A young woman takes out her smartphone while waiting for the subway and begins reading an article for class that she downloaded earlier.

A garage has been transformed into a makeshift music studio and a teenage girl mixes beats while her friend recites his latest lyrics.

Two girls sit at home and text each other while watching a popular television program.

At a local park, a group of adolescent boys meets weekly to participate in an alternate reality game mediated by handheld GPS technology.

These brief examples suggest the range and variation of literacy outside of school walls, images that are in contrast to the daily experiences of many youth as they sit in classrooms. In this chapter, we examine the complex and shifting terrain of literacies beyond classroom and school contexts.

Our definition of literacy is informed by studies that primarily employ sociocultural lenses to explore literacies as social, multiple, and imbued with the political, cultural, and historical meanings of particular contexts. We also draw on theorizing about literacy as multimodal (engaging multiple modes of expression to communicate meaning) and moving across space and time to frame our discussion of the range of literacy practices that are engaged across contexts.

The term “out-of-school” is often used to denote particular literacy practices by virtue of where and when—geographically, spatially, and temporally—they occur and their perceived distance from school expectations and routines. By understanding out-of-school literacies, the argument goes, educators can create better bridges to academic goals. Tethering an understanding of out-of-school literacies to material spaces, however, can be problematic.

An attention to spatial understandings of literacies therefore has implications for how we study literacies and how we incorporate and live new spaces in our literacy pedagogy. Most pointedly, it encourages an interrogation and disruption of the in and out-of-school literacy binary. Studies of out-of-school literacies are often characterized by descriptions of how they allow for experimentation, for expressions of affinity with other likeminded people, and for the pursuit of a variety of purposes, including searches for meaning, self-authoring, and political action. In contrast, many descriptions of in-school literacies reflect Street’s (1995) notion of the “autonomous” model of literacy that understands literacy as a primarily cognitive process, as an act of de-coding, and as disconnected from the social context and relations of power. Hull and Schultz (2002), however, question tendencies to “...build and reify a great divide between in school and out of school,” arguing that “this dichotomy relegates all good things to out-of-school contexts and everything repressive to school” (p. 3). Given the recent emergence of digital artifacts and electronic tools that mark communication practices, and the corresponding research about the new ways of communicating and composing in this landscape, the in/out-of-school binary is further complicated (Stornaiuolo, Hull, & Nelson, 2009). With new spaces and new modalities come new social
Our purpose in this chapter is to explore the range and variation of the communicative, composing, interactional, and dissemination practices encompassed within the term “out-of-school literacies” and to consider the implications for classroom practice. First, we explore how multiple studies of young people’s out-of-school literacies provide a framing image of adolescent literate identities as engaged, shape-shifting, and socially conscious. Next, we review literature that presents new ways to think about what it means to be engaged in literacy and learning, particularly for young people whose identities in school belie the robust nature of their out-of-school literate lives. We continue a discussion of learning in the third section by focusing on the possibilities of bridging in-school and out-of-school literacies. In our fourth section, we raise cautions about doing so uncritically. We conclude by calling for a re-imagining of institutional spaces of learning by engaging the rich landscape of out-of-school literacies research. While we recognize the plurality of literacies research situated outside of school that explores the experiences of preschool children to adults, in this review we focus on the out-of-school literacies of adolescents.

Adolescents’ Out-of-School Literate Lives

Alvermann and Eakle (2007) argue that young people actively “dissolve” the traditional boundaries of time, space, and in/out-of-school literacies, characterizing their work as “completing projects to help explain themselves, their interests, their pleasures, and the worlds they inhabit or would like to inhabit” (p. 164). Given our awareness of how young people are continually inhabiting multiple spaces at any given time and how their literacy practices are continually moving across multiple contexts and modalities, we seek to highlight the complexity and dynamism found in the literacies in which youth engage outside of school walls. In this section, we explore some of the out-of-school spaces—physical locations and virtual domains—in which literacies flourish through the multi-layered image of an engaged, shape-shifting, and socially conscious adolescent. This lens is shaped by studies that depict adolescents as engaged participants, whose involvement in spaces such as after-school programs and spoken word venues is visible in their textual as well as embodied performances. In these spaces, youth enact “agentive identities” (Hull & Katz, 2006) through acts of (re)authoring themselves in ways and in spaces of their choosing. Just as youth can be understood as engaged and agentive, we also see them as “shape shifting portfolio people” (Gee, 2002) whose acts of authoring and communication are not confined to a limited scope of local sites, but exist across networks with global reach. This shape shifting contrasts the shape-fitting that is required of many adolescents in their in-school lives. Finally, we understand that adolescents engage multiple modalities, literacies, and digitally mediated spaces of expression in order to seek social change through social critique of their lived realities and their surrounding contexts.

Youth media organizations such as the Educational Video Center (EVC) and HarlemLIVE in New York City and Appalshop in Eastern Kentucky are representative of organizations populated by young people who seek opportunities to compose narratives outside of school and to be heard in their role as media producers. Youth Radio, located in Oakland, California, was founded with the intention of helping underserved youth to develop technical skills and to cultivate their identities as multi-media producers and mentors to their peers. These young broadcasters contribute much needed youth voices to adult-dominated discourses such as international conflicts and unemployment, as well as topics to which they have personal affinity, including standardized testing, the Iraq war, and the youth vote in the most recent election (Soep, 2006). In these spaces, youth are held to professional and artistic standards (Heath, 2001) and they embark on social critique and analysis from the position of storyteller via the medium of radio or documentary film.

Whereas these youth media programs exist as spaces where youth intentionally engage in social issue media production, there is also evidence of youth whose incidental and everyday literacy practices reflect an ongoing social critique in response to the world around them (Alim, 2007; Blackburn, 2003; Kinloch, 2010). From self-initiated documentary making to the writing of poetry and lyrics, the five African American youth in Mahiri’s (2004) study composed out-of-school texts known as “street scripts.” These literacies were motivated in response to personal experiences and ongoing analysis of their worlds. For these young people, and many others (e.g., Gutierrez, 2008; Hull & Katz, 2006), the practices of writing and composing multimodally were themselves spaces in which to assert authorial power and perform social critique.

Sablo Sutton (2004) also shares accounts of youth seeking social action through their language and literacy practices. She studied the spoken word practices and performances among youth she describes as “young magicians,” youth whose connection with their community and lived realities are transformed through this practice. The spoken word performances Sablo Sutton attended took place in a setting she calls “The Basement,” where candlelight and an eager crowd await the poets’ latest musings on topics ranging from sociopolitical issues to personal relationships. Unlike most school writing, authoring in this space was intimately tied to a connection with the audience; the poets viewed their texts and performances as acts of truth-telling to a room of engaged listeners.

Still other compositions across a variety of spaces highlight different aspects of the performative nature of out-of-school literacies. Lewis (2007) suggests that in this current digital climate, performative practice might very well be
“built into digital technology with multiple windows, synchronicity, graphical possibilities, and what Ito (2006, p. 3) calls ‘hypersociality’” (p. 232). Today’s youth, more than in any time previously, are writing prolific amounts and with an especially acute awareness of audience. Adolescents are active participants in online sites for video sharing, blogging, and social networking in which their participation is mediated through a range of literacy practices necessary for creating online profiles, commenting on others’ profiles, and communicating with known and unknown audiences (e.g., Livingstone, 2008; Wilber, 2007). Youth are aware of and writing to multiple audiences and adapting the form and content of their writing to meet the diverse demands and expectations of those audiences (Lunsford, 2006). For instance, instant messaging (IM) and its communicative cousin, texting, are two literacy practices that are ubiquitous in adolescents’ communications. Lewis and Fabos’s (2005) research, along with Jacobs’s (2008), highlights the multivocality of their participants’ IM practices, suggesting layered and simultaneous authoring occurring during any one IM session.

Multivocality and audience motivated the adolescent girls with whom Pleasants (2008) worked at a community center to craft digital stories that allowed them “to tell stories in their own voices, and render these stories visually” (p. 230). As both a form of text and a space of composing, digital storytelling afforded these and other youth opportunities to assert discursive agency as they made themselves known on their own terms (Vasudevan, 2006). The work of Hull and her colleagues (2006) echoes Pleasants’s discussion of the unexpected and agentic affordances of digital storytelling. They find community-based sites to be especially fertile ground for adolescents to assume new roles and identities through their multimodal composing.

Such forms of textual remixing (Knobel & Lankshear, 2008), in which “original” material is cut, copied, edited, and rearranged to create new texts, have led literacy researchers to inquire into the motivations and rationales behind the production of online content (Alvermann, 2008). Researchers studying various forms of digital remixing—e.g., anime music videos (AMVs) (Ito, 2006), fan fiction (Black, 2005, Thomas, 2007)—find that adolescents take on roles that allow for multiple forms of participation in communities to which these remixing practices are connected. Portable technologies and a reliable Internet connection make it possible to leverage these practices more readily for entry into a variety of virtual spaces, including virtual worlds and online gaming sites. In the next section, we consider the implications of these engaged, shape-shifting, and socially conscious identities that youth assume outside of school for rethinking what it means to be engaged in literacy and learning across contexts.

Re-Envisioning Literacies and Literacy Learners

Research that considers literacies in the lives of youth across a range of contexts provides compelling portraits of students who are engaged in literacies outside of school, but who are considered “struggling” inside of school. Many students have school histories that reflect low test scores, placements in remedial classes, and labels such as “reluctant readers,” “below grade level,” and “at-risk”; however, ethnographic research provides contrasting images of these very same young people successfully navigating a range of sign systems, including print, outside of school. In her study of 13-year-old Jacques, Knobel (2001) found that his involvement in his family’s church community and family business called upon a range of sophisticated practices related to reading, writing, listening, and speaking. These literacies were marked by a clear sense of audience and utility, e.g., to create flyers to attract potential customers for the family’s lawn care business, to provide a compelling testimony of faith. His out-of-school literacies were not recognized in what Knobel (2001) calls the “impoverished conceptions of literacy in national curricula and benchmarks” (p. 409).

Other researchers have also found students who were considered based on test scores and teacher perception as “struggling” readers to be especially adept at moving across sign systems, particularly when tied to popular culture. O’Brien (2006) provides vivid portraits of young people who thrived in the “mediacentric” atmosphere supported by a literacy lab that differed from the “printcentric” attributes of school classrooms. Within opportunities to conduct multimodal research on a range of topics from music, to historical events, to local issues, students drew upon a range of sources to find information and to present their perspectives. Given the students were both active consumers and producers of multimodal and multigenre texts, O’Brien (2006) develops the term “multimediating” to suggest how young people orchestrate a range of literacies to construct knowledge, identities, and meaning-making with and through multiple media. In these inquiry projects, students used such practices as Instant Messaging, Internet searches, and video games—practices that were not condoned in classrooms and were in fact often seen as detracting from school sanctioned literacies. O’Brien (2006) claims, however, that these practices were in fact more sophisticated than those valued in school and allowed students to claim agency in their own learning, arguing, “These multimediating adolescents are developing a very clear self-regulation of complex linguistic, cognitive, technical, and social skills and strategies” (emphasis in original, p. 44).

Staples (2008) describes the affordances of non-school spaces to open up new ways of being for youth who are laden with disparaging identity markers inside the school walls. In her description of her work with African American young men and women who met with her for an afterschool media literacy club, she recounts how the students had been identified by their teachers as having low literacy proficiency and in need of remediation. Staples, however, details richly layered and analytical conversations and resultant texts that were the hallmarks of her interactions with and observations of the same youth.

These studies and others that inquire into the distinctions
between the literacy cultures inside and outside of classrooms illustrate the ways in which the institution of school itself, whose practices of labeling and categorization coupled with missed opportunities to really know youth, plays a significant role in the bifurcation of youths’ lives and literacies in and out of school. They suggest that a recognition of the nature of the literacy practices pursued across contexts could expand not only our understandings of students and their literacies (Moje, 2002), but also our understanding of the literacies we value and promote in schools, an area of inquiry we explore further in the next section.

**Bridging In and Out-of-School Literacies**

In their review of research on out-of-school literacies, Hull and Schultz (2001) ask two questions that are reflected in the inquiries of subsequent studies exploring the possibilities of incorporating out-of-school literacies into school-based pedagogies, asking “[h]ow might out-of-school identities, social practices, and the literacies that they recruit be leveraged in the classroom?” (p. 603) and “[h]ow might teachers incorporate out-of-school interests and predilections but also extend the range of the literacies with which [students] are conversant?” (p. 603). These questions and the studies that are informed by them attempt to explore and disrupt the in and out-of-school divide.

A number of studies explore how literacy practices typically viewed as being pursued outside of school have been incorporated inside of school to build on existing curricula to promote academic literacies. These studies reflect the calls of such organizations as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association to respond to the evolving nature of adolescent literacies and to suggest how “new literacies are in a synergistic, reciprocal, and constantly evolving relationship with older literacies” (Swenson, Young, McGrail, Rozema, & Whitin, 2006, p. 357). Digital media and software, for example, have been found to complement progressive writing process principles and traditional print-based approaches to literature response. In her discussion of the insights she gained from studying her middle school students’ out-of-school blogging, Read (2006) argues that she incorporates the practice into her writing instruction in order to extend her instructional goals related to raising student awareness of the importance of audience, drafting, and revising. Davis and McGrail (2009) engage their fifth-grade bloggers in “proof-revising” the stories posted to their classroom blogs. Teachers create podcasts that encourage students not only to look for surface errors and sentence-level revisions, but also to consider the narrative impact of their work across the semiotic domains. Even the study of Shakespeare has been shaped by literacy practices hardly imaginable in his time. Desmet (2009) discusses using YouTube within the study of the bard, while Shamburg and Craighead (2009) draw on a repertoire of practices informed by out-of-school praxis to extend the study of his plays, including the incorporation of nonprint texts, the creation of a participatory culture within the classroom, and the principles of remixing to invite a range of student responses.

Another related line of inquiry explores how the practices traditionally considered out-of-school can play a role not only in revitalizing English education to reflect the emerging reading and writing practices of today’s adolescents, but also how these practices could be used in the service of social justice. Morrell calls for the recognition of popular culture and youth cultural production to inform school practice. Arguing for a “critical English education,” Morrell (2005) contends that students need “skills to deconstruct dominant texts carefully (i.e., canonical literature, media texts) while also instructing them in skills that allow them to create their own critical texts that can be used in the struggle for social justice” (p. 313). Lee (2007) argues for the use of cultural models drawing from African American language practices, music, film, and literature to facilitate academic literacies. Hip-hop (Alexander-Smith, 2004; Hill, 2009); spoken word and slam poetry (Fisher, 2007) and “digital DJing” (Mahiri, 2006) all proceed from the premise that the cultural practices that have relevance and significance to youth outside of school can be pursued within school to enhance critical literacies, engage with academic texts, and provide opportunities to work toward social change.

**Lost in Translation? Considerations and Challenges**

As we consider further what are or what could be relationships between in and out-of-school literacies, and as we consider the possibilities of infusing classroom practices with out-of-school perspectives, we wonder what happens when out-of-school literacies are not in a “synergistic, reciprocal, and constantly evolving” (Swenson et al., 2006, p. 357) relationship with the values, definitions, outcomes, and purposes of school-based literacy education or schooling in general? How do we think about the seemingly intractable “deep grammar of schooling” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 30) that shapes how knowledge is constructed within schools and for what purposes? How do we consider the fate of critical, culturally relevant, and multimodal pedagogies within schools that adopt scripted curricula aimed at teaching basic skills and preparing students for standardized exams? How do we consider the institutional constraints that shape not only access to the digital media tools in schools, but also how structures of power and authority within schools can limit students’ freedom and agency in pursuing online literacies?

Questions therefore emerge about attempts to import out-of-school literacies without sufficient attention to how the context of schooling necessarily shapes the literacies that can emerge within in-school spaces. As Sheehy (2009) contends, we need additional work “examining the social processes that hinder or facilitate the mobility of specific literacies across contexts” (pp. 144–145). O’Brien and Bauer (2005) describe the challenges of bringing new literacies into what they term “Institutions of Old Learning,” suggesting that we need to “to consider the broader social,
cultural, and political ecology within which schools exist” (p. 126), an ecology shaped by an emphasis on the value of print literacies and the pressures on schools to raise test scores. Lankshear and Knobel (2007) contend that a particular set of conditions, what they call “technical stuff” (the affordances of new technologies) and “ethos stuff” (characteristics of literacies as “participatory” or “distributed”), are needed to foster the affordances of online learning. This “ethos stuff,” however, is not at all easy to foster, even within well-resourced schools. In Leander’s (2007) study of a school where students had ample access to laptops and a wireless network, classroom practices emerged that began to exert increasing control over students’ access to online sources, over the processes they were allowed to pursue once online, and over the purpose of the students’ learning. Leander (2007) argues that in contrast to the ways in which young people engage in online literacies on their own terms, “In official school practice, the wireless network was ‘re-wired’ or closed off and anchored in ways that reproduced traditional school space-time” (p. 25).

Thus, the ways that time and space are organized within schools influence and are in a shaping and reciprocal relationship to how learning is pursued and knowledge is constructed. In practices associated with gaming literacies it is possible to see how this phenomena can cause particular threats to out-of-school literacies once they move into school (Squire, 2008). The complexity of the learning and participation involved in gaming, Gee (2003) argues, is in stark contrast to the “skill and drill” and “back to basics” approaches that shape many approaches to literacy pedagogies. Gee’s (2003) work highlights how video game players display habits of being and ways of participating that allow them to take on distinctive identities, assert agency, tackle challenging problems, think sequentially and holistically about issues, assemble resources and players to address meet goals, and pursue competence through trial and error. Gee (2003) approaches the research less from an impetus to consider how video games themselves might be incorporated into school-based curricula; instead, he considers how young people’s engagement with video games can provide insight into theories of learning.

These kinds of approaches to exploring the in and out-of-school literacies relationship suggest the need to move away from an importation model. Gustavson (2007), in his study of the creative practices of three adolescent boys, argues for a “process-based understanding of youth” and their art forms through which educators might more effectively appropriate the “ritual, routines, and skills that youth within these and other practices employ in order to do the work” (p. 136). He calls for teachers to take on the perspective of inquiring amateurs and ethnographers, to pursue exploration with students, and to encourage multiple forms of performance and experimentation. These kinds of principles, as we contend in our conclusion, have potential for moving the field forward in considering what we can learn from the out-of-school literacies of adolescents to inform in-school practice.

Conclusion: Re-Imagining In-School Spaces and Literacies

We conclude our review by reflecting on how institutional contexts for learning might be re-imagined and transformed through critical and thoughtful engagement with the knowledge gleaned from studies of spaces outside of school in which adolescents are participating in meaningful literacy engagements. When teachers create opportunities to engage the out-of-school commitments, histories, and bodies of knowledge that students bring with them to school, classrooms can become more permeable, less bounded, and more inclusive (cf. Fisher, 2007; Kajder, 2004; Kinloch, 2005; Medina & Campano, 2006; Larson & Marsh, 2005; Mahar, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006). Such blurring of the in/out-of-school divide is evident in Wissman’s (2009) research with adolescent girls of color in an urban high school who participated in a photography and poetry elective course. As a teacher researcher, Wissman pursued a critical and multimodal pedagogy (Janks, 2006), co-constructing this in-school course with the young women with the aim to give the students “the space and support to communicate critically, aesthetically, lovingly, and agentively” (Hull, 2003, p. 230). The texts that were explored and composed within the course illustrate the ways in which the students’ literacies circulated across the multiple contexts of home, school, and community. Like the course Wissman taught, the Power Writers program located within a Bronx high school was envisioned as a space where the literacies of adolescents were viewed through the lenses of possibility and transformation (Fisher, 2007). Here, adolescents and their dedicated teachers came together to engage in deep critical inquiry, language exploration, and personal reflection. Fisher writes, “Power Writing was more than a class. It was a job, a sacred space, a home, a functional—or sometimes ‘dysfunctional,’ as one student wrote in a poem—family” (p. 3). Fisher urges educators to recognize that “young people are yearning to be chosen and to be claimed” as part of something bigger and that educators have a privileged role to “help young people develop the tools to transform this yearning into words and actions that chart the future they desire and deserve” (p. 101).

We contend that maintaining the in/out-of-school binary has detrimental effects on how we understand youth and consequently what kinds of educational spaces we construct with and for them. While we recognize that opportunities for expansive literacies are often more readily evident outside of boundaries of the classroom, we argue that it is not predetermined or preordained what can happen within schools, as evidenced by the growing number of examples that reflect re-imagined purposes of literacy teaching, learning, and research within and across contexts.

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