Following the Rules – A Digital Literacy Narrative

Rules seem like they were particularly important in my childhood, starting with card and board games played with my family, and I can’t remember a time we neglected to follow the rules except when I adjusted the rules for Solitaire so that I could win more games. In school, the only thing I got in trouble for was talking and for forgetting my homework once in fourth grade. In music, I learned the rules for reading music, fingering notes, and playing in tempo, and in junior high, I tried to conform to the rules for feminine dress and behavior. I also tried, with mixed success, to follow the rules for the mind and body as defined by the various religious groups I frequented. Despite encountering deconstruction as an undergraduate and gleefully deconstructing texts, over the years, I seem to have reverted to a habit of binary – clear-cut, rules-based – thinking. In some ways it has simply been more safe to live in a world rooted in clear definitions of particularly treacherous areas like sexuality and gender. I had no trouble with variations existing in the rest of the world, but my own world had to remain stable in order to maintain what I had built. Although I have always felt comfortable in grey areas, I feel safe in clearly defined contexts, and this has influenced my literacy experiences.
Computers fit neatly into my safe world because they operate on binaries and depend on rules: they are on or off, files are open or closed, compatible or not compatible. Of Richard Selber’s theory of multiliteracies, made up of functional, critical, and rhetoric, I have been most heavily invested in the first. Therefore, I have not considered myself entirely literate in the digital sense since I do not know how to program and have limited scripting knowledge. Dwedor Morais Ford, in a discussion of computer use in Egypt, seems to validate this by referring to computer training in “basic programming concepts and creative thinking,” with a focus on “science and technology” (312). However, other people might consider me highly literate in digital technologies, including both hardware and software. When my cheap PC died in 2006, I mined it for parts that I installed into an older Macintosh. In order to run the CD drive, a silver case jutting from the ubiquitous putty case of a 1998 PowerMac (see photo to right), I located and installed a “legacy” driver from a box of software I had collected. Perhaps I have not been as functionally illiterate with technology, after all, or perhaps my conceptualization of digital literacy was not what I thought.

In eighth grade, I decided I would study either music or English in college, but I’m not even sure how I knew about college. The knowledge must have come from my parents, both of them first generation college students with education degrees, following the rules of upward mobility. My parents expected their children to go to college, and although my brothers were not as successful in school, I happened to be the eldest, the one held up as an example, the dutiful daughter. I did
protest on a couple of points: taking home-economics and typing in junior high. My parents insisted on both, pointing out that I needed to know how to type my own essays in college. I also typed up my poetry, which I had previously recorded in a cloth-bound journal. I was never concerned with typing speed since I did not intend to be a secretary, and since I did not focus on accuracy either, I learned to correct errors efficiently. I could even roll the paper back into the typewriter and make corrections that would line up with the rest of that text, a skill I am sure I have lost.

My first experience with a computer was at 17, and nobody in my family knew quite what to do with it. From there, it seems that computers exploded into my life, perhaps really beginning with the scientific calculator I bought the previous year (and I still have). A couple of years later, I was sliding a 5¼” inch floppy disk into a computer at school and typing my short stories in WordStar for my creative writing class. At home, I was using an Atari computer that was connected to the projection screen television as a monitor. When I left college to join the military, however, I left behind the world of computing for several years. As a band member, I was more concerned with the technology of my instrument, and as a music librarian, my collateral duty, I was assigned the task of logging every piece of music played at every concert into a light green, military-issue journal. Since we played each piece multiple times, a database would have been ideal, but the band’s computers were assigned to the administration section only. I should note that joining the Marine Corps also meant conforming to the rules governing military service as well as transforming into an identity one carries throughout life. One may be an ex-soldier, but “Once a Marine, always a Marine” is the rule of thumb for Devil Dogs.

It would probably be redundant at this point to mention that I was a tomboy, and I will leave out my complete story of trying to become more feminine in junior high. I do want to mention that I finally gave up the pretense of trying to be anything other than a tomboy after I moved to
Colorado. I worked as a cashier in a few hardware stores simply because I loved tools, and I collected a hammer, screwdrivers, sockets, wrenches, plyers, nail punch in a small metal toolbox that my brothers and stepfather occasionally pilfered. Since then my collection of tools has grown to include basic power tools, two work benches, and many tools bought for special jobs around the house (my next major tool purchase will probably be a table saw). Being in Colorado also meant I could indulge my childhood dream of skiing. I went exploring by horseback, I biked to work, and I hiked up some of the highest peaks in the state. It was a heady place for a tomboy.

I bring up this aspect of my life because I think it gave me an atypical attitude toward computers. While several scholars have discussed the complicated relationship women have with technology, the only complication I believe I have with computers is not knowing how to program them. I used to tinker with some of the resources in older Macintosh programs, but I always resisted the contorted use of text most of the scripting languages seemed to require. I learned some Visual Basic but didn’t use it enough to become proficient. This isn’t to say that my use of computers in a career context has not been complicated by being the only woman in production at a mapping firm, or taking time away from production to document the processes in my department, or missing out on some training when the male employees flocked to train a younger blonde female hired after me. Although I don’t think I was ever intimidated by computers, I do wonder why now I never considered buying a computer before I started graduate school. I wonder what function other than writing papers might have persuaded me to buy a home computer – perhaps for writing music or for artwork or to write the novel I always hoped to publish, which is to say that I do have a draft.

While indulging in all of these material activities (I really enjoyed my Geographic Information Systems job), I also sustained a rich imaginative life in literature and writing. I have
probably drafted far more poems in my head than I have completed, and while I was working in land surveying and mapping, I continued to read the “classics” in American and British literature. I thought of myself as inhabiting two different worlds, one concrete and one abstract. Katherine Hayles, however, complicates the concept of abstract ideas by pointing out that all information is contained in material form, whether in books, on hard drives, or in our brains. Despite decades of working to disembody knowledge, she points out that that information is as linked to the physical world as it ever has been. As I worked on this narrative, I envisioned literacy – both print and digital – as a mediation between the material and the abstract worlds, but almost in the next instant, I revised this to a relationship between what we experience as material and as abstract. Perhaps the only thing that creates a sense of the abstract is distance from the meaning – in a book, we are distanced from the author by the means of the book production. In a computer, we are distanced from the material by a computer case and the perception of the material being on the other side of a screen. In fact, for many years, I vacillated between composing on paper and composing on the screen, but now the distance between my fingers on the keyboard and the words seems much shorter and the process as nearly organic as scratching the words onto paper.

I may seem to have strayed away from rules, but just as we never entirely escape the material world, we never completely escape rules, whether the ones we construct or those imposed on us, whether or not we consent to follow them. Therefore, we can say that all forms of literacy, whether in print or digital form, in work or our private lives, in recreation or art, are a relationship mediated by socially constructed rules. Furthermore, part of that literacy is knowing when to adjust the rules, when to break the rules, and when to just replace them. I think one of the most important thing I learned about computers while working with programmers was that they were not constrained by what computers could already do. They imagined what they might be able to do and then created a script or program to accomplish that task. They never seemed to doubt that what they conceived was possible. Part of my developing digital literacy was learning not just how to
follow the rules but to imagine what I could do beyond the existing tools, and if I can't create the program or script myself, to enlist someone who can. In the end, I doubt I will ever escape or even want to escape rules, but I am more willing to transgress them, and I will certainly continue to redefine and to widen my limits.
Works Cited


Studies in Writing and Rhetoric.

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