

"I plan to be a 10": Online Literacy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people use computer mediated communication (CMC) in a variety of ways as they come to understand their sexual identity and begin to identify with larger communities. A Web-based survey gathered 75 responses from Web users who supplied information about their online experiences as LGBT people. They report using online resources to serve many functions in the coming out process: They gather information, try out new ways of self-expression, and find an audience of like-minded people with whom they interact. Online resources were reported as most useful for obtaining basic information, for offering the ability to express oneself on LGBT issues and as a LGBT person, and for connecting with a larger LGBT community. The ways people find, use, and interact with these resources are examples of online literacy, a set of skills that may parallel traditional academic literacies but which may be used in different ways and to different ends.

chat rooms community gay identity lesbian literacy Web sites

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people have been impacted particularly by computer-mediated communication. The opportunities offered by the Internet and other online channels for relatively anonymous access to resources have been especially welcomed by those LGBTs who have chosen not to be open about their sexuality or who are in the process of coming out. Tom Rielly, founder of Digital Queers (an organization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender computer professionals), explains this radically new access in these words: "Our vision is a national electronic town square that people can access from the privacy of their closet from any small town, any suburb, any reservation in America. It's like bringing Christopher Street or the Castro to them" (as cited in Vaillancourt, 1995, p. 61). Web-based resources such the *Queer Resource Directory* (see <<http://www.qrd.org/qrd>>) or *Rainbow Query* (see <<http://www.glweb.com/RainbowQuery/index.html>>) offer links to a diverse array of resources, including academic, commercial, and personal sites; home pages for local, national and international organizations; repositories of cultural, political and sexually explicit material; and links to such interactive sites as chat rooms, bulletin board systems (BBSs), and

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other forms of interactivity geared to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people.¹

As a writing teacher, I have been particularly interested in these interactive fora: No matter what the topic or the tone of conversation, people are using writing in a way meaningful to them. Unconstrained by the expectations of formal polished prose, people interact with others in a variety of registers, impelled by the basic need to communicate. In an earlier study, I examined some of these online spaces, seeking to understand how different spatial metaphors emerged from and were encouraged by different kinds of discourse (Woodland, 1995). In meeting and talking with other gay people online, in particular college and university students, I was struck by the fact that they were pursuing a “writing life” that, in most cases, was totally invisible to their composition teachers. How, I wondered, does the writing that LGBT students produce online compare with their academic writing? Do skills developed in one context transfer to another? What aspects of online literacy are most useful in each context? How do online resources and communities offer support and opportunity for people coming out of the closet and into a larger community?

As I began to consider how the LGBT people I knew were using online resources in their coming-out processes, I thought about my coming-out story and the resources available to me some twenty years ago and more. I found that much of the support and information that had been crucial to me then was now available online. Therefore, I begin this look forward by looking back: The questions that drew me to this study have their roots in my own life.²

When I look back on the ways I learned about being gay, the list is long and surprising. I think LGBT people become incredibly resourceful to get the information they need to make decisions about their lives and to learn what it means to live as a LGBT person.

I was in high school when I first connected the word *homosexuality* with what I'd been feeling for many years before. I can remember having a crush on another little boy in second grade, being conscious of other boys' bodies in junior high, and realizing that I didn't share my friends' developing interest in girls. But, only in high school did I begin wondering if *that word* explained me. Good student that I was, I went to our small town's public library (across the street from the church where my father was the minister) and looked up homosexuality in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*; there I learned a number of things that were not true.

Neil Bartlett (1992) described the process by which gay men construct knowledge this way:

You hear a man talking about a pub, or you read an address in a paper, or sometimes you simply follow someone you fancy and discover a whole new part of town. You know that your knowledge is quite arbitrary. Your knowledge of the city is shaped by the way ex-lovers introduce you to their

¹See also *Q Planet* <<http://qplanet.com>>, *Lesbian Expansion* <<http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/Garden/1708>>, *Gay and Lesbian Politics: WWW and Internet Resources* <<http://www.indiana.edu/~qlbtpol>>, *A Womyn's World* <<http://members.tripod.com/~womyn98/index.html>>, and *Planet Out* <<http://www.planetout.com>>.

²There are a number of fine studies of coming-out experiences; see Ritch Savin-Williams (1988), Robert Rhoads (1994), and Linnea Due (1995). Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope Stanley (1980), Deborah Abbot and Ellen Farmer (1995), Lisa Moore (1997), and Patrick Merla (1998) offer collections of such stories. I offer my story not as representative but as illustrative of one life.

friends, by the way you hear someone's story simply because he happened to be in the same place as you at the same time. And eventually you build up a network of place and people, perhaps you discover a particular group of people, or you look for, or accidentally find, one man who focuses your life. (p. xxi)

Here are the ways my knowledge of the city was shaped; here's how I learned what it meant to be gay:

I learned what it meant to be gay by trying to pull in the *Tomorrow* show with Tom Snyder on the old black and white TV in my bedroom. The topic was gay rights and I stayed up late—on a school night!—to watch. I kept the sound off and the picture was lousy, but those ghostly flickering images of actual gay people were as important to me as the branch that Noah plucked from the dove's mouth.

I learned what it meant to be gay from the fact that gay people were never mentioned in my home, school, or church.

I learned what it meant to be gay from the football players who raced by me in their car one late Saturday night while I was delivering newspapers. They screamed "Faggot!" and tore off into the night. And I wanted to go after them and ask "How do you know? How can you tell? Are you sure?"

I learned what it meant to be gay when rumors swirled around the high school about a sexual encounter between the school queer and a football player. (The football player, because he boasted about it, was obviously not "gay.")

And later at [Louisiana State University], when Todd, the football player, lived across the hall from me in the dorm, I learned that being gay had a lot to do with lying and hypocrisy.

I learned what it meant to be gay from the clinical tone in my college psychology textbooks. Apparently, the APA [American Psychological Association] had decided, it wasn't as bad as they had thought.

I learned what it meant to be gay in college literature classes, where Shakespeare and Whitman were acknowledged to be great poets in spite of their alleged homosexual tendencies.

And I learned what it meant to be gay in a Milton course, where the professor led us through a close reading of the passage in Milton's *Paradise Lost* where Raphael blushing acknowledges angelic intimacy: "Easier than Air with Air, if Spirits embrace./ Total they mix" (viii, pp. 626–627). Reminding us of Milton's earlier observation that "Spirits when they please/Can either Sex assume" (i, pp. 423–424), the professor pushed us beyond our heterocentric assumptions: given such unencumbered choice, she asked, was there anything in the text to suggest that heterosexual behavior would be the only option chosen, or even the preferred one?

I learned what it meant to be gay by observing boys I thought were gay, and watching how they acted, how they talked, how they wore their jeans.

I learned what it meant to be gay by watching who those boys hung out with, and who they hung out with, and so on, till I had a whole social network of potential gay men in my head, none of whom I'd ever met.

I learned what it meant to be gay by running across a novel by John Rechy, *City of Night*, and hiding that book (and some of the books from HQ 76) elsewhere in the library, since I couldn't imagine checking such a book out. (As I recall, I kept this private reserve shelf in with the Milton books.)

I learned what it meant to be gay by visiting Elliott's Bookshop, a recently-opened independent bookstore in Baton Rouge—hanging around for over an hour, passing by the gay section (four or five books) again and again, picking out the one I wanted by its cover, waiting until the store was deserted, taking the book up to the counter blushing furiously, making my purchase and dashing from the store. (With some irony, I note Elliott's closing in 1997, another victim of the sparkling new mega-stores with their extensive shelves devoted to Gay and Lesbian Studies and Gay and Lesbian Literature.)

And a year later, I learned what it meant to be gay by going to the B. Dalton bookstore in the mall, seeing that the book I wanted was held protectively behind the counter, and saying as boldly as I could, "I'd like *The Joy of Gay Sex* please."

I learned what it meant to be gay from jokes my straight friends in the college dorm made about The Dock, Baton Rouge's gay bar. I learned how to find the bar from them.

I learned what it meant to be gay by driving through deserted downtown Baton Rouge streets past The Dock on Saturday nights. I saw three men laughing and walking into the bar carrying a cake and some balloons. Whatever being gay meant, it involved cake and balloons.

I learned what it meant to be gay by going to the bar (quite a step for this United Methodist preacher's kid); I learned that being gay meant hanging out in bars and meeting people there.

I learned what it meant to be gay by finally getting up the courage to enter the chill sterile modern classroom in the new Chemistry building where the Students for Gay Awareness were meeting.

And I learned to be gay by taking leadership in that group, by having my name, and later my prose, appearing in the campus newspaper.

As I grew to be a part of gay communities in Baton Rouge and in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, I learned more about the dimensions of gay life from older friends: about politics and culture, activism, camp and cuisine. I learned that we could make fun of Julia Child at the same time we mastered the art of French cooking from her, learned about Judy Garland and Judy Grahn, learned how to organize a dinner party for ten or a nonviolent protest for two hundred, and in the lives of my friends, learned about the joys and pains of love, the vibrancy of life and the suddenness of death.

These channels—by which I learned to be gay, and more importantly (to use Gertrude Stein's words) to be "gay every day," to be "regularly gay" (1998, p. 308)—are echoed by others of my generation who share my academic inclination: books, the library, whispers in the margins, close observation, guessing, taking those first steps. Coming-out today is different, in this time of *Ellen* and *XY* magazine and K. D. Lang and Calvin Klein ads. Without falling into the facile generalization that it's "easier" today, I think we can agree that the contexts in which younger queer brothers and sisters come to know themselves, to act out and act up, to form friendships, families, and communities, to express themselves openly—these contexts are different from those that nurtured us.

One crucial difference is the arena of cyberspace: Through bulletin board systems (BBS), websites, chat rooms, and any number of other online venues, LGBT people today have many resources that allow them to gain information, ask questions, explore their identity, and discern the shape of larger communities, while also maintaining a safe level of disclosure. They browse Web pages and newsgroups anonymously, not needing to visit a bookstore or library in person. They enter chat rooms with a greater sense of safety and comfort than when I entered that classroom or that bar. They create virtual identities, trying on new definitions of self, performing those identities to see what fits. They panic and leave and come back six months later with a new virtual self, one based less on stereotypes and fantasies and more on their experience of what other LGBT people are like. They meet other people like themselves, form friendships, flirt with strangers, fall in love, and break up—all in a virtual space somewhere between the physical world and the life of the mind.

I have a friend, who, when I first met him four years ago, dared not tell me his first name or even the state he lived in. Through online contacts and support he gained the confidence in himself to go out to a gay bar for the first time. That weekend he met someone, and they're well into their third year as a committed couple. Another friend first realized his same-sex desires by talking to an openly gay man online: "I met my first out gay man online, on a local BBS, when I was 15 or 16, and that's when I started to realize people CAN and DO live openly. Even here in Nebraska." This encounter opened new

worlds to him personally and professionally; he and his partner have been together seven years and he's just received a fellowship for doctoral work in Queer Studies.

A 24-year-old gay male graduate student from the West describes how this process worked for him when I asked if he could express himself differently online:

Yes, definitely. You're more free to air your feelings and express your thoughts. People online are generally more supportive of people they don't know (but not always). I mean, you can go on an online forum and say 'I'm worried about coming out'; and get sympathy and assistance. . . you wouldn't get that in a gay bar or many campus groups. [Without the Internet, my life] would be much more boring. I can get online for a good conversation and someone who understands.

I asked how online resources affected his coming out process: "I think they speeded it up, particularly because I was living in Nebraska at the time. It showed me that there were people who lived happily 'out.'" (In using the word *resources* in this study, I mean to imply more than a deposit of information and advice; for someone looking for answers, a friendly ear or the simple chance to express oneself can be as valuable a resource as any list of phone numbers or useful books.)

Observing how these younger gay men carried on a full online life that was for many entirely separate from the other parts of their lives, I recalled some hints I'd gotten of the hidden literacies of students, capacities for writing and self-expression that go on outside our classes and that we may never see. I once received a research paper on casino gambling from a not-particularly-skilled student in one of my first-year writing classes at the University of Michigan—Dearborn. He plodded through the pros and cons, woodenly nodding to his research sources at the end of each paragraph: We've all had papers like this, where the student perceives the essay as a mechanical exercise that she or he will perform dutifully and with as little engagement as possible. Then, at the end of one paragraph, there was an unexpected gush of emotion, in words something like this: "Those people in Detroit do this all the time. They take and take from everyone else and don't give a damn about the rest of us. They can just go to hell, for all I care." Then, in the next paragraph, that voice was gone: "Another factor supporting the establishment of casinos is. . . ." And, as I read over his paper, trying to understand where this new voice came from, I was reminded of the passionate free-flowing discussions I'd seen among undergraduates on a university-affiliated BBS sponsored by the Iowa Student Computer Association commonly called "ISCA" (see <telnet://bbs.isca.uiowa.edu>. There I'd seen extended arguments about almost every subject: point/counterpoint, response and rebuttal, challenge, clarification, and endless peroration. I'd wondered what happened when these students wrote an argument paper in a first-year writing course. It seemed to me that we didn't (and don't) know much about these unofficial literacies students develop, that we don't know much about how those skills connect with the "academic" literacy skills we're encouraging in the composition classroom.

The online behaviors and discourses of LGBT students, I suspect, are another instance of this hidden nonclassroom literacy, one particularly important to their development as mature persons. In these online spaces, on topics deeply meaningful to them, they ask questions, form hypotheses, test evidence, develop a personal voice and discourse style, see themselves as members of a community, and form themselves into thinking, writing, acting selves that they may (or may not) transfer to their lives offline. Now we know a good deal, I think, about how people develop these skills in academic contexts; I wanted to learn about how these skills develop in such unofficial online contexts. I wanted to

learn, too, about the interplay of the various discourse communities to which these students belong.

To begin gathering this information, I designed an online survey (see Appendix A). In addition to requesting basic demographic information, I asked respondents to rate the usefulness of resources from their campuses and communities and from cyberspace. Several free response questions invited respondents to write more extensively about their experiences. I distributed information about the survey in news groups, e-mail lists, online BBSs, chat rooms, and MOOspaces. At this stage of the investigation, I have not separated student from nonstudent responses; many of the nonstudent respondents reported experiences that occurred when they were students. (Although my present study compares the online and classroom experiences of students, in the future it would be valuable to investigate the experiences of persons who move directly into the workforce from high school). The 75 respondents constituted a highly self-selected group (that is, LGBT people who were online and cared enough about the topic to respond to the survey); nevertheless, the patterns that emerged suggest the kinds of resources people have found most valuable. Furthermore, the narrative responses will be particularly useful in suggesting questions for the next phase of this study, where I will further investigate these issues by interviewing some of the respondents and developing case studies.

RESULTS

The results so far suggest that people coming out and coming into the larger community use online resources in three major ways: to get information, to explore their identity, and to find an audience. Together these three activities place the online writers in lively relationships with new discourse communities—relationships that shape their development both within and beyond those communities.

Two overarching features of online resources allow these activities to occur and flourish. The first is anonymity: “I can express myself as a man who likes both sexes without anyone knowing who I am,” writes a 21-year-undergraduate from the Midwest. A 24-year-old graduate student cites this anonymity as the major force behind his online interactions: Without it, he wrote, “I wouldn’t have found the courage to confront who and what I am. I’d be deeply conflicted and still buried under the socks in the back of the closet.” Again and again respondents credit the anonymity of cyberspace by allowing them the freedom to explore new aspects of their selves and of the LGBT communities with which they want to identify.

Related to anonymity is the second feature supporting these activities—safety. A 21-year-old undergraduate from the Midwest wrote:

I feel much more comfortable stating my identity as a bisexual woman online than I do in the real world—the risk is much lower and if someone chooses to react badly, leaving their presence is simple and relatively painless.

Others frame the issue in even stronger terms: “I think part of the reason the online community is so safe . . . is that you can’t be physically harmed via a computer,” wrote a 27-year-old female graduate student from the Midwest. “In an area like Bible belt South Carolina,” wrote an 18-year-old male undergraduate, “using the computer you do not have to fear your life as you do by being open in public.” The distance that computer-mediated

communication allows the kind of “safe space” where people can live a virtual life apparently free from many of the oppressive forces that threaten jobs, friendships, personal safety, and even lives in the physical communities in which they live. Through gathering information, testing identities, and finding supportive communities, many can move from these safer spaces into the more threatening world of IRL (the online acronym for “in real life”).

INFORMATION

That people use the Internet to get information is perhaps the most obvious of these findings. The respondent I just quoted used online resources “to help my parents cope with my coming-out.” Another respondent mentioned the ability to keep up with “attacks on queer people” and to “keep tabs on what the ‘right’ is doing.”

Overall, of the 12 kinds of resources I asked about on the survey, online resources were designated as most useful (that is, more useful than campus or community resources) for every category except health information; respondents found online information about local resources and health care only slightly more useful online than those sources available offline. They rated online resources as significantly more useful for each of five kinds of activities—finding basic information, finding national information, expressing oneself on LGBT issues and as an LGBT person, and connecting with a larger LGBT community. (See Appendix B for a summary of these responses.) An 18-year-old lesbian from the East credits resources from America Online with helping her come out:

AOL's GLCF/OnQ forum provided me with valuable resources, such as questions to ask before coming out, reasons to come out and/or stay in the closet, things to consider, lists of phone numbers for local resources, etc. Without this. . . I probably would not be 'out.'

Although online gay-friendly resources have dramatically affected the lives of people who live in isolated areas and who have little or no contact with other LGBT people, they can be a valuable networking tool as well for people who live in more supportive communities, as this 18-year-old undergraduate from the Northeast reports, when asked how her life might be different without online resources:

geez. . . i'd be more isolated, definitely. . . i mean even though i'm in a verrrrry queer-friendly town, and even though i'm part of my college lbta and all of my best friends here are lesbian or bi (just b/c they are, not b/c i've sought out queer friends), still sometimes people are out of it or apathetic and don't know what's going on with more current issues. and all the time i spend on my computer. . . is just makes SENSE to have resources online.

Online spaces are so easily accessible that they are invaluable to people just beginning to explore their sexual identity. A 21-year-old undergraduate from the Midwest put it this way: “Having the internet has sped up the process greatly. I was barely willing to accept my homosexuality when I first sought out that web page or chat room.” Though his level of anxiety on crossing that threshold reminds me of similar crossings in my life, those virtual crossings are much more widely available over the Internet. But, once that crossing is made, people’s capacity for growth is astounding: One respondent replies to my request for a 1 to 10 rating of how “out” he is in this way: “If by ‘out’ you mean fully accepting of my sexuality, then I am surely a 19.”

True literacy means more than accessing information, of course; to be literate, whether in online contexts or traditional technologies, means being able to communicate with others and express one's ideas confidently. A 24-year-old "female-ish" grad student from the Midwest cited a number of websites tied to a campus group, then admitted, "Well, actually, most of the online resources I listed are ones I wrote myself. . . So I guess making myself aware of these resources has helped me become more involved in the state's queer activities."

IDENTITY

The respondents offered ample and moving testimony to the importance of online spaces in finding a voice and an identity. A 20-year-old undergraduate from the West, who identifies himself as gay and queer, writes: "When I first came out, online I was able to be who ever I wanted to be; after being that person for a while, I decided I could be the same person off-line too." Another 20-year-old from the South, who identifies himself as bisexual, sees a similar two-stage process: "I am more likely to come out to people online, than in real life." A 22-year-old bisexual undergraduate from New England suggested that the anonymity of online discourse allowed her to gain confidence in her newly realized identity:

It was easier to come out to someone I didn't know personally first and be comfortable with that; it gave me the strength and courage to realize that I could tell my friends and family. After I told one online friend, I felt as though I was ready to tell the world.

For many people, performing an identity online is a rehearsal for acting out that identity offline. An 18-year-old undergraduate explains the shaping of her bisexual identity this way:

I've been able to tell all of my net pals about my sexual identity. This has helped me to be more confident about telling penpals, my boyfriends, and my close friends at school. Telling people I didn't know over the net encouraged me to join a campus organization that I didn't think I had the guts to join. It was much easier incorporating my "hidden life" into my "real life" because I was able to speak freely without having any possible serious backlashes.

Many respondents describe how they develop a new sense of self by communicating online with like-minded people. A 19-year-old undergraduate from the Northeast, who identifies herself as "queer" and "bisexual," articulates how her self-understanding and self-expression as a queer person was encouraged by sympathetic audiences, beginning with contacts made from a discussion list for fans of the Indigo Girls:

The first people i ever came out to were people i had met thru the IG list. since they were queer, i felt like i could identify w/them more than i could w/ my straight friends. they gave me advice and reassurance when i felt somewhat alone, since i was just an e-mail address to them and not a face or a real person. the first girl i kissed, i met on the list, she also became my first gf. i felt like i knew her pretty well through e-mail before we ever met IRL, & i no longer rely on the online community as much, since my real friends accept & support me. [Without the Internet] i don't know that it would really have occurred to me that being queer was an option. i never met any LGB people until i joined the IG list! i probably would have figured out that i was bi, but it would have taken a lot longer if not for the Internet.

What's striking about this respondent's story is the continued interplay between her own expressions of identity and the communities she has found online. Her report reaf-

firmly what we have learned in the composition classroom about the ways in which a discourse community can shape and encourage varied voices among its members.

A 16-year-old from the rural Southwest writes of the importance of the supportive communities she has found online: “where I live it is a farm town and no one accepts it at all. I have a few friends who know and accept me, but the rest of my friends are all homophobic.” For teen-agers in particular, these connections with other gay and lesbian people are extraordinarily important; this respondent imagines her life without the Internet: “I would probably be the most depressed person in the world. The internet showed me that I wasn’t the only one even though I already knew that. I just felt all alone anyway.”

Despite my stance as an objective observer of these experiences, I’ve come to admire the courage and integrity of many of my respondents, in particular, the high school students who exhibit extraordinary heroism in living their daily lives honestly and with integrity. One of my heroes is a 17-year-old “bisexual queer” high school student from New England, who describes in a wonderfully refreshing way how the particular features of online space supported her coming out process:³

I was out online long before I came out to anyone other than my school’s GSA [Gay Straight Alliance]... and in fact my mom found out I was because she went to my webpage (oops! <g>) but it is much easier to be open about anything because being online is a lot less personal, but a lot more inviting. People are much more open online than in real life, mainly because you can be who you are without much fear of anyone caring. It’s faceless, and if you want, nameless, and yet there’s a feeling of warmth that kinda radiates from the people who are online.

One respondent put the matter simply: “On-line resources may have actually saved my life—spiritually, if not physically.”

AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY

A third support that online spaces offer people coming out is an appropriate audience, a discourse community that shares their assumptions and gives, in much the way the “queered classroom” Harriet Malinowitz (1995) analyzed supports the expressions of queer students.

A 29-year-old woman from the Midwest described the support she felt from the *sappho* discussion list; without the Internet

I would not have had the support of the 200 women on sappho while coming out. They taught me a lot about what the lesbian community is, and what issues are of import to lesbians. . . . Knowing I wasn’t alone made it easier to come out more often.

This sense of finding a supportive community emerged from a number of the respondents.

Some find the Internet valuable for connecting them with smaller communities within the larger lesbian and gay community. A 41-year-old lesbian undergraduate from the Northeast reports on the support she has found in her roles as a “moderately new co-parent”:

³One “word” in this response may puzzle those who have not encountered it before: “<g>” is a shortening of “<grin>”; a common practice in online discourse is to articulate what would be non-verbal gestures in a face to face conversation: <nod> <wink> <shrug>.

I have connected with other gay and lesbian co-parents and have come to realize that I'm not going crazy—the kids do weird things sometimes. Parenting is a very tough job and being lesbian makes this job just that much more stressful—though the kids are, so far, ok with our 'family.'

Some respondents value the diversity of online communities as much as their commonality. A 22-year-old bisexual woman from New England puts it this way: "Because of where I am in my life now, not being online would prevent me from being exposed to the majority of people opposed to homosexuality. I enjoy talking with these people, something I do not do in person."

Others, however, value online LGBT because, unlike similar groups they've been part of in real life, online communities are more accepting of difference. "No face-to-face interaction," wrote a 39-year-old gay Scotsman, who is disabled, "removes the ageism, racism, and looks-ism which pervade both the gay/les/trans worlds as well as the greater, straighter world. People make less judgments about you when they cannot see you." Another respondent, a 23-year-old recent college graduate from New England, believed that the essential feature of online spaces is "a matter of *community* and *audience*." He, too, pointed to dissatisfaction with offline gay groups:

In online situations, there tend to be many more groups, some more accepting of certain things than others. I am who I am, regardless of where I am, but the fact that I'm gay tends to alienate straight people and the fact that I'm conservative tends to alienate gay people. Online, there's less pressure to be like everyone else, since it's easier to find a new, different, accepting group of people. Offline, there is an incredible amount of pressure to not rock the boat. . . . My (98% straight) fraternity was a hell of a lot more supportive than the campus gay group, who were more intent on politicizing the coming-out process. . . than they were on supporting gay people on campus.

Another respondent made a similar contrast between the acceptance he finds online and his experience with the "local campus queer group. . . in which only the pretty and the largely vacuous and mainstream ever got to speak." Of course not everyone is totally positive, even about online communities. A 24-year-old lesbian from the Midwest reported: "I have not found a place where people are interested in more discourse than cybersex." Most of my respondents, however, have had positive experiences, a 21-year-old male undergraduate from the Midwest reporting that online resources have "helped me find something more to being gay than sex."

LITERACY AND CITIZENSHIP

The communities of cyberspace also provide a larger audience for formal expressions of identity. One respondent notes that he's "made a personal home page I'm quite proud of, and its development has helped me to think about identity issues and the public aspect of being gay." Another notes that on his Web page,

I can say whatever I want and I am not imposing myself on anybody, so I don't have to worry about making them uncomfortable. On e-mail, if people contact me about my gay web page, then the door has been opened and I can similarly say whatever I want.

For these two respondents, as for several others, online literacy has meant not only accessing information and participating in relatively ephemeral discourse, but crafting more permanent personal expressions that stand as artifacts of their literacy.

Throughout these responses, I learn that people have used these online writing spaces to explore and shape their lives. Again and again, they report that reading and writing online have helped form them in ways that strengthen and change their lives offline. One respondent, a 17-year-old gay high school senior in the Northeast, writes articulately about the ways his online experiences have helped him gain confidence and envision a better life for himself. Despite the frustrations he feels, the virtual lives he has written for himself allow for possibility and growth and give him the sense of who he might become. I quote his responses at length because he pulls together in a compelling way many of the ideas expressed in other responses. I invite you to read his story as a literacy autobiography:

I do not feel that I can express my homosexuality in social ways beyond being online. Being online gives me a certain anonymity, keeping me at arm's length from hurtful discrimination. Meeting and talking with people online has not only helped me learn about myself, but also to grow maturely and accordingly as a gay high school senior.

[Without the Internet, my life] would be much different. I have a few close straight friends who are very open minded and accept me for who I am, and encourage and want to talk to me about it. However, in cases where I want to be around other gay people both informally and socially, I don't really have those chances outside of being online, for a few reasons: I'm afraid of discrimination; therefore I am still living with one foot "in the closet," and therefore haven't had ample opportunities to seek relationships and friendships with other gay people.

I found a very nice guy who was significantly older than I am when I was 15. Contrary to social stereotype, this now-38 year old man was compassionate, understanding, and had a will to help me understand and learn from myself. He was not a pedophile or anything; he had just wanted to help me. In his words, he "could feel the burn of the tears" that used to pour out of my eyes at times, because he saw himself in me when he was 15. He gave me helpful advice, and at the same time never pushed his opinions on me, and when the time came when my parents asked me if I was gay, I could effectively describe who I am, in terms of my desires et al., due in part to his countless email correspondences helping me.

[On a scale of 1 to 10,] I am around a 6 or 7. All of my close friends know, and anybody who really knows me as a person has probably heard about it. Word gets around quick in a republican infested white suburbia high school. However I don't go around flaunting myself or showing off, and in fact when I've been asked about by curious people in school, I usually say "No, it's just a rumor" because I don't know what their intentions are. I would like to eventually have the esteem, dignity and self-confidence to answer "yes" to anybody who asks me, without thinking about it.

Now, there's nothing new about young people, gay or straight, having role models, but I would argue that online communication not only helped this respondent find his mentor, but also gave him the opportunity to write himself into a new relationship with his life and with those people around him. By rehearsing his new identity via e-mail, he was able to communicate more openly with his parents. By writing openly about his identity to others online, he can imagine a world where he can walk with dignity and confidence.

Such "trying out" of oneself online makes cyberspace a virtual Provincetown: In this Massachusetts resort town, gay and lesbian tourists, led by the sight of men and women holding hands wonder, "What if our town was like this?" In the virtual communities of cyberspace, LGBT people experience a different way of being in the world and gather the tools to build that new city in their lives.

Although what I've learned from this study gives me confidence for the future, I'm reminded of Cynthia Selfe's 1998 keynote address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication; we need to pay close attention to all dimensions of technology, to whom has access, even to these marginalized technological spaces. People with the least access to tech-

nology, as Selfe pointed out, are already those with the least power to effect change: "They come from families who attend the poorest schools in the country; and they attend schools with the highest populations of students of color." For every life that has been changed in the ways I outline here—for every life that has been saved—how many have been lost? How many will be lost if we do not pay attention to the ways in which people gain and are denied access to these resources? Not only should our lesbian and gay professional organizations continue to build bridges with people of color and other marginalized groups, but all of us concerned with planning and implementing access to technology across our educational system can hear in these responses that what is at stake here goes beyond the "good jobs" and "marketable skills" that impel political deal-making and corporate investment.

These inequalities must spur us to continue finding ways to extend access to these online resources to more and more students, so we can hear more testimonies like that from the final hero of my paper, a high school student deep in the Midwest. I end with his words, in his answers to my four narrative questions:

The only reason I can express myself online is because there are people out there who are the same way I am. I haven't met any gay men in my town, and my straight friends don't like to talk about it.

[Without the Internet] I would still be wondering who I am. I wouldn't have met anyone to talk to about my questions about my sexuality.

I've found incredibly nice, fantastic people on the net. They've showed me that it's OK to be gay. And I should be open with my parents and friends.

How out are you?

I have told several friends, and my parents. For now I want to stay at that level. When I go to college, I plan to be a 10.

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APPENDIX A

Study of LGBT Students and Online Resources

[This survey is available at <<http://www-personal.umd.umich.edu/~woodland/survey/>>. Additional responses are welcome.]

Randal Woodland

University of Michigan—Dearborn

Thank you for being a part of this study.

My purpose is to explore the ways LGBT(hereafter LGBT) people use the Internet and various other online resources as part of their coming out process, and in the ongoing process of living as an LGBT person. I'm particularly interested, at this point, in examining the experiences of undergraduates in colleges and universities, but I would welcome responses to these questions from anyone who feels he or she has something to contribute.

These questions are the first part of my study. After analyzing these responses, I hope to conduct more in-depth interviews in various online venues. If you'd be interested in helping out in that part of the study, please let me know in Section C, below.

If you have questions or comments, please contact me by e-mail at <woodland@umich.edu>.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Unless you indicate otherwise in Section C below, I will treat your responses as anonymous, and will discard any identifying information (such as your e-mail address or Internet Service Provider) that I receive in the process of your e-mail transmission or the receipt of information from your web form. All information will be held in confidence. In the publication and other dissemination of the results of this study, any information that would lead to the identification of a particular respondent will be altered or withheld.

PERMISSION

By submitting this information, you grant me the right to use the information you provide for the purposes of the study previously described. In particular, you grant me the right to use quotations from your response in conference papers, articles, or other publications resulting from the study.

Section A

Some Basic Information

(If you'd prefer not to answer a question, just leave it blank.)

Gender:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

State of residence:

(or country, if outside the US)

Current educational status:

Sexual Identity

People choose different ways of identifying themselves. Check any of the following that you feel identify you, or list another identifier in the box.

Choices: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Transexual, Transvestite, Straight,
Other

(continued)

APPENDIX A

(Continued)

Online resources

Which of the following do you use regularly?

Choices: E-mail, Websites, Commercial services (AOL, Prodigy), Chat rooms and talkers, MUDs and MOOs, News Groups, IRC, Other:

Section B**Online Experience and LGBT Identity**

Listed below are some particular kinds of information, resources, and opportunities that people have identified as important in coming out or in living as a LGBT person. For each item, I'd like to know how valuable online resources have been to you, particular in comparison with non-online resources on your campus and in your community. For each item, please use the following scale:

- 5 Very
- 4 Helpful
- 3 Moderately
- 2 Slightly
- 1 Not helpful

Thus, if you got all your information about safer sex, for instance, from a web site, you'd assign a 1 to Campus resources (not online), a 1 to Community resources (not online), and a 5 to Online resources. For online resources, please supply, if possible, a description and/or a URL.

1. Basic information about homosexuality
2. Information about local LGBT resources
3. Information about health issues, including safer sex and AIDS
4. Information about national LGBT issues and politics
5. Advice and counseling about coming out to parents and friends
6. Advice and counseling about relationships
7. Advice and counseling about health issues, including safer sex and AIDS
8. Contact with other LGBT people
9. Opportunities to meet socially with other LGBT people
10. The opportunity to express yourself on LGBT issues
11. The opportunity to express yourself freely as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person
12. The opportunity to connect with a larger LGBT community
13. Do you feel that you can express yourself online in ways that you cannot (or choose not to) in non-online situations (including classes, among friends and family, in campus organizations)? If so, how would you describe these differences?
14. How would your life as a LGBT person be different without the Internet or other online resources?
15. How have these online resources affected your coming-out process?
16. On a scale of 1 to 10, how "out" are you? Where on that same scale would you like to be?

APPENDIX B

Responses

Listed below is the mean average of responses to questions about the usefulness of various kinds of resources. (For the full survey, see Appendix A.) The total number of usable responses (more than 50% of items ranked) was 75. Respondents rated the usefulness of resources from the community, from the campus and online on a five-point scale, with 5 = *most useful* and 1 = *least useful*. (See the numbered list below to identify each resource.)

TABLE 1
Ratings of Usefulness of Resources

Resource	Community	Campus	Online
1 Basic info	2.7	2.7	4.0
2 Local resources	2.7	2.8	3.2
3 Health info	3.4	3.3	3.0
4 National info	2.4	2.6	3.7
5 Coming out	2.4	2.6	3.0
6 Relationship	2.3	2.2	2.7
7 Health advice	3.2	3.1	2.9
8 Contact LGBT	3.0	2.7	4.1
9 Meet LGBT	3.0	2.8	2.4
10 Express on issues	2.9	2.6	4.0
11 Express as LGBT	2.9	2.9	4.3
12 Community	2.6	2.9	4.1

Key

1. Basic information about homosexuality
2. Information about local LGBT resources
3. Information about health issues, including safer sex and AIDS
4. Information about national LGBT issues and politics
5. Advice and counseling about coming out to parents and friends
6. Advice and counseling about relationships
7. Advice and counseling about health issues, including safer sex and AIDS
8. Contact with other LGBT people
9. Opportunities to meet socially with other LGBT people
10. Opportunity to express yourself on LGBT issues
11. Opportunity to express yourself freely as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person
12. Opportunity to connect with a larger LGBT community