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Social scholarship and the networked scholar: researching, reading, and writing the web

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a digital/social scholar today? What does it take to be a networked scholar? What complicating and mitigating factors are emerging today for digital and networked scholarship? Those are some of the questions that a group of digitally connected “obnoxious academics” (the Authors) have been wrestling with, first individually and now as a collective, for several years now. The four authors, all literacy teacher educators and former schoolteachers, engaged with social media, new/digital literacies and the new calls for digital scholarship, share their reflections situated in three distinct regions of the United States and Colombia (the Global South). The Authors discuss conceptual and practical considerations and cautionary tales for researchers, students, and practitioners willing to engage in their own digital turns. The goal of this conversation-turned-article is to involve others in a larger dialog about the kind of global and digitally connected networks we need to create in order to develop stronger forms of digital scholarship that truly address the questions and research challenges in contemporary times.

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Introduction

A twenty-first-century learning educational system requires the effective use of technologies that permeate society to prepare learners in the society for the future. This is problematic as scholars have little or no guidance in how to embed these new, digital literacies into their work process and product as it relates to their scholarship. As more scholars begin to study digital spaces that produce digital data and as more scholars use digital tools in their scholarly lives, they need opportunities to not only read, but also to write the “web”. For scholars in particular, a general understanding and savviness of how to leverage digital and web literacies is central to the collective scholarly future, and especially for those who engage with digital data.

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In our exploration of networked scholarship and the implications for research with digital data, Peggy (Texas) shares the socially networked ways she connects with other researchers who are studying online education. Raúl (Colombia) shares on digital connectivity; e.g., the need to connect with colleagues as a digital leader in his research with the Literacies in Second Languages Project, where he and his students engage in digital dialog with others. Ian (South Carolina) views the Internet as an opportunity to learn, connect, and collaborate with colleagues on a global scale, including work with Mozilla on the web literacy initiative as well as work in open, and digital badges. Ian has viewed the Internet as a tremendous learning space that should not discriminate based on access or geographical determinants. Bill (Ohio) focuses on multimodal, arts-based, and blended learning, with partnering school districts.

Theoretical framework: networked, open, and participatory scholarship

Theoretically, we build on the work of Veletsianos and Kimmons (2016) which makes salient the role of social scholarship, open scholarship that is made publicly available, and networked participatory scholarship. All four of the authors are currently teacher educators who make use of social media to foster professional dialog. We share our work in open access formats to intentionally foster debate (e.g., Wise & O'Byrne, 2016), and ultimately transformation in a field (literacy studies and more broadly, education) which needs "shaking up" toward a more futuristic sense of literacy/literacies and learning. Drawing on the work of James Gee (2004), we seek shared affinity spaces in which we can connect and grow as scholars. The work of Grimes and Fields (2012) suggests that research of youth must study the ways that they interact and connect via social media platforms. Similarly, we also examine the ways that scholars connect and collaborate via social media. Such participatory media and culture (Jenkins, 2006) are increasing the ways that digital data can be shared and discussed.

Veletsianos and Kimmons (2016) suggest that social media spaces such as Twitter provide a meaningful platform for scholars to share work and coalesce around shared hashtags of mutual interest. Our work focuses on our own small group and the ways that we engage across a wide variety of technology-based platforms beyond Twitter. Veletsianos and Kimmons state, "Researchers need to explore a wider range of scholars' activities to fully understand their online lives and participation." (p. 8). For instance, the authors of this paper have used a combination of Google Docs and a constantly fast-paced Facebook Messenger backchannel to write this article, which was a very efficient way to do real-time collaborative editing and knowledge sharing. We are friends with each other on Facebook and we tend to post both personal and professional thoughts on each other's Facebook posts. Does this matter to our scholarship? We feel that it does matter – by strengthening the bonds we have as personal friends, even across thousands of miles, we feel that our professional bonds have been strengthened

as well. In the following sections, we share our perspectives on engaging in networked, open, and participatory scholarship in four individual narratives.

Connecting with the co-authors of this paper came about through Facebook and our work as columnists for the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Our subsequent dialogs via Facebook Messenger and through publicly recorded and posted video talks on YouTube developed our scholarly connectedness on topics related to digital data. Our connections and communications about digital pedagogies and scholarship took place in both public and private spaces, multimodal means, and through social media. Digital connections and dialogic exchanges are ways we shape and influence one another's thoughts and work on digital projects in concrete ways.

Peggy Semingson: socially networked spaces surrounding online teacher education

A mid-career scholar in Texas, and literacy teacher educator who teaches all online, I am also an action researcher studying online teacher education. Being a digitally connected public intellectual who writes across a wide continuum of digital genres (e.g., Twitterchats, blogs, social media posts, webinars) is a core part of my researcher identity as an open and networked scholar (e.g., Veletsianos, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016). Networked scholarship via Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube greatly shaped the origins of my own focus on digital pedagogies. I did not learn about nor consider digital data as research until 2004 when I saw Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel, eminent scholars in the field of literacy and new literacies, present ethnographic research about youth bloggers in 2004 at the Literacy Research Association Conference. I quickly began following their website (<http://everydayliteracies.net/>), as well as other digitally connected scholars in their digital network. This quickly expanded my own professional social network.

My own field of study is inquiry surrounding online teacher education across both formal and informal digital platforms. I seek digital connections to digitally focused scholars as allies to learn more in order to think critically about digital spaces and to build a solid empirical case to counter naysayers, resisters, and "lag-gards" who oppose digital learning. There is a sense of emergence in learning the research literature, as well as learning to use new data analysis methods and tools. This requires self-study for researchers as well as socially and proactively fostering research collaborations and networks. Socializing through digital networks and face-to-face networks requires an aspect of self-efficacy to continue learning. Other scholars are very DIY (do-it-yourself), socially connecting with other colleagues via Facebook, blogs, and conferences to discuss methods, resources, and to influence and be influenced.

The learning/scholarly ecosystem in which we study and learn, both locally, and more broadly ("the field" as a whole) continually shapes our methods and possibilities for digital data, as digital scholars. Key people shape and influence

each other in socially networked spaces. Recently, I have been involved in part of the big-data turn as a digital researcher. I have been influenced by collaborations with the Learning Innovation and Networked Knowledge Lab at my university, The University of Texas at Arlington, and its well-established director George Siemens. More recently, influenced by George and his work, I have begun to consider research approaches of predictive analytics software as well as the field of learning analytics.

Ian O'Byrne: digitally literate scholars writing themselves into existence online

In my role as a scholar and educator, I recently transitioned from working in the Northeast United States to working in an institution in the Southeast United States. This transition not only required an adjustment for my professional and research contacts, but it also provided me with an opportunity to consider my affiliations online. In this, I thought about the personal learning network I have developed as a networked scholar and the possibilities to continue connections with colleagues as I moved across the country. In many ways, I saw my physical identity changing drastically, whereas my digital identity would not change at all. In fact, I made a conscious decision to expand and streamline my digital presence to provide opportunities for my colleagues, friends, and family to have an opportunity to stay connected online. This thinking was heavily influenced by Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotopes, or the configurations of time, space, and place. I believed this would allow me to keep up these connections, while still building new alliances in a different part of the physical world. What I quickly realized is that many of the contacts in the physical world did fade, whereas my digital affiliations not only remained connected, but expanded due to this focus on building up my digital identity.

This examination of my online and offline identity requires that I consider my own ontological narrative, as I need to identify myself in multiple capacities, and present myself in different ways in different settings to different audiences. These skills prove integral to the ways in which scholars view themselves as professionals in online and hybrid educational spaces (Dede, Jass Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009; Pytash & O'Byrne, 2014). As I continue my own exploration and examination, these networked, digital spaces provide opportunities to explore, examine, and create online representations of identity (Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes, 2009; Stern, 2008), while connecting and learning with others away from our physical spaces.

This exploration began in earnest in 2009 as I moved from my role as a secondary classroom teacher, to a graduate researcher and future scholar. At this point, social networks were in a nascent stage as Facebook began to overtake MySpace, and Twitter continued to grow as a platform. As I joined the New Literacies Research Lab, we examined the skills and dispositions involved in online reading comprehension

and ways to engage learners instructionally. At this point I did not use social media and did not have a presence online. I began to reconsider this position when I would hear critiques about educators and scholars that would research and write about digital literacy practices, but would not engage in them as a part of their own practice. I began to think that in order to fully understand these spaces, I needed to fully engage in these digital practices on my own.

As I look back along my journey, I most closely find guidance in my development as a networked scholar in the literature on social scholarship (Greenhow, 2009), and identity as a literacy practice (Moje & Luke, 2009). Social scholarship helps me understand the use of digital texts and tools to support teaching, learning, and inquiry (Greenhow et al., 2009). Social scholarship as a process connects formal scholarship with informal, participatory internet-based civic practices while espousing specific values, e.g., openness, collaboration, transparency, access, sharing (Ellison, 2007; Greenhow, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). As networked scholars, this holds that in attempts to create meaning in the world, these activities can be viewed as collective socio-collaborative acts of meaning that also impact our educational and social identities (O'Byrne, 2017).

Raúl A. Mora: treading the digital connectivity path – considerations from the south

Training and serendipity characterize my path into new literacies and multiliteracies. I started as an English teacher in the 1990s, then gradually moved from teacher education to literacy along graduate school. I have gone from reading one of my favorite authors, William Kist, into co-authoring multiple presentations and this article. Through social media, I built my ongoing relationships with Peggy Semingson and Ian O'Byrne. I actively participate in discussions about what it means for teachers to go digital (Mora, 2014), what new networks and communities (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012) we need, and current contributions to literacy through the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP; Mora, 2015, 2016, 2017b).

This section offers three considerations for scholars in the north (i.e., US, Canada, and Europe) and the south (i.e., Central/South America, Asia, and Africa, especially the non-Anglo countries in these regions); (Mora, 2016; Santos, 2009). These considerations stem from our shared belief in the importance of engaging with digital (Hicks & Turner, 2013) and twenty-first-century literacies (Burnett & Merchant, 2015; Morrell, 2012) as the basis for a meaningful transformation of schooling and scholarship (Alvermann, 2015; Mora, Gee, Castaño, Orrego, and Ramírez, *in press*; Morrell, 2014).

First, scholars and institutions can no longer frame digital scholarship as Google Scholar's h- and i-indices, SCOPUS, and ORCID profiles. This worries me because indices are easy to rig: just make sure you and your colleagues are citing each other. I am also concerned that some faculty still bind digital scholarship to the

institutional, not the personal (or even global) channels. We must openly talk about what digital scholarship means and how to break potential resistance. We need to learn from the trailblazers, shadowing others as we discover our own digital trademarks.

Second, we need to engage in grassroots efforts (Mora, 2015) – as Peggy also emphasized – particularly in the Global South (De Roock, personal communication, 27 July 2017). In Latin America, for example, grassroots efforts in literacy research may help link its recent expansion with the need for more regional integration (Trigos-Carrillo & Rogers, 2017, *in press*). In our case, as we propose a new field of study (Mora, 2017a, 2017b), we have learned, on the one hand, even if colleagues within our institution are interested, many of them already have well-established research agendas, thereby making it difficult to join. On the other hand, the way we conceive interdisciplinarity in our institutions (Golovátina-Mora, personal communication, 28 July 2017) sometimes may also make such synergies difficult at certain moments.

Such realities have encouraged us to consider grassroots digital networking and scholarship. At LSLP, we use a hybrid model (Mora & Semingson, 2017) combining on-site, face-to-face meeting with our teams with digital tools (Google Drive, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, and Zoom) for record-keeping, community building, extended networking, and scholarship itself. The power of social media as a catalyst to bridge gaps and build bridges is an area that south–south scholarship (Mora, 2016), for instance, needs to embrace as part of our advocacy efforts.

Finally, digital engagement must revisit the foundational value of “old-school” practices. Digital scholarship entails transcending devices (Mora, 2016, *in press*) to delve into deeper issues. It means embracing the Slow movement (Berg & Seeber, 2016), as we slow down a notch (Saldaña, 2014) and let ideas simmer in the physical realm to find that zone where the ideas become tangible. I invite our readers to embrace and seek patience before you go to the fast-and-furious digital world to make your experience more successful.

William Kist: multimodal, arts-based, and blended learning, with partnering school districts

As I prepared to write this article, and reflected on my own experiences, I have realized that it is not the digital data and digital methods that have complicated my scholarship. Rather, the complicating factor has been the reaction from many academics and K-12 educators who continue to resist a broadened conception of literacy and literacy research dissemination. As a former professional musician and filmmaker, I brought the so-called “new” literacies into my high school English teaching because I enjoyed doing so. And, in retrospect, I think I instinctively viewed my teaching as a kind of performance art (Eisner, 2002; Greene, 2001). As I moved into higher education, my inquiry deepened to include a kind

of documentation of the instructional practices of other teachers who were interested in new literacies. It would not have been possible for me to follow this line of inquiry if I had not been able to find colleagues and potential research participants via social networking. I began to find these teachers via what social networking existed at that time – mainly listservs and discussion groups. I found this kind of networking to be lifesaving to my inquiry – If we don't allow for such pluralism, we are limiting human thought (Eisner, 1997, 2002).

During the early 2000s, I began to participate in both social networking and social networks as delineated by Boyd and Ellison (2008) who defined *social networking* as between individuals who are strangers and *social networks* as being for established contacts and colleagues. My participation on Twitter and Facebook began to blur the lines between my various professional and personal identities. On Twitter, I have connected with scholars from all over the world, some of whom I've arranged to meet in person at conferences or to collaborate with on a piece of writing (such as this one). My social scholarship continues to jump back and forth between my role as a producer of academese and as a part of what Jenkins called "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006). I'm only able to gain "street cred" with my academic colleagues by translating my pop culture work into peer-reviewed journal articles. I've realized that what I have had to do has been a kind of sad transmediation (Semali & Watts Pailliotet, 1999) or even code switching (Blom & Gumperz, 1972).

Many years ago Dewey (1934/1980) lamented our current loss of the "close connection of the fine arts with daily life" (p. 7), because it is the arts that keep humans "alive" to "sense experiences". As he wrote, "The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure" (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 40). I wonder what Dewey would say about these online spaces. For me, it has been these online spaces and the connections I've formed there that have kept me in contact with the arts, my scholarship, and, really, myself. In sum, I think the unique characteristics of digital data and digital methods that have most complicated scholarship for me have been the lack valuing of those networks as ways to disseminate my work. But the characteristics I have most prized – the ability to reach people I never would have reached otherwise, both as colleagues and participants; the ability to blur the lines of my scholarship; and the ability to cross boundaries in the attempt to make sense of these "new" literacies – have far outweighed the complications.

Implications and call to action

As networked scholars, the Internet provides us with a variety of digital spaces and tools to create and curate our digital academic identities. We can create and host our own websites to share our research materials, notes, and reflections. We use social media to tweet, blog, and post about research and respond to important

events in the field. These social platforms may be linked to other scholarly websites that allow us to maintain and build our professional digital identities. What follows are suggestions to be a digitally networked scholar.

Three steps to be a networked scholar

To develop the approaches described here, and work as a networked scholar, we suggest three steps. You will need to reflect along the process of developing your own personal cyberinfrastructure (Campbell, 2009), while modifying aspects of your identity. Once you have the essential mindset of how you want to represent yourself online, continue to iterate and build on your identity as you see fit, in order to leverage and negotiate digital spaces.

Create and curate your digital identity

The first step is to create and curate your digital identity. Scholars spend a great deal of time preparing and polishing their identity in the “real world”. This is also informed by the individuals we associate with and our fields of study. Most of the time, we pride ourselves on being organized and presenting ourselves in a positive light. Much of this veneer of professionalism and organization is not carried through to our digital identity. You need to create that digital identity and explore the different opportunities to write yourself into being.

Digitize your workflow

The second step in this process is to modify your workflow. As you work as a networked scholar, you need to have the opportunity to quickly access and share your work through digital tools. The challenge is that this is often viewed as adding more work, when in reality it is a case of working *differently*. Many of us have been indoctrinated into thinking that we have “our office” and “our computer” and that work only happens in these spaces as we create, manipulate, and save files on these machines. By working in the cloud, or using networked digital tools, your files are everywhere. In a distributed, networked society, you need to be able to work from multiple places and with multiple tools (e.g., mobile devices), and easily gain or provide access to all materials. Your work and scholarship becomes ubiquitous as it follows you and is available when you need it.

Build an online learning and research hub

Finally, build and establish an online learning hub. As you create and curate your digital identity and modify your scholarly workflow, your identity will be spread across numerous spaces online. Having one website, or online hub, allows you to connect all of these feeds into one location. All authors have experimented with online hubs as part of their individual (Peggy, Ian, Bill) and team research (Raúl) efforts. This is important because you want to consider what happens when you meet someone for the first time and they Google you. How much are they

learning about you if they only found your LinkedIn or Facebook profile? Is that an appropriate, adequate, or complete picture of you? If you build and maintain one scholarly space on the Internet, you can archive and/or share materials using your own website.

Negotiating the process

There are significant challenges that exist as we try to utilize these technologies and practices. There is also the challenge that using these tools in research, promoting work on social networks, and actively maintaining a social presence online becomes a representation of an individual's identity. In addition to challenges that are associated with our identity as a research in online and digital spaces, there is also the issue of utilizing varied digital texts and tools that are always changing. Researchers have little or no guidance in how to embed these new and digital literacies into their work process and product. As tools change, there is a need to stay abreast of new tools and opportunities to enhance productivity and work process. Within this discussion of new tools and social platforms, there is also the challenge of time expended learning and adopting these new tools. With the cost of time, there is the challenge of maintaining a system where data and materials are protected and secure at all times.

In this work, we must guide junior academics making their way through the tenure maze, but also to those senior faculties who vote on tenure and promotion committees. We must have a broadened notion of what scholarship counts in which there will always be a place for professional societies and traditional peer-reviewed journal articles, but also room for other criteria and metrics. We need to make room for the dialog that exists within Twitter meet-ups and Facebook messages. This provides opportunities to share your research and ideas with a professional learning network while building your digital identity.

As we have indicated throughout this article, we believe that scholars need to think, work, and share openly online in networked spaces. The reasons identified above for working as a digitally agile researcher are from our experiences. In this, we needed to modify our working process, habits, and ultimately our digital identity. We did this without much guidance or mentoring from others in the field. There is little to no guidance on how to write and present outside of publishing in the established forums, how to blog, build a website, or host a domain. In fact, we have found there is often explicit guidance against this form of outreach from faculty, advisers, and tenure committees. Working publicly as an intellectual is viewed as possibly being deleterious to one's career, tenure possibilities, and status among colleagues. By developing our own group of networked scholars, there is an opportunity to shape pedagogy, research, and service to shape the societies in which we live.

Conclusion and discussion

The question that framed this paper and our dialog that preceded it was, “What unique characteristics of digital data and digital methods complicate scholarship in the field of education today?” All four authors are open and networked scholars (Veletsianos, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016) grounded in broader sociocultural approaches to scholarship (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, we are primarily qualitative researchers and seek ways to explore digital data (e.g., as described in Gerber, Abrams, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2017). As researchers working with digital data, we also employ mixed methods and other approaches such as data analytics and big data. Our perspective demonstrates that digital researchers work in participatory and networked spaces, in order to find common ground, reflect together (as in our videoconference-based chats and social media spaces where we dialog with each other and other scholars who study digital data), and learn new methodologies.

The Internet and other networked technologies should profoundly affect the nature of digitally focused research collaborations, teaching, learning, and service, but for the most part it has not happened because the practices are not fully understood as they evolve, not taught in doctoral programs, and not fully valued by tenure and promotion metrics. We have been able to leverage these technologies through our willingness to experiment, flexibility to iterate, and the support of other likeminded scholars in the field. Peggy indicates that by intentionally and strategically placing herself in research networks (both digitally and face-to-face) with the right people, who are asking similar research questions, with a diverse research skill set is what has enabled her to pursue interdisciplinary emerging research related to digital learning. Ian suggests that by engaging in social scholarship in digital spaces has helped him to develop educational identity and focus his purpose while stimulating promulgation of theory and pedagogy as a scholar while studying reading and writing online. Raúl suggests that he has relied both on grassroots efforts and a healthy combination of online and offline practices as build-up for his digital scholarship agenda. He also calls for a view of digital scholarship in the Global South that needs to combine top-down (institutional) and grassroots (research teams and individual scholars) efforts as combinations for a successful transition to digital learning. Bill indicates that the complication comes not so much from using the digital media themselves for scholarship but, rather, from the reaction to that use on the part of more “old school” academics.

Though the authors have consensus on being digitally focused scholars, in general, researchers have little guidance on how to embed these new digital literacies practices into their work in open publishing spaces. Where there is any guidance, it seems to focus more about the use of gizmos for their sake (Mora, *in press*) and less about looking at the deeper issues related to the use of technologies, which involve epistemological considerations, facing the fears of embracing multimodal design and technologies (Mora, Semingson, O’Byrne, & Kist, 2016), and the need

to transform teacher education at the pre- and in-service levels. To prepare for and research this, researchers need opportunities to read, write, and produce the “web”.

In this theoretical article, the four authors, all scholars whose work studies digital literacies and learning, identified some of the knowledge, skills, strategies we each have utilized to help us act as a connected and networked scholar and researcher in open, online participatory spaces (O’Byrne, Semingson, & Mora, 2016). We discussed opportunities to utilizing *social network communities* for research, including writing toward publication. This requires a focus on self-organizing, cross-functional work processes that adaptively plan, are sometimes improvised, continuously improve, and are flexible to change. We framed the discussion within the context of our own work and subjectivities as we work toward digitally focused research projects. We have found immersive experiences in staying digitally connected to foster a way to connect to other scholars toward collaboration, critical feedback, and dialog on work in progress. Such an approach is also an idea incubator for emerging ideas and projects, all ingrained within a larger perspective of the affordances that digital literacies may offer to generate true global communities of practice, affinity, and advocacy.

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