collective Event

Having discussed both subjectivity and agency as it relates to my interest in women bloggers, I now want to touch on a literature that is a bit more current and seems to incorporate both subjectivity and agency in a way that is similar to the way a later
Foucault allows for some agency within a web of imperfect discourses. I use the term web, not a term Foucault uses, but one that is useful to me in my thinking about how discourses, agents and the material are connected and how one change can affect the entire web. The term web is also useful to me as I think about how women bloggers are connected to the web of discourses, certainly, but also in the world wide web, a technology that affects and changes the way that discourses occur and bend about in space; a literal web that makes that imagined web appear much more material (even in its virtuality) than ever before. Lather (2010), a self-proclaimed tehnophobe, acknowledges the connection between knowing and being and the internet as a model for play. “Citton (2009) writing of Jacque Ranciere’s ideas of agency as a collective event, fleshes out such self-organization [web 2.0] as ‘dynamics of general responsiveness, temporary guidance, coordinative framing, opening up of free spaces for individual explorations, exacerbation of singularity through common empowerment and reciprocal stimulation’” (p. 134).

Saukko (2003) in her text on qualitative research in cultural studies, discusses this intertwining (common to new technology and web 2.0) as important to her work. Throughout this book I underline the need to pay attention to how cultural or intellectual phenomena, material circumstances and political regimes are intertwined. As I am doing the final technical edit to this book, I am, once again, reminded of the importance of these interactions. I correct the pages, knowing that the original cradle of cultural studies in Birmingham has just been ‘restructured’, and my own conditions of work in Leicester have deteriorated beyond any recognition due to ongoing ‘reorganization’ (p. 8).
The world cannot be boiled down to discourses that explain subjectivity and agency in a way that is neat and tidy. Saukko’s worry in this regard leads me to the concepts of the rhizome and becoming.

Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) well known concept of the rhizome is similar to my own use of the word “web.” The rhizome is a sort of ontology and epistemology, in that it explains how knowledge can be organized and understood, but also being itself. My bloggers are rhizomes, just as the way they understand the world is rhizomatic.

Unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. The rhizome is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes. Two or even directly three, four, five, etc… It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather, dimensions in motion (p. 21).

The concept of “becoming” (p. 21) is also an important one to Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy. The rhizome is always becoming, there is no finished endpoint to knowledge or being; both are always in process. These two concepts enhance the somewhat static concepts of subjects and discourses. Though historically contingent, and open to shifting, subjects and discourses, at least in the work of Foucault, are static for a time until some sort of opening happens where a shift in epistemes can occur. The rhizome complicates that understanding of a shift.

Another example of this post-individual network, is Actor Network Theory, a well-known theory that has since been revisited by Bruno Latour (and many others) in a collected volume by Law and Hassard (1999), titled *Actor-Network Theory and After*.
Latour explains ANT by deconstructing the words actor, network, theory and even the hyphen (!). Latour admits that ANT might instead be called “actant-rhizome ontology” (p. 19). He explains ANT in a Deleuzian way:

‘Actor’ is not here to play the role of agency and ‘network’ to play the role of society. Actor and network- if we want still to use those terms- designates two faces of the same phenomenon, like waves and particles, the slow realization that the social is a certain type of circulation that can travel endlessly without ever encountering either the micro-level- there is never an interaction that is not framed- or the macro-level- there are only local summing up which produce either local totalities (‘oligoptical’) or total localities (agencies). To have transformed the social from what was a surface, a territory, a province of reality, into a circulation, is what I think has been the most useful contribution of ANT (p. 18-19).

This circulation is similar to a rhizome, a becoming, a web of discourses and subjectivities, that also includes another controversial component the material, or non-human actors.

Barad (2003), a science studies scholar also brings the material back to ontology. She allows for an agency of nonhuman bodies and calls for a more network-like approach to agency and being.

“We” are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places in the world; rather, we are part of the world in its ongoing intra-activity. The particular configuration that an apparatus takes is not an arbitrary construction of “our” choosing; nor is it the result of causally deterministic power
structures. “Humans” do not simply assemble different apparatuses for satisfying particular knowledge projects but are themselves specific local parts of the world’s ongoing reconfiguring (p. 829).

This text is reminiscent of Butler’s notion of a fully produced human body and is useful to me as I study women and blogs “intra-acting” in particular ways. Rather than assuming that blogs are an ontological given, or construction provided by the women, perhaps I should allow for the agency of the technology itself.

Massumi (2002) further discusses the idea of becoming with objects. To him, process, movement, not being, but becoming is being. Echoing Donna Haraway (1991a), Massumi also says that the “natural and cultural feed forward and back into each other” (p. 11). And in a Deleuzian vein he describes being as an “event” always in the process of becoming, rather than as a “thingness” (p. 11). “It is not enough for process concepts of this kind to be ontological. They must be ontogenic: they must be equal to emergence” (p. 8). My bloggers, to Massumi, would be inventors (p. 12), producers (p. 13), participating in miraculation (p. 13), a sort of doing that becomes being. They are, in their actions with the material of the computer, the keyboard, the web, and other distant bodies, adding to world (if ever so meagerly (p. 13)) in their emergence.

Conclusion

This study is entangled in a varied set of literature, only a portion of which is laid out here. This literature review undertook to lay the groundwork for studying blogs in informal educational environments with an eye on gender and theorizing subjectivity and agency in new digital spaces. As such, this chapter examined a broad range of literature.
surrounding blogs. Consideration was given to how blogs were used in both formal and informal learning environments, with an extensive review of an oft-cited learning theory used in support of blogs and learning. In addition, a review of subjectivity and agency was presented to provide context for a poststructural virtual ethnography.

This chapter, then, walked the reader through the literature on blogs and learning, to show how various fields have taken up this topic, and then it framed the study from a cultural perspective in order to prepare the reader for the type of study with which she would be engaging. It situates the inquiry that takes place in this dissertation in the larger inquiry encompassing technology, learning, and cultural studies of education. This study will contribute in different ways to each of these fields.

As with any fictional enterprise however, this literature review has false boundaries limited by time, access, and the format of the dissertation. There were many times in the writing of this chapter that I felt like I was missing something or someone, multiliteracies, multiple literacies, Derrida, statistics, discussions of time, space, more Deleuze, more Butler, but mostly more, more, and more. In the next chapter, I will lay the groundwork for the method in this messy space with my (always) incomplete understanding of the literature, keeping in mind St. Pierre’s (2011) notion that “[e]ach researcher who puts the “posts” to work will create a different articulation (e.g., Hall, 1986/1996; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), remix, mash-up, assemblage, a becoming of inquiry that is not a priori, inevitable, necessary, stable, or repeatable but is, rather, created spontaneously in the middle of the task at hand, which is always already and, and, and....” (p. 31).
Chapter 3
The Post Possibilities of (Not) Being There

**Introduction**

The methods that I use to theorize learning, subjectivity and agency in new digital spaces are important in that they frame my understanding of the possibilities for analysis. In this chapter, I introduce a relatively “new” form of ethnography, virtual ethnography, and spend a good deal of space defending this ethnography as in no way lesser than an ethnography that takes place in the same physical location. This is important to my study, but also to a theorization of qualitative methods as possibilities for thinking otherwise. And so, I lay out my methods with some hesitancy, as I desire not to follow these methods to the letter, but to use them as a tool to begin to think, as a jumping off point to make the inevitable twists and turns of a qualitative study.

*Qualitative Research and Virtual Ethnography*

Qualitative research for me, as a novice researcher, entering the field in all its historicity, entering a progressive program in 2008, should always be poststructural, contested and decentered. It is difficult for me to imagine how qualitative research was ever humanist, objective and universal. I read ethnographies through the lens of a rhizomatic power/knowledge framework (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1971, 1980). Therefore, ethnographies of the modern persuasion evoke in me an uneasiness in
their easiness, an incredulity in their certainty, and even hilarity in their methods and conclusions so tidy. This is both, I think, the goal of my educational experience in the qualitative sequence at Ohio State’s School of Educational Policy and Leadership, but it is at the same time a new sedimentation, a way of thinking that I have trouble unthinking, a way that I see as the best way to do research. I am bound to it now, bound to the messiness, bound to the deconstruction of these post truth games, bound to the idea that all research is, in some way, fiction. But there is yet another problem. As I sediment, while always trying to resist that sedimentation, I try to write about my research and what appears is certainty and neat conclusions; the very neatness at which I scoff in others’ work, appears in mine. I write, I reread my writing, and I am troubled by these histories that I know I want to think anew, but which have shaped my being. The hilarity stops there. At least for a moment.

Having situated myself in a postpositivist environment, I am not unaware of the history of ethnography and qualitative research, especially in educational research. Like Glesne (2006), “I use ethnographic somewhat interchangeably with qualitative to refer to practices that seek to interpret people’s constructions of reality and identify patterns in their perspectives and behaviors” (p. 9). Qualitative research and ethnography grew out of the field of cultural anthropology and the works of ethnographers like Mead (1928) and Malinowski (1922). These traditions, while breaking ground in research methods and ways of knowing, also purported to understand an “exotic” culture objectively through observation and participation in that culture. The shame of colonial influence of the early traditional ethnographies caused anthropologists to begin to study their own cultures around the time of WWII (though this often continued colonialism as many
studied the “exotic” or marginalized of their own cultures). It was at this point that ethnographers began to include a more participatory approach with their subjects (Glesne, 2006, p. 10).

Qualitative research expanded to include various modes of research including, case study, discourse analysis, grounded theory, life history, phenomenology, and others (Glesne, 2006, pp. 11-13). In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, with more of a sensitivity to power and authority, there was a rethinking of research design that included the participants (rather than “subjects”) alongside openly ideological design that “empowered” the participants to resist oppression in some way. This was also a time when there became a more distinct delineation between qualitative and quantitative research, as qualitative research was seen as subjective and thus inferior by those who clung to a “rational” and “objective” definition of science (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This was particularly true in educational qualitative research with a double bind of illegitimacy (Lagemann, 2000), having to bear the weight of both the feminized profession of education and the skepticism of scientific knowledge available through qualitative work. Research in this vein included participant-oriented research, critical ethnography, feminist ethnography, and action research (Glesne, 2006, pp. 13-17). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) would describe the periods mentioned so far as traditional, modernist, and blurred genres (p. 3).

At the end of this period (the late 1980s) came the crisis of representation in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3), which laid the groundwork for the postmodern turn and a plethora of contested inquiry that exceeded the bounds of a term like ethnography or qualitative research. The crisis of representation was a time when
“[q]ualitative researchers sought new models of truth, method, and representation… Issues such as validity, reliability, and objectivity, previously believed to be settled, were once more problematic” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 18). Objectivist visions of qualitative research and ethnography are still prevalent in many fields, but I identify with an ethnography that embraces the crisis of representation.

Virtual ethnography arose in a time when postmodernism and poststructuralism were already a part of qualitative research. Indeed, postmodern/poststructural theories that fragment the notion of identity, truth, and reality, have a history with technology and the virtual as a useful metaphor/tool to think those concepts anew (Baudrillard, 1983; Benjamin, 1932/2008; Haraway, 1991a; Massumi, 2002). The notion of a “virtual ethnography,” however, does not imply a certain research paradigm, nor does it claim to be something other than ethnography. I espouse the term as described by Hine (2000), as an ethnography of the internet:

There is a place for a study of the everyday practices around the Internet, as a means to question the assumptions inherent in the prediction of radically different futures. Ethnography is an ideal methodological starting point for such as study. It can be used to explore the complex links between the claims which are made for the new technologies in different arenas: the home, the workplace, the mass media and the academic journal and monograph. An ethnography of the Internet can look in detail at the ways in which the technology is experienced in use… This book explores the ways in which an ethnographic perspective can be adapted to cast light on the construction of the Internet in use (p. 5).
Hine also sees the internet as both a place of culture and a cultural artifact (p 9). Each, according to her, will have differing questions and methodologies. In my own work, I am more interested in the culture of the internet as it relates to poststructural understandings of the individual, culture and the world, than the internet as cultural artifact, but I also see the recursive relationship as the practices of the culture continuously create and are created by the artifact of that same space.

In using Hine’s (2000) understanding of virtual ethnography, it seems appropriate that I create a distinction between other terms and methods of qualitative researchers that study and use virtual tools. When I speak of a virtual ethnography (sometimes also called online ethnography or cyberanthropology in social science (Beaulieu, 2004, p. 142)), I am speaking to an ethnography of virtual space rather than ethnography that makes use of digital technologies as tools of research or what Murthy (2008) calls “digital ethnography.” Though I will also be making use of digital tools as I research, and this deserves attention, the tools for data collection and analysis, though impacting the materiality of the research process (Voithofer, 2005), are not the objects of my research. The term “webnography” has also been used by market researchers in business settings as a method to get “useful” data from the information made available by interactions on the internet (Puri, 2007). Given this connection, I prefer to use the term virtual ethnography over the term webnography. The term “visual ethnography” is another term related to virtual ethnography. It is distinct, however, in that the focus is on the visual nature of technologies ranging from a photograph to video to electronic texts (Pink, 2006; Rose, 2007). As such, this sort of ethnography is focused on what imagery and placement of text can tell us about the culture of the internet or a particular culture on the internet and,
like digital ethnography, is also related, but not the main focus of my research. In a way, I am using one method (ethnography) available to those interested in internet studies ("Association of Internet Researchers," 2010) or critical cyber-culture studies (Silver, 2006) (or a plethora of other terms associated with researching the internet). My study of the internet also happens to intersect with education and feminism.

In sum, I situate virtual ethnography in the greater field of qualitative research, keeping in mind the historicity of this method and paying particular attention to a paradigm that takes the crisis of representation into account. I use virtual ethnography in a sense that the virtual space of the internet has its own cultures, cultures that can be studied using an ethnographic approach. And, though this sort of study uses the culture of the internet as its object of research, I do not ignore the fact that new issues arise with new forms of mediation, materiality and ways of being available in the space of the internet. I see the newness of these forms as a threat to traditional, humanist understandings of the subject, the body, and being. Indeed I hope to use those issues as a way to think my way into a more poststructural form of ethnography, one which St. Pierre (2011) would describe as “provocative, risky, stunning, astounding. It should take our breath away with its daring. It should challenge our foundational assumptions and transform the world” (p. 40).

*Doing Virtual Ethnography*

*Exemplars to Think with: Data Collection*

Having decided on virtual ethnography as my method, it is important to consider the doing of virtual ethnography, the types of data collected and the ways in which those data are collected and analyzed in some of the first examples of virtual ethnographies. As
such, I create here an archive of exemplars to explore and think with the current practices of the method. All of these practices differ to some degree from the practices of a “traditional” or “in-person” ethnography, but their purposes are not completely different, nor do they necessarily function in entirely new ways.

Data, in a virtual ethnography, can be collected in a variety of ways, the first being in-person. Often, however, interviews take place via chat or email. Observations can occur offline, while participants use the internet or talk about its use, or online as the ethnographer observes the web interface, visuals, text, threaded discussions, changes to the environment, participant interaction, etc. Documents can also be gathered that relate to the culture of study, statements of rules and regulations, an “about page,” news articles related to the community or practice, etc. Schoneboom (2007), in her ethnography of workbloggers, “employees who write online about their work” (p. 404), uses all of the data listed above. She also participates in the culture of blogging by actively commenting on the blogs she studies. Her interviews were face-to-face. She describes the use of face-to-face interviews as a testimony to validity and she struggles with the fact that most of the bloggers are writing fictionalized accounts of “real” events. She assures her audience that, “[t]hrough interviews and face-to-face meetings, I have tried, as far as possible, to build a level of trust that allows me to assume that the bloggers involved in the study are being broadly honest about their occupation and are drawing their artistic inspiration from real events” (p. 410). Schoneboom is addressing a concern she has for the validity of her data as it is mediated by a greater affordance for anonymity available on the web. I will address these concerns in more detail later in this chapter.
In an early virtual ethnography of an electronic bar, Correll (1995) also used data similar to Schoneboom (2007), observation of discussions, interviews of participants (hers were mostly via email with some follow-up in person), though she did not study offline documents related to this community. She also participated in the community by posing questions to the group.

Four larger virtual ethnographies, Miller and Slater’s (2000) study of the internet in Trinidad, Boellstorff’s (2008) study of Second Life, Markham’s (1998) study of life online and Hine’s (2000) study of websites dedicated to the Louise Woodward case, all collected similar types of data though in different ways for their differing purposes. Miller and Slater, for example, were studying how the internet technologies were being taken up in a physical geographical location (the country of Trinidad), and so collected documents surrounding the infrastructure and economy of the internet, conducted face-to-face interviews with people about the internet and that were using the internet (as they hung around cybercafés). In addition, they had students conduct door-to-door questionnaires. The only virtual exchange they had with participants was as they participated in occasional online chats. This study, framed in the most traditional sense, also collected the most traditional types of data, and is reminiscent of Turkle’s (1995) early study of MUDs, video game users and other aspects of online interactions.

Boellstorff (2008), on the other hand, conducted his entire research within Second Life, observing behavior as an in-world avatar, conducting interviews and focus groups at his “home” in Second Life, and looking at documents and programs created within Second Life. Markham’s (1998) approach was similar; all interviews and fieldwork took place online. Hine’s (2000) approach was somewhat mixed as compared to the three
previous studies. Hine observed websites related to the Louise Woodward case by tracking changes across websites, following links between them, reading news stories and newsgroup discussions online regarding the case. Interviews were conducted with the developers of some of the websites via email and with the newsgroup community via their discussion boards. She also collected data offline including newspapers, videos of news commentary, and field notes of thoughts and observations.

As I reflect on the types of data that were collected and the ways in which they are collected, I am reminded of a particularly passionate paper, read by Cynthia Dillard at last year’s (2010) International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. She read a story about her work in Ghana, describing the smells and the sounds of the local market in great detail. She also provided bright visual imagery of what the people were wearing and how sweat dripped from her face in the heat of the day. It occurs to me that this sort of sensual detail can scarcely be had in the screen-mediated text and two-dimensional image-based environment of a virtual ethnography. Though I contend that I am just as much “there” in my work as Cynthia Dillard was, I cannot describe for my audience in all of that sensual detail, what it is like to be in a blog, to interact with a blog, indeed much of the sensual is absent. Wittel (2000) suggests that a virtual ethnography conducted entirely in virtual spaces is not an ethnography at all, but a simple document or content analysis. I disagree.

However little sensual detail is involved, I contend that even when virtual ethnography is “purely virtual” (if there is such a thing) that it is still ethnography for two reasons, 1) ethnography does not demand physical being in the traditional sense; privileging the physical world and the body is privileging a humanist, “scientific” notion
that we can only know by seeing, touching, measuring and 2) spaces available on the internet are artifacts in some sense composed mostly of text, but are cultures in their own right. They are not static documents waiting to be analyzed, they part of a dynamic culture, one that can be studied ethnographically, with or without physical presence.

St. Pierre (2008), a poststructural feminist researcher decenters voice and presence in qualitative research argues that, “For poststructuralists presence and other related concepts of qualitative inquiry – e.g., voice, interview, narrative, experience – cannot secure validity, the truth” (p. 321). “Being there,” however, is no longer a guarantor of validity, as “being there” does not guarantee access to the truth. “Being there” does give access to a certain kind of truth, and being in a virtual ethnography gives access to a different kind of truth, both equally fictitious. That, as ethnographers, is really all we can hope for and acknowledge… partial truths. But, Talburt (2004) would say that this partial truth does not mark the end of the practicality of ethnography because ethnography must not be concerned with finding the “real,” but about a “dialogic rather than a monologic research… that seek[s] less to persuade than to invite readers to form relations with the text by offering ‘a balance between engagements with others and self-reflective considerations with those engagements’ (Goodall, 2000, p. 14)” (p. 95). Virtual ethnography is a working example of how ethnographers can resist the desire to study the “real” and how they can rethink what in fact is “real.”

Though Wittel (2000) remarks on the dangers that the material presented online can be removed at any time, it is equally likely that data collected online is persistent and replicable (boyd, 2008) posing a different set of problematizations. “While spoken interaction is ephemeral and local, texts are mobile, and so available outside the
immediate circumstances in which they are produced” (Hine, 2000, p. 50). Indeed, texts on the internet are often archived over several years, making them available to searching and researching. What this means is that texts in a virtual environment can travel greater distances, can be copied and changed, and can resist and transgress a traditional notion of place and time. This can be an advantage to an ethnographer as data is more readily available and easier to save and record, but this can also be a problem as it can be difficult to locate the positioning of the text and to understand if and how it has changed forms over time, create an overwhelming amount of data and posing a greater threat to participant anonymity. Here again though is the poststructural possibility inherent in a virtual ethnography, the chance to rethink place as bounded or unbounded in different ways with differing effects of time and space (Hine, 2000, p. 58).

Data collection on the internet involves gathering existing textual material and almost entirely dismisses the need for transcription, a well-entrenched process of social science research. This causes some angst in the social science community. “If the ethnographer is expected to go somewhere, and bring back a story, then what happens when it seems that the story is already written, and what is more, authored by more legitimate writers” (Beaulieu, 2004, p. 155)? The textuality of the internet does allow for many “pre-transcribed” sorts of data collection, but it does not entirely undermine the need for field notes regarding the researchers thoughts and interactions of the participants. This may be another issue, however, that can help ethnographers reconsider being as a result of the restrictions/affordances of research on the internet.

Orgad (2009) makes the decision to include offline data in internet inquiry. Indeed, Markham and Baym (2009) and Hine (2000) also begin discussions regarding the
boundaries of this sort of research. Should online data collection be collected with offline data collection? Do they need each other? Can they be considered comparable? Markham and Baym (2009) submit that it depends on the type of question you ask of your research (p. 38). For some sorts of virtual ethnography, offline data will be a natural part of the phenomenon being studied, for others it will be less so. While making this assessment, she warns that researchers should not imply that online data is somehow not as authentic as offline data, but as another way to contextualize and to understand your data, if it seems like a reasonable source for a particular study (p. 39). In addition, this type of decision may also have to do with ontological understandings of identity. Is there such as thing as a “complete” identity? Must we see or talk to a person in order to understand their identity fully (if this is possible)?

Exemplars to Think with: Data Analysis

A variety of data analysis techniques are used with regard to virtual ethnographies. Textual analysis is commonly used. For example, Denzin (1999) uses discourse analysis alongside a “method of instances.” “The goal is to achieve a strong reading and an adequate analysis of a particular instance or sequence of experience (Psathas, 1995, p. 50)” (p. 113). Mitra and Cohen (1999) espouse a critical textual analysis as a way to “focus on the central aspect of the WWW – its textuality – and begin to answer questions about the WWW by considering the unique characteristics of the text” (p. 181), including its intertextuality, nonlinearity, interactivity, multimodality, and connectivity. Textual approaches seem well suited to a virtual ethnography.

Content/textual/discourse analysis techniques are advocated by virtual ethnographers, but are also used in conjunctions with other analytic methods. A sort of
general grounded and a priori theorizing is another technique used often by virtual
ethnographers in the same way it has become popular for ethnographers in general
(Boellstorff, 2008; Correll, 1995; Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998; Miller & Slater, 2000;
Schoneboom, 2007). The specific method of data analysis, however, in each of these
studies was not explicitly stated. Many did not mention specific techniques for analysis
at all; rather they may have mentioned that analysis was ongoing alongside data
collection and that themes were generated.

Also important to data analysis in virtual ethnography is the consideration of the
unit of analysis. Early studies in computer mediated communication, a socio-
psychology-centered field that works to understand how human beings related via
computer technology, focused on the individual. Work such as Turkle’s The Second Self
(1984) and Life on the Screen (1995) looked at the experiences of individuals using the
computer interface and communicating with others through the interface. Turkle
observed and interviewed her participants in “real” life as individuals having an
experience. Others such as Garton, Haythornwaite and Wellman (1999) call for a
network approach, in which the individual is part of a virtual community and must be
explored as such.

Types of data, data collection and data analysis, though similar in form and
function to a traditional ethnography are mediated differently in the context of the new
materiality of a virtual environment. The issues surrounding how to conduct a virtual
ethnography are not, I argue, in tension with what counts as ethnography, but a chance to
rethink the underlying assumptions, ontology and epistemology that traditional
ethnography has been afforded in the past.
Challenges of Virtual Ethnography

The Research Question

A virtual ethnography may, in some sense constrain the type of research question that can be asked. Since the interactions found online are different types of interactions, mediated by the computer, the question asked would be different than a question about interactions in physical environments. Though no interaction is truer than another, those taking place over the computer are materially different and mediated in a different way than in-person behavior. Wysocki (1998), in her study of visual communication, encourages the analysis of seemingly invisible design structures (including web pages) as influencing the meaning of a text. Wittel (2000) laments the lost material “complexity” (p. 9) that cannot be found in virtual environments as a result of this mediation. And while Orgad (2009) would say that it is just about asking a different kind of question, Talburt (2004) would instead resist the search for the “real” in qualitative research. Talburt claims, “[b]ecause it is relational and social, ethnography offers contingent knowledges that are never self-evident but whose meanings and implications must be constantly reinterpreted” (p. 98). Whether virtual or in-person, ethnography can only produce a “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1991b).

Anonymity

Another way that the research question in a virtual ethnography may seem constrained is that, due to the mediated nature of the internet, it may not be possible to know if the person participating is representing themselves accurately. This means that a researcher cannot assume, as he/she formulates a research question, that the participants will be who they say they are. This is similar to the problematization of identity when
considering the collection of offline data (see p. 71 of this dissertation). In real life, people misrepresent themselves in many ways, but there is an increased layer of anonymity without the physical presence of the body, though as I mentioned before, I would not privilege the physical world as unmediated nor would St. Pierre (2008), Haraway (1991a) or Butler (1990). Having said that, Wittel (2000) and Murthy (2008) worry about the accuracy of information and the validity of the research if participants are not who they say they are. Boellstorff (2008), however, in his study of Second Life, purported to study this virtual world “on its own terms” and so conducted the entire ethnography within Second Life.

I took their [participants] activities and words as legitimate data about culture in a virtual world. For instance, if during my research I was talking to a woman, I was not concerned to determine if she was “really” a man in the actual world, or even if two different people were taking turns controlling “her” (p. 61).

In the case of a virtual world (and in the case of most poststructural research), it is possible to consider different types of validity that do not lend themselves to a humanist understanding of a knowable reality.

The issue of an authentically represented person and humanist validity are the same sorts of issues that might underlie challenges to the claims that can be made in a virtual ethnography as well. If a person is not who he/she says he/she is online, then what can you claim to know about that phenomenon? Perhaps you can claim to know the workings of that particular phenomenon, but you could not claim to know a larger more universal truth. This point is well aligned with poststructural thought and a cultural studies approach. “Given the existing work, the challenge facing cultural studies Internet
scholarship is to retain its critique of realism while at the same time speaking to the real” (Sterne, 1999, p. 255). In addition, what claims can a virtual ethnographer make about more universal understandings, if his/her research is situated in an online environment? Orgad (2009), again, would wonder if the online world and the offline world are comparable and say that the research question drives the types of data you collect, and therefore the types of claims that can be made.

*Validity*

Validity in a virtual ethnography is clearly an issue that varies by epistemology and ontology of the researcher. How can a virtual ethnography be valid if it is not certain who the participants are, if time is not spent “being there” with the participants and if the researcher potentially never leaves the comfort of her office chair? Validity, in poststructuralism, is a contested term with implications for qualitative research. Britzman (1995) in her piece on poststructural ethnography declares that it is necessary to:

revision the project of ethnography beyond the structuring regulations of the true and the false, the objective and subjective, and the valid and the invalid… disturb the impulse to settle meanings… to think the unthought in more complex ways, to trouble confidence in being able to “observe” behavior, “apply the correct technique,” and “correct” what is taken as a mistake (p. 236).

Thus, virtual ethnography seems a great opportunity to be truer to the difficult task of reading beyond a stable validity in poststructural inquiry.

Alternatives to traditional validity and methods of validity have been proposed by different authors. Lather (1986) in her early work, calls for a “catalytic validity” or one
that provides the research participants an opportunity to “grow” during the research (this was a neo-Marxist take on validity). Her later work, though, rethinks validity further, calling for a poststructural transgressive validity, one with incorporates ironic, paralogical, rhizomatic and voluptuous validities (Lather, 2007, pp. 128-129). With regard to triangulation as a method to improve validity, Richardson (1997) proposes crystallization as an alternative. “I propose that the central imaginary for ‘validity’ for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach” (p. 92). Validity and the means of evoking validity in virtual ethnography are problematized just in much the same way they are problematized by poststructural theorists.

*Rigor and Quality*

Much has been made of rigor and quality in qualitative research, oftentimes in response to the “science envy” of early forms that continues today, particularly in educational research as No Child Left Behind called for “data-driven” decision-making to increase test scores. The National Science Foundations’s (“NSF 04-219, Workshop on Scientific Foundations of Qualitative Research, July 11-12, 2003,” 2010) guidance for developing qualitative research projects is also a good example. Lincoln (1995) and others, however, have tried to take a more flexible look at quality in qualitative research, bringing the methods and goals of this type of research to the fore. Lincoln distinguishes this “new” paradigm from a more “purely scientific” one, not as second-rate, but as having different commitments: 1) to relations with respondents, 2) toward the use of
inquiry to foster action and 3) to research that promotes social justice (p. 277). While noting that different methods call for different sorts of quality criteria and while also noting the dangers of criteria, she points to several emerging criteria for quality in qualitative research: positionality (all texts are situated), community (as arbiter of quality), voice, critical subjectivity, reciprocity, and sharing privilege (p. 278-285).

Virtual ethnographers, using a somewhat contested, new form of qualitative research, have begun discussions regarding quality and rigor as well. Hine (2000), formulated “principles of virtual ethnography” (p. 63-65) in her text dedicated to the method. These principles were created as she “develop[ed] an approach to the Internet which embraces complexity offered by this form of mediated interaction” (p. 63). These principles include: 1) sustained presence and participation of the ethnographer in the field setting, 2) attention to context, 3) investigating the remaking of space through mediated interactions, 4) a focus on flow and connectivity rather than place, 5) exploring boundaries throughout study, 6) attention to temporal dislocation for intermittent immersion (at best), 7) necessarily partiality (strategic relevance over faithful representation), 8) intensive engagement with mediated interaction requires reflexivity, 9) the notion that all forms of interaction are ethnographically valid, not just face-to-face (“The shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available technologies is the ethnography. This is ethnography in, of and through the virtual” (p. 65)), and 10) virtuality that is taken as ‘not quite’ real, but “adequate for exploring relations of mediated interaction… It is adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (p. 65). Though these principles are not necessarily explicit guidelines for rigor or quality, they address some of the “stuck
places” (Lather, 1998) of virtual ethnography and ways to think through these “stuck places” in an effort to model rigor and quality in this messy method.

Markham and Baym (2009), also discuss quality and rigor, not specifically in virtual ethnography, but in internet inquiry more generally. Indeed, they acknowledge that one of their goals in putting their text together was that qualitative internet research could “use a healthy dose of rigor” (p. 177). They also call attention to the difficulty in establishing standards, but recognize that there should be some sort of pragmatic criteria for quality. After reviewing exemplary internet studies, they list quality as: “1) grounded in theory and data, 2) demonstrating rigor in data collection and analysis, 3) using multiple strategies to obtain data, 4) taking into account the perspective of participants, 5) demonstrating awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process, and 6) taking into considerations interconnections between the internet and the life-world within which it is situated” (p. 179). Though Markham and Baym’s indicators of quality are applicable, they also seem to be applicable to all qualitative research, regardless of whether or not they are virtual. Hine’s (2000) principles, though more amorphous and with less direction, are more relevant to the difficulty of the virtuality of the research.

**Ethical Issues**

While validity, rigor and quality continue to be fleshed out, ethical issues involved in virtual ethnography resulted in ethical guidelines created by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) in 2002 (Ess & AoIR ethics working group, 2002), which allow for consideration of a variety of projects. As internet inquiry was on the rise, several issues spurred these guidelines. These issues included, protection of participants, anonymity of participants, and the conflation of public and private in this new space.
Regarding the protection of participants, Murthy (2008) and Wittel (2000) both discuss the age of participants as a potential problem. Due to the mediated nature of communication via the internet, it is difficult to know if the person you are interacting with is really who they say they are. This may be less important when understanding the culture of that space, but it becomes more important when one considers the ethics of the situation. If this person is under 18 or in some other more vulnerable group, they should be afforded more privacy and protection. However, if this person is misrepresenting herself, then her protection becomes more difficult to achieve. In the same way, consent becomes a thornier issue on the internet. How can a researcher achieve consent to study a message board with thousands of participants? The AoIR’s guidelines suggest checking the site for posted rules of the community, considering the site’s level of publicity, and determining if emailing consent forms or sending them in the mail is more reasonable (p. 6).

Consent also brings to light another ethical concern, that of the anonymity of the participants. If the participant uses a pseudonym and wants to participate, emailing or mailing a consent form may reduce his level of anonymity. In addition and in opposition to the problem of increased anonymity offered by a mediated environment, the searchability and replicability of the internet as noted by Beaulieu (2004) and boyd (2008), contributes to a reduced anonymity. Even if researchers use pseudonyms of pseudonyms, if they put direct quotes from a message board in their published work, a reader could easily use a search engine to find a direct quote and the participant. The AoIR (2002) guidelines suggest that a researcher gain consent from the moderator of a
group rather than individual members to protect anonymity and could consider paraphrasing text (p. 7).

A few further ethical issues less considered by the AoIR, but considered by other authors were lurking, access, and power. “Lurking” is tangentially considered by the AoIR, but is specifically mentioned by Beaulieu (2004), Hine (2000) and boyd (2008). Lurking is visiting a site while not participating or letting the members of the site know that you are watching and/or studying them. Lurking is problematic in that it permits the appearance of a certain “objective distance,” while not allowing for the intimacy and participation called for by virtual ethnographers such as Boellstorff (2008), Correll (1995), Schoneboom (2007), Hine (2000), and Kendall (1999) (and ethnographers in general). Lurking also violates an assumed privacy of many participants online, intending to participate in conversations, not to be spied on or studied unknowingly, even if they are in a public of sorts. It might be helpful, according to AoIR (2002) to ask: Is the site like a blog where the author is purporting to broadcast to an audience or is it a discussion site where participants have more of a sense of privacy (p. 7)?

Regardless, in my own study of a group of blogging women, I asked for permission from each of my bloggers to study their blogs, to identify them by name if they used their real name (as I knew that by using portions of their blog, they might be identified), and to quote from their email interviews. Since my participants were adults, this option allowed them to decide if they felt comfortable with their information being shared and studied in this way. Even though blogs are public documents and permission may not have been necessary, I found it more ethical to do so.
Access and Power

Access and power are two other important ethical considerations in a virtual ethnography. The digital divide (Voithofer & Foley, 2007) is neglected in many arenas of education and educational research and should be considered with care particularly in qualitative research in virtual settings. How does studying communities and interactions online limit the types of participants that can be studied? This is as much a question of access as of power. The question is not only who has access, but who has the ability to use that access in ways that researchers might find “analytically interesting” and how has this use been shaped by gender, sexuality and race? How are certain groups kept from certain communities by, for example, sexual innuendo (Kendall, 2009) or racial indifference/bigotry? And further, how will research on small groups of rather elite standing contribute to the exclusion of certain groups from new technologies? These ethical issues should be a concern to researchers as well, particularly if we follow the guidelines presented by Lincoln (1995) for quality in qualitative research as an activity for social justice.

The IRB

The institutional review board (IRB) is the governing body for research conducted at academic institutions. Since IRBs were created with mostly quantitative medical research in mind, social science has been struggling to explain the ways that concepts like “harm” is different for this sort of research. Adding virtuality to qualitative research presents further problems for IRB approval including those already hashed out by AoIR guidelines including consent, anonymity, identity and privacy. In some ways IRBs can be too cautious in their reviews of internet inquiry, but in other ways, they can be naïve in
their understandings of the ways in which computer technology works. For example, the
IRB regulations do not take into consideration that “existing” material on the internet can
mingle with new material, making it nearly impossible for a researcher to declare that she
will only be accessing existing material (though this is still an option for an expedited
process). In addition, internet research can more easily (and even accidentally) cross
international borders wherein international laws of privacy may need to be considered by
the IRB. IRBs also may not take into consideration conceptions of privacy by
participants in “public” forums on the internet. Though many of these forums may be
public record, participants should know that they are being studied. The researcher, then,
must be ethical in a way that the IRB has perhaps not considered due to their limited
understanding of networked publics and technologies.

In sum, virtual ethnography is a challenging method that requires that researchers
consider the questions they ask, the claims that they make, the validity, rigor and quality
that is possible, and ethical concerns. In a traditional ethnography, a researcher might not
have to step into their field site and wonder about the nature of the environment, how she
exists, what counts as existence and what is real. Virtual ethnography thrusts these
questions upon the researcher in a productively burdensome and delightfully
poststructural way.

Methods for the Current Study

Research Design

The current study is a qualitative study using a virtual ethnographic approach
(Hine, 2000). I observed the blogs of these six women in graduate school by reading
posts (that include text, links, images, and videos), going through archives, reading
others’ comments, investigating hyperlinks, and studying the design of the blog,
including the about page. I also participated in the blog space by writing/commenting on
the blogs. I interviewed and dialogued with my participants via email. I also asked the
bloggers to join me in different experiments of blogging (record themselves reading a
blog post, creating a video to post, creating artwork to post, directly addressing issues
that are left out of blogging on the blog, exceeding the bounds of the blog, etc.). (See
Appendix C for the data corpus). I studied blogs as small cultures that interact in various
ways, but I also “played with” those cultures as I/we studied them. The collection of data
took place for a period of approximately 12 weeks between January and April 2011
(though data collection lingers).

This study is a virtual ethnography of these women and their spaces on the
internet (acknowledging that spaces are never really contained), but I attempt to push the
term virtual ethnography further to contribute to the literature on the method itself as well
as to the literature on learning, subjectivity and agency on the internet.

Sample

This study followed 6 blogs. The subjects in the pilot study were found using
internet searching, social networking sites and, in person, at conferences and in classes.
The criteria that had to be met were that the subject had to 1) be or have been a woman in
graduate school and 2) maintain a blog. In this study, I approached the same participants
from my pilot study, getting agreement from three of the five original participants and
sought out several more, eventually being granted permission from three additional
women. One woman entered the study late, sending me her interview questions after much data analysis had taken place (See Appendix B for timeline).

Since the blogs I studied are already public and available on the internet, I used the names provided by those participants (on their blogs), which only included the first name of each participant. I received consent to identify them in this way in my study.
Finding Participants

Hooray, I discovered a way to find female PhD students on blogger! When I was following blogrolls, I clicked on Occupation: PhD student on one of my would-be participant’s profiles and it led me to 4,000 users that identify themselves as PhD students. It’s relatively obvious which are female, but it is still not *easy* to find what I’m looking for. Many blogs are dead, or are commercially focused, many just began, some are in other languages, etc. I wonder as I browse, though, how I am really pre-sorting these potential participants. I’m not clicking on those without a picture because I assume that if they don’t have a picture, they really don’t have the skill to have a "real" blog. I’m also passing by girls I think have too nice of a picture because I think they might be vapid and boring. I’m clicking on all kinds of women that I think might be "interesting." They are from South Africa, India and Malaysia or parts of Europe. This is a different kind of bias, toward the "Other." What am I missing as a result of this? And, I can’t help but think of all of that data I am missing, because of my selection or because they don’t want to be in the study or because they don’t have time. A mother and a PhD student? Some of these women just won’t be able to fill out my silly survey and "experiment" with their blogs. (On a side note, a reader of my blog responded to my request for female bloggers to study... she saw me a conference and follows my blog, Huzzah!)

On another methodological side note- as I was crawling through Catherine’s and Vicki’s blogs, capturing one post per month for the life of the blog, I was getting a feel for their blog, but I was also awash in memories from my own life that were going on in parallel with theirs. In 2003 when Catherine was an undergrad, I was thinking that I had just finished undergraduate and was just starting my first teaching job. In 2005, when Vicki was a Teach for America Volunteer, I remembered teaching at my second job. In 2008 flipping through Vicki’s life as a grad student, I thought about how I was just then trying to decide if I would go back to graduate school and quit teaching. What does this mean? Does this data mean anything? Is this psychoanalysis beyond my work? What would Bettie say about it... dream data? Memory data? Hmm.
Meet the Bloggers

Cathy, Vicki and Laurie (myself) continued from the pilot study. Catherine, Katie and Sarah are new to this study. The previous figure, and several more throughout the chapter, contain blog posts from my private dissertation journal/blog\(^1\).

Cathy is a doctoral student in Ireland at Dublin City University. She began blogging part way through her academic career and was a more reluctant blogger. She blogs the most infrequently of the bunch claiming that since she studies blogging, she felt the need to create a blog in order to establish and online presence. Her blog can be found at http://rumblingstrips.blogspot.com/.

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\(^1\) Please note all dissertation journal/blog entries are as is, misspellings, grammar mistakes and all.
Notes on Cathy's Blog Design

Cathy has a blogger blog with a pretty nature background, a blurred blue sky and some trees. She has been blogging sporadically since 2005. She notes this in her blogger profile/about page. She's also from Dublin and she happens to study blogs and youth. Cool. Her blog is called Rumble Strips and along the side of her blog she has a badge that shows that she has a creative commons license (which makes sense since she studies blogging and digital things), a list of academic, Irish, and French blogs that she reads (she is bilingual... sweet), a blog archive, a badge that shows that she is a part of the Association of Internet Researchers (also makes sense) and a list of random books that she is reading (with images of book covers). While scrolling through her ten most recent posts on the homepage it seems as though she likes to post videos and comics. She has also used the blog space for a book club and has allowed another person to blog her book club response (which is sort of interesting).

A couple of notes about Cathy's blog. Since she blogs sporadically, but usually at least every month, my once a month data collection puts her on equal footing with those that have significantly more posts. Maybe I should have done a percentage of posts? Or, maybe it doesn't matter how often? In any case, the once a month posts will give me an overview of the life of the blog, a progression if you will. It's also interesting that Cathy posts video from youtube and comics from other sites to her blog. How do I go about analyzing these. They aren't necessarily hers and they are images. Should I explain what's in the video or the images? Should I just note them? Should I be asking permission of the original creator to analyze them? I have actually re-blogged several of these things and I noticed this as I was going through her blog. How has her blog leaked into mine? How has her blog allowed mine to share data that's both not mine or hers? What does this say about "our" blogs? Where do these videos and images come from anyway? How do they function in blogs?
Vicki began graduate school in 2004 at Rice University and defended her dissertation last year in 2010. She began blogging the year she started her graduate studies. In Vicki’s words, “Running With Carrots is my blog, where I write about the shady underbelly of academia, my low-budget adventures in Texas, and the very esoteric topics I ponder while sitting alone at home, supposedly working on becoming a tenured professor.” Her blog can be found at http://runwithcarrots.wordpress.com/.
Notes on Vicki's Blog Design

Vicki's page has a giant, hand-drawn carrot as the banner. Did her husband draw this picture? We learn in her about page, one of the two tabs at the top of the page, that her husband is an artist. The title of her blog is RUNNING WITH CARROTS, in all caps, which might be of her choosing, but which might also be the theme that she selected. I notice that she has changed the background color of the site. It was a pale green, and it's now a light orange (an homage to carrots?). Her URL is runwithcarrots.wordpress.com, which suggests that this site is freely hosted by wordpress. Her favicon is a tiny picture from the Victorian period, as we know that Vicki, or Victoria is a Victorian scholar. How appropriate. Is this an example of how language frames our ways of being? Along the side of the homepage, there are links to what she is reading in print, what she reads online, and what she is rereading of her own blog posts. That last section is new and as I enter her site, I am drawn to it. I wonder what posts she would feature and I click on them all and I reread parts. I have read all of these posts before as they are all written within the last two years. She's a good writer. Well, she's an English PhD, so this is to be expected. I scroll down the page, scanning the last ten posts to get a feel for her space here. She doesn't blog daily, rather she chooses to blog once every two weeks or so and her blog posts aren't like mine, a daily digest of the goings on of my life, they are observations of quirky things or funny experiences. She also uses small visuals, real pictures of her or of objects to which she is referring. They are well placed and her blogs looks appealing and interesting. As I'm looking at her blog, I'm feeling self-conscious about mine. Hers is a collection of essays, mine is constant, endless drivel. She keeps too much emotion out of her posts, mine sometimes cross the line. Why am I worried about this? Blogs are different. Hers is better though somehow. She could be proud of this whereas I am slightly embarrassed of mine. A hiring committee would like hers, but they would worry about mine. Why do I do this? Why do I put myself out there? Why can't I write for myself? Why don't I matter to myself enough?

Back to the data collection/analysis... her about page has been the same for quite awhile. It's witty and well written. She tells about the places that she's lived throughout her life as a way of describing herself. She mentions that her husband is an artist and that she is a PhD and a few other quirky details (she loves Arby's roast beef sandwiches). I like her about page. I can hear her voice in it, which might be an important detail. I know Vicki in person, but I haven't seen her in person for going on 12 years. We were friends for one year our freshman year of college at American University in Washington, DC. Then, I transferred to another school and we lost touch. Vicki is a kind and gentle spirit. She seems older than she is and she also, even at 18, seemed to know exactly who she was already. She's also funny in an unassuming way. And, she has red hair and I remember how she said that she couldn't ever wear pink because it clashed with her hair. And I remember that she always wore a crucifix, as she is Catholic as am I. We had a little Catholic bond. Although I don't think she practices anymore, nor do I. Although, I could be wrong.

I also just noticed the archives on the side of the page. She's been blogging since 2004. That's impressive.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Blog Post January 27, 2011
Laurie is me. I began my blog the day I began a doctoral program at Ohio State University in 2008. I am in my third year of doctoral studies and describe myself on my blog as “a writer, PhD candidate, runner, vegetarian, blogger, teacher, wife, travel enthusiast and mildly crazy person.” My blog can be found at http://bugsii.com/.

Catherine is a doctoral student at Ohio State University. She began writing her blog the day she declared her decision to major in Spanish as an undergraduate in 2003. The title and tagline of her blog are “i should probably be doing something else: musings, gripings, observations, and shiny objects.” Her blog can be found at http://theloonybin.blogspot.com/.
Notes on Catherine's Blog Design

Catherine's blog design has been the same since I've been reading the blog for about a year and a half. It's a turquoise colored blogger blog. The title of the blog is "i should probably be doing something else" with a tagline of "musing, gripings, observations, and shiny objects." The URL of her blog is theloonybin.blogspot.com. Catherine is funny and it shows in her posts. Her voice is very much a part of her posts. I also have known Catherine in real life (like Vicki), but it was in a Very Serious Foucault class, so there wasn't very much funny banter going on. Still, I can here the way she talks by the way that she uses punctuation and caps, etc. in her posts.

Right now, in the top right corner of the page, she has a little icon of a guy from the television show Modern Family, with the words "WTF Why The Face" on it. She also lists what she reads online, links to her friends' blogs, a blog archive (since 2003), her photo blogs and a series of 15 "team blog" posts that she wrote with a friend from about 2004-2006. It appears as though she and her friend were in the same room and went back and forth with the computer to create a blog post. They are funny as well. From scanning the page, you can tell that Catherine has a good sense of humor and that she enjoys pop culture (particularly television and movies). Each post has a funny title and the text of the posts are scattered with varying uses of text that allow her voice to come through. The posts don't appear "neat" like Vicki's. Of course, this is a blogger blog, which is a little bit of a "less neat" shell in my opinion. You can also tell by scanning that Catherine is personable and has a good deal of friends. Her friends also appear to be active online as only one of her posts on her homepage right now have zero comments. I am jealous. Wait, I just checked Vicki's page and she, too, has only one post with zero comments. I am a loser.

Onto the about page... Catherine has a nice picture of herself looking all grad student professional like and she lists lots of her "favorites" as this is how blogger frames the about page. These favorites, again, show her love for pop culture and her sense of humor.
Katie is a doctoral student at Ohio University. She began a photo blog in September of 2009 to document her travels, though recently and as a result of her participation in this study, she has begun to blog more about her daily life as a graduate student. She is also an 8th grade Math teacher. Her blog can be found at [http://travelsbykatie.tumblr.com/](http://travelsbykatie.tumblr.com/).

Figure 5: Screenshot of Blog Post January 31, 2011
Sarah was a graduate student that took a break to teach English in China for two years. She came late to the study and is not fully integrated into my data. Though she began her blog in 2006 and blogged intermittently until her decision to teach, her blog now documents her experiences teaching and living in Asia. The title and tagline of Sarah’s blog are, “Not all those who wander are lost…: The wanderings of a twenty-something mid-westerner.” Her blog can be found at http://www.sarahsandersonwanderlust.blogspot.com/.

**Detailed Study Procedures**

I observed these blogs by studying the posts on the site (which include text, links, comments and visuals), the design of the site, and the profile of the author. I began the study by sending around a list of interview questions (see Appendix A) via email. As I was waiting on the questions to be completed, I observed the design of the site of each of the participants and took field notes. I then observed the ten most recent posts on the blog and mined the archives for one post per month for the life of the blog. I used this sample size to begin to code for themes using what might be similar to grounded theory, but with poststructural theories informing my choice of codes. As I began receiving the interview questions back from my participants, I also coded those interviews and started to formulate follow up questions for my participants. These questions were based on the themes that I was finding in both the posts and the interviews. The follow up questions served to understand responses more deeply and as a sort of member check with my participants. I chose not to do a full-scale member check with my participants as most of my coding was the result of a priori theorizing not shared with my participants.
Once I had collected both sets of interviews and had observed each blog, I set up a dialogue around the practices of blogging by asking the women in the study to participate in different blogging practices, such as posting a picture that represents their blogs, and then having a discussion on the blogs about how the picture represents their blogs in different ways. In this way, I attempted to use the blog not only as an object of study, but as a space to interact with the bloggers. I asked the bloggers to participate in one “experiment” and of their choosing.
Internal Validity

In order to acknowledge study bias as much as possible, I reflected on my own experience using blogs as a female doctoral student and I wrote these reflections and musings in various formats (art, fiction, nonfiction, blog posts) in order to explore blogging, the bloggers and myself rigorously throughout the study. I triangulated and crystallized (Richardson, 1994) the data by interviewing and dialoguing with the participants after observing them to understand their rationale regarding the writing of their blogs and by investigating the truth games inherent in an ethnographic study such as this.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data, I used a loose version of the constant comparative method (Erickson, 1985) which I played with to make my own. First, I took notes on the data gathered via observation and interview and pre-coded for themes. Then, I began to write and tried to parse out stories from the themes as they arose. I also tried to remain critical of those themes as I wrote using poststructural theories of knowledge and power, trying to remain conscious and wary of themes that “emerge” or texts being what at first they appear to “be.” I often returned to the literature on theory. Indeed, I would occasionally read for an hour or so before or after I coded and wrote, trying to get the theory into my bones and weave it throughout my analysis. I wrote continuously throughout the research process (as mentioned above), journaling and experimenting with other forms of writing as a way to create “a cabinet of curiosities designed to incite curiosity” (Stewart, 2005, p. 1041).
"Coding"

I've been spending time coding Catherine's posts (one per month through the life of her blog) and as I read, I'm putting sticky notes with potential themes, thoughts, commentary, etc. And, as I do this I wonder if I'm really coding "properly"? Are my random thoughts and words an acceptable way to code the data? Am I just making a big mess of things? What will I be able to say about subjectivity and agency in new media environments after all of this mess? I have the data corpus, blog posts, live blogs and interviews (all except for Cathy's) and I am afraid of mucking it up with silly words and phrases and/or "ruining" the beauty that's there with my intellectual commentary on what may not meant to be over thought and studied in such a way. Is anything meant to be studied though? He hum.

Methodology thoughts as I move through this virtual ethnography:

- Should I be analyzing comments of people from whom I did not receive permission? Is it public record because it's on a blog? Further, how am I to understand comments around inside jokes that took place in the "real world" and have leaked onto this blog. This blog can't make 100% sense to me because I'm only seeing it from one perspective. Would I have to live Catherine's life with her to really understand her blog? Or is this what it is to be a blog... always partial? Well, then, isn't this what it is really like to be human? Always partial? What if I studied Catherine without her blog? What would I be missing then? So, I guess I'm focusing on this person in this new space, while realizing that any angle I take of any of these women will be partial. So, how can I theorize subjectivity and agency from this angle? Does it afford new opportunities?

- Another comment about comments. Sometimes they give me clues to what's going on in Catherine's life. In this way, the other helps to construct Catherine.

- How am I to analyze links? Links to other websites, to old posts, to audio recordings that no longer exist. As I was analyzing Catherine's "older" posts (from 2003-2005), there were links that were still live, but were now historical. For example, there was a link to the Oscar winners from 2005 and to a very old video sharing site with a video of an animal doing something funny. The website looked old, you know, how old television shows from the 80s look old. They look dated and a bit off. Yet, her blog looks the same to me because the past posts are still in the current background. This is an odd way to view archives, I realize, in a new context. How does it make these posts seem even further from the present? How does it make the posts seem more present? What happens when someone searches today and finds something written in 2003?

- I'm having trouble as I go through these funny archives and I realize that the reason archives are presented in the present tense is because blogs are meant to be read daily. They are subscribed too, they are perpetually new, with the latest post appearing at the top and the older posts disappearing from the home page. They aren't really meant to be read from start to finish. They are meant to be picked up, to be joined, to walk through the present moment with the blogger. They have archives, yes, but they have very little sense of pastness. So, as I study, I'm doing something strange. I'm not really reading blogs as they should be read. Should I be doing this more instead? Is this what my experiments will bring out? I do need to get a feel for the woman, the space, the history of the thing... right?
Lastly, as part of analysis, I use the themes that I find to develop a metaphor for understanding the blogging practices of women graduate students. As a result of both my pilot study and my dissertation study, my metaphor is that of a clone. I use this metaphor as it is a scientific concept often misunderstood by the general public as a copy of a person that appears out of thin air. But, a clone is a replica of DNA that then must be grown into an adult person. It can never be an exact copy because of the changing contexts in which it finds itself and because of the ways in which those contexts are already not the same as those of the “original” person. A blog is not simply a woman put online. It may share identical DNA, but the ways in which it “grows up” in a new space with differing materials for design and existence, means that it can never be an exact replica and also means that the DNA itself can change. In some ways blogs as clones are an exemplar of a simulacra, a copy of a real that never existed. If we take Deleuze’s concept of becoming seriously, then a person in her physical body is never “the real” and so her blog is not a simple “copy” of “her,” it is a rhizomatic cyborgian clone of her culturally produced/constructed self, one which is produced/constructed in a materially different way.
More thoughts on Method (inspired by coding Catherine, Cathy and Vicki)

Collecting data online and interacting while doing it is causing me to reflect on what I’m doing as I’m trying to do a simple pre-ending reading of the blog posts that I’ve collected so far. And, I’m going to bullet my list because I like to do that.

- As I was reading Catherine’s blog, I found a post on when she started her Twitter account. So, I went and followed her on Twitter. I thought twice about it, but Twitter, unlike Facebook, is meant to be public. So, I thought, no harm no foul. But, it’s weird. It’s another type of communication that I am intruding on as a researcher, even though Twitter isn’t part of my research and even though I don’t check Twitter that often. Another connection, another line between her and I. I don’t know what she thinks about it. I decided not to befriend her on Facebook, even though I was sent a link to her page from one of her friends that I asked to be in the study. I wonder if that’s because I have more personal information on Facebook that I don’t want to share. Maybe, I’m a hypocrite. I’m friends with Vicki on Facebook, but that’s because we are friends and this happened before I found her blog (or, she found mine).

- As I read Catherine’s blog, I also wondered about being friends with her “in real life.” I think she’s funny and cool in a nerdy way and I like those types of people. She’s younger than me though and I wonder if she’s really even want to be friends with me. I wonder if she reads my blog. I wonder how crazy it would be to go hang out in real life and for me to say something like, remember that one time on your blog? Har har. That just seems stupid, but dang, I just sifted through 7 years of her life in a week or so. I know a lot about her. Time is accelerated for me, but for her, not at all. I can feel one way and she has no friendly feelings for me in the same way. I experience her, but not vice versa. It’s definitely different than if she were telling these stories to me in person, but she didn’t do that even though she shared them for “whomever” on the internet.

- As I went through Cathy’s blog, I realized that I had reposted at least two of Cathy’s posts. This is a place where her blog leaked into mine whether she knew it or not. I appropriated a part of her that she appropriated from someone else. And who knows where it went from there? This all seems very D&G.

- I also commented on one of Cathy’s post and ask her to be in my original blog study. My comment has nothing to do with the post, but I couldn’t find an email, so I put it there. I felt like I was mucking up her blog when I read that. It felt like spam.

- On Cathy and Vicki’s blogs, there were missing video links and photos (sometimes). I’m not sure if this was because I captured the pages in Zotero or if it is because the links are dead of if Vicki or Cathy removed them at some point. Where is this “missing data” and how can I analyze it? How can I use it as a tool for theorizing subjectivity, agency, and learning in this space where missing data happens all the time? Missing data... I could write a whole chapter on this.
• Another instance of “missing data” is that several of Vicki’s posts, that I’m sure I have read in the past are now password protected. I can’t see them any longer and in her interview, Vicki did note that she made some of her posts private because she felt that they were no longer appropriate to share. But, I wonder how to “code” for these. Do I ask her about them? Do I ask that she share them? Do I ask her rationale for hiding them? Are they no longer a part of my data corpus or are they holes in the data corpus or are they, in fact, still objects to be included (albeit opaque, problematic objects).

• Vicki had one post where she “updated” two days later with a special “update” at the top of the post. She did this because in her original post, she had presented her readers with a poll offering books that she was interested in reading. I participated in the poll I am sure, but she doesn’t give much data on the poll, only the winning book. This is interesting, asking her readers to interact. She does this a few other times, ending her posts with a question. I’m curious about this “updating” though because it makes me rethink the idea that a blog post should be read the day it is posted or soon thereafter. I was struggling reading blog archives because links were dead and it was he against blogging norms to comment on a post 5 years later, but if she updates some, then maybe a blog can be read later than the day of. There are also comments that appear later. But, some posts no longer make sense (especially when they refer to a “new” background or something of note in the sidebar that no longer exists). These things place an archived blog post out of sync in an interesting way.

• Also, something interesting that happened on Vicki’s blog is that she told a story from her childhood about Halloween and she said that her brother told her that at the haunted house there were real organs in the coolers. Her brother then left a comment that it was true, confirming her memory and musings. Her brother’s version of events, leaked into hers, not of her own choosing, but she didn’t oppose or remove it, so now it’s part of the story. (Along the way I found some places where the author of the blog and the commenter of the blog have removed comments. These comments are replaced by a line in italics that it has been removed... more “missing data”).

• In the last two years of Vicki’s blog, I’ve also become a part as a regular commenter. As I read and coded her posts and comments, I had to start ending myself and my own involvement. I, the researcher, was a part of the research in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. I could not untangle her from me. I snuck my way into her data.
Conclusion

The methodological approach laid out in this chapter is designed to provide tools as a starting point to begin to think and theorize learning, subjectivity and agency in new digital spaces, such as a blog. This approach is traditional in some ways (observations, interviews, coding, etc.). In other ways it is unconventional, becoming dialogic (“experiments,” writing as a method of inquiry), artistic, and allowing for cracks in traditional methods so that a leakage of theorizing may occur and may transform the methods from some systematic approach into an experience put into words to fulfill the requirements of the dissertation. This chapter laid out the history of the method and the methods of the current study in order to situate the reader in the ways in which this study would be conducted and the reasons and purposes for doing so.

In the final two chapters of this dissertation, I will analyze not only my observations and interviews, but also my experiences with the women and in the assemblage of my mind and body to put on display my floundering to understand and to theorize an experience that may have implications for learning and being.
Chapter 4

Cyborgian Possibilities and Zombied Murmurs as Virtual Invention

It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories. Though both are bound in the spiral dance, I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

Donna Haraway, 1991, p. 181

*Introduction-like Imaginings*

This chapter documents my journey with and through the virtual space of six female graduate students’ blogs. Here I look at these new spaces, what they mean for these women, how they produce women in graduate school in certain ways and how they are just as much produced within new assemblages of materiality. Woven throughout the chapter are excerpts from my private dissertation journal blog, with thoughts about method and what I call “missing data” and what Deleuze and Guattari might call “virtual” data. “The virtual is the unsaid of the statement, the unthought of thought. It is real and subsists in them, but must be forgotten at least momentarily for a clear statement to be produced as evaporative surface effect. ‘The statement is neither visible nor hidden’” (Massumi, 1992, p. 46). My missing data is both forgotten in the moment and absent entirely.
I use this chapter, then, to theorize agency out of blog practices (with “real” and missing data) toward expanding the space of the feminine. A blog allows space for an expanded subject position, as the traditional feminine subject position is both utilized and undercut in this new sort of material existence. A blog helps to make visible and bring about this expansion. Simply put: On a blog, there are more ways to be a girl.

On playing

Every moment in life is a step in a random walk. Uncannily familiar as the shore may seem, looking back reveals no Eden of interiority and self-similarity, no snowflake state to regain. Ahead lies nothing with the plane of reliability of solid ground. You can never predict where the subatomic particles will appear, or what will flash across a synapse (pure instantaneous event). Once through, however, the dice are destiny. God is a drunken gambler. Dionysus snickering at fate as he steals an extra turn.

Brian Massumi, 1992, p. 23

I have played in virtual spaces with data that I have found, produced and missed entirely. I am still playing, but I come to this chapter of the regime of truth (Foucault, 1971) that is a dissertation in the academy. Now, I must interpret the data that is transforming as I type. I worry and I fear that I cannot pin it down even for a moment. I will work with that impossibility and I will stammer through, using this experiment much as Foucault would write an experience book, to learn something that I did not know before (Foucault, 1991), a historically contingent knowing that is produced by discourses

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that I cannot think without (Butler, 1997), but working diligently toward seeing in an

effort to begin the unending work of “a thousand things to do” (Foucault, 1991). As

such, this interpretation of the data will tell the story of how this play began to take shape

into that which could be interpreted, what I produced by pausing in the play to seek

interpretation and how I begged my play to turn into something serious.

In this interpretation, however, I must make note of what I missed. The missing
data could write more dissertations than I could conceive and yet, I find myself

wondering and fearing the missing data that is exponentially piling up beside/within my

“real” data. It swallows the data that I do not miss. It taunts me with what I can never

know. This data could be the thoughts of my participants that are held back during

interviews, the thoughts they never have, the words they type and delete, the words they
cannot think, the words they would have thought without my poorly worded discourse-
heavy questions, the posts they have deleted, the ones they have yet to write, the pictures

that they take and will never post, the backgrounds they do not choose, the comments that
they do not approve, the dreams that they have, the bodily movements I will never see,

the thoughts of their readers, the discussions about the blog with family and friends, and

so on. It seems as if the missing data is far more significant in some ways, even as it

remains a mystery. What other story would I have to tell with a tiny fraction of the

missing data? How would the story that I tell here become something else entirely? How

is it already different? I will never know and yet, I must write the story I have, admit that

I have indeed learned something, and carry on as ethically as possible. All the while I

suffer from what Deleuze and Guattari call schizophrenia or a “bastard kind” of

philosophy, one that is less a pathology than a “positive process,” an “inventive
connection, expansion rather than withdrawal” (Massumi, 1992, p. 1). The missing data gets the better of me just as it pushes me to do what I can with what I have, always incomplete, contingent and partial. I acknowledge this if only to allow myself to carry on with the chapter.

Figure 11: Screenshot of Blog Post March 1, 2011
My play inside the data, both existing and missing, has provoked a story about women in graduate school and their blogs. One version of that story will be told here, using my observations, interviews, life experiences, reading and contemplations. I write through the pain of not knowing enough, not being enough and not doing justice to the experiences of these women. And through that pain, I find “themes” of their experiences as subjects and agents learning in new virtual spaces. I find, first and foremost, that they produce themselves and are produced as kind, giving, interesting human beings. In this kindness and giving, though, they feel that they are required to be guarded. They share their stresses with their real and imagined audience as much as is possible from behind that guardedness. And despite the guard they put up, they write themselves into being in a different space bringing along their bodies while hiding them and rendering them in a different form. These women write and produce missing data without apology. Most of what they write is missing, but it matters not, this is their space.

*Good Girl Cyborg*

Overall, on these blogs, the women present themselves as kind, caring, and interesting people. I hesitate to comment on the heteronormativity (Warner, 1991) inherent in words such as those when they are applied to women, especially women that are being indoctrinated into a traditionally masculine institution, but I notice them. I notice them as “zombied murmurs of social acceptability” (Massumi, 1992, p. 41). The women that write blogs about their lives in graduate school frame themselves as kind, caring and interesting. They do their best to write positively about others. They write for
their friends and families. And, they write in a way that will not lose the interest of their readers. Of course, as they frame themselves, they are also framed by discourses that they cannot think without. Even as they are writing themselves into being, they are using the tools of the discourses that have shaped them, and thus, these discourses show up even as I am hopeful of “new” spaces and “new” ways of being. (As I write that I am worried that I am fond of the “new” rather than just noticing the differences, the truth games, and the discourses of this historical moment.)

I use Foucault’s theories of technologies of the self and Butler’s understanding of gender as constructed all the way down, to understand the way that these women in graduate school construct themselves/are constructed as “good girls” even as they push boundaries and write themselves in new ways. Sometimes the good girl is overt and takes over the blog post, but other times there are simply traces, shadows, apologies. The heteronormativity that surrounds the way that women should be, even educated women in graduate school, seep into these blogs, old containers in new spaces. I notice its bold and hidden permanence just as I notice the cracks in its foundation.

I use the term heteronormativity here, as defined by Warner (1991), to describe a default subject position in which traditional sexual roles are taken as the standard and thus become invisible. This includes the feminine female and the masculine male, who are just as heterosexual as they are assumed to be white or middle class, and they play their roles as such. The feminine subject positions that I notice in these posts are heteronormative in this way, heteronormatively feminine rather than a different kind of feminine. The traditional, kind, nurturing and feminine woman appears in these blogs, although, at the same time this subject position that fits a heteronormative stereotype is
also undercut, perhaps by a sort of doubleness that comes from being in graduate school in feminist spaces (see p. 113).

Catherine stands out to me as the best “good girl” of the girls in my study. She presents herself as funny, yet self-deprecating, a lover of pop culture who also understands that discussing such things is “non-academic,” a loving sister, friend, teacher, girlfriend, and family member. She makes it to every family wedding possible. She features pictures of friends and her boyfriend and talks about them fondly. She makes an effort to have fun with her students. In her older posts, she frequently talks about church activities and in her interview, I find that she does not share her blog with church friends from back home because she doesn’t want them to know that she now lives with her boyfriend.

At the same time, she lives with her boyfriend. She writes biting commentary about teaching, pop culture and other observations about the world. She posts it to her blog and shares it with friends and the internet, hiding perhaps, but in plain sight/site. She’s getting a PhD in Spanish Literature. She’s well-read, she’s fluent in academese and she is certainly not a housewife. But, even in these non-heteronormative roles, a kindness lingers. A kindness that makes me quite fond of Catherine, that draws me in. In an interesting post on October 31, 2010, Catherine writes:

And then, when I tell myself that, my inner feminist comes out and says, "Are you really congratulating yourself for having a successful week without a boyfriend? What *happened* to you?" She's right, of course; I think I need to periodically make sure that I haven't become overly dependent on the boy. And I don't think that I am, with the exception of last night when I called him and asked for
directions because I had printed-out directions to the Halloween party, but I don't have a GPS, and the street signs in Clintonville are poorly lit. Also, I missed him. She has an inner dialogue that recognizes the discursive constructs that she finds herself abiding by, so she recognizes them chastises herself for them, but then accepts them somewhat wistfully.

In another post, the heteronormativity is but a wisp. A post that she wrote on March 31, 2009 with the hilarious title, “Also The Following TV Characters Are Communists…” discusses her thoughts about modern technology, both a critique and a commentary. She concludes with this thought:

I'm not saying technology doesn't scare me a little; if people thought that in the 60s, what are we going to think 50 years from now, looking back on the quaint age of iPods and Twitter? However, I think that we're living in a era where technology is beneficial for both our professional and personal lives, and most of us are unmarried and childless, with friends scattered all around the country, so we might not be a good sample set. I mean, while I do try to get out and have genuine human interaction as much as I can, I'll admit that I sometimes wonder if I'm becoming a brainless automaton. For the time being, though, I think that I'm okay. I only tabbed to Wikipedia three times while writing this entry. ::::sigh::::

Though here she describes herself and her friends as somewhat non-heternormative (unmarried, childless, scattered), but at the same time, she is framing herself (and “genuine human interaction”) as apart from technology, an object that has historically been coded as masculine. She critiques technology intellectually, which is both heteronormative and nonnormative at the same time. She also notes her
dependence, her reliance as a weakness, which is also both in that she utilizes technology (such as this blog), but she also needs it in a way that she should be embarrassed (:::sigh:::).

In many other posts, however, Catherine presents a fairly straightforward and heteronormative “good girl.” She is a nice teacher:

Speaking of teaching, I really like my class this quarter. Fall classes with freshmen are a lot of fun, and we played charades last night, which is always entertaining. And then two of my students came up afterwards and actually told me that they really liked my class, and that they had been nervous about taking Spanish again and were surprised how fun it is. I know they're probably sucking up a little, but it is nice to hear that from time to time.

But, she does take a little jab at her students. Is she using humor hear to appear less “good girl” or is she doing so to be more likeable and more of a good girl? How can I know this? Even if I ask her, can she tell me? Either way, she seems to be happy and content that her students are happy and content and in this way, she is caring and nurturing to some degree.

Vicki also claims a good girl subjectivity, while undercutting it at the same time. In a particularly poignant post written on July 27, 2010, Vicki discusses a novel she read and recalls the vivid image of a moth whose wings calcified in a mason jar as they were not able to be opened soon enough.

My memory won’t let the moth die. The inevitable stray cat or hungry bird never swoops in from the margins of Dillard’s book to take advantage of those calcified, unopened wings. But that moth that is always walking, not flying, down the
driveway is now part of a file of images in my mind that make me want to help when it’s too late. Some seem minor. The ragged cat crouching under the 59 overpass. Others are impossible to consider for more than a moment. The homeless woman near the Farragut North metro in DC, dazed and trying to negotiate December, unaware that a police officer is approaching. Hopefully to help her find a shelter, maybe to tell her she can’t sit so close to the escalator.

In this nurturing moment, she considers when she feels like she wants to help “when it’s too late.” This is an apparently good girl position, but in the end of her post, she leaves us with this decidedly selfish and ungood girl thought.

Stories like that of Dillard’s moth not only leave such a permanent residue — reviving a series of images that are easier to let alone — but also make you want to share their twinging, aching insistence with an innocent person nearby: the stranger in the coffee shop, your husband nearly asleep next to you, a receptionist at the dentist’s office. Maybe if you hand it off to someone else, like a baton, it will leave you.

Maybe that’s why I’m sharing the story of the moth here, then. Maybe it will walk down your driveway for awhile.

There are noticeable patterns of the use of discursive constructions of the feminine and the subtle and obvious subversion of those constructions in blog posts, when these women are writing for themselves, for a small group of readers or no one in particular. Is this agency? What happens when strangers attempt a Google search and happen upon a post in which this is occurring? Disgust? Enjoyment? Seeds planted?
In the “stats” section of Wordpress, the blogging platform that Vicki uses, it is possible to view “recent search terms” or terms that readers have typed into a search engine to come across a given blog. In a recent blog post dated March 1, 2011, Vicki discusses her thoughts on how readers have come by her blog.

I enjoy browsing my WordPress dashboard to see what search engine terms lead strangers to running with carrots. I’ve meditated in past posts about my loyal following of Arby’s roast beef sammich eaters, but I’m also gratified that new readers find me by searching for “taxidermied dueling squirrel,” “Zadie Smith is pretentious,” “cheese with hair,” and “what do armadillos carry.” I assume that last person was looking for armadillo-related diseases and not wondering what sort of handbags armadillos prefer, or what firearms they use to protect their wee armadillo homesteads.

I appreciate these visitors and often craft in my mind entire narratives of their lives. What led this particular user to type “cheese with hair” into his Google window? Is he also having nightmares after unexpectedly encountering Robert Grober’s creepy haired cheese at the Menil? Oh, dear “cheese with hair” searcher! I feel your pain! I often wake in the deepest hours of night, imagining a spectral, mulleted swiss levitating in the corner of my bedroom, biding its time, waiting for the perfect moment to ATTACK!

The humor, while not exactly of a feminine subjectivity in that Vicki artfully jokes making herself an authoritative, satirical voice on these odd search terms, is at the same time feminine in that the humor is used as a people-pleasing tool (according to an interview with Vicki) to entertain readers to keep them coming back. The humor is also
quite pleasant in its sarcasm, which leads me to include this juicy snippet of blog post in this section regarding the subject position of the “good girl.” In addition, this is a highly reflective post. Vicki is monitoring her blog and wondering (worrying?) about who reads it, reflecting on what these readers wanted and musing about it in her online journal. This appears to be a heteronormative feminine subject position, though with an undercurrent of some subversion and a host of missing data.

Later in this same post, Vicki remarks that her husband does not read her blog.
She discusses my interview with her, in which her husband and my husband both give the same rationale for not reading our blogs. They “live” our blogs. I told Vicki that this makes me mad. She writes:

I could offer many counter-arguments to the whole live-the-blog argument, most notably that I don’t always blog about my day-to-day activities, and when I do, I try to comment upon them in a measured way that does not correspond to our “How was your day?” conversations. If I was blogging each evening about what I ate for breakfast, Danny’s rationale would hold some water. And that would be a boring blog, anyway, because every entry would read “peanut butter toast.”

Mmmmmmmm. Peanut butter toast.

Here Vicki is making visible the fact that a blog is not just a journal, nor a journal of mundane activities, it is more than that. It’s more “measured.” It says something more than her daily conversations. She says something more than what she would say in the “real world.” As such, she may be using feminine subject positions of the good girl, but she is also undercutting them in this space in a way that she would perhaps not do without it.

In an interesting comment to Vicki’s post, a reader that identifies herself as K Cummings Pipes also discusses how her voice is different in the space of the blog, even to her partner. In fact, she claims that it has brought them closer because he knows her thoughts more intimately.

Whenever I finally write a new blog post, it is automatically emailed to DMP at his office and he reads it. He says, “sometimes it doesn’t sound like you.” He is continually surprised at what I’m reading and thinking. It seems to me that since I
started blogging The Life I Read, our conversation has deepened and he brings me flowers more often. I urge Danny to read your blog. It’s funny and clever and poignant and he needs to know the super-cool carrots who writes it as well as the one who plays MarioKart.

This is interesting to me too, in that my husband, when he has read my blog, says that he hears my voice as I tell stories. Perhaps he does not, though, in the more academic posts? The only time that he has commented was in the very beginning of my blogging life, when I would tell stories, before I was searching deeply and reading materials that changed my being.

On my own blog, I see this same theme of the good girl. For example, in a post dated August 30, 2009, I simply tell about my best friend’s bridal shower, without any biting commentary. There’s also a nice picture of her smiling in a pretty dress.

Today was Marcy’s bridal shower at her Aunt Kathy’s house. It was a super cute brunch followed by presents. I was in charge of writing down the gifts, which is a job I like as it involves making lists. Todd stopped by toward the end and he and Marcy played a cute game where they sat back to back, with one of their own shoes and one of their fiance/e’s shoes in each hand. Then, Aunt Kathy would ask a question like, who is going to mow the lawn (Todd) or who is going to do the cooking (Todd) and who is more of a planner (Marcy) and they would raise the correct person’s shoe and then we’d laugh at how predictable some questions were and how they differed on others. It was a very nice shower and a very nice weekend in Canton.
Although I am my own worst critic, this post is about as “good girl” as it gets. Everything is “nice” and “super cute.” The only minor comment that could be anything but good girl was a comment about myself making lists, as I was trying to be self-deprecating in my love of lists.

The post is entirely heteronormatively feminine, but it may be the type of post that draws this out in me and some of the other women. (Catherine, for example, when she attends family weddings or social gatherings with friends, often takes a very nice girl tone in her posts. Vicki too, when her mother-in-law came for a visit.) In my interviews with my participants and in the coding of their blog posts, some posts to their blogs, particularly those that occur with family or on vacation, are more of a documentation of events, rather than a personal telling. I think these sorts of documentation style posts, especially those that involve other people, are toned down in order not to offend and in order to appear gracious and happy. I can tell you, for example, since I am now analyzing my own post, that though the bridal shower was very “nice,” I felt quite uncomfortable and out of place. I thought that my choice of outfit was not up to par with everyone else’s (as I had pulled it out of my closet after not having worn it for 5 years the day before). My mom was also invited to the shower and she notoriously chews with her mouth open. (I am reminded of Bourdieu’s (1977) habitus and Delueze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomatic becoming that might include the materiality of the spittle coming out of my mother’s mouth and the food stuck to her open lips, a line of flight in this middle class space.) This was an elegant event at my friend’s aunt’s house and my friend’s aunt has more money and more manners than my family does. I was embarrassed, but I did not write that because I know that both Marcy and my mom read my blog and I did not
want Marcy to feel anything other than great about her shower. I also would not want my
mom to know that I was embarrassed of her (in fact, I’m really worried about keeping
this commentary in my dissertation, in case my mom wants to read it). Had this blog
been a journal that day, it would have been an entirely different entry. Having said that, I
feel like not only was I a “good girl” that day, I was also a “good cyborg,” negotiating my
audience and my virtual space to put out only what would not cause pain, particularly as
that which I write can be replicated exponentially and viewed by friends, family and
strangers alike.

What does this mean for subjectivity and agency? Did I have the agency to write
what how I really felt that day? Though the medium affords me that opportunity, the
discourses of the feminine friend and family member bound my hands. I am still framed
in a certain way and the networks I have with my mom and my friend keep me from
shifting from the familiar and comfortable way of speaking about a bridal shower. So,
even though I wrote this post and put it out there in a space I claim for myself in the
virtual, I write only what feels appropriate to write, at least in this case, when it comes to
those to whom I am closest. Here, the zombied murmurs get the best of me, but “[i]n
every order-word there is indeed an implicit presupposition of funereal normality, the
echoed refrain of the walking dead” (Massumi, 1992, p. 41). In other words, when
something comes into being (the good girl on my blog), it is as good as dead. To live is
to die.
In a post dated August 31, 2010, I discuss my busy schedule that includes four different jobs. And, in that post, although I still seem perky, happy and quite the good overachiever, I undercut the state department’s webinar with biting sarcasm.

In the past two days, I’ve been busy at 3 of my 4 jobs. I spent all day at ODE yesterday, then I came home and worked on my research assistantship until 7pm. That was tiring.

Today, I got up and did some more research. Then, I stopped into the girls’ school to meet my Lego League participants and chat for a bit over lunch. That was great and I am soooo excited about that gig! (P.S. Even their cafeteria is amazing.) In the afternoon, I attended a webinar for ODE, which was the worst webinar ever. It was completely text, so I had to read everything. Propping of the eyelids was essential to keep from falling asleep. Note to self: Text-based
webinars stink. After that it was more research and more research (although I broke for dinner), followed by creating a schedule for the Lego League and mailing it off. It is now 8:31pm and I am officially a workaholic. Sigh. BUT! In just two more days I will be on a plane to Portland, Oregon where I will not be doing any work! Well, most likely.

Because this one doesn’t involve my friends or family, or anyone whom I would be aware of reading the post, I tell about this webinar with less guardedness. I feel as though I have more agency and I feel as though my subject position is allowed to be broader than a “good girl.” Perhaps this is a cyborgian possibility that the title of my chapter suggests. “Communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women world-wide” (Haraway, 1991a, p. 437). Haraway’s metaphor of the cyborg becomes more literal in the space of the blog and these “tools” can no longer be thought of as separate from our bodies or as mere tools for our use. Barad explains, “apparatuses are not mere static arrangements in the world, but rather apparatuses are dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted” (Barad, 2003, p. 817). In the next section, the transgressive undercutting of discourses appears to allow for cracks in the foundation of normative discourses.

Guarding the Bad Girl Cyborg

Regarding the broadened sense of agential possibility if the woman is writing about something not related to friends or family, the women, in their interviews, discuss
the ways in which they are guarded. This seems to provide explanations and leakages of the “good girl” posts. For example, Vicki writes:

I think I associate my blog with both pride and anxiety. I’m happy with my blog and gratified that a few readers have expressed how much they enjoy reading. At the same time, I wonder how I would feel if a hiring committee from a university found running with carrots. My blog also offers anyone the opportunity to travel back to my graduate career and read about how I felt about my comprehensive exams or more personal information, like the ways I remember my mom since she died. I don’t think I’ve written anything that I wouldn’t tell someone in my professional life, but I like to be in control of what information people in my professional life are reading and when. Of course, that hasn’t stopped me from writing.

In this portion of her email interview, Vicki associates the guardedness she exhibits on her blog as a result of her (weakened) subject position as a graduate student and future scholar. She feels (rightly so) that her more personal life, including her growth as a graduate student, could impact the way she is viewed as a “serious” academic. What is most intriguing about this segment, though, is the last sentence. With all of her concerns, she continues to write. Although she is more measured in her writing than perhaps she would be otherwise, she writes.

Further along in the interview, Vicki also discusses the limits of self-disclosure that she determines for her blogging space.

Most of the things I write I don’t consider terribly personal, so usually it isn’t an issue. However, if I’m feeling a little squeamish about posting something, I
consider how I would feel if a few select people read it: my dad, my husband, my dissertation advisor, and a scholar I respect but haven’t met. All of those audiences draw different boundaries around what I’m willing to share. Considering my dad and my husband, for example, makes me very aware of the impact of my writing on others in my life. Would Danny mind if I write about his kidney stones online, since it’s his body, his problem? (I asked him, and he didn’t.) Considering my advisor and a scholar I respect remind me both to remain professional and to protect my intellectual property—original research that I’m planning to publish.

Here she expands on who limits the subject position available to her in her blog. In this way, her blog is not full of unlimited “voice” and agency, it is significantly impacted by who Vicki considers may read her blog space. It does not seem to matter whether or not any of these people actually visit the site, the possibility is enough. I’m reminded of Foucault’s ideas of the panopticon and the gaze. Vicki doesn’t really need to be watched in order for her to act as though she is being watched. The threat of the gaze is enough for her to mind her p’s and q’s, at least overtly.

In addition, it seems as though Vicki is quite content with the limits of her blog. She uses a sort of measuring stick of comfort to gauge the appropriateness of her posts, perhaps in the same way that she gauges the appropriateness of acting in any sort of public forum.

I often think about writing for my blog like trying on clothes. If it’s uncomfortable in the dressing room, it will be even more uncomfortable at home. If a blog post makes me uncomfortable in the drafting stage, it will feel a lot more
uncomfortable once I hit “publish.” I rarely push the envelope in that way, which I suppose makes my blogging less than adventurous. But I’m satisfied with the happy medium I’ve found: not sharing too much, not sharing too little, and doing it all in a pretty standard-post type of way.

I feel as though I should feel (and she thinks I will feel) disappointed with this type of response. And, in a way, I do. I am interested in agential possibilities and expanded subject positions in new spaces on the web and this snippet of interview suggests that, those possibilities are limited by discursive realities, and that those discursive realities are comfortable in a way that sediments them in even the “newest” of spaces. But, what am I really looking for? Do I want women to be putting themselves in danger so that I can be more excited about blogging practices? Maybe. Would I put myself in danger? Perhaps the blogging experiments, discussed later in this paper will provide more insight.

In my own interview with myself, I discuss the limits of self-disclosure in a similar way, though I don’t specifically mention academia as a concern.

If it’s personal and sad, then I usually don’t share it. But, that’s not really true because I share old stories from my difficult childhood. I guess if it’s personal, sad and current, then I don’t share. There have been several struggles that I’ve had since starting the blog and I have purposely left them off of the blog. I remember days that were so low where something was really occupying my mind and instead of write about it, I would write a short post on general things or just pretend it wasn’t happening on my blog. I don’t want my blog to turn in to some passive aggressive way to communicate or some pathetic way to be a crybaby. I guess this is driven by what I think my readers want to read and I know I
wouldn’t want to read someone being angry or sad all of the time. I do surprise
myself by writing certain things about my childhood and certain political things,
but I’m usually really glad that I share those things. I think it helps my family and
friends that read the blog really understand who I am and what I believe. Oh, and
I leave personal, relationship details that are between Dan and I out as well.

It seems as though I am mostly concerned with what my readers want to read. This
imagined audience shapes my writing and limits the emotional details of my life. I
wonder why I think that emotions are less interesting than other details. Do these sorts of
emotional experiences that I leave out of the blog also count as data? As missing data?
Why is the emotional left out? “This is not merely a lament: power, it must be
recognized, is now massively potentializing, in a new planetary mode. But neither is it
necessarily cause for celebration: the potentialization is just as massively delivered to

**Cyborg Learning**

Defining learning as practices of legitimate peripheral participation, as Lave and
Wenger (1991) would, the practices of blogging women in graduate school are learning
practices as they move from newcomers to old-timers. Part of these practices including
learning technological skill and the appropriate sorts of writing on this medium, but this
learning also includes (as all learning does) the incidental learning of the parameters of
agency and subjectivity. The practices of agency and subjectivity for women in graduate
school blogging online are no doubt influenced by their lives offline. However, I argue
that there is another dimension, or another strand in the rhizome that occupies this
particular (non)space and (non)time online.

In this data listed above, for example, these women feel the pull of enacting
feminine subjectivities, while at the same time, they seem to collectively undermine those
same subjectivities, pushing them, perhaps, in a space where no eyes watch their fingers
move across the keyboard, where many passersby do not comment or object. Perhaps in
this space, those subjectivities that take in place in the physical world are able to be
shifted by the availability of different material (inter)actions. Perhaps blogs help the
imagining of a different space of the feminine. Perhaps there is some transgressive
agency in a feminine subjectivity in these new spaces; perhaps something can be that
isn’t.

_Evidence of Learning_

Vicki has been blogging since July of 2004. In that time, she taught herself to set
up her blog, changed blogging platforms (from Xanga to LiveJournal to Wordpress),
modified her blogging practices and “settled in” to a blogging style with which she feels
comfortable. In an interview with Vicki, she describes how she learned to blog.

I find that most of the sites that provide free infrastructures for blogs- Xanga,
LiveJournal, Blogger, and Wordpress, for example- are pretty use friendly. It's
certainly easy to begin a basic blog. I never had any formal instruction, in any
case, so I suppose I'm a blog autodidact. I like tinkering with the way my site
looks, the links and pages I include, and other customizable options.

She later describes how she wants her blog, at this point in time to stay “as-is” and if she
were to do anything other than what she does now, she would do so in a new space.
Running with carrots will probably stay as-is. I’m not very interested in experimenting with it at the moment. I am, however, interested in using the blogging format in new ways. If I ever get a chance to teach a service-learning course, for example, I plan on using a class blog to document students’ experiences in community service and, if possible, the perspectives of the communities they’re helping. Some Rice professors have used blogs in other interesting ways, as well—formats I’m still learning about. I think it can be a great educational tool. But to take advantage of any of those opportunities, I would start a new blog.

In a sense, Vicki has become an old-timer in that she is no longer at the periphery of blogging. She has learned to write and perform her blog, in a manner that is satisfactory to her. She is contemplating becoming a newcomer to different practices of blogging, ones not in the personal genre in which she has experience, though many of the practices she has learned on her own blog will translate into this new environment.

In my own blogging practices, I have also gone through a similar process of teaching myself to set up a blog, changing blogging platforms and settling into a routine that feels suitable to the space. I am, however, interested in pushing boundaries with my blog, though I typically do not and the idea of pushing some boundaries scares me very much, mostly because I don’t want to alienate myself from others. I already feel, in some ways, uncertain about many of my interactions in the physical world because I am not sure who reads my blog and who does not. That has defined my learning in some ways. When I put something on my blog that is experimental, such as a poem or a story, and I receive no feedback or negative feedback, I go back to blogging as usual for a while.
More missing data tidbits

I've been jotting notes about missing data as I've been writing and reading lately.

- Vicki's husband is now thinking of starting a blog. His blog is to be about golfing. Vicki introduced this idea in a post where she recounted a discussion with me (via comments on her blog and our email interviews) about how our husbands don't read our blogs. I wonder what sort of conversation led to Danny starting a blog. I wonder if my interactions with Vicki precipitated that.
- Vicki has a section on her blog titled "Carrots is reading carrots" in which she highlights some her favorite blog posts. She explains in an email that she wants to direct casual readers to her best work. I wonder about the sorts of vetting and rereading that went on as she chose these posts.
- Most of the bloggers that I've talked (not really "talked", but this is also interesting in that I'd have to be careful with my wording as I write to not say words like "talk" or "speak" as I didn't actually use my voice to talk to these women) to have noted that the comments that they receive are mostly from family and friends (those with whom they are familiar in the physical world) and I wonder how this constrains possibilities for subjectivity. If these bloggers are ostensibly writing for the same audience as their "normal" life, then are they able to explore the boundaries of subjectivity? Although, they also note that they aren't sure who is reading... so it's still different because even though it may include the same actors, it also includes some mysterious ones as well. How do these women think as they write? And who do they write for and how does it shift? (Does this count as missing data?)
- Cathy sent me her email interview as a Word document (as did most). She copied and pasted my questions and then write her answers in a different font and color (Helvetica and dark purple). I found myself hesitating as I changed it into the standard font and color that is required of a dissertation. These things matter and they are now missing from my writing.
- I'm also considering this private blog that I am keeping right here right now and all of the other things that won't fit into the formality of the dissertation.
- Recently I posted a video tour of my new house on my blog. And, in that post, I liked to the video tour of my apartment from almost three years ago. I was struck by the limited visibility available in the rectangular frame of my small video camera. What was missing from that view of my home. I also noted that I didn't say much else but what each room was. I left out a lot of commentary. Video is not the same as being there. It constructs space differently. I also wondered what people were thinking of my house as they watched. What they think and won't comment on.

*I'm thinking of using the parenthetical as a form of "doubled writing."
Using parentheses allows me to insert my thoughts into my thoughts. Hmm.

Figure 14: Screenshot Blog Post March 9, 2011
This kind of learning goes hand-in-hand with the idea that women bloggers feel the need to be guarded. In my own interview with myself, I address this issue as I explain the way I feel about my blog.

I know that one time when I thought that I had lost everything because I let the domain expire on accident that I cried and was frantic. I didn’t want to lose all that I had written for the past couple of years. I care for my blog like I would a journal. There are a lot of memories and thoughts recorded there. So… feelings… Happiness? Love? But also vulnerability. I love my blog because I have put myself out there, but that also makes me feel insecure sometimes thinking of the range of people that read it and what they might be thinking of me. I like the good, I hate the bad, but I feel freer too.

In this way, I am certainly learning the limits of subjectivity available in this space, while at the same time testing the waters of what a different type of subjectivity might feel like.

Cathy, on the other hand, who blogs differently than Vicki and myself, whose blog posts are more limited to her research and life in academia, describes her learning a bit differently.

As I think I may have mentioned already, I set up the blog as a way of understanding blogging from the inside as it were. I have another research blog, which is on the same platform as the blogs I study, and which is only open to the participants in my study. I felt that having a public blog would make me experience blogging from another perspective; I had also met research bloggers who blogged their PhD, and I loved the idea - although not engaging fully is one of my regrets. The private blog did share the research in more detail, and gathered
responses to the ongoing research from the bloggers involved. The public blog represented my voice online, in a public space, but for ethical reasons mainly did not contain too much detail on the research itself. (this is where I think i could have worked around the ethical issues and blogged theory, lit review etc.)

Though, clearly, Cathy has learned to navigate her blog space (albeit differently than my other bloggers), she sees her practices of blogging as hanging about on the periphery. Her blogging practices were separated into a public and a private blog and so, perhaps she did not experience the same types of subjectivity learning as did the other bloggers, who were blogging completely in public, facing the outcomes of those practices and finding comfort or pulling back as a result.

(Not) Writing an Experience Blog

In Remarx on Marx, Foucault (1991) discusses his work as the practice of writing an “experience book.” “I write precisely because I don’t know yet what to think about a
subject that attracts my interest… When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (p. 27). I like to think of the blog as an experience book of sorts. Of course, this is not always the case. Oftentimes, my bloggers tell me that a post is meant for documentation purposes, but other times, they say that they are thinking, trying out ideas, and being creative. In this way, they come closer to what I understand as an experience book. And over time, this book tells a deep and rich story.

But what happens when a blogger is asked to participate in experiments to challenge the typical process of writing a blog post? Is she eager to have a “limit-experience” in her virtual space? Is she apprehensive? Does attempt to experiment moderately? When I began the portion of my research where I asked women to play with the medium of the blog post a bit, I received a variety of responses. Most would try some things and not others and one dove in headfirst. But what I am feeling as I watch these experiments unfold is a sense of guilt for having stoked a fire that could cause danger to the women in my study.

Sarah, for example, a late participant in my research, suggested that she would like to experiment with talking about religion. She considers herself a very religious person, but she is currently teaching in China and has been forbidden to speak about religion with her students. Her students are curious about her faith and ask her questions about it, but she has remained dutifully silent on the topic. She decided to go ahead and write this post about her struggle and her observations surrounding this topic (with my prompting to write about something typically left out of blogging) and, only after I read the post, did I realize that this could be a problem for her. Her job ends soon, but still, I
do not want to be the cause of trouble for her in her daily life. In a post dated March 5, 2011 and titled, “On being religious here,” Sarah writes:

Religion in China is a tricky issue, to put it mildly. The students want to know everything about me but I'm not really supposed to talk about my faith which feels a little strange since it's a big part of who I am. The scary thing is, once I got scared about talking about my beliefs I found it hard to talk about it to anyone, even other foreigners. Hiding that part of my life became like a habit which is obviously not at all the point of being a Christian. This is word-for-word what my teaching contract says: "You are free to keep your own religious belief and to have your own religious life, but you are not allowed to talk about religion to the students either in class or outside class, nor to the Chinese teachers or anybody else. And you cannot invite other religious people to do anything relating to religion with the students. It is prohibited to convert anybody who is not religious before, either on campus or off campus."

If students ask if I'm religious (and they do often) I say that I'm a Christian but that's as far as I go. Many of them are very curious about it and frequently try to start conversations relating to it during English Corner. Another place where students constantly ask questions about my faith is at my second jobs downtown, particularly at Web. The questions they ask are tough and I always feel at a loss how to answer. Here's some examples that I've jotted down from last year:

"Do you think you're better than us because you believe?"

"How do you know it's all true?"

"How does your religion affect your life?"
"If religion is so important to you, why don't you try and convert me too?"

"Are you saying that all of the other religions are wrong?"

"Is it true that if I don't believe then my family and I are going to hell?"

"Why do you believe in God?"

"Why do you need to believe in God - why don't you just believe in yourself?"

"Do you believe that everybody should believe in God?"

I'm not trying to get in trouble or rock the boat - precisely the kind of actions that usually occur while following Christ even in the States - and I'm left constantly feeling inadequate and guilty since I usually change the subject or give a short answer to the questions I get regarding faith.

As soon as I read this post, I was scared. Not only for her, though I realize she makes her own decisions about what to post on her blog, but for myself as well. In introducing the experiments to my bloggers, I said that I would participate in the experiments by dialoguing with them via comments or email and that I may even try out the experiments on my own blog. I used the word “may” because I was afraid. I wasn’t anticipating a post on religion, but a post on religion on my blog could be devastating to my relationship with my husband’s family.

My in-laws are fundamentalist Christians and, while I consider myself spiritual and on a spiritual journey, I do not in anyway think that what is in the Bible is literally true. This is a point of contention in the family and one that they think could change. I have been mostly silent on the topic thus far on my blog and certainly in person with them. They would not like what I have to say and I’m afraid to lay it on the line like Sarah did. I feel like a hypocrite and I feel, at the same time, that this is the perfect
opportunity to push my blog, but at what cost? I’m even afraid of writing about my in-laws here in my dissertation because I’m afraid that they will ask to read it or that they will be able to look it up for themselves at some point and find out how I really feel about their religion.

Figure 16: Screenshot Blog Post February 22, 2011
The experiments, then, come at a price, I realize only too soon in the process. This price is connected to that guardedness that each of my bloggers speak of. It’s also connected to the heteronormative discourses that make us all feel more secure and stable. When we start to broach a limit-experience in this virtual space, there is much opportunity, but also much on the line. And I’m responsible for it.

Katie was my standout “different” blogger, who maintained a photo blog of her travels with minimal commentary. When I asked her if she would be willing to participate in blogging experiments, she said yes to a few different ones, but she also said that she would just like to start blogging more. In an email exchange with me on February 19, 2011, she writes:

I was also thinking of another blog experiment I could try- blogging about my day-to-day life on a consistent basis. It doesn't seem very radical, but it would be radical to me. So, I might try that, too.

Since that time, she has blogged her thoughts on Senate Bill 5, education more generally, how to host a murder mystery dinner party and her experience as a doctoral student and full time teacher. These posts are vastly different than what she was sharing before and I cannot help but wonder what I have taken part in creating. Suddenly, her blog is much more like the other women’s blogs. For example, in a post dated March 9, 2011 (today, as I write), Katie discusses the stress of graduate school, a common theme among the women.

I also sat down yesterday in the middle of a freak-out about OU switching to semesters, and how will I ever finish my coursework… and I figured out a plan for the rest of my program. Basically, after this spring quarter, I’m over 1/3 done
with coursework. If I take 1 class per quarter and 2 each summer (which I may not do this summer if I get the job I want, and I might have to take a quarter off if I run out of money or no classes are offered), I will be finished in spring of 2013. Not bad, right? Especially since this program is designed for people to take 3 years of full time coursework. So I’m no longer freaking out. Yay.

Am I homogenizing or is this “radical” for her (on that note, I never used the word radical when I asked about blog experiments, but apparently that’s how Katie interpreted what I asked). What has my study produced?

![Blog Experiments]

Figure 17: Screenshot Blog Post March 1, 2011
Vicki, Catherine and Cathy let me know which blog experiments they were interested in trying out and I responded by email that they may try these when they feel comfortable. Catherine has posted a video blog, but Vicki and Catherine remain silent. All of their responses to my inquiry, however, were analytically interesting.

In an email dated February 17, 2011, Vicki writes:

Hi, Laurie.

I think I'm a curmudgeon. (Wow. I spelled that word right on the first try!) I'm willing to participate in just a few blog experiments. Here are the reasons why/why not:

(1) **Recording yourself reading a blog post and then posting the recording:** I wouldn't do this one. First, I hate the sound of my voice when recorded. (Ha! I actually blogged about that!) If I type, my readers can imagine a very pleasant voice for me as they read. Maybe Susan Sarandon? I also like the blog to be very accessible and easy, and I sometimes find it troublesome myself when I encounter posts in formats other than type. (Although I have to say -- I always watch your videos!)

(2) **Creating a video to post:** I'm also not very comfortable with this one, for the same reasons as above. I also have a very rudimentary cell phone that doesn't support video. I suppose I could use the camera on my laptop, but a video of me sitting at my desk isn't terribly exciting. **BUT!** -- and I just thought of this as I'm typing this response -- I would perhaps be willing to post some old home movies with my commentary. This requires my dad to finish his project of transferring
them to DVD. We'll see how it goes.

(3) **Creating artwork to post:** This I would do. I'd want to think of a way to make it meaningful, of course, so it seems organic to the blog and not gimmicky. I recently ran across a book on Victorian photocollage. (It looks really interesting; [here's a link.](#) Maybe I could create my own sometime.

(4) **Screencasting your writing process:** Just to be sure I understand this one: the video would be of my screen and not of me as I type, correct? This is something I wouldn't mind giving to you, but I suspect it would be boring to watch, so I don't think I'd post it.

I don't have many other ideas for blog experiments at the moment, but I'll keep you posted. One option: I've had friends who allowed someone to "guest post" on their blog. I would perhaps be willing to do that. I've also included creative writing once or twice, and in fact I left a story I began unresolved. I'd be willing to pick that up again.

Hope that helps.

V.

Vicki calls herself a curmudgeon, which again implies that I somehow wanted these experiments to be, as Katie said, “radical.” I wonder about how I presented this information, but I also wonder about Vicki’s subjectivity and agency. How much does Vicki feel constrained as an academic, as a woman, and by her social circle that reads and comments on her blog? Do I expect her to want to experiment with her blog? Although, in a way, she does want to post interesting things as she suggests home movies (which I
think is an exceptionally interesting idea) and a “guest post,” she just has boundaries and she’s not afraid to admit it.

Also interesting to note is her comment that she does not like the sound of her voice and that she wants her readers to imagine her sounding like Susan Sarandon. It seems, then, that the blog is a space for increased agency and subjectivity. Vicki can remove her physical self (her voice, her body) and can permit the audience to fill in the blanks in a way that allows her to be something other than she is in the physical world.

In an email dated February 18, 2011, Catherine replies:

And yes, I'd be willing to record myself, create a video (I did do that in December of 2008, but it was just a regular videoblog), or screencast myself (if you have the software), but I'd rather not talk about my sex life (since my parents still read my blog; unless it would only be for your data?), and I'm terrible at anything artistic, so that probably wouldn't work either. I'll let you know if I think of anything else.

So, Catherine, on the other hand, is willing to share her physical presence with her audience. This could perhaps be because Catherine perceives her audience as less threatening than Vicki does (Vicki is certainly more guarded). Whatever the reason, the contrast in their responses is notable.²

² Update: Catherine posted a video of herself reading a new blog post on March 24, 2011. She also sent me the text of the post, which I read after watching the video. She discusses her favorite new TV show and in the video she calls herself a geek, but in the text she does not. She ends by saying that she wishes she could do this for a living. She seems more cool and collected in the video than I read in her posts, but I don’t know how much new data this post offers. Similar themes are there, and I would be worried about Catherine presenting her face to the world, but she always has a picture on the sidebar of the blog and she doesn’t really say anything that could be held against her. Though a video blog isn’t beyond the standard practices of blogging per se, it is for Catherine, so I asked her how she felt about it. “I felt fine about posting it; I was kind of waiting for an opportunity to talk about something in a little more animated way, so when I was telling
Cathy in an email dated February 22, 2011 writes:

Sure, why not. 3 [creating artwork], 4 [directly addressing issues left out of blogging] and maybe 2 [creating video] for me. The screencasting I am not sure about - I start my blog posts on paper sometimes, then move to blogger, or sometimes Word. Screencasting could be a bit tedious, but I would be willing to document the blog post, from mere thought to post.

Cathy doesn’t give a lot of explanation for her choices, but she also seems less willing to share her physical self in this space. The question right now, however, is: What might Vicki and Cathy post, if anything? And, what will these experiments actually tell me about subjectivity, agency and learning in virtual spaces, if anything? But, more than that, the question is: What have I done?

What I have tried to do with these experiments, is to push the space of the blog into uncomfortable, or at the very least, different territory. As Massumi speaks of it, “invention.” “Outside productive work: invention. Outside school: halls without walls, a universe free for learning” (Massumi, 1992, p. 41). I tried to imagine what could become of virtual spaces, women and learning if I and my participants could find cracks in the foundation. I still do not know if this has potential and perhaps I never will. But I feel as though I have attempted in my own meager way to answer the call from Massumi:

“Don’t toe the line – be superlinear. Don’t plod the straight and narrow path down the aisle – marry the void. Rewrite the slogan of the United States Army: dare to become all that you cannot be. Complicate and chortle” (1992, p. 41).

my dad about Community, it occurred to me to do a video post. However, I did do several takes, because I kept flubbing words, and then my webcam was a little laggy and choppy. I think this video was the fourth try. “
In an effort not to toe the line, what follows are two different types of interpretation, something between data and analysis, what I call data-analysis and discuss further in Chapter 5. These pieces of art and (non)fiction are more pieces of missing data. They are as virtual, as almost, as what can be found on the space of my blog. They are neither visible nor hidden. The art was never posted to my blog, but describes an event on the blog. The (non)fiction piece, also never posted, was informed by my imaginings of my life as a high school student, might I have kept a blog at that time. As you, the reader, read through these data-analysis, wonder with me about the implications of these bits for my study, for qualitative research and for cyborg learning. Are they more data, interpretation, both or neither? Are they irrelevant? Are they part of “the story” or not? Does it matter? What do they explore about myself, my learning and my work in education?

Art as Data-Analysis

The artwork that follows is a sketch that I created after going through my own archives and wondering about new sorts of time and place in the space of the blog. On October 30, 2010, I wrote a blog post while visiting Colorado about how I had tried and failed to ride in a hot air balloon. The title of the post is “I tried,” but the content of the post is much less important than the comments that followed from different members of my family, each in a different state, reconstructing a memory together, planning the future, making references to stories not in the blog and not understanding stories referenced. In a word, it’s a mess. First, see Figures 18 and 19, which are screenshots of the comments from that blog post.
7 Responses to I tried

**Dianna**
30. Oct, 2010 at 10:47 pm Edit

You may not have made the flight today, but I wouldn’t count it a total fail. 😞 You scheduled it, you showed up, and you were ready to go. Mother nature said no, that’s not your fault...
I have always thought it would be fun to ride in a hot air balloon since we watched that one land in Grandma and Grandpa’s yard! Do you remember that? It was so cool! I think riding in a hot air balloon is a must on my list of things to do.
I’m curious, how much was it going to cost to go?

reply

**Laurie**
01. Nov, 2010 at 9:35 am Edit

I think I vaguely remember the hot air balloon in Grandma and Grandpa’s yard, but I must have been young... It was going to cost $225. Not too shabby.

reply

**Beth**
31. Oct, 2010 at 9:13 pm Edit

I always think that hot air balloon was a dream. 😞 I already said I wish I could... now I’m thinking that would be an awesome 30th Birthday thing. Yes?!?!

reply

**Laurie**
01. Nov, 2010 at 9:35 am Edit

That sound good to me! We’ll have to see if we can get it all figured out!

reply

Figure 18: Screenshot of Blog Post Comments October 30, 2010 (Part 1)
Dianna, my cousin who lives in Washington state, recalls an experience that occurred at least 20 years ago in Canton, Ohio. I vaguely remember the event. Beth, another cousin of mine who lives in Oregon, thought that she had dreamed the event and then proceeds to make future plans with me to ride a hot air balloon. Beth’s mom, my Aunt Ann who now lives in Texas, adds that we should ride the hot air balloon in Oklahoma. She says this because she knows that in the past Beth and I have taken road trips to “collect” all fifty states and we have routinely missed Oklahoma. My own mother in Akron, Ohio then weighs in to suggest California, having missed my aunt’s reference to our other travels.

This one post and the comments that follow it somehow manage to span twenty-plus years and both coasts, reconstructing a long forgotten collective memory from
participants in disparate locations and plays with future plans that mingle with past plans in a confusing, but interesting mess of data-analysis. I sketched this post to try make visible the complexity of activity on one tiny page on my blog.

Figure 20: Sketch of Blog Post October 30, 2010
(Non)Fiction as Data-Analysis

In the piece of (non)fiction that follows, I tell a somewhat nonfictional, somewhat fictional account of a day in my own high school life and I imagine if I had a blog back then what I would have written in my blog on that day. I also include a dream that I remember having had at some point. I call myself Lavender here as the story is not, nor ever can be, pure nonfiction. Changing my name allows me to feel less bound to a historically accurate truth that does not exist.

I decided to write this piece because as I analyzed my data from this study and theorized subjectivity and agency, I wondered how my blog would have taken shape had I written it years ago. I wondered how I would have crafted a blog post, particularly with the backdrop of what was happening in my “actual” world and my dream world. I wondered, in a theoretically helpful way, about the space of subjectivity and agency in another place and time to help me to think through the subjectivity and agency that I thought I was seeing on the blogs of the women in this study.

Lavender’s Day

The final bell rang, and Lavender waved goodbye to Marcy and headed for the parking lot. She got in her tiny blue Ford Escort. It was 12 years old and something was wrong with the engine. Every few months her older brother, Nick, had to change the spark plugs which had gotten so oily that they wouldn’t start the car. It was getting to be that time.

Lavender sat in the car for a while, pretending to look through her book bag, watching as several, much nicer cars pulled out of the parking lot. She put on lip gloss in the review mirror and noticed Tony walking by. He waved a silly wave and kept moving.
Lavender turned around and waved back, but he was already gone. More than half of the parking lot had emptied, and Lavender thought it might be safe to start the car. She paused for a moment, praying that it would start the first time.

She turned the key and held it in place. NUH nuh NUH nuh. NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh. It was a slow sluggish sound. She stopped. Crap.

She took a deep breath and tried again, a little longer this time. NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh. She stopped again. Fuck. Am I really going to get stuck in this parking lot again?

Blue smoke poured out of her exhaust pipe and a few people looked over. One more time, she thought, trying to give the car some positive energy. NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh NUH nuh. VROOM! The car finally started. Thank God.

Lavender backed up slowly and drove past the remaining students, fiddling with the radio and trying to avoid eye contact. She took a left out of the parking lot and started down Tusc. It was a short five minutes to her house. She took another left onto her street, wedged between a closed-down arcade and a strip club. She barely noticed the strip club anymore, unless she had someone in the car with her, other than Marcy. She pulled into the driveway behind Nick’s garage space. Dad’s car wasn’t there yet.

Lavender lived in an old, but decently maintained bi-level with her dad and two brothers, one older, one younger. She has a sister too, but her sister was in college and lived with her mom. The house was peach colored and the rent wasn’t too expensive. Lavender was so excited when they moved into this house before her freshman year
because it was light-years ahead of the section eight housing they had been in downtown. She thought that she would have a house she wasn’t embarrassed to bring people. But, she had since learned that this may have been better to her, but it was not even close to good enough. Of course, it didn’t help that she lived with three guys who never wanted to do the dishes or mow the lawn. The house wasn’t exactly Martha Stewart, or clean, for that matter. There were times when Lavender would go crazy and clean the house from top to bottom, trying to arrange the old furniture and knick knacks of a family torn in two, to look more acceptable. She would also occasionally get out the old electric mower and plow through the tall grass. Usually, it was when she wanted to have a friend over. But, most of the time, she refused. “I’m not your wife!” She would tell her dad derisively. She just wanted to be the teenager that didn’t have to take care of things like that.

The garage was open, so Lavender went in through the kitchen door. She dropped her book bag in the dining room and turned the corner to find Ben, her younger brother, sitting in the armchair watching reruns of Full House. He was still in his uniform from school and she noticed that his shirt had a stain on the front. He had a bag of chips and a soda next to him on the end table.

“Hi Lav! Jerry Springer’s on next!”

“Oh, good. Is it the one with the paternity tests?”

“I think so!”

She was more interested than she would have admitted at school or anywhere else. She liked to come home and eat junk food and watch trash with her little brother. It
was their ritual. After school, she could just sit and zone out. She never changed out of her uniform either.

“Do you want some Dr. Pepper?” Ben jumped up from his chair and Lavender sunk onto the couch.

“Sure,” she said. He emptied his cup, grabbed the chips, dropped them by Lavender, and headed to the kitchen, smiling at Lavender as he went.

“Did you have a good day?”

“It was alright. My car took a while to start again. It’s so loud.” She stretched out on the couch and grabbed a blanket.

“That sucks.” Ben was in the eighth grade at the grade school down the street from Central. A place Lavender thought of fondly, where her class was tiny and tight-knit, where she felt like she belonged, but more than that, where people looked up to her and thought she was better than average.

“Yeah,” she said. “I need Nick to change the spark plugs again.”

Ben returned from the kitchen and plopped her glass of soda onto the coffee table. She grabbed a coaster from the pile and placed it underneath the glass. Ben always forgot to use a coaster.

As Jerry Springer began, Lavender started to doze off. She was in a deep sleep when she heard a familiar, “HOLA!” from the door. Her dad knew no other Spanish, nonetheless, that was the greeting he chose when he got home from work. There were times she was happy to hear his booming voice and there were times she wasn’t. Today, she just wanted to rest.
“Hi Ben! Hey Bugsy!” Lavender pulled the blanket over her head and mumbled that she was trying to sleep.

“How was school today?”

“It was fine.”

“How did your Physics test go?”

“Good, Dad, but I’m really tired.”

“Well, I was hoping we could run out to get some Burger King for dinner. What do you think?”

“I’m tired. Can you bring me something back?”

“No. Get up! I want to know how you think you did on your test!”

It was painful for Lavender to force herself to move off of the couch. She had been up late studying last night and she had gotten into a bad habit of staying up late, needing a nap after school and then staying up late again to finish that night’s homework. Her dad rarely made dinner and he always wanted to grab fast food, but for some reason, he never wanted to pick it up on the way home without his kids there. Lavender knew it was some type of nice gesture, so she got up and brushed her hair, smoothed out her shirt and said, “Fine, let’s go.”

They went to Burger King and chatted about the test, which had been tough, but she also knew that Dr. Lozier always had to curve because no one ever received a 100%. Lavender was confident enough that she would get an A. Ben sat by and listened.

When they got home, Lavender plopped back on the couch and fell asleep for a few more hours. When she got up, The Tonight Show was just starting and she knew it
would be another late night. She still had a bunch of homework to do and she couldn’t skip her blog.

She worked until one. Her dad had taken her place on the couch and would probably sleep there all night, as he did most nights. She crept up the stairs, got ready for bed, and laid her tired head down. She was careful to shut her bedroom door, put the stuffed penguin in front of it and fall asleep facing the door. She wanted to be able to see if her dad came in her room again tonight.

**Lavender’s Blog: September 23, 1999**

So, what was with the Physics test today? I studied for hours last night, hours, literally, and there were questions on there that made absolutely no sense. I think Dr. Lozier might be writing himself prescriptions again (jk!). Anyway, I think I did alright. You can still get like a D on that test and end up with an A with the curve, so I feel like it’s sort of random anyway. I already smell college in the distance… where will I go, where will I go? I don’t know yet, but it will surely be somewhere FAR AWAY from this boring place and, please note, I WILL NOT be majoring in Physics. Night all!

**Lavender’s Dream**

I’m at calling hours for someone. I feel sad and I don’t know why yet. Everyone is walking slowly and wearing black clothes trimmed with lace. The place is so crowded. I see my Grandma in the distance crying. Crying? She never cries. I try to walk through people, but they are moving so slowly that I can barely make any progress. I am impatient, I am nervous. I want to know what’s going on. Suddenly, we’re at St. Joe’s in the sanctuary. Now everyone is rigid in the pews, heads down. The casket up front is closed, but I know my Dad is in there. I look around frantic, I cry audibly, I shake the
person next to me, but he is cold and lifeless. *No, Dad! What am I going to do? Please, NO!* 

*Analysis of Data-Analysis*

What could these two pieces of data-analysis mean for my dissertation, qualitative research and cyborg learning? I present one version here in an analysis of analysis, a fold upon a fold of research.

For this dissertation, the sketch does the work of considering the difference of this space. On a blog, time and space converge in a materially different way, a way that may have possibilities for women. The (non)fiction piece also considers the space of the blog, but in an imaginary and “real” time and place. It pushes the blog into a time it was not, in order to contemplate the blog of a girl long before she entered graduate school and in order to wonder about what is left out of the space of the blog. The guardedness that women present is always around in some form and it makes me curious about what is left out and what might have been left out of blog posts as a result.

For qualitative research, both the sketch and the (non)fiction piece urge the reader and the researcher to think differently about the containers and the reach of the stories that we tell and the reality to which we contribute. They help me to consider what is not there as I analyze and to explore the missing data with more missing data. What sorts of imaginings and histories am I missing and how might those also be a part of the story of any qualitative study that takes its contribution to truth games seriously? But mostly these two pieces confound and disrupt the study, productively and purposefully, so as not to be read too easily or accepted too readily.
For cyborg learning, the sketch is a tool that can be used to consider how learning, especially situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation, might look different in these spaces. Perhaps it becomes more difficult to understand the learning that may be occurring in these new spaces in these different types of communities, or perhaps these complex interactions make the difficulty more visible. Are groups of non-drinking alcoholics as contained as they appear? The (non)fiction piece, too, makes one consider again the “third space” (Skerrett, 2010) in education as not just what happens in either formal or informal learning spaces, but somewhere in between. Learning is not contained in the classroom, it includes the activity online, at home, in dreams and in spaces yet to be imagined.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have ethnographically explored the blogs of women in graduate school highlighting themes of sameness and difference. I theorize along themes in order to see what the bloggers might have in common, but I also allow for difference between women and between the types of data that are permitted. In doing so, I attempted to push the boundaries of the blog alongside my participants and the dissertation as a piece of qualitative inquiry. As I did so, I wondered about the possibility of the blog space for learning, subjectivity and agency for women.

It was through writing that I was able to hit upon the notion of a potentializing space for the feminine on blogs, though I leave with more questions than answers. Rather than finding the “big” and “transgressive” spaces for agency that I may have hoped for at the outset, I instead find myself and my participants negotiating the tensions
between transgression and more livable spaces of the feminine in these new digital environments. Rather than a massive and profoundly transformative space, the blog instead appears to allow for many tiny transgressions. In these small movements, women are able to negotiate and to have agency in a way that is less fantastic, but more doable. This resituates my critical work and, ultimately the possibility of political work, in spaces such as these. Small changes that we can all live with, can still do work.

In the next chapter, I return to the literature to discuss how this study can further the conversations within learning, subjectivity and agency and the field of qualitative research.
Chapter 5

The Doing/Repercussions of Possibilities

Introduction

At the beginning of this dissertation, I posed two questions of my study: 1) What subject positions are made available to and/or (co)constructed by these women in graduate school through blogging? How do these subject positions imagine different livable spaces of the feminine through the use of technology? 2) What do these women learn (skills, content, subject positions, agency, etc.) as they blog? As I attempted to answer these questions, I journeyed through the virtual space of the blogs of women in graduate school, telling a story of learning, subjectivity and agency. In this chapter, I will translate that story into dangerously “useful” knowledge with great hesitation, but with the understanding that this is indeed what a dissertation study does. I will also translate the story of my research in an effort to contribute to knowledge surrounding qualitative research.

Blogs and Learning

In this section, I address the literature on learning and critical media literacy reviewed in chapter two. I offer the implications of my study for this literature and provide loose recommendations for the use of blogs in formal and informal educational environments as a way to contribute to and open up the existing literature which has a tendency to reduce learning to formal processes geared toward content learning and to
reduce educational technology tools as tools to be acted upon without contributing to the environments of which they become a part.

Situated Learning or Blogging as Learning

In the literature on learning with technology in both formal and informal environments, socio-cultural theories of learning are typically used as a framework for understanding how learning is occurring. In my own work, I use (much as a ball of clay is used to create something new) the framework outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) in order to understand how learning works as women in graduate school blog.

Lave and Wenger (1991) use the terms “legitimate peripheral participation” and “situated learning” to understand socio-cultural learning in various communities (from Alcoholics Anonymous to tailors). As women learn to blog, they certainly begin at the periphery, as newcomers, beginning their blog on their own and growing in their confidence in structuring a blog and writing blog posts by reading and participating in other blogs until they settle in to blogging as an old-timer. As these women practice blogging, they learn. Practice and participation in the community is learning.

The ways in which blogging as learning differs, though, from Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conception of legitimate peripheral participation is that the learning to use blogs is sometimes taught by the framework of the blog itself as well as by the blogs of others with whom the newcomer bloggers interact. Many of the bloggers in my study consider themselves blog autodidacts in that they “simply” signed up for a blog and set it up by “following the instructions.” Where Lave and Wenger see tool use as a part of learning, here I see the technology itself teaching. The way the blog is formatted suggests what a
blog is to look like and what content it requires thus framing the way most blogs end up looking and being used.

At the same time, however, these women undercut and play with the format of the blog in various ways. They do this as they become more comfortable with the centrality of their blogging practices. For example, Vicki uses her links widget to create a list of her best blog posts, which is not necessarily the intent of a links widget. This use is a way to make the blog fold upon itself in order to control and direct her audience back to specific posts on her own blog. I tell of how I searched Google to find the html code for a gadget not yet available on blogger. In the first instance, Vicki steps out of standard blogging practice to shape her own space and in the second instance, I enlist the help of another blogger (though this blogger never knows) to post something as yet unavailable in this blogging framework.

Learning as blogging may also be different than situated learning and learning as peripheral participation because, though these women are part of a community, the community looks different than the communities described by Lave and Wenger. The communities with which the bloggers participate contain members that do not know that they are members and are surrounding individuals as hubs. Each blogger has at least two different communities: 1) the community of her blog, which is mostly controlled by her, but which also includes participants that exist as commenters, participants that are invisible visitors/(maybe)readers, and imagined participants that may never actually visit (A hiring committee? Employers?) and 2) the community of blogs that she reads and participates in, which may or may not be connected to one another, but of which she uses to shape her blogging practices.
These two communities create a fragmented, incomplete, mysterious, but impactful community that looks more like a group of unsensing, homeless, partially complete avatars, than like a community of alcoholics that meet in a room once a week to learn the practices of AA. This is a materially different community that connects and learns in different ways. The individual learns from technology and from others that are there, but not there, and that may or may not know that they are part of the community, all the while using that knowledge to shape their own personal community which is continuously shaped by the other intermittent community “outside” of the personal space of the blog. Virtual, indeed.

And so, learning as blogging is a more Deleuzian concept than a situated learning described by Lave and Wenger (1991). The practices of blogging, situated in both the virtual and the actual, are rhizomatic. These practices “connect any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). The rhizome, blogs and my study “operate by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots… [they] pertain to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21).

As such, the space of the blog incites a type of learning not contained to the individual or a singular community. It is not amenable to the literature on educational technology, unless it is bastardized into a singularity used to learn a piece of content knowledge as described by a curriculum. Not that this sort of harnessing of the blog really limits the learning to what is desired by the curriculum. “There are no individual statements, only statement-producing machinic assemblages” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987,
Still, blogging as learning leaps from the content and muddies the water of curriculum, while the state apparatus tries desperately to lop off pieces of the out-of-control rhizome. The blogs of these women in graduate school display a type of rhizomatic learning that does not fit into notions of “school” learning and is ignored as a source of any importance.

Blogging as learning is also cyborg learning or learning that is:

- resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, cyborg [learning] defines a technological polis based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the house-hold.

- Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resources or incorporation by the other (Haraway, 1991a, p. 426).

These women with their blogs, on the internet, in the world, bleeding rhizomatically into multiple spaces and times while using and undercutting notions of the feminine, elicit cyborg learning as a metaphor for being and learning with technology at this particular historical moment. Women, blogs, this study and learning are rhizomatic and cyborgian at the same time. They are tangled up in possibilities for learning understood in a way that expands rather than contains.

**Critical Media Literacy**

Critical media literacy as defined by Alvermann and Hagood (2000) incorporates a diverse set of definitions, ones which include being critical of the media and creating media, but also ones which incorporate being critical of the ways in which individuals are produced by media. This understanding of literacy has a connection to rhizomatic,
cyborgian learning in that learners (bloggers, in this case) are learning with/from new media tools, tools with agential intra-activity (Barad, 2003), as much as humans or any other part of the network. As such, they should become aware of/consciously participatory in how this post-individual network is shaping agency as a collective event.

Critical media literacy is one way to describe an expanded understanding of literacy, one that includes tools of the media and a reflection upon those tools and the processes surrounding their engagement. As women in graduate school blog, it becomes apparent that they are negotiating the use of their blogs and their production as women, graduate students and bloggers (among other things) in critical ways (reflecting upon these technologies and undercutting constructs of the feminine even as they embody them). How can this type of literacy be made explicit, furthered and brought into formal educational environments so as to dissolve some of the boundaries between formal and informal learning? At the same time, I can’t help but ask: Will this dissolution do any good? What am I trying to do by suggesting that formal educational environment should learn from the practices of women blogging in graduate school? Are new virtual spaces really allowing for different types of subjectivity and agency, types that may be beneficial for women and girls in all sorts of educational environments? Or, am I an academic pusher of my own optimism of virtual spaces? Are there really possibilities to take advantage of? It certainly can’t hurt to explore.

Recommendations

Three primary recommendations for blogging as learning in support of rhizomatic, cyborgian learning and critical media literacy:
1) Encourage the unregulated use of blogs by women and girls in both formal and informal settings.

2) Support reflective blog use by creating dialogue around tools of the media, femininity and other discourses of the group involved.

3) Begin community groups both inside and outside of formal educational environments to increase access and promote blogging by underserved populations of women (working class and people of color).

The first recommendation, a recommendation aimed at teachers, community workers/volunteers and educational researchers, is one meant to provoke blogging by women and girls in a variety of settings as a means to explore subjectivity and agency through the virtual. The word “encourage” is meant to be somewhat vague, intended to allow for productivity while at the same time not being too prescriptive. Encourage women and girls to use blogs, so as not to perpetuate negative stereotypes of the media that often portray blogs as narcissistic oversharing or the dangerous relinquishing of privacy (“Teacher Natalie Munroe defends blog comments about ‘whiny’ students – This Just In - CNN.com Blogs,” 2011). But also encourage the use of blogs a way to invite women to participate online and to use that participation as a space to think and explore. The action of “encouraging,” though, is ephemeral at best.

In this first recommendation, I also carefully selected the word “unregulated” to describe the way in which blogs should be used. I do not mean to say that women and girls should put themselves out there and say anything, particularly if that means that what they say might hurt their jobs or reputations (though I wouldn’t count this type of blogging out either). In fact, I would encourage women and girls to keep their blogs
password-protected, sharing only with those they can trust until they are ready (if ever there is a time) to share more publicly. By unregulated, I mean to say that encouraging the use of blogs should not be accompanied by some sort of rubric, assignment or set of rules that impose unnecessary limits on the structure and content of the blog. Indeed, it appears in the literature that blogs used more formally, with restrictions at the outset are less successful (Instone, 2005) then blogs like those of the women in this study who continue to use the space as they choose. Rather, encourage the blog to be used as the women and girls see fit, perhaps for school, perhaps for musings, dreams, memories, complaining, journaling, recording, etc. Allowing for a type of play with blogs is still promoting learning, although in a more rhizomatic, cyborgian manner than one expected by the formal setting of the school.

The second recommendation, to support reflective blogging practices, may seem counter to the first recommendation, specifically the unregulated use I describe above. It also may appear to promote a critical, rather than a poststructural type of learning. I argue, however, that provoking dialogue around subjectivity and agency within and across blogs in community with women remains both unregulated and posty. This sort of collective reflection is meant to stimulate, not restrict and it is meant to incite conversation, not to free women from a set of structures in this historical moment (though certainly, discussing perceived structures can provide for a poststructural sort of work in which women may both be revealing contingent structures and prodding them).

As such, these reflective blogging practices, conversations and dialogue that take place about and through the blogs of women should remain unregulated, stimulating and perhaps bizarre at times (a nod to cyborg learning). Women should both work within and
at the limits of the confines of the blogging space, just as the bloggers in this study work within and at the limits of the discourses of femininity. It is possible to both use constraints and rouse them at the same time and those are the types of reflective practices that I recommend here.

The third recommendation, to begin blogging community groups, is meant to address the limitations of my study and to use those limits to invite further forms of explorations of subjectivity and agency made available by the interworkings of woman, blog and discursive formations. My study is limited to educated, white women. I limited my study to educated women, not in order to exclude, but in order to study a subgroup of which I am a part. While searching for participants, I came across women of color in graduate programs, much less than white women, and I asked for their participation, but did not receive it. I will not conjecture as to why this is so, but I would like to include women of color in further, broader research and I think that the race of bloggers should be specifically addressed.

As for non-graduate students, those purposefully left out of my study, especially working class women or women of low socioeconomic status, this recommendation could benefit them the most. As I began my search for blogs from my pilot study on into the present study, and in my casual reading of blogs, working class women are noticeably absent. Indeed, in Technorati’s yearly survey of bloggers, two-thirds (slight variation by region) of bloggers are college graduates and half of US bloggers have a median income greater than $75,000 (“State of the Blogosphere: Introduction - Page 2 - Technorati Blogging,” 2009).
The absence of working class women from blogging of the nature studied here is of particular interest to me for a few reasons. My mother is a waitress and has been for thirty-plus years. When I first started to blog, she indicated some interest, but when I approached her about helping her begin to blog, she told me that she did not have anything to write about “like you do.” I also watch her struggle with her typing and written language skills and I wonder how many working women, given access and the appropriate technology and technology training, would shy away from blogging because they do not have confidence in what they have to share or the writing ability that it would take to share it. When 83% of female bloggers write personal accounts of their lives, the absence of working class women is unfair at best.

Community groups that take place at libraries, churches, public schools (as after-school or community programs) and other community spaces in areas with populations of either people of color, the working class or both could bring together women to explore not only the technology of blogging, but the experiences of writing on the internet. In these community groups, women and girls could gain knowledge, experience and confidence as they practice blogging and dialogue about blogging. I imagine these community groups as places where a blogger like me could give an overview of the practices of blogging, explain the technology, share examples of the blogs of other women and engage women and girls in blogging experimentation and discussions surrounding that experimentation. As blogs open up new configurations of women and tools and make available different subject positions and agential possibilities, these community groups may be a way to expand access and further open up subjectivity and agency.
Perhaps this last recommendation mirrors work being done surrounding the internet and marginalized groups. boyd (2007, 2008) studies the ways in which youth take up social media. She offers counternarratives to the essentializing and demonizing discourses that surround the use of social media by youth. Jenson, de Castell and Bryson (2003) have worked to change the power dynamic surrounding technology for women and girls in the classroom. Bryson (2008) and Gray (2009) have also begun to extend this research by studying the practice of queer populations on the internet; Bryson on queer youth and Gray on rural queer youth. Everette and Watkins (2008) have also studied the role of race in educational environments such as video games. The work in these studies, and many others, contributes to our understanding of the role of technology and the internet among non-dominant populations, much in the way that I hope future work can be done specifically on the use of blogs.

Subjectivity and Agency

In this section, I address the literature on subjectivity and agency reviewed in chapter two. I offer implications of my study for this literature and continue the conversation within this literature, particularly as it pertains to ontological questions of being with technology (and using this technology as learning subjectivity and agency). In this section, I also put forth the metaphor of the clone as a way of understanding this complex being with technology from the perspective of a small group of women in graduate school that use blogs in various ways.

Blogs and Poststructural Subjectivity and Agency
The work done by women in graduate school on blogs helps me, the researcher, to answer my first set of research questions: What subject positions are made available to and/or (co)constructed by these women in graduate school through blogging? How do these subject positions imagine different livable spaces of the feminine through the use of technology? My data suggests that heteronormative and deeply ingrained feminine subject positions are made available and used by these women (and Butler (1997) would certainly acknowledge the necessity of this use) as they blog. However, these women also seem to use the space of the blog to put those same subject positions under erasure in subtle, but cleverly crafted ways. Is this a result of their education? Is this a result of the space without physical body? Do their missing breasts allow them room to fill that space with some social commentary?

My study does not allow me to answer the latter questions, but it may suggest that this is the case. As my study was of, in and through the virtual, I was unable to see these women interact in the physical world and cannot compare their virtual performance of self with their physical performance. Setting this aside, I observe as I study these spaces designed and populated by women in graduate school that women both use and undercut feminine stereotypes. This using and undercutting is reminiscent of what Grumet (1988) refers to as “bitter milk” in her book on the subject of women and teaching of the same name. “Bitter milk, fluid of contradictions: love and rejection, sustenance and abstinence, nurturance and denial” (p. xi).

These women talk about the necessity to be guarded on this space, just in case someone that may not read the space as it is to be read or may use the space to judge falls upon it. Though these same sorts of interactions take place daily in the physical world
(the management of identities and space-based performances) multiple spaces come
together (and do not) on the space of the blog and though women note that they must be
guarded, they continue to write. And more than that, they continue to provoke. Just
today, March 17, 2011, as I visit Vicki’s blog to see her latest post, I read this:

   In fact, as I discussed with my friend Bee just yesterday, I feel that I am not alone
   in being somewhat surprised by thirty — baffled by the fact that I just don’t have
   my shit together, to put it bluntly.

   When Foucault discussed technologies of the self (1988) as cultural means to
shape people in specific ways, he included journals and other technologies of self-
exploration. Do blogs count in the same way? Or, are they something different in their
materiality and in the cultural production that they bring about? Of course, Foucault was
talking about a very specific time period and was pointing it out to describe historically
contingent discourses, but do some pieces of those discourses leak into our current modes
of being, or is his description of technologies of the self a good metaphor for the ways
that discourses work across histories to shape human bodies and behaviors? I will
borrow Foucault’s understandings for how discourses shape us and provide a new
metaphor for the current historical moment as informed by my tiny study and my
thinking and playing along the way. I will return to that metaphor in a moment.

   The statement made by Vicki above is not a provocation of discourse simply
because Vicki uses a swear word, though it must be noted that this is a difficult thing for
a guarded woman to do on her blog. It is a provocation, however, because Vicki, as she
is framed by discourses that she cannot think without (Butler, 1997), tells her audience
that for all of her doing, her PhD, her writing skill, her successful marriage, she is undone.
She declares this boldly, knowing and not knowing who might read the words on the screen, entering her thoughts into a different material form. She has some agency, but that agency incites other agents and activity just as it does not. She has known and unknown intentions and she lays out her thoughts in order to connect with others, to be creative and to think (by her own admission). In this different sort of material space, her body is on hold in some ways and active in others, certainly as she types about discourses that press upon her as a result of her female body. This space is different, though not revolutionary; new, but not a savior. It is, however, pre-sedimentary. It is still settling into place, so the hammer required to make cracks in the foundation can still be made of rubber and can still be wielded haphazardly as in play.

This is not to say that these women pick up the hammer and attempt any sorts of foundation-cracking, it is just to say that there are possibilities because of the soft rock and various hammer-wielders playing in this space. The possibilities are where different sorts of agency and subjectivity lie. And these new sorts of technologies that have become available in the past ten years, technologies of social media, are contributing to this agency and subjectivity. Haraway (1991a), Barad (2003), Massumi (2002), Baudrillard (1983) and Benjamin (1932/2008) all see these possibilities in different ways, using various frameworks and paradigms, but they all see shifts and the “usefulness” of studying how technology is producing and produced in our society.

Benjamin (1932/2008), for example, in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* discussed how mechanical reproduction was taking away the aura of works of art and permitting powerful symbols to be used for political propaganda. He theorized that the new way that symbols moved through space, with ease, would have
a political impact. This begs the question, what do new technologies make thinkable? What does a blog make thinkable for women that previously was not? And, on the other hand, what thinking might a blog eclipse?

These questions are explored by these women and their blogs in this study. The answers are not and never will be clear or defined, but they hint at possibilities made available by different configurations of women, technologies and discourses. We see women writing in different ways, using and undercutting discourses, displaying their bodies differently, learning differently and willing to explore the space of the blog. What is their blog, then, to these women? What does it to/for them? In an attempt to answer that question, I offer the metaphor of the blog as clone. The blog is a clone, misunderstood as an exact replica, carving out spaces of its own with implications for possibilities around subjectivity and agency.

Blog as Clone

A clone is a scientific creation, one often misunderstood by the general public. I am reminded of an episode of the popular television show The Simpsons one of my students once referenced when discussing clones with my sixth grade class. On this episode, Homer Simpson was cloned. The clones appeared instantaneously as dumbed-down servants to the original person. Clones, in the public imaginary, are copies of a human being, exact replicas, appearing out of thin air. The cloning process in actuality, however, is a slow process of replicating cells and growing them into a fully formed organism. The clone is therefore never exactly like the original. Even the copied DNA changes based on environmental factors. So, the irony is that a clone is never actually a
clone. A clone is another being with DNA that started out as identical, but continues to change just as the “original” being changes. This is a blog. A blog is a clone.

A blog is created by a woman (in this case) in her image. She designs it and releases it to the world. It starts out as a fledgling specter of a more fully developed future blog. As the woman learns to blog, as she learns to develop her “personal” style of blogging, the future blog begins to come to fruition in unexpected ways. It doesn’t do what she wants it to do exactly. It appears as she designed it, but once released, it is opened up to the marks of others, the marks of culture and, unlike a physical clone of a body, pieces of it are stolen, replicated, passed on, or never seen. All of these events change the blog without the permission of the “creator.” She continues to write, design and engage in her own space, but her blog takes on a rather different sort of imaginary. Although she and her regular readers continue to treat her blog as a representation of her, it is not her exactly. In addition to the marks of others, the marks of culture and the passing around of its bits and pieces, her blog can “only” ever exist in this space without a body, just as her physical body can only exist on the physical plane. Neither are her exactly and so her blog is not a representation of her, but a different part of her, subject to both the same sorts of inscriptions of culture and new inscriptions that are now possible in virtual spaces and places.

She could shut it down, delete it, stop writing, end the life of her clone, but even if she does this, pieces will remain. Just as if she were to end her own physical life, it could be done, but pieces of her would still hang around the physical world, reminding others of who she was. Although, if the “actual” woman dies, her blog does not. It can stick around for a long time continuing to grow and change or stagnate. And, if the blog dies
and the woman does not, the woman will somehow change. In this way, the blog is a clone, a body with identical DNA to the “original,” but with DNA that changes just as the original changes, that leaves remnants just as the original, that is vulnerable to suicide or homocide as much as a physical body.

The blog is a clone, not as the public imagines it, not as an exact replica of the woman. The blog is not the woman put online. It is not her thoughts and her being directly translated onto a formulaic website. It does not allow a reader to peer into this woman’s life, unfiltered, unadulterated. It is instead a clone of her. It is something different, made available and sculpted by the new materiality of the world wide web. Her blog, her clone, grows up differently than she, though her DNA is present in every cell (bit?) and they are linked by common origins. Indeed, in some ways, her blog is like her twin separated at birth. She can nary understand how different its life is from her own, how it sees the world, moves through space, how it relates to people and how it got that scar on its forehead. And when she meets it for the first time (aside from lying next to one another in the nursery in some long forgotten hospital), she has both a loving recognition and a horror of how she could not know someone that shares her DNA. Just as all of the women love their blogs and fear the repercussions of its outgrowth in the same breath, far from wanting to end its life, they continue to nurture it, lovingly and fearfully.

The blog is not the only type of clone present today. The internet is allowing for a proliferation of mediated clones surfacing, replicating and being nurtured in the new materiality of the web. I liken my metaphor of blog as clone to Haraway’s cyborg (1991a), Deleuze’s “monstrous” child of philosophy (Massumi, 1992) or Lather’s angels
(Lather & Smithies, 1997), each doing work to open up ontological positions in their relative fields, feminism, philosophy and qualitative research. Perhaps the metaphor of the blog as clone can open up questions of being in the fields of educational technology, where a student is often thought to act upon and utilize new spaces on the web to learn curricular content. If what a student “creates” on the web is thought of more as a clone, then maybe learning with technology can be seen as “a kind of knowing through not knowing” (Lather & Smithies, 1997, p. 53). These clones aren’t just appearing out of thin air, dummies that do work for us. They are “trickster [clones] that both mark that something Too Big is going on and render it elusive, ambiguous, outside easily available ways of making sense” (Ibid). This is the work of my study on agency and subjectivity and the work of my clone metaphor in educational technology and qualitative research.

Qualitative Research

In this section, I address the literature on virtual ethnography and qualitative research reviewed in chapter three. I offer implications of my study for this literature and attempt to participate in the conversation surrounding the nature and scientificity of qualitative research. I also offer recommendations for furthering ethnographic research in virtual settings as theoretically productive work keeping the “missing data” in mind.

Poststructural Virtual Ethnography

A virtual ethnography is one of and through the virtual of the internet (Hine, 2000) and a virtual ethnography in and of itself, as defined by Hine, seems to be poststructural in some ways. As she explored the space of her study of a piece of the internet, she was searching for how a space was constructed by discourses and new
materialities, alongside trying to figure out what was going on with a particular news story (her other object of study) in this place and time. Her sociological roots show, but she appears to be using the tools of Foucault and other cultural theorists to understand her study and newly available methods and tools, such as email interviews and listserv conversations.

Where I wanted to take the virtual ethnography a bit further into the poststructural, though I feel that I wasn’t able to achieve my goal as fully as I had hoped, was in the area of exploration and experimental play as another tool to provoke “different knowledge” and to “produce knowledge differently” (Lather, 2007, p. 13). I do not seek, in this meager study, to produce knowledge to be applied to all women in graduate school who choose to blog or to fully understand learning on the internet. I seek rather to explore a “new” space produced by social discourses, new materialities and configurations of those materialities, and to push the boundaries of that space to see what I might come to understand, knowing that that understanding will always be slippery and unfinished. I seek to explore, to get close to a “limit experience” (Foucault, 1991), and no more.

Along the way, I have done what I did not really want to do, reduced “data” to themes and wrote a story, but that’s the challenge of producing different types of knowledge when the tools of knowledge production have a long history and have shaped me, tools that Butler would say I cannot think without (1997). And so, I have done my best to muddy the story with other stories, informal thoughts and artistic imaginings. All at once I feel that these are interesting and provocative and nonacademic, silly, misplaced, forced and uninteresting. As I use what I cannot think without and attempt to produce a different sort of knowledge, academic discourses weight heavy on my mind and
fingertips as they glide across this keyboard. I imagine an uncomfortable exam defense where I am attacked and I fail. Who do I think I am? I have done nothing here. Is that the point or will I be in danger?

I have often thought, as I have learned what it means to be “posty” in qualitative inquiry, whether it would be better to just lay out my data for a reader to interpret. How is any sort of analysis and “discussion” post-anything? But, even in the selection of what counts as data, what to include as data is interpretation is analysis. And so, I must admit to what I’m doing here. I’m interpreting in one way. I have learned something and I have to do my best to explain what I’ve learned and how I’ve learned it to contribute to some sort of amorphous, monstrous body of knowledge, ever-changing and growing, hoping to contribute in a way that doesn’t do harm the moment it is published, if it ever is.

I have decided to call my interruptions of private blog posts, and additive works of fiction and nonfiction data-analysis. These snippets are both data and analysis and neither data nor analysis. I wrote some to describe my data, some to explain my data and some because of my data. As I did this, I realized that I created more data that could not be separated from analysis. And I also realized that this data in its description, explanation and origin were themselves analysis of existing data and the data I was creating. There is no separation of data and analysis in these snippets, and there is less separation in the linear text than I intended. The slippages in my attempt at a linear academic text are obvious, juvenile even, but it is in these slippages, that I feel that I am not pretending to be separate from the data-analysis and from the story of this study. St. Pierre (2011) discussing a type of post qualitative research offers this piece of advice:
My advice is to read, and analysis, whatever it is, will follow. (Do tell me what you think you are thinking with when you think—what are your data? And do tell me what you think you do when you think—when you do analysis? Do that). In the end, it is impossible to disentangle data, data collection, and data analysis. Those individuations no longer make sense. We could just give them up (p. 38).

**Missing Data**

In some ways, it is these snippets of data-analysis that allow me to expose and play with the vast amount of missing data in a virtual ethnography. These sorts of missing data creep into every study, to be certain, but in a virtual ethnography not only are thoughts, unthoughts, dreams, memories and alternate interactions missing, the physical person and physical context is missing, replaced by words on a screen, the background of an email inbox or the chosen layout of a blog. This sort of “obvious” missing data forces ethnographers into seeing what is missing. This is new for ethnography, a way of knowing that very much relies on the “being there” (St. Pierre, 2008). So what if, not only the researcher is not present, but the participants are not present either? At least, not present in the ways that we have become accustomed to. Is the validity of the study damned? Is the authenticity of the participants problematic?

Instead of trying to compensate for the lack of validity or authenticity that virtual environments may or may not provide, I tried to embrace the difference in order to explore and experiment, keeping my methods in mind as I wrote and studied. As I kept track of my experiences with this method, I consistently ran into questions surrounding the data that was left out of the study. This data got in the way as I tried to analyze, interpret and code. This data helped me to remember that my study is more broad than I
initially intended and also more of a tangled knot. This knot contains both intentional
data and analysis, data-analysis and the types of unintentional data that I cannot keep in,
but I can also not leave out (even if I don’t directly put it in). Hence, my efforts to both
leave them out and insert them as blocks of text, art, and story.

Through my wonderings and wanderings of missing data, I interviewed my
participants via email. This left me feeling, not disconnected from their facial expression
and their body movements, but connected instead to words that they carefully chose,
fonts and colors that they both chose and did not choose, and my careful rereading (and
rereading) of their words. Sure, I supplied the tone and voice in my imagination, but
rather than this being a-affective, it was only affective in a different sort of way.
Massumi, paraphrasing Deleuze might explain this experience as such: “[T]he problem
with the dominant models in cultural and literary theory is not that they are too abstract to grasp the concreteness of the real. The problem is that they are not *abstract enough* to grasp the real incorporeality of the concrete” (2002, p. 5).

As such, perhaps the “distance” between me and my participants are not so much abstract, but bringing forth with reckless abandon how the real is not a body. New technologies challenge researchers with ontological and epistemological questions of being and how to understand being. When the context changes, and we can no longer grasp onto the hand of our participant, how can we use that as an opportunity to rethink what we are doing in qualitative research? How can we think of it as invention? If being is becoming, then research should not be thought of as an uncovering of the world, but as productive, additive, inventive. “Critical thinking disavows its own inventiveness as much as possible… The balance has to shift to affirmative methods: techniques which embrace their own inventiveness and are not afraid to own up to the fact that they add (if so meagerly) to reality” (Massumi, 2002, pp. 12-13).

Perhaps missing data, then, is one way to be provocative in a research that is invention rather than discovery. Using missing data as an opportunity to get lost in the study (and the world) is a method that may be helpful in creating a different kind of knowledge. “At its simplest, getting lost is something other to commanding, controlling, mastery” (Lather, 2007, p. 11). As I swing back and forth between the data that I planned and the missing data, I try to allow this to be an ethical move rather than a problem, or maybe a rich problem dripping with ethics.

*Recommendations: Of Headaches and Creative Contagion*
Wow. Coming to the pretend-end of a dissertation does not feel as expected. This is it, my final list of recommendations, recommendations that I think sound pretty good right now, but will surely sound like crap come my defense. Recommendations that I feel compelled to list in threes for some historical (perhaps biblical?) reason. I’m sitting at home in my pajamas at my kitchen table with newly purchased, though already dirty, flowery placemats. It’s 10:39am on Wednesday, March 23, 2011 and it’s a warm, but cloudy day. I’m on my second cup of coffee. Here I am adding to reality. And here are my recommendations for qualitative research in and of the virtual:

1) Play
2) Look around
3) Produce

My first recommendation is to play in the data. Play in the virtual and the actual, explore, poke around and see what you find there. You should have some theoretical background, but read widely, otherwise you will find only what you want to find, but you may find that anyway. This is why play is important. Your work in a virtual ethnography should be not just an observation, but a provocation. Your interaction changes things and you should not be afraid of that. Embrace, engage and play in it.

Play especially in the missing data that surrounds you, that is left out of your study and that confuses your methods. Dance with it, challenge it, but do not ignore it. Pick it up and wonder about it, but do not demand that anything come of it. Just throw your head back, laugh and enjoy the process of exploring data that comes at you from all angles, that attacks you and hides from you. Don’t try to tame it, try instead to “get lost”
(Lather, 2007), “remix, mash-up” (St. Pierre, 2011, p. 30) or start a “creative contagion” (Massumi, 2002). Just play for a while.

Once you have played in your study, your virtual spaces, my second recommendation is to look around. Put the play on hold for a moment and look, really look, at what your play is producing, how your play is produced and be aware of what is happening, has happened and might happen. If there is a time for reflection, this is it. Try to see what you might not have seen in the frenzied activity of play. Feel the play fully and process what has happened, where and what/who was involved. Look at the details of the whole event, peek under rocks, open doors, ask questions; count nothing out.

Why not look around to begin with, before the play? You can and should do that too, but don’t expect to understand too much before you have experienced. Don’t walk into a blog, look around and expect to understand that with which you have not played. In fact, do not expect to understand at all, but give understanding your best shot by becoming a part of the experience and then looking around. In virtual spaces, the play is just as important as the looking around. You will follow rabbit holes of data, through archives, comments, other social spaces, other individuals in that space and on and on until you have no idea where you began. Hine (2000) calls this approach “adaptive ethnography” and adaptation is important in order to allow ethnography to “thrive in the conditions which developments in mediated communication offer” (p. 154).

Playing and looking around, getting lost and observing circumstances entangled with the lost bring me to my final recommendation: Produce. I use the word produce, recognizing the heavy load that this carries for those in American and academia. Rather than use this term to mean to “be productive” whether in a career or the day-to-day grind
of list-making and “doing,” I use this term in a more artistic sense. After and during all of the playing and the looking around, record what you have done. You don’t necessarily have to write, though writing can be an exceptional method of inquiry (Richardson, 1994). You could draw, create media, begin conversations, paint, build, grow or excite. Produce something that adds to reality. “[W]ork to remember, imagine, and realize ways of knowing and being that can span the chasm presently separating our public and private worlds” (Grumet, 1988, p. xv). Produce carefully, with the knowledge of the experience and play, but also with the understanding that your knowledge and all knowledge is partial and, the moment it is created, is awaiting death. Do it anyway.

Produce stories that may or may not belong in a dissertation. Put them in anyway. Produce conversations on your Facebook page and then write more about them later. Produce a video about your experience in the world and share it. Produce what I have not produced here. Follow the work of journals such as the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, which has allowed for alternative formats and the bizarreness of research. I guess what I really mean to say is that you should participate. Pay attention, live and participate. And in that participation, feel no need to be easily understood. Better yet, be misunderstood. Confuse someone. Leave them with a “headache” (Massumi, 2002, p. 19), just as the virtual world can leave us with the pain of not understanding, of worrying where we are or where our thoughts reside, of being found out, of being meaningless. Play, look around and produce in this space and do so without apology.
Conclusion

In this chapter, I have returned to the literature that framed this study of women blogging in graduate school. I have offered an interpretation of my study that adds to the literature by thinking through theories of learning, subjectivity and agency in order to explore implications for the fields of learning, cultural studies and qualitative research. These implications include the use of blogs in ways that do less harm and more work, the understanding of being with technology that might offer alternatives to their use in educational environments, and the continual expansion, discomfort, and new ways of knowing possible in qualitative inquiry.

I offer an end to this study, one that is both incomplete and premature. There is much to be done to continue the work of my dissertation and that work will continue throughout my academic career and my life. Just last week, I was interviewing at a university, and the dean was explaining to me that he would like to begin a program to prepare teachers that will never meet their students. Cloned teachers that will work with cloned students. I’m looking forward to it.
References


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Appendix A

Interview Questions

• What motivates you to continue blogging?
• Do you like your blog? Would you read your own blog?
• Do you think you have changed as a result of writing this blog? In what ways (if any)?
• What interactions take place on the blog that wouldn’t otherwise?
• Can you see yourself giving up blogging in the future?
• What emotions/feelings come to mind when you think of your blog?
• How do you decide the limits of self-disclosure on your blog? Do you ever surprise yourself with what you are or are not willing to share?
• Have you ever posted something on your blog that you thought was beyond the “standard practice” of blogging, or that perhaps made you uncomfortable? If so, would you share that experience?
• Have you ever thought about using your blogs in unexpected ways? What ways are those? What happened when you did or what is holding you back?
• Do you ever go back and reread old blog posts, change them or remove them? What do you think about old blog posts?
• What types of comments does your blog posts draw?
Appendix B

Timeline

January 2011- Secured 5 participants (3 from pilot, 2 new), sent out interviews, began data collection

February 2011- Analyzed blog posts and interviews, formulated follow up interview question, coded data, sent out blog experiments to participants

March 2011- Secured a sixth participant, continued to analyze data and return to the literature, wrote as analysis, dialogued about the few experiments that were taking place

April 2011- Continuing to write, revise and collect bits and pieces of new data
Appendix C

Data Corpus

“Real” Data

• 6 initial interviews (25 pages)
• 3 follow-up interviews (8 pages)
• Email correspondence with participants (40 separate emails)
• Observations of 5 (one participant entered late) blogs (sampled 1 post per month for a total of 303 posts, including visuals, comments, reply comments, and links to other pages)
• Observation of blog experiments (21 posts and counting, including 1 video post)
• Field Notes/Journal/Blog (24 posts and counting)
• Fiction/Nonfiction writing (8 pages)

Missing Data

• Blog posts that remain password protected
• Blog posts that were deleted or have yet to be written (for a variety of reasons, including discursive pressure)
• Comments that are deleted or never posted (or the thoughts of the readers who do not comment)
• Interview questions left unanswered
• Links from blogs to pages that no longer exist
• Stories not written or kept private
• Blog experiments not undertaken

• Other online writing by the women (posts in other blogs, Facebook, Twitter, forums, etc. in which they may link back to their blog or not)

• Edited posts (What was there before I read it? How might it change in the future?)

• Reposted posts (Others reposting my participants’ posts and comments left on those reposted posts)

• Private emails sent to the bloggers about their blogs or specific posts

• Forgotten blog posts

• Blogs started as a result of my bloggers (I know of five at least)

• Thoughts from the bloggers on blog design

• Blogs of bloggers that chose not to participate in my study

• Dreams of my bloggers and of readers of the blogs

• What I cannot think… and on and on.