Jill Olthouse

Blended Books:

An Emerging Genre Blends Online and Traditional Formats

Write an achingly heartsick poem on your blog. Compose an obtuse status update on your Facebook page. Co-opt a TV commercial and refashion it for your personal use. These are assignments you will never find on a state standardized writing assessment! Yet these are the types of literacy activities students engage in daily. Among online teenagers, 64% engage in some type of content creation, and blogging attracts 35% of all online teen girls and 20% of online teen boys (Lenhart, Madden, Smith, and Macgill, 2007). Some English teachers feel conflicted about all this online writing (Bromley, 2006). Is it enough that students are writing in any venue? Or do their online literacy habits threaten the development of more traditional literacy skills? For example, what are teachers to do when students use "textese" in school assignments, or when they pay more attention to the fonts and clip art than they do to the form and content?

Today's English teachers must respond to their students' varied literacies, but they walk tightropes reflective of the competing theories about what it means to be literate. *Cultural literacy* theorists posit that there exists a set of shared conventions and canonical texts, and that students need to understand these conventions and texts in order to accomplish their career goals, or indeed, communicate at all. *Multiliteracies* theorists disagree that these shared conventions exist at all. Rather, they believe that students need to learn how communication functions in a specific context and then use communication to change that context. For multiliteracies theorists, students who write in new ways are to be encouraged. This might lead to the conclusion that blogs, text messages, and Facebook posts are a valid way to write in English class, and are valid texts to read and discuss.

In *serafina67 *urgently requires life**, a work of adolescent literature that is written entirely as a blog (but published in print form), the main character anticipates just this change occurring in her English class. "Because one day people will stop reading *Bloody Romeo and his Crap Dead Girlfriend* and they will all sit in classrooms watching YouTubery from THE PAST that is now and reading BLOGGAGE instead and write essays about magnificent us" (Day, p. 51). In this passage, Day seems to be commenting on her own work; finding a publisher who will accept a novel that is written entirely in blog format can be seen as one step in the journey toward validating adolescent literacy practices as real literature. Day is not the only author who is reflecting teen life by incorporating current literacy practices into their fiction. There are a number of books for young adults that blend online and traditional formats.

This article presents a genre study of these types of books and attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How are adolescent literacy practices represented in these books?
2. Do the books share similar themes or stylistic elements?
3. Could these books have a place in the English curriculum?

The Novels

When searching for these blended novels, I originally limited my search to books that were composed entirely of online formats represented in print form. Finding only four of these, I expanded my reading to include novels that alternated between online formats and traditional narrative. I rejected a few of the titles I found because of poor reviews or because they did not incorporate online formats and themes to a considerable degree. The books I read include: *ChaseR* (Rosen, 2002), *serafina67 *urgently requires life** (Day, 2008), *tmi* (Quigley, 2009), *are u 4 real?* (Kadefors, 2009), *Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)* (Vega, 2005), *ttyl* (Myracle, 2004), *and Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat* (Spooner, 2009). (See Table 1 for full descriptions of these books.)

Themes

Analysis of the seven novels was influenced by qualitative research and multi-case studies. Each novel was treated as one case. As I read each novel, I noted unique stylistic elements that reflected online literacy practices. Examples of these include acronyms like OMG. I also noted general themes addressed in the novels. For example, a theme in *ChaseR* was animal rights. As I read each additional novel, I eliminated themes that were not shared in common with the other novels or themes that were not related in some way to the novels' portrayal of online literacy practices. I refined some themes by combining them or redefining them so that they were held in common by most of the novels. I made notes about how the themes were connected to the stylistic and structural aspects of the text. This method of analysis is also referred to as the *constant comparison method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Themes are determined inductively from the individual cases rather than being theorized ahead of time. The following themes were most prominent.

Playful Structures

These books portray adolescents as very playful writers, creatively adapting traditional morphology, syntax, and genre structures. Many of these play-

Table 1. Blended Books

Title	Author	Narrative format	Plot
ChaseR	Michael J. Rosen	Emails from Chase to his friends	Chase has just moved from the city to the country. He discusses how this change, as well as the issue of local hunting, has affected him.
*serafina67 *urgently requires life**	Susie Day	Blog entries accompanied by blog readers' comments	Sarah is recovering from her parents' divorce and an embarrassing incident at school. She discusses her daily life and her search for happiness on her blog.
tmi	Sarah Quigley	Blog entries blended with traditional narrative	Becca tries to curb her habit of sharing "too much information" by weaving a fantasy world on her blog. But when her veiled descriptions of her friends and family are revealed, she must deal with the consequences.
are u 4 real?	Sara Kadefors	Traditional narrative interspersed with email and chat logs	Kyla and Alex meet online and develop a friendship. But can their relationship stand the test of meeting in real life?
Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)	Denise Vega	Traditional narrative punctuated with website diary entries	Erin struggles to manage her friendships as she transitions to seventh grade. Her outlet is her offline website. But when it becomes public, she must live with the consequences.
ttyl	Lauren Myracle	Chat logs	This book, the first in a series, tells of three friends who struggle to maintain their friendship and give each other much-needed perspective on the high school experience.
Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat	M. Spooner	Chat logs	Two girls, along with two accomplices, develop an evil plot; they will create fake online identities and try to lure each other's boyfriends into virtual affairs as a test of these boys' devotion. Hilarity (and consequences) ensue.

ful aspects of teen online writing were no surprise: emoticons, abbreviated spellings, acronyms, a lack of capitalization (except for emphasis or "shouting"), and fragmented and run-on syntax. Action phrases such as *clomps about in a flying rage* (Myracle, p. 88) or *looks soulfully into the distance* (Myracle, p. 34), set aside in asterisks, add humor and drama. I also noticed some features I did not expect; what follows details some of those features.

Five of the seven books depicted teens who narrated incidents in their lives by adapting traditional genre formats. They turned their daily struggles into fairy tales, ORPG (Online Role Playing Game) logs, sonnets, scientific reports, romance novels, screenplays, and newspapers, all for humorous effect. Chase, in *ChaseR,* crafts an email newspaper with humorous stories as he records his relationship to his new life in the country. One issue of his newsletter includes a fictional advertisement for mail-order cicadas.

serafina67 depicted a blogger who had a tendency to play with morphology to make up new words, e.g., "I know I should be all Yay Achieviness!" (Day, p. 25). Other examples include "adorkable" (Day, p. 101), "lardtastic" (Day, p. 3), and "head-breaky" (Day, p. 26). I did not notice this feature in any of the other books, but I am convinced that the author meant to portray this type of wordplay as characteristic of many teen bloggers in general.

Slang was abundant in these books. Within the "teen only" worlds created by their blogs and chat rooms, teens used language that might be censored in contexts governed by adults. Such slang may be playful or it may break boundaries for what is considered acceptable language. *serafina67* poses some small challenges to American adult readers, as it is chock full of teen slang, computer (or "l33t" slang), British English, and British slang all rolled into one. A surprising amount of the slang in these books was in the form of insults, such as "retarded," "slut," or "gay." The insults ranged from mild and playful to vicious; often a verbal "crossing the line" theme came into play and created conflict between characters. By indicating that such name calling was common, hurtful, and a source of controversy amongst adolescents, these novels did not treat the topic lightly. However, such language may preclude some books from classroom use, depending on district policies.

In general, this playful disregard of conventions seems to have a literary function. The acronyms and abbreviated spellings allow writers to type faster, thereby conversing in spontaneous bursts as they would if conversing in person. Those books written as chat log were akin to conversations, while those that incorporated email were more reflective and epistolary. The play of morphology and genre contributes to a humorous narrative hyperbole in describing daily events that might otherwise seem insignificant or mundane. The slang makes for an edgy, authentic read, and introduces conflict into the books. To summarize the general effect of the playful structures, an analogy can be made to stand-up comedy, which is conversational, edgy, hyperbolic, and funny. In contrast, a traditional, reflective, descriptive account focusing on the unfolding details of a lived experience reminds me more of an art house film.

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Vented Honesty

Another characteristic theme of these novels is what I call "vented honesty." The adolescents in these novels feel that their everyday lives are false. Peer pressure and social mores limit their speech and behavior; they need an outlet for their true identity and emotions. Internet relationships and journals offer them a sanctuary for unfiltered discussion. serafina67 makes a resolution regarding her blogging efforts: "Be brilliant and interesting and completely totally honest on here, daily" (Day, p. 3). All of the books incorporated the theme of vented honesty in some way. Even in *Entr@pment,* a novel about forming false identities online, there was some irony in the fact that the false identities allowed the teen writers to express feelings they would normally not express. Some of the secrets these characters discussed were their opinions of their peers, their self-consciousness, and revelations about friends' sexual orientation.

Vented honesty is reactive, rather than reflective; it reveals the author's perceptions "in the heat of

the moment." The storytelling p.o.v. accompanying vented honesty is often first person or third-person limited. The writers provide very authentic representations of their emotional state, but their descriptions of events and others' perceptions are often biased and unreliable. Through the course of the novels, readers are privy to the characters' broadening understanding of the events of their own lives.

The theme of *tmi* centers on the problem of vented honesty. Becca tends to talk continuously, sharing observations that are awkward and inappropriate, which often leads those around her to protest, "Too much information!" Becca tries to curb her habit by venting her observations on her blog, but the blog is ultimately discovered by classmates. This discovery is also a common theme in these novels; it is the theme of "unintended audiences," which I will discuss shortly.

Managed Identities

It is a paradox that vented honesty is often accompanied by "managed identities." Students who manage (fictionalize) their identity take advantage of the fact that life lived online is somewhat separate from daily life. This can be done in small ways, like the use of screen names to preserve Internet safety and anonymity, or in more elaborate ways, as seen in the plot of *Entr@pment.* Perhaps because they believe their identity is disguised, online writers are more subject to the phenomenon of vented honesty. This plot detail speaks to larger themes in these works, like what is our "true self"? *Entr@pment,* a book whose chat logs also mirror the structure of a Shakespearean comedy, offers rich reflections on the theme of managed identity by making an implicit parallel between the Shakespearean concept of "mask" and the taking of an online identity. For example, in the beginning of *Entr@pment,* the teen girls are discussing their plan to create false identities online, and through these personas, test their boyfriends' devotion.

Ms. T: true, um, Annie? online? we make up identities and hit on them from there?

gothling: exactly

Ms. T: e-dentities

gothling: whole new personalities. like costumes and masks and foreign accents. see, bliss? (Spooner, p. 10).

Unintended Audiences

Vented honesty on the Web is different from vented honesty in a diary, because on the Web, it is easier for writings to develop unintended audiences. In three of the seven books, the combination of vented honesty and the revelation of an unintended audience provided a major plot twist. These plot twists are parallel to real-life conflicts, such as those that occur when adolescent bloggers learn their parents have been reading their online journals (Kornblum, 2005).

In some of the books, the revelation of the unintended audience brings with it a moral subtext regarding Internet safety for adolescents. Couched in gentle humor, the message of "be careful out there" is reflected in words of parental wisdom or embarrassing social consequences for the book's major characters. In *Click Here* (Vega, 2005), Erin's parents explain to her that even after you delete something from the Web, it remains stored in a cache on Google for awhile. serafina67 writes a letter directly to her readers comparing the Internet to a conversation on a train full of strangers, all of whom are overhearing your conversation. For some listeners, the conversation may become a shared source of interest and spark a friendship. Other times, the conversation will be a source of embarrassment . . . for the listener *and/or* for the speaker. And on other occasions, it may be dangerous. This metaphor puts the concept of unintended audiences in a very concrete form.

Social Focus

I was a somewhat solitary and bookish teen, and my high school life revolved around school, family, and church, but I found that these themes were not generally emphasized in these seven books. Rather, the focus was on social relationships with peers. While this is a feature of a great deal of adolescent literature, the cyber elements seemed at least tangentially connected to the social focus in these works. Many of the characters in these novels seemed to see cyberspace as "their domain," reminding me of one journalist's description of online journaling websites as "a kind of online breakfast club" (Nussbaum, 2004). This was especially true for serafina67, whose "ulife" account mirrored sites like myspace, xanga, and livejournal, sites populated largely by communities of adolescents. Within these online domains, peer relationships were generally tested without undue influence from adults.

Romance, unsurprisingly, played a major role in these novels. The temporal, fragile nature of teen romances was further complicated by the themes of managed identities (can teens be their true selves in romantic relationships?) and unintended audiences (what do you do when pictures of you kissing another girl are revealed online to your girlfriend and her friends?).

Friendships between teens were also a major theme. Characters learned who their true friends were, and these friends supported them through challenges with other relationships and with parents and teachers. The girls in *ttyl* supported each other and kept a friend from being seduced by her teacher. Loneliness, bullying, sex, eating disorders, and alcohol all played a role in these teens' relationships with each other. Of contemporary relevance was the theme of homophobia. In *tmi*, Becca accidentally "outs" a best friend. In *are u 4 real?*, Alex's peers assume he is homosexual because he is a ballet dancer. A summary of the themes and the books in which they were reflected is presented in Table 2.

Theory and Application

Luke (2002) has described today's classrooms as influenced by an era of "corporate managerealism"; this refers to standardized testing, a culture in which performance and accountability drive how and what we teach, giving rise to an acceptance and/or expectation that curriculum will be steered from a distance and will emphasize marketization. Many students' concept of good writing is distilled into the minimal requirements of following a predictable five-paragraph pattern and avoiding surface-level errors for the purpose of passing an exam. This lies in sharp contrast with the informal literacy

portrayed in these YA novels, which consists of social writing filled with humor, hyperbole, creativity, and disregard for conventions.

Table 2. Adolescent Novels and Their Themes

Title	**"Textese": Emoticons, Acronyms, Abbreviated spellings**	**Personal Story Told in a Different Genre**	**Heavy Use of Slang**	**Morphological Play**	**Hyperbolic Humor**	**Vented Honesty**	**Managed Identities**	**Unintended Audiences**	**Social (Peer) Focus**
ChaseR	x	x			x	x			
*serafina67 *urgently requires life**	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
tmi	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
are u 4 real?	x		x			x	x		x
Click Here (to find out how I survived seventh grade)	x	x	x		x	x		x	x
ttyl	x		x		x	x	x		x
Entr@pment: A High School Comedy in Chat	x	x	x		x	x	x		x

High school English teachers today are caught between two competing views of literacy. "Cultural Literacy" theory posits that a general knowledge base exists that is necessary for communication to occur (Hirsch, 1987). Standardized conventions and canonical texts are thus important to the curriculum. In contrast, "multiliteracies" theorists write that "there is no single, canonical English that can or should be taught any more" (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999, p. 5). They posit that literacy is contextual, multimodal, and ultimately related to issues of social power (Cope & Kalantzis, 1999). In pedagogical terms, students would work with localized versions of English and nonlinguistic forms of communication to creatively adapt social messages. To my mind, this could translate into a variety of conventional literacy practices, but also expand to include practices such as *serafina67*'s blogging or the re-imaging that appears in texts such as *Adbusters* magazine.

Not only is the entire novel written as chat logs, but it contains the following elements of a Shakespearean comedy: masks, wise fools, monologues, sonnets, insults, allusions (to Shakespeare, of course), destiny, and even a marriage at the end.

Even teachers unaware of the theoretical formulations are impacted by the practical applications of these theories. Teens surveyed about how their in-school and out-of-school literacies have intersected responded this way: 50% say they sometimes use informal writing styles instead of proper capitalization and punctuation in their school assignments; 38% say they have used text shortcuts in schoolwork, such as "LOL" (for "laugh out loud"); 25% have used emoticons (symbols like smiley faces) in schoolwork (Lenhart, Lewis, & Rainie, 2001). Another interesting fact is that teen blogs have been banned by some school districts—not because of their nonstandard conventions, but because of the social conflicts they create between students (Kornblum, 2005).

I remember a conflict that occurred while I was teaching in a school in which curriculum was delivered online and the ratio of computers to students was 1:1. Students had spontaneously developed an online forum in which they posted and discussed movies, games, original poetry, and politics. While they were admirably engaged in writing, they were also writing on the discussion forum instead of doing their schoolwork, quickly minimizing the page when teachers walked by. The website was temporarily blocked by school administrators, but eventually a truce was reached in which students who were up-to-date with schoolwork and used "school-appropriate language" could use the site during school. This truce honored what the students had to bring to the table (their interest in writing) as well as what teachers had to bring to the table (knowledge of conventional discourse and belief in civil guidelines for discourse).

Literature, too, can offer such a truce or method of translating one's experience and values into a form that outsiders can understand. *Entr@pment* is a perfect example of a YA text that serves this function. It clarifies for student readers the function of a Shakespearean comedy, while adult readers come to understand the comic, social function of online chat. Not only is the entire novel written as chat logs, but it contains the following elements of a Shakespearean comedy: masks, wise fools, monologues, sonnets, insults, allusions (to Shakespeare, of course), destiny, and even a marriage at the end. Because this book is written in the language of informal online adolescent literacy, yet is unlikely to cause the censors much discontent, I can easily imagine either using it as a two-week unit before teaching a Shakespearean comedy for the first time or giving it to an AP class as a weekend read accompanied by the question, "Can chat logs be literature?" Even writing lessons might be inspired by such novels. For example, students could learn to switch between textese and Standard English by "translating" the dialogue in *ttyl* or Entr@pment into Standard English, or rewriting a classical story in modern day, chat formats.

Conclusion

There is some danger, though, in co-opting students' informal literacy in the classroom and offering it up for deconstruction and analysis. Rather than co-opt, teachers can acknowledge and protect these literacy practices in small ways, such as housing these blended books in their classroom leisure reading

library, allowing students to write in their school journals in "chat speak" and "textese," or teaching grammar by asking students to translate textese into conventional grammar while letting students challenge their teacher to decipher their textese. An NCTE position paper on technology and writing asserts that as culture and literacy change, so must English teachers and classrooms. This includes paying attention to issues of privacy and copyright, as well as developing composition assignments that blend hypertextual and visual forms of communication with print (Swenson, Rozema, Young, McGrail, & Whitin, 2005). But in order to teach these new literacy practices, one must become famiiar with them. As a primer for teachers, I would recommend *serafina67*, which introduces the interactive, creative nature of teen blogging through a character whose voice is strong and authentic.

As adolescent literature adapts to reflect changing adolescent literacy practices, it is probable that the number of blended books will rise. Some may even begin to incorporate image, a hallmark of online literacy, though none of these seven did. An example of a contemporary novel that includes visual images is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). This novel is appropriate for older readers, and though it does not focus on online formats, it does incorporate varied forms of communication. And as these adolescents grow into adulthood, the genre may become more prevalent in literary fiction. For now, authors of blended books and teachers of adolescent literacy will continue their balancing acts, their bridge building, so that more serafina67s will appreciate Shakespeare, and more Shakespeare teachers will have their own blogs.

Jill Olthouse *is a doctoral student studying gifted education, literacy & composition, and educational technology at the University of Toledo.*

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