Impressions, improvisations and compositions: reframing children’s text production in social network sites

Clare Dowdall

Abstract

Social networking can currently be described as a mainstream youth activity, with almost half of 8–17-year-old children, who have access to the Internet, claiming to participate. As an activity it is of particular interest to literacy educators because it is enacted through the production and consumption of text. However, a growing body of research is finding that while young people transfer knowledge and practices across the sites that they occupy, children’s text production using informal digital literacy practices and children’s school-based text production can be regarded as increasingly disparate activities. This paper draws from a current research project that is exploring three pre-teenage children’s text production in social networking sites. Here one child’s Bebo profile page is presented and discussed in order that the forces that play upon her text production can be identified. Through consideration of these forces, a framework for considering children’s text production in informal digital environments is suggested. This framework steps away from the existing frameworks currently found within the Primary National Strategy for Literacy and Mathematics and instead requires that children’s texts are viewed in relation to structure and agency.

Key words: text production, social networking, digital literacy practices

Social networking and children’s text production: an introduction

In the United Kingdom, the activity of social networking has grown and taken hold since the launch of MySpace in 2003 and Bebo in 2005. The impact of social networking has been so significant that the government has recently commissioned the Office for Communications (Ofcom) to undertake extensive quantitative and qualitative research to explore this phenomenon. Based on research involving over 600 families, Ofcom has found that “almost half (49%) of children aged 8–17 who use the internet have set up their own profile on a social networking site” (Ofcom, 2008a). This usage is not restricted to the older members of this age group. Although most social networking sites attempt to restrict children who are younger than 13 or 14 from creating profile pages, Ofcom have found that primary school-aged children frequently bypass these age restrictions, and despite the efforts of MySpace and Bebo, 27 per cent of 8–11-year-olds who are aware of social networking say that they have a profile on a site (Ofcom, 2008a). This makes social networking a mainstream youth activity in the United Kingdom – and one that is enacted through the production and consumption of text. As such it is an activity that bears exploration by those interested in supporting children as they learn to become confident and critical producers of text in a range of contexts.

Social networking is not only booming in the United Kingdom. Key studies based in the United States and Japan argue that social networking is now a mainstream form of communication, offering new ways for children to communicate and socialise (Boyd, 2007; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Lenhart et al., 2007; Takahashi, 2008). This recognition is contributing to the reconceptualisation of childhood in relation to the use of digital technologies and literacies. With its rapid growth and uptake among young people, social networking can be viewed as an activity that contributes to a new ‘technosocial sensibility’ (Castells et al., 2006, p. 142), where the act of producing texts for one’s ‘networked public’ (Boyd, 2007) occurs as part of some young people’s essential everyday communication patterns and within their everyday play spaces (Davies, 2008). While issues about the very nature of communication and the reconceptualisation of young people as communicators are raised by these studies, much has also been written about social network sites as platforms for impression management (Boyd, 2007; Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Liu, 2007). Drawing from Goffman’s work, Boyd explores the use of profile pages to write the self into being and to create an online presence (Boyd, 2007). Boyd finds that most profile pages are circumscribed by the primary audience for the profile page, who will usually be known to the composer of the page in face-to-face contexts. Therefore, far from being an unfettered stage for the performance of separate and contrived identities, online representations are usually anchored to the profile owner’s face-to-face social identity negotiations. Data from the United Kingdom concurs with Boyd’s findings. Here, available research also indicates that children’s online social networking is often tied to their day-to-day
activities and face-to-face friendship work, restricting the opportunities for the creation of entirely separate identities through text creation (Ofcom, 2008a, 2008b).

This paper recognises the extensive work that has been undertaken in relation to social networking as a communicative and identity-performing act. However, the aim of this paper is to explore social networking from a different perspective. In earlier work, I have drawn from Marsh (2005) to explore how identity, communicative practice and context interplay as texts are produced (Dowdall, 2008, p. 77). Based on this notion, I would like to take text as the main focus in this exploration of children’s text production in social network sites. A key implication of the phenomenal uptake of social networking in the United Kingdom is that children are producing vast amounts of text that are circumscribed not only by the institutions of school and family, but by the affordances and constraints of the sites themselves, and the mastery and knowledge of the children involved. Here I am not trying to suggest that a school and out-of-school opposition exists in relation to text production. In fact, from talking to children who use social network sites, it is clear that their school and out-of-school, online and offline worlds converge and interweave through the texts that they create in their social network sites (Dowdall, 2008; Dowdall in press). However, I am suggesting that the texts that children create as members of social network sites possess some qualities that vary from the qualities of texts that are created as part of their everyday school-based text production. These differences are significant for educators involved in supporting children as they learn to create texts in the wider context of digital communication (Marsh, 2008; Merchant, 2007). By exploring the texts that children create in social network sites, it is hoped that issues central to text production in digital landscapes can be illuminated.

Reframing children’s texts

The landscape in which texts are produced and consumed continues to be subject to the rapid evolution of digital communication technologies (Bearne, 2005; Carrington, 2005a, 2005b; Carrington and Marsh, 2005). This landscape surrounds and pervades children’s identities as text producers in the home and at school due to the mass uptake of the Internet and broadband (Ofcom, 2008a).

The affordances of new digital technologies mean that screen-based, image-dominated texts proliferate in our everyday lives. We communicate using mobile phones; we increasingly transact using screen-based methods; we view screen-based texts for work and recreation. However, for school-age children in England, it is argued that their out-of-school and school-based digital practices are not yet integrated (Marsh, 2008).

Young people’s daily textual experience is likely to involve an eclectic mix of the old and new: traditional and contemporary texts exist side by side as children learn to read and write using a range of digital and pre-digital tools and resources. As technologies evolve, the possibilities for children’s text production expand. Children learn to navigate this wide range of textual forms, where meaning is inscribed and decoded in a variety of ways as part of their everyday life.

As children create digital and pre-digital texts, at school and beyond, they compose a trail of textual artefacts that vary in their materiality and purpose. The texts that children produce for their teachers provide an artefact and archive of their abilities that support the positioning of the child in relation to other children and their teachers. This in turn reflects the cultural and social forces playing on the act of text production and contributes to their identity as a text producer in school. My child was recently awarded a learner of the week award for ‘excellent writing’ by his teacher. Of course he was extremely proud. At just 5 years old, his identity as a successful school-based text producer is being nurtured carefully within an institutional setting. Equally, children using social network sites are creating texts that reflect their social and cultural worlds and that contribute to their social identities and positioning within their peer group. The reward for these children is validation from friends, who read, comment on and discuss the content of the profile pages as a different sort of archive of identity is constructed. Kress has described how texts can be viewed as socially motivated signs (Kress, 1997, p. 87). To describe a child’s school-based writing and a profile page for a social network site in this way invokes a perspective of text taken from social semiotic theory (Kress, 2003, p. 84). From this perspective, texts can be viewed as the “stuff of our communication” (Kress, 2003, p. 47), created within fields of power (Kress, 2003, p. 85). Kress neatly defines text within this theoretical orientation: “Text is the result of social interaction, of work: it is work with representational resources which realise social matters” (Kress, 2003, p. 47).

In their exploration of the new literacy studies (New London Group, 1996), Pahl and Rowsell describe how identity can be found inscribed within children’s textual artefacts and communications (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, p. 107). Based on this premise, children’s texts – those constructed in school as well as those produced within social network sites, can be described as artefacts of identity (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, p. 27): spaces where social identities (Gee, 1996, p. 91) can be performed, as cultural and social forces interplay. Bourdieu and researchers who subscribe to his theories of the social world have long argued that social identity is negotiated across fields of practice invoking the competing forces of structure and agency (Bourdieu, 1991; Gee, 1996). In their study of identity formation, Holland et al. (1998, p. 4) describe how identities are improvised within specific social situations and from the available cultural
resources. For Holland and colleagues, identity is a hard-won standpoint, constructed as we bring our sense of histories and the stories that we tell about ourselves to bear on present actions. Cultural and social forces structure our negotiations of identity, and in the process, the opportunity to express and enact agency is realised. As humans improvise identities through their actions, the capacity to express agency and control is dialogically constructed. The creation of a text, either within a school-based context or a social network site, can be regarded as an artefact of the process of identity formation that reflects both the structuring forces and the agency of the text producer in that moment.

This paper will focus on the texts produced by one pre-teenage child who uses the social networking site **Bebo** as part of her everyday textual practice. Data are drawn from my current doctoral research project in order to raise issues around audience, materiality and ownership of the texts that a small group of pre-teenage children create using **Bebo** and other social networking sites. Semi-structured interviews that have been scheduled over a 9-month period from June 2008 to February 2009 form the basis for the discussion that follows. Using an approach based on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000), each interview is conducted around the computer, recorded and transcribed. Transcript data are coded and analysed for themes and categories relating to the production of texts in social networking sites. Screen shots of the profile page are taken and stored in order to contribute to the coding process and to capture an archive of the profile pages over time. Through this analysis my aim is to explore the forces that play upon children’s informal digital text production in order to raise issues for educators who are working within the digital landscape of the 21st century.

**Introducing Chloe: November 2008**

Chloe is 12 years old. She has been an avid user of the social networking site **Bebo** for the past 2 years, since her brother helped her to make her first profile. Chloe describes how she creates profile pages to showcase who she is to other people. I include here the screen shots taken from her profile page based on our interview in November 2008 (Figures 1–5). Chloe’s profile page is composed of the different modules that **Bebo** provides, or that she copies and pastes from other people’s profiles. Chloe selects which modules she would like to include and edits them as she wishes. She can then compose her profile by including or deselecting specific modules. This facility, provided by **Bebo**, makes the editing and transformation of a **Bebo** profile relatively simple and speedy. The modules that Chloe includes are carefully selected to represent herself to others. Chloe’s profile page is extensive. To read it in full, the reader has to scroll down the page to allow it to unravel. In addition, the reader can select items that hyperlink to another level of content. Chloe’s profile page is therefore a multidimensional and dynamic text that requires the reader and producer to work flexibly to make and inscribe meaning.

![Figure 1: Chloe’s profile page](image-url)
Chloe regularly updates her profile pages. She changes the images that are displayed, the modules that are included and the text that is written. In material terms, her texts are ephemeral artefacts that are constantly subject to revision. Chloe claims to spend some time each day on Bebo. She uses this time to craft and edit her own profile page, and to surf other profile pages looking for ideas and catching up on the events of the day. A strong motivating force for Chloe is the desire to find new and ‘cool’ ideas for her page that others will adopt. She describes herself as an entertainer and uses her profile page as a vehicle for negotiating this role.

The top of Chloe’s profile page includes her profile photo and her current user name: ChloeJane. She changes this name regularly. She has selected a plain turquoise background, with a headline: “Let’s flip a Coin. Heads we’ll be together, tails, we’ll flip again”. The background and headline together with the overall look of the page are known as a skin. Chloe regularly changes her skin. She visits sites where skins are made and selects them from there, or copies and adopts them from other people’s profile pages. Bebo makes this facility available. Chloe’s profile photograph shows Chloe taking her own photograph in a mirror. Further down the profile page, Chloe has chosen to include a module called The Other Half Of Me. This is a facility that shows the person in your network who you are closest friends with. For Chloe, it is her friend Georgie. In Georgie’s photo, she is also holding a camera and taking a photograph of herself in the mirror, literally reflecting the visual image that Chloe has presented at the top of the page. This type of photograph is fairly typical among the children in Chloe’s network and reflects the popular memes that are reverberating through her social network: in this instance, the use of camera tricks in self-portraiture. This echoing demonstrates how Chloe’s texts are used to affiliate herself with and position herself among her peers in a dialogic fashion through her text production.

Accompanying her user name and photo, Chloe has introduced some text of her own: first a motto “ARM OUT OF SLING stuff wot the doctor says it didn’t hert lol !!X”. She also has written an “about me blurb”. This blurb begins “(Y)Family, Friends, My Animals . . .” The sign preceding the text is taken from the conventions used in Instant Messaging and stands for a ‘thumbs-up’ sign, meaning ‘I like . . .’. Chloe lists her favourite possessions and pastimes using a combination of conventional script, emoticons, conventions from instant messaging and interjections. These are designed to help her reader. She uses the term (bludd) alongside London to signal her awareness of London street-talk. Here, Chloe is inscribing her identity into her text, choosing words and images to convey a specific image. However, it is clear that while this section of the profile is a site that Chloe authors in order to improvise her negotiations of identity, this
endeavour is circumscribed as much by the conventions that are acceptable within her peer network as by Chloe’s agency through this action.

In addition to modules that Chloe authors herself, she has also included a module of quizzes that Bebo provides. Bebo began as a quiz sharing site. Bebo creates quiz templates that can be uploaded and adapted. Profile owners can select quizzes to include on their profile, and display their results. The results are generated by Bebo, and as such are not created by Chloe. Chloe has completed an *Am I a Good Person?* quiz. Her result is displayed for her friends to read. The wording reflects the text that could be found in a teen magazine and appears to draw from this genre. Chloe has also included a list of more quizzes for her friends to either take, or copy and upload to their site. As a text producer in a social network site, Chloe has to continually select and revise material from a variety of sources to upload to her profile. Consequently her page is an amalgam of her own content (photos, videos, original writing); Bebo-generated content (quizzes, blog templates, etc.); elements from her friends’ profile pages, where Chloe sometimes will ‘borrow’ ideas, photos, skins and elements from other user-generated-content sites, such as YouTube, where Chloe might upload video.

The remaining modules that Chloe has included on her profile include personal details, a ‘favourites’ list, a video box carrying a link to her favourite music video and a series of headings that Chloe has completed, providing further information about herself. These modules allow Chloe further opportunities to craft her identity. In these spaces, she aims to amuse and entertain with her responses to the numerous template questions. When asked “How do you want to die?” Chloe responds: “don’t mind Just Want it To Be MAGERLY TRAGIC”. These modules reflect Chloe’s ability to play within the cultural structures provided by Bebo. While they appear to be lengthy and considered compositions, these sections are actually built from a template that can be found on many of Chloe’s friends’ profile pages too. Different modules go in and out of fashion. Their selection and inclusion is a key way of constructing the identity that is being composed through the profile page.

The examples so far have described how Chloe’s profile page is circumscribed by a range of influences that play upon the creation of the text. Another distinctive feature of Chloe’s profile page is that it can be regarded as co-authored. Chloe has selected six of her 178 friends for display on her profile page. She can change how many friends are shown and the order of her friends within the display to reflect their status in relation to her. Chloe’s friends’ profile photographs contribute to the appearance of Chloe’s page, but apart from being able to move, add or remove them, Chloe has no control over their appearance. Whenever a ‘friend’ alters their own profile image, or adds a comment to Chloe’s page, Chloe’s page will change too. This means that Chloe’s profile contains both the words and images of other children. Her profile page is therefore composed of a medley of contributions.
that are constantly changing. The textual artefact is not only co-authored but exists outside of her control.

In addition to her own contributions, Chloe’s profile page is contributed to by other people within her network who explore her profile and post comments for her to read. These comments can be read by any of Chloe’s friends. However, on Chloe’s profile page, the audience can only read the comments that are left for Chloe. Often these are part of an ongoing dialogue, that is being conducted in the networked public (Boyd, 2007) of Chloe’s profile. However, the impression that is created is only partial as only half of any conversation is visible to the profile audience. By allowing others to comment on her pages, Chloe’s profile pages do not only represent Chloe. Instead they represent her interactions with others and her negotiations of identity and positioning more dynamically than pre-digital or school-based texts are able to do. In addition, Chloe’s text is tethered to the profile pages of other children. This tethering is significant because it reflects the perpetual connectivity described by Ito et al. (2004).
in relation to children’s mobile phone networks and supports the notion that social networking, through text production, is contributing to new ways of communicating and being as text producers.

The examples provided here do not fully conjure Chloe’s profile page as the video clips and music that play when the page opens cannot be displayed, and the layering and tethering of text using hyperlinks is not able to be shown. However, it is clear from this overview that Chloe’s profile page is a complex remixing of material from a number of sources that are both local and global, user-generated and adopted from others’ sites and Bebo itself by Chloe. As a text producer, Chloe is confronted with endless choices as she crafts her page. Her profile page is used very carefully to construct her desired social identity and appears to be contrived and purposeful. Significant attention has been given to the artistic presentation and impact on the audience. The result is impressive, particularly as the skills used are learned informally and seemingly effortlessly with and from friends using the social network sites themselves. Chloe’s use of Bebo appears to be driven by her enjoyment of all these factors: the opportunity to create an amalgam of textual elements within one space; the use of text as a tool for social positioning; and the opportunity for representation of self through text and the agency that can be derived from this.

Discussion

An aim of this paper is to offer a useful framework for considering children’s text production in social network sites. The framework currently available for considering children’s text production within educational settings in England is the Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) section of the Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics (Department for Children, Schools and Family, 1997–2008), which describes eight assessment focuses for writing.1 However, in their research reports More than Words and More than Words 2, the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA) have argued that the conventional frameworks available to teachers are inadequate for analysing and assessing children’s multimodal text production, particularly where texts depend on image and words for their cohesion (QCA/UKLA, 2004, 2005). Therefore, an alternative framework for describing Chloe’s text production in online profile pages is needed if educators are to explore how children’s text production is evolving in response to digital technologies and web 2.0 capabilities. Key themes emerging from analysis of Chloe’s interview data include issues around agency and the circumscription of text production in social network sites, as well as issues around audience and authorship. For educators to explore these issues and recognise the evolution that is occurring in children’s text production, a framework that engages with the New Literacy Studies paradigm (Marsh, 2005) and positions text production as a socio-cultural endeavour is required.

Vassily Kandinsky, the Russian abstract artist, reflected upon the act of representation and composition in art extensively as he moved from figurative art towards abstraction (Fischer and Rainbird, 2006; Kandinsky, 1977). I would like to suggest that Kandinsky’s views about the struggle between inner emotion and the outer world can be contrived to offer an interesting alternative framework for considering children’s text production in social network sites. Kandinsky experimented with a range of ways to render his abstract art in concrete forms, from the most loosely improvised to the most fully formed. According to Kandinsky, two competing forces play upon artistic representations. The first force is the degree of reference made by the artist to the outer world. The competing force is the inner emotion of the artist. A parallel can be drawn here with the competing forces of structure and agency that can be seen to play on Chloe’s online profile page creation. Aware of the tension created by these competing forces, Kandinsky coined three parallel terms to label different types of representation within his spectrum of artwork: impressions, improvisations and compositions (Behr, 2006; Kandinsky, 1977). According to Kandinsky, these terms conjure three different sources of inspiration when representing ideas in artistic terms:

“(1) A direct impression of outward nature, expressed in purely artistic form. This I call an ‘Impression’.
(2) A largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, the non-material nature. This I call an ‘Improvisation’.
(3) An expression of a slowly formed inner feeling, which comes to utterance only after long maturing. This I call a ‘Composition’”

(Kandinsky, 1977, p. 57).

In relation to Chloe’s profile page, the terms impression, improvisation and composition allow us to focus on the influences that play upon her text production. As discussed earlier, Chloe’s profile page can be regarded as an amalgam of elements and modules. Some elements are designed by Chloe to reflect her desired identity, yet are bounded and influenced by social and cultural structures that are beyond her direct control. These might include her choice of skin (background), the inclusion of popular video clips, music videos and song lyrics. The templates provided by Bebo limit what Chloe can do, while appearing to offer creative opportunities. Chloe’s local immersion in teen popular culture and her desire to entertain her peers also circumscribes her actions as a text producer in parts of her page. Using Kandinsky’s terms, the elements of Chloe’s profile page that reflect her struggle with structuring forces and agency can be described as impressions. They serve to present Chloe as she wishes

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to be presented, while reflecting the structures that confine her text production.

In Chloe’s profile pages improvisations would include the least polished and most raw elements of her pages: the comments that are posted by others over which she has little control and ownership, yet that expose facets of her social identity to her audience; a one-sided dialogue that occurs in response to an event or photograph which reveals a more detailed conversation or chain of events; a photograph of another network member who leaves a comment. The opportunities for co-authoring that are present in Chloe’s text mean that her profile page is poly-vocal and beyond her control as a text producer. The look of her page can change at another’s whim. These features contribute to the improvisatory quality of her text by allowing the inclusion of spontaneous and impulsive outbursts, from her and co-authors. However, these improvisatory elements serve to anchor Chloe to her local network. They shrink the field in which she creates her profile page and reflect her negotiations of position in relation to others.

The most polished and refined elements of Chloe’s profile page can be regarded in Kandisky’s terms as compositional elements. These include the most rehearsed aspects of Chloe’s profile pages: the elements over which Chloe has the most control to express her agency as a text producer. According to Kandinsky, “consciousness, reason and purpose play an overwhelming part – but of the calculation, nothing appears, only the feeling” (Kandinsky, 1977, p. 57). In Chloe’s profile page, the profile photograph and ‘about me’ blurb sections appear to conform to this description. They are the elements of Chloe’s profile page that allow her to enact rather than reflect her desired social identity for others. While still circumscribed by outward structures, her habitus, teen popular culture and the affordances of the resources involved, Chloe owns these elements of her profile, and uses them most powerfully to engage the audience.

While the use of Kandinsky’s terms as a frame for exploring Chloe’s online profile page creation may seem awkward, his ideas about representation provide a fresh lens for contemplating how Chloe uses online text production to create textual artefacts which represent her to the audience of her choice. The notion of her texts as an amalgam of impressions, improvisations and compositional elements reflects the evolving affordances of digital texts in the 21st century where children’s text production is circumscribed by powerful social and cultural influences. This discussion only attempts to reflect the practices of one child as she creates text in her chosen social networking site. However, by considering her text creation from a position that recognises the social and cultural influences that are playing upon the act, it is hoped that those charged with responsibility for supporting children, as they develop as producers and consumers of text, may increasingly be able to stand back from conservative definitions of text production, such as those invoked by the eight assessment focuses for writing described within the Primary National Strategy, and embrace the agency of young text producers as well as the structuring forces that are playing upon their texts.

In this paper I have tried to describe the elements that constitute Chloe’s Bebo profile page and through this description demonstrate how these digital texts are played upon by competing forces of structure and agency. All texts in their creation, whether school-directed or not, are played upon by these forces. My son creates texts that combine words and images for his teacher. However, this activity remains fixed in the pre-digital age, where his texts are concrete performances of who he is at any given time and in any given context. His school-based texts are structurally defined. His teacher plans their construction, directs their production and evaluates their success in relation to institutionally imposed criteria. His agency as a text producer is expressed through his willingness and ability to comply with these structural expectations. Chloe’s Bebo profile vividly illustrates how her agency as a text producer can be equally enhanced and limited by the affordances of the digital technology that supports social networking and the social and cultural influences that surround it. Chloe’s profile page is simultaneously a site for polished performance and a site for improvisation. It is one-voiced and many-voiced. As a textual artefact it exists beyond the structuring influences of educators and policy-makers. Consequently, it defies examination using traditional methods. However, children like Chloe are excited by and motivated to produce these texts. Educators must therefore recognise the widening spectrum of textual possibilities present in the 21st century communication landscape. As Castells et al. noted in relation to youth mobile phone use, “A new collective identity with global relevance is emerging” (2006, p. 169). Children within social network sites share ways of communicating and understandings about text and audience that may change how texts and communication come to be viewed. Educators need to embrace these understandings in order to support children as text producers into the digital age.

Notes
1. See http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframework/assessment/app/waaf/page004 for a description of the eight assessment focuses for writing that are used as part of the Assessing Pupil Progress package within the Primary Framework for Literacy and Mathematics (DCSF, 1998–2008).

References


