In a computer lab on the sixth floor of a federal building, four young men and one young woman spread themselves out across the machines. Three iMacs were brought in that day and set up adjacent to one another on a long folding table, and eight PCs lined the perimeter of the room. Frankie, the young woman, used one of the PCs connected to the Internet to search YouTube (youtube.com) for a video she had previously uploaded to the video-sharing site. Bruce sat down in front of an iMac, opened up iMovie, and named his file “slickone,” after the moniker he had earned in his neighborhood. All of the images he wanted to use for his afternoon movie project were on his MySpace page, so he borrowed a flash drive from the facilitator of the digital media drop-in hours and accessed his online profile on a PC. After selecting six images, and with Joey’s help, he transferred the images onto the iMovie clip palette. Joey and Bruce worked together to drag and drop the images onto the iMovie timeline, where images and video can be organized into a desired sequence. When Mathu,1 the facilitator, asked if Bruce could find the “effects” tab so that he could apply them to his images, Joey, who was still sitting with Bruce, pointed to the tab and responded with laughter, “It says ‘effects.’” Bruce spent the next hour applying and then removing effect after effect and made accompanying noises of exclamation and dissatisfaction at regular intervals. He left
for work before he could finish his movie, but felt confident that he had mapped out the story he wanted to tell: one of himself as a former graffiti artist who was now seeking new canvases by painting clothing, hats, and signs for friends.

The youth who used the computer lab during the digital media drop-in hours moved seamlessly between “online” and “offline” spaces, and their digital literacies reveal hybridity in their multispatial navigations. While this vignette does not offer a definitive description of a completed project or product, the interactions across youth and adult reflect the pedagogical nature of a space in which multiple modalities for expression, communication, and representation are present. In this and other digitally rich contexts in which youth are engaged in the composition of multimodal texts (Hull & James, 2007; Ranker, 2008; Ware, 2008), experimentation and exploration are encouraged and literacies are not tethered to “in-school” and “out-of-school” binaries.

The well-documented literacies of adolescents reflect the shifting terrain of young people’s communicative practices and the technologies that mediate them (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 2006; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Skinner & Hagood, 2008). Virtual worlds, social networking sites, microblogging services, blogs, and wikis are among the several new kinds of spaces that Web 2.0 technologies make possible. Wesch (2007), a cultural anthropologist, in his highly popular video in which he analyzes the participatory culture of Web 2.0, suggests that among the concepts we need to rethink in light of the communicative, archival, and design affordances of evolving Internet technologies are authorship, identity, aesthetics, and even love. Recent studies of adolescents’ literacies resonate with Wesch’s claims and illustrate a range of emerging practices across a diverse digital landscape encompassing spaces online and offline. These emerging literacies are evident in the sophisticated layering of texts, images, and sounds involved in the production of anime music videos (Ito, 2006). Digital literacy proficiency is also required to navigate and communicate within the unfamiliar semiotic contexts of video games (Gee, 2005), in which participants confront new situations, assume a range of roles and identities, and find themselves in a variety of communicative interactions. These are not merely new forms of “letteracy” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2007) and not solely concerned with the production of written texts. The challenge to educators is to be pedagogically nimble in order to most effectively support the literacy learning of adolescents who are engaged in these and many other literacies, which move across spaces of home, community, and school.
To this discussion of youths’ online and digital literacies we bring the concept of multimodal play (Vasudevan, 2006), which illuminates otherwise dismissed or overlooked interactions with digital media and technologies for purposes of composing. Often, youth use humor and playfulness to navigate their daily discourses. This approach is also evident in the ways that youth approach new technologies and cultivate new literacy practices. In this chapter, we draw on research with adolescents in media saturated contexts in order to advocate a “pedagogy of play” while making connections with adolescents’ digital literacies landscapes. We suggest that through multimodal play—including textual explorations, reconfigured teaching and learning relationships, and the performance of new roles and identities with and through new media technologies and media texts—educators are better able to make pedagogical connections with adolescents’ evolving literacies.

The theoretical concept of multimodality provides a framework for understanding new forms of composing—not only the composing of multiple texts out of multiple modes but also the engagement of myriad digital “tools” to participate in equally varied digital geographies (Vasudevan, under review). Multimodal composing, therefore, refers to more than bringing together separate modes of expression, such as sound or image, in the production of a text. Two ideas are important to consider when applying a multimodal approach to composing. First, it is important to recognize that reading and writing have always been multimodal. As Jewitt (2005) notes, even printed texts “require the interpretation and design of visual marks, space, colour, font or style, and, increasingly image, and other modes of representation and communication” (p. 315). A multimodal approach allows educators and researchers to attend to all of the resources involved in composing, which are especially visible in digital composing. Second, the ability to bring a variety of modes—for example, print, image, sound—together in the same text not only changes the way a text can be conveyed but also opens up new possibilities for what kinds of meaning can be conveyed (Hull & Nelson, 2005; Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Adolescents are engaged in these types of composing across the hybrid spaces they travel on a daily basis (e.g., instant messaging with written language within a virtual world in which they must communicate using an avatar; or incorporating photographs taken with a smartphone camera to their latest blog post). Portable technologies and increased wireless connectivity enable greater variation in what is composed, where and when composing happens, and reasons for composing.
We recognize that when youth are tethered to virtual spaces, such as microblogging sites like Twitter (twitter.com) and online video services like Hulu (hulu.com), their physical location also matters. Thus, we draw on this framework of multimodal play to extend the ongoing discourse about multimodal text production by considering the makeup of the physical spaces in which teaching and learning with multiple modalities occur. Outside of schools, in many youth-focused media organizations, the availability of a wide variety of expressive modes, multiple audiences, and opportunities for collaborative as well as individual composition is mediated through a shared understanding of what we refer to here as multimodal play. While many examples of multimodal play are found to exist outside of school and in spaces that afford different social arrangements, there is growing evidence that suggests ways in which this ethos is possible within school spaces (Fisher, 2007; Hill, 2009; Wissman, 2005, 2008). As the examples in this chapter illustrate, the pedagogical stance of multimodal play can be helpful when reimagining classrooms and can be generative of meaningful literacy practices and teaching and learning relationships.

In places like Youth Radio, which is a broadcast training program for youth in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as other projects that provide youth with largely unrestricted access to technologies, their explorations yielded unexpected and unplanned digital innovations (e.g., the music sharing service, Napster; the footage shot by children involved with the documentary, Born into Brothels; on the ground documentation by young soldiers of the war in Iraq) (Soep & Chavez, 2005). Soep and Chavez (2005) urge adults “to recognize that young people’s media experiments are pushing the work of many adults and the institutions created ‘for’ youth”(p. 417) so that educators can build on these digital innovations in purposeful ways. In a youth media organization like Youth Radio, adults and youth engage in a “pedagogy of collegiality” to accomplish collective goals of youth development and media production. This “[c]ollegial pedagogy, then, characterizes situations in which young people and adults jointly frame and carry out projects in a relationship marked by interdependence, where both parties produce the work in a very hands-on sense” (2005, p. 419). This approach to pedagogy works in such a setting where a spirit of experimentation abounds, and where there is both physical and figurative room to play with roles, composing repertoires, literacies, and goals. Youth Radio and similar settings (Goodman, 2003; Hull & Katz, 2006) exist outside of the school walls. While calls for rethinking literacies pedagogies with adolescents abound (Alvermann, 2002; Burke & Hammett, 2009; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Schultz, 2002), we have fewer examples of this
call to action coming to fruition inside schools.

In this chapter, we present three instances of practice from our research with youth across three unique, urban educational settings and focus on the significance of play with technologies and media in literacy teaching and learning with adolescents. Each of us assumed different positionalities in our research, which afforded us varied entry into these multimodal educational spaces. We offer three different perspectives on creating and sustaining sites of multimodal pedagogy that are informed by understandings of adolescents’ emerging literacies. One case explores an eighth grade journalism and media studies class and illustrates the ways in which the teacher utilized online tools and resources in the creation of a monthly school newspaper. A second case looks at the unexpected affordances of blogging in a high school English classroom. And a third case examines the engagement of social networking and video-sharing sites in the negotiation of identities and relationships between teachers and youth in an alternative to incarceration program. We conclude our chapter with a discussion on the implications of the increasingly digitally mediated lives of youth for the educational institutions in which they participate.

**Becoming New Media Journalists in an Urban Middle School**

Room 208 at East Side Middle School looks very different from most of the other classrooms in this large urban public school. Thirty-five eMac computers circle the perimeter of the room surrounding a large “conference” table in the center where the 43 students enrolled in the journalism and digital media studies class meet at the beginning of sixth period each day to discuss their current projects and ask for support or feedback from the class. Though many of these students did not have an interest in journalism or expertise in digital media prior to being randomly assigned to the class by the administration, most readily took up the task put forth on the first day of school by their teacher, Mr. Cardenas, “You report. Journalists report the facts...[In] this class you will be journalists.”

Over the three years that Mr. Cardenas has taught the journalism and digital media studies elective, he has transformed his classroom into an authentic workspace where he and his students explore both traditional and new media journalistic practices such as podcasting. During sixth period, students are journalists. They are provided with “press passes” that afford them freedom to move around the school to report on issues of interest and importance to the student body and access to a few digital still and video
cameras which they use to perform their role as journalists. This freedom comes with responsibility. Students are required to make appointments to obtain interviews from their “sources” which include faculty and administration as well as fellow students and community members. Mr. Cardenas encourages the journalism students to work hard and be creative, and reminds them often of the importance of their jobs to “dig a little deeper to find something interesting that’s happening, things that will matter to [our] students.” He also takes his students on a field trip to the major newspaper in the city to learn about how and where journalists work.

As the above description of his classroom depicts, Mr. Cardenas employs a pedagogy of play in his classroom informed by a view of adolescents’ literacies as meaningful and complex. His students play out their role as journalists, using props such as reporters’ notebooks, cameras, and press passes to write about important issues in their school ranging from the academic curriculum to the nutritional quality of the cafeteria food. In contrast to some recent attempts we have heard about of teachers bringing out-of-school online literacy practices such as social networking on MySpace into their classrooms to engage students in academic content (e.g., create a MySpace profile for your favorite English poet), Mr. Cardenas acknowledged that many of his students had gained proficiency in a range of technologies through their participation in online communities and drew upon their expertise as he introduced them to new forms of composing with which most were not already familiar.

When I (Stephanie) interviewed one student, Casey, about her experiences in the class, she shared how she appreciated the way Mr. Cardenas respected the knowledge that students brought with them into the classroom and didn’t “waste time” teaching the students skills they had already learned outside of school. Casey noted “Like he [Mr. Cardenas] knew that we use cameras outside of school. He knows that you [Casey and her fellow students] know how to use them.” Furthermore, Casey valued how Mr. Cardenas pushed students to learn about new ways of using familiar equipment and tools to explore topics of interest, saying “He let us do our own topics and let us play around with the camera.” Another student, Sabina, described how Mr. Cardenas incorporated new online literacies into the classroom in ways that valued what the students knew and positioned them as responsible. Unlike other teachers and her parents who she felt did not trust the students at the school to use the Internet appropriately without strict supervision and instruction, she felt that Mr. Cardenas created an environment where the students could learn to use the technology responsibly and in Sabina’s words, “let us learn how to fly,” something that she described as essential for the youth at her school to succeed in
our increasingly digital world.

Mr. Cardenas and his students drew upon the affordances of a variety of online resources throughout the academic year as the school newspaper developed from a print-based PDF posted to the school website to a series of audio and video podcasts hosted through a free third-party online classroom resource. The podcast project required students to create a digital and downloadable audio file of one of their news stories using GarageBand software (http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband), which Mr. Cardenas had introduced through a directed whole-class lesson. Just as with all new projects that Mr. Cardenas introduced, many students played with the format of the project in order to tell their stories in creative ways.

Rosy was one such student whose podcast documented the exceptional artwork of a student at the school. Through experimentation with the software, Rosy realized that she could use both iMovie and GarageBand together to create a video podcast. In her podcast, she juxtaposed an interview she conducted with the student artist with her artwork. In so doing, Rosy created a meaningful multimodal text that showcased the artist’s work in a way that would not have been possible in a solely audio format. Rosy, who aspired to be a journalist, shared that the use of technology in the journalism and digital media studies class “open[ed] the doors to what is going to be in the future…Getting us prepared for what’s going to come.” In an era when traditional print newspapers are quickly becoming extinct, the curriculum that Mr. Cardenas designed clearly helped Rosy consider how she can blend her proficiency with online media and passion for journalistic writing. She was able to position herself as a “shape-shifting portfolio person” (Gee, 2002), with the ability to design and redesign her work processes and texts, a skill which some have argued will be essential for success in our emerging global economy (e.g., Gee, 2002; New London Group, 1996).

Marie was another student who played with the podcast project format, leading to the creation of a digital text that uncovered and critiqued concerns over the quality of the educational experiences available to students at East Side Middle School. In her core academic classrooms where the curriculum is mandated and designed primarily to prepare students for the state standardized tests, Marie, who is an avid writer and blogger in online spaces, often takes up the position of “disengaged student,” especially when the task is a traditional type of print-based school assignment with strictly mandated parameters put forth by the teacher. However, this was not the case in the journalism and media studies class, as is exemplified in the way that Marie approached the podcast pro-
ject. For the podcast, she chose one of the topics offered by Mr. Cardenas, a new teacher profile, though she had the option of coming up with a topic of her own as well. Marie wanted to interview her new English teacher, the fourth teacher that the eighth graders on her track had that year. Marie developed a list of thoughtful interview questions which included “What made you want to teach at our school?” and “Are you still in teacher school?” When I asked why she inquired about whether he was still in school, she replied, “He doesn’t look like he has a lot of experience.” She went on to articulate her frustration with some of the English teachers who had taught at her school previously but was impressed with the fact that this new teacher agreed to come in during lunch and be audiotaped. Marie spent her own time during lunch recording the interview, editing her podcast, writing and recording an introduction and conclusion, and adding her own touches to the piece including music. Clearly, the social space of the journalism and digital media studies class allowed Marie to take up a different subject position than in her core classes, and the multimodal affordances of the podcast project allowed her to reposition herself as a “successful and engaged” student in ways not available in her core classes. The space also allowed her to critique the circumstances in her school, and design a multimodal text, which articulated what she saw as a grave injustice: that she and her fellow classmates in this under-resourced school are not provided with the experienced teachers who can give them the quality education they deserve.

The case of Mr. Cardenas’ journalism and digital media studies class exemplifies how educators can make pedagogical connections with adolescents’ evolving literacies through creating an authentic and meaningful workspace in which they can explore topics and issues of importance to them and share their thoughts through the creation of multimodal online texts. Mr. Cardenas’ openness and flexibility to both ideas from other educators as well as the students in the class created a different type of space than the classrooms where students spent most of their day taking core academic classes. In these spaces, strict pacing plans and standardized curriculum provided by the school district were employed, and a majority of the students in the school were positioned as “underperforming.” By contrasting these dominant school spaces and routines, Mr. Cardenas afforded diverse students at East Side Middle School opportunities to tell the stories that they wanted to tell in new and different ways, allowing them to reposition themselves as successful authors and designers, as they played with literacies and identities through their roles as new media journalists.
Blogging and Other Social Media in the Classroom

In my bright, sunny classroom at a new, arts-focused small high school in Brooklyn, New York, I (Tiffany) have a small but revealing window into students’ technology interests. I consciously incorporate media and various technologies into my class projects, have more technology tools available than any other classroom in the school, and invite students to participate in social networking spaces (i.e., Facebook, AIM) with me if they choose. In practice, this means that students often work on laptops from the school’s computer cart during class and that I let them “get away with” more time on their sidekicks than many other teachers would, often to the dismay of my administrators. Over the course of the year, I’ve found that interacting with students through social media has been one of the key factors in knowing them more deeply and also building trusting relationships.

Being the “techy” teacher means that I have a broader range of media resources in my room. Most visible is the stationary Mac tower with a large flat screen monitor in the back of my classroom. As a teacher of 12th graders with college applications due and a yearbook to design, I negotiated having this nice and more or less unclaimed computer moved into my room. Because of my willingness to let students on the computer for various reasons any time of day (before and after school, during free periods, and often even during a lesson), a student is working on that computer almost all of the time. No less significant is that I have two drawers of my desk full of technology: two “unlocked” laptops that are special because they aren’t blocked by Department of Education Internet filtering software and can be used to access YouTube and social networking sites. We often call these the “good” laptops, simply because of their unrestrained access to tools we need and use. Additionally, my desk drawers hold my personal SLR camera, a digital video camera purchased with an educational technology grant, a tripod, a projector, and speakers for streaming music into the classroom. Thus, the technology in the cart and desk drawers are used in this English classroom in a range of ways—from class work to college work, personal communications, and a range of visual documentation, presentation, and entertainment purposes.

Media have a real presence in our school often in terms of the arts; however, media rarely enter into content area or literacy classes in ways beyond “typing up” papers or doing loosely guided Internet research. Of the various media projects that I’ve brought into my classroom this year, student-created blogs
(short for web logs, journal-like personal web pages) have become the longstanding form of classroom multimodal text production that I've introduced as an educator. Student blogs fit into the classroom structure primarily as a “homework” assignment, free-writing that I read and comment on digitally and assess solely on completion. A content analysis of my students' blogs found that they focused their writing on the following issues: academic or financial stress, high school graduation, college, friendships, dating, national politics, hobbies, special events, identity, other media (i.e., games, music, films), and a few students used their blogs exclusively for creative writing—poetry and short stories.

Other technologies are brought into the classroom with implicit invitation. I often observe students with personal communication devices out on their desks—SideKicks, iTouchies, BlackBerries, or the like. Students use these devices in class for a range of activities—from cell phone text messaging to instant messaging (i.e., AIM) to blogging to even typing up papers or doing research for class. My students have learned that only answering their phones in class will garner much disciplinary action, as it is distracting to others and socially inappropriate. Otherwise, small communication devices and social networking are invited into the classroom space when they aid in learning or do not get in the way of it.

As an English teacher who is a bit unconventional in her curriculum (more a writing and media teacher than a literature one), it has taken some time for students not only to trust me as an individual but also to trust my methods as a teacher. When I first asked them to start blogging many students expressed extreme dismay. “Why do we have to write so much? Can’t you just give us a quiz? What’s the point of all of these writing projects? Can’t we learn the material another way?” Some of my students were fairly resistant to an unconventional, writing-based curriculum and my department peers weren’t quite sure what to do with it either. Often these students are the ones who have been successful in more traditional literature-based classrooms. Other students, ones who struggle with print, were visibly delighted in being able to type in whatever script they like on their blogs, post photos and videos, and so on.

One particular student, A’idah, often does not want to do the assigned work for class and asks if she can blog. I don’t always allow it, but her class happens to be at the end of the day and many students cut class. One afternoon A’idah asked if she could take a short story written by Junot Diaz (1997) with her to read on the train and blog during class instead. I nodded my head, handed her an “unlocked” or “good” laptop and told her I would check three entries at the end of the period. I’d learned to give her a goal and check it, because sometimes
she only pretends to blog as she sifts through Facebook pages and music videos instead.

About midway through class, I sat down next to her and watched her type. She barely looked up but began to narrate without prompting. She said, “I’m trying to describe myself from the outside in.” I watched as collected adjectives poured onto the page and she checked how they lined up visually next to the photo of herself that she’d pasted into the entry. Next, I watched her edit the html code in the entry, watched her delete the ads from the song she’d posted in the entry (from imeem, a social media outlet that allows users to watch, post, and share digital content). She didn’t like how the ads cluttered up her post, so she went into the html code and started editing out the ads. She moved quickly and effortlessly in editing the code; however, when she had finished the html was broken. She said, “I hate that.” I muttered, “yeah, me too, because I can never figure out where I broke the html when I was deleting stuff.” Nonetheless, she persevered, quickly found the missing bit of code, repaired and published the entry. I was surprised when the next thing I saw on the screen was an entry that looked different than the one we’d seen in “preview”—the words didn’t roll alongside the picture just as she’d planned. When I asked her about it, she shifted to the larger question of how limiting the blog layout was. However, she exclaimed she loved blogging despite these limitations. Of course, I asked why. She started talking rapidly, rambling on. I said, “This would help me with my dissertation. Can I take notes?” She nodded, watching me begin to type up her words as fast as I could. Here’s what I wrote as she talked:

I hate writing stuff on paper because I feel like my hands can’t keep up with my thoughts when I write on paper. When I get to the end of the page with my pen, I feel like I lost my thoughts.

I notice that I have more good thoughts when I’m on the Internet, clicking on stuff is more efficient than writing. I can get to everything I want on the Internet. If I click on Wikipedia I can get to what I want. I have more access to things like turtles…pet section. Plus online you can find a lot of other people who think the same thing you do. Google is my favorite thing. You can research forums and just anything. It expands my thinking more than books.

[She pauses; I redirect with “Why blogging?”]

Blogging is more exciting than a journal because people can appreciate writing more than if it’s in a book. I also feel like people are more apt to read my stuff if it’s on the Internet than it’s in a book.

She was talking about how great it was to write quicker than on paper and I was barely keeping up transcribing her thoughts. She asked as I plugged away transcribing in real time, “You writing all this?” I nodded and kept typing, “Cool”
she said. As she talked, she unplugged her SideKick from the wall, packed up her belongings, and when she’d said about all she needed to say, she mumbled toward the door, “Yeah, I’ll text you Miss DJ, we can talk more about this when I get home.” As she left, I handed her the short story and told her to read it on the train.

Audience is no small thing to A'idah. Her best friend often gets a shout out on her blog, and she was pretty delighted the day a girl she had a crush on began to publicly “follow” her blog. One afternoon, after I’d commented on something I’d liked in an earlier blog entry, she asked, “So do you really read all our blogs, Ms. DJ?” I said, “yeah.” Her response: “You’re a good teacher, Ms. DJ.” I laughed, “so you like it that I read your stuff?” “Well a lot of teachers don’t actually read stuff.” Writers need readers and blogs are a good shot at making that happen, if an imperfect one. A'idah told me that her favorite entry of the day was the one titled “apathy,” one that I suspect she wrote for the art teacher—a mentor of hers for four years who reads her blog and keeps telling her to move beyond her newfound apathy. Instead of simply moving beyond it, A'idah uses her blog to explain how her apathy is a matter of coping with stresses for her. Thus, the blog has provided a space for A'idah to connect through writing with a few trusted readers who give her feedback on dilemmas she has experienced.

A?idah’s story is not unusual. Many of my students used the space of blogging to gain an audience of trusted readers—friends, teachers, and sometimes even parents and siblings. Throughout the year, student blogs have provided me as a teacher with a sense of students’ emotional states and their practical progress through many of the stresses of 12th grade—high stakes high school exit exams, difficult classes, the college application progress, and more personal, individual issues. Thus, blogs provided a way to not only get to know my students better as writers and media-savvy young people but also enabled me to be a better advisor—to follow up digitally and in person, sharing in their successes and struggles and supporting students as they developed into independent young people.

## Making Our Space by Engaging MySpace and YouTube

In a classroom context where new geographies of teaching and learning were being crafted on an ongoing basis (Vasudevan, 2009), the online literacies of both youth and adults played an important role. This was evident during a brief exchange I (Lalitha) witnessed while talking with two teachers one afternoon.
Joey, a young man who was 18 years old at the time, walked into Christina’s office as she, Norman, and I were discussing potential candidates for the Digital Media class I was planning. Joey, who we all agreed should certainly be one of the participants, was finished with classes for the day and had come to hang out with Christina for a few minutes before he headed off to his internship at a media design company.

The four of us squeezed into Christina’s office and Joey, a born storyteller, regaled us with the latest tale of his adventures around town. He told us that while riding the subway on his way home the previous afternoon, he started talking with a young woman whose cell phone he admired aloud. It was the latest SideKick, a newer version of the phone he currently owned. Being a tech savvy teenager himself, Joey felt he had found a kindred spirit as he observed her navigate her multifunction communication device with ease. Not wanting to lose touch, Joey and the young woman “swapped URLs” so that they could access and be linked to each other’s MySpace profiles. The three of us listening to the story laughed out of curiosity, and Joey clarified that “they”—presumably, youth of his generation—are more inclined to share online profile information than phone numbers. He identified a shifting communicative lexicon that is readily emerging in the social practices of youth.

Far from being dismissive, however, Norman and Christina were engaged in the story and probed Joey further. They asked him about his online profile, made note of his URL, and agreed to “friend” him so that his profile could be linked to each of their profiles as well. These teachers, like many of the other teachers, counselors, and other staff members at Alternative to Incarceration Program (ATIP), also used the social networking site and actively communicated with others via their online profiles. Some of them were linked to participants via the “friending” function of the site. As Christina once noted, MySpace messaging was sometimes the quickest and most consistent way of contacting the participants when they couldn’t be reached otherwise. I created an online profile for myself as a way to maintain contact with some of the youth, particularly after they graduated from the program, and found Christina’s observation to ring true. Sometimes cell phones and home phones were shut off for periods of time, but the youth could always find a way to access their MySpace pages.

At the ATIP where Christina and Norman taught, and where Joey was a participant, educational classes were organized to support participants’ preparation for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) test. ATIP provided a range of services for youth who had been arrested and mandated to attend their pro-
gram by a judge, in consultation with a court representative who worked with
the program. Only a small percentage of the mostly young men who attended
the program already had their high school diplomas or equivalency certificates.
Many had dropped out of high school prior to their arrest and most had a his-
tory of interrupted school experiences. However, many displayed a range of dig-
tal competencies including, but not limited to, participation in online social
networking spaces. Amid a steady stream of photocopied math and grammar
worksheets—that, on first glance, seem out of place in a context that places pri-
mary on a holistic approach to education—are consistent pedagogical practices
that draw on youths’ digital literacies.

One afternoon, following the administration of a GED predictor that eli-
gible participants take to assess their readiness for the GED exam a few weeks
later, Norman was conducting a mini-lesson about basic economic principles.
He asked the class of eight young men seated in the classroom what they knew
about investing. There was a long pause, and then one young man asked for
clarification: “You mean, like, how white people invest their money?” Norman,
who was of South Asian descent and who had recently cut his long dreadlocks,
looked at the young man wearing an over-sized plain white tee-shirt with
curiosity. He probed for a longer response. The young man continued, “Cuz,
person in the hood—they wear their investments.” A smile began to creep
across Norman’s face and, seeing the computer lab unoccupied, Norman shift-
ed the physical location of that afternoon’s class across the hall. He asked
Martin, the young man who made the observation about racial differences and
investment strategies, to find evidence for his claim. A couple of the other par-
ticipants sitting near Martin laughed when he initially logged into his profile.
The humor was due in part to the cacophony between Martin’s “tough-guy”
pose seen in his profile photo and the good-natured persona he often dis-
played at ATIP. In response to Norman’s invitation, Martin clicked on sever-
al of his friends’ profiles, repeating “see?” after each one. As he brought up
several images of youth adorned with large pieces of jewelry or pointing to cus-
tomized accessories, Norman wrote terms on the whiteboard on the wall adja-
cent to Martin in a manner reflective of free association. He wrote
“consumption” next to “supply/demand” and then underlined both with a
double line and underneath wrote, “personal economics.” During the next 45
minutes of class, everyone in class opened up their own MySpace profile and
began identifying images that reflected some of the economic terms that
Norman had highlighted. The room was filled with a steady stream of laugh-
ter as the young men looked over each other’s shoulders, and as they waved
The teachers at ATIP recognize the importance of the visual media for the youth who filter through their classrooms every day. They are equally aware that these youth are inhabiting and participating in a variety of digital spaces that are multimodal and online in some way. Similar to Martin’s navigation of MySpace to support his economic argument, ATIP participants routinely brought up video clips they had either viewed or uploaded to YouTube, the video-sharing site. Like Frankie, the young woman who used her YouTube video to simultaneously communicate a narrative about her sexuality and her identity as a multimedia artist, other participants named and shared videos they found terrifying, funny, realistic, and unbelievable.

Along with Norman and Christina, Tony was another teacher at ATIP whose pedagogy was responsive to the cultural funds of knowledge that youth brought with them into the classroom (Moje et al., 2004; Moll, 1992). One of the classes Tony taught was Next Steps, a college preparation seminar designed to meet the needs of ATIP participants who either had obtained their high school diploma or who had taken the complete GED test. During one of the cycles of Next Steps that I documented, the writings of James Baldwin served as the main texts for the seminar. Tony, who had been teaching at ATIP for four years at the time, had begun to explore the visual realm in his teaching and was increasingly aware of the participants’ familiarity with digital technologies and YouTube in particular. He began to incorporate this resource into his teaching as a way of illuminating the words and messages of a prolific author like Baldwin. By using a familiar resource like this video-sharing site, whose access is blocked in many public schools, Tony aimed to disrupt any dichotomizing that might have occurred between a revered author and current popular texts. In doing so, he was not merely using “out of school” literacies and texts to bridge “in school” objectives, but rather strived to construct a hybrid space constructed of shared understandings—amongst Next Steps participants and teachers—toward the realization of collective goals.

On one particular afternoon, this hybrid space lived in the context of Tony’s office where he had access to his computer and loudspeakers. Rather than continue a discussion on the way Baldwin moved and held his cigarette during interviews, Tony shifted the location of class so that he could share a video of the author in different contexts. What ensued was a visual journey of representations of Blackness across various media clips found on YouTube. Table 1 offers an overview of this journey:
It was clear from Tony's enthusiasm and the ways he punctuated the video clips with commentary that this was a person and a subject for which he had great passion. Tony thought of himself as an artist and writer and used multimedia texts to elicit these and other identities from the young men who were enrolled in his classes. Tony's objective in this class session, and with his emphasis on Baldwin's work throughout Next Steps, was to illustrate the power of language for the youth seated around him. Not only did he share the writing of a beloved author with young men who had not been exposed to this work before, he also provided another way into reading Baldwin: by seeing and hearing the author,
and interacting with other media texts, which Tony felt reflected the lasting impact of this pioneering African American author.

Afterwards, Tony reflected on his decision to move the class to his office with a characteristic smile and look of amusement on his face. He was surprised that “it worked,” referring specifically to the conversational rhythm and observational insights about the representations of African Americans across various media that emerged in between the collective viewing of clips. The young men in the class took a cue from Tony’s engagement with and spontaneous analysis of the texts and began to share their own intertextual connections: comparing reruns of the *Cosby Show* with current representations of Black families; recalling the cartoons they had watched as kids when the clip of *Black Sambo* appeared on the screen; musing about the ways in which President Obama had been characterized in the news as, alternatively, “not Black enough” or “too Black.” Many of the video clips that the group watched were not familiar to most other than Tony, but each was evocative of multiple connections and engendered further inquiry that was nurtured during the next several weeks of the Next Steps seminar.

Although YouTube was a familiar resource for the young men in Next Steps, the setting and purpose of this class session suggested new uses for this popular video-sharing site. This pedagogical move, reminiscent of recommendations for educators to effectively leverage the funds of knowledge about popular culture that adolescents bring into the classroom (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Morrell, 2004; Staples, 2008), was consistent with Tony’s objective to connect with the youth with whom he interacted every day. Even in his role as a teacher, he sought to be a “student of students” (Staples, 2005). Like Norman and Christina, Tony embraced spontaneity and play in his pedagogy. Multimodal play is a pedagogical stance that holds real possibilities for the youth at ATIP to be reengaged in their educational trajectories. This is an approach that is culturally responsive, digitally intuitive, and grounded in a commitment to teaching and learning with youth.

**Creating Classrooms of and for Multimodal Play**

We conclude this chapter by widening the lens once more to consider the vast landscape of the increasingly digitally mediated lives and literacies of youth. In their three-year study of the online habits of teens, Ito and colleagues (2008) found that youth regularly navigate various new media and technologies includ-
ing social networking sites, online games, video-sharing sites, mobile phones, MP3 players, and the like. While these artifacts of digital culture saturate the daily lives of youth, Ito and her colleagues assert that when youth engage in these practices and spaces, they are developing a range of social, intellectual, cultural, and technical knowledge that should not be dismissed. Thus, they argue, adults who impact the lives of youth—including educators, caregivers, and policymakers—must take seriously the ways in which “new media forms have altered how youth socialize and learn” (2008, p. 2). Their findings echo the arguments we have made in this chapter about the impact of youths’ digital cultures and practices for literacy teaching and learning across contexts. As youth are engaged in the processes and practices of exploring, making, and remaking their identities across a wide array of representational modalities and spaces, both online and offline, the role of the educator becomes more complicated and, we would argue, ripe with possibilities.

In this chapter, we offered a brief look at three different classroom contexts in which we explored adolescents’ online and digital literacies from a variety of perspectives. At the center of each example is the profound act of teachers and students knowing each other through multimodal play in order to teach and learn together. We invite readers of this chapter to consider the implications of these instances of practice for other settings, such as non-urban classrooms, school libraries, and after-school programs. We wonder how institutional spaces such as these might more effectively engage the digital knowledge and practices in which young people are already proficient. When educators are more aware of adolescents’ digital literacies and composing repertoires, they can more effectively marry instructional goals that children and youth need to meet in order to successfully navigate formalized education with pedagogical agility that affords adolescents multiple ways to construct and represent knowledge. Thus, as our work and that of others (e.g., boyd, 2008; Soep & Chavez, 2005) suggests, educational institutions must become spaces that can more readily accommodate and encourage literacy experimentation, exploration, and discovery.

Notes

1. Mathangi (Mathu) Subramanian worked with Lalitha as a research assistant on the project Education In-Between: A Study of Youths’ Lives, Learning, and Imagined Futures within and across the Justice System.
2. The class was referred to as an elective by school administrators though students were predominantly assigned to the class based on scheduling needs.
3. GarageBand is a software program available on Macintosh computers that allows users to
author various types of audio recordings by composing, recording, and mixing music.


5. Some clips were only played for a few seconds and thus not all of the clip URLs were documented accurately. Here, I briefly note the context for each clip that was viewed, drawing from field notes of the ongoing, intermittent discussion. I intentionally do not offer an extensive analysis of these clips but rather present this table to provide additional background for the Next Steps class.

6. A children's book that originally depicted a caricature of a South Indian child given the name “Sambo.” In the 1930s, newer versions of the book gained popularity in the United States but were widely criticized for depicting racially insensitive stereotypes.

**References**


