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KELLY BLEWETT, JANINE MORRIS, AND HANNAH J. RULE

Composing Environments: The Materiality of Reading and Writing

In her 1999 book, *The Wealth of Reality: An Ecology of Composition*, Margaret Syverson points out the stubborn blind spot we have in thinking about literate and other intellectual processes. "[W]e are not accustomed," Syverson writes, "to considering the *physical environment* as an active participant in the learning situation" (188, emphasis added). This collaborative essay—which began as a panel at CEA 2015 in Indianapolis—assumes along with Syverson that though we are not always aware of it, material environments are primary and active agents that shape everyday literate activity. Our panel initially came together on this point. We shared curiosities about our students' composing environments: the objects, tools, beings, devices, and ephemera that gather around and found their reading and writing processes. Directing our focus to the "stuff" of literate practice, we discovered, necessarily entails perceptions and cultural assumptions about reading and writing: the ways, for example, that students imagine stark or unnecessary differences in self- and school-sponsored reading; the powerful presumption that we are all irrevocably distracted; or the belief that "digital reading" is a monolithic endeavor, one simply defined by its media rather than its genre or purpose. Indeed, composing environments are populated by both material objects and readers/writers' perception of themselves acting in space and time and through those objects. Just as feminist scholar Elizabeth A. Wilson insists on "the ongoing, mutual, co-constitution of mind and matter" (qtd. in Alaimo 5), so we believe effective English teachers in the 21st century must "make matter matter" in more significant ways in our classes.

Toward this goal, we each implemented primary research methods[1] directed in various ways toward students' material ecologies of reading and writing, focusing on their imagined scenes of reading, the non-writing activities in which they engage, and the practices they enact using digital reading technologies. These qualitative and quantitative pictures are valuable to English Studies students and teachers alike for what they have to teach us about the roles of mindfulness, intentionality, and self-perception within the flexible material environs of literacy. In what follows, we present these scenes, all with an emphasis on some shared assumptions.

As established, our work is foremost connected through a set of theoretical frames that assert that *reading and writing processes are fully environmentally contingent*. Building from the assumptions of material, activity, and ecological theories,[2] we suggest that readers and writers cannot be understood separately from the dynamics of their environments. Literacy should thus be understood not only as a socially shaped but, equally, as a *materially* contingent practice because objects can become forceful participants—even potential determinants—in composers' actions. This ecological, material perspective, however, disrupts the recurring cultural image of the lone writer and solitary reader who transcends material space and occupies instead an ephemeral or "purely mental" one. Disrupting this image is vitally necessary because, for one, digitally connected readers and writers are surely never socially isolated; they, moreover, face a dizzying array of material configurations (devices, programs, tools) with which to accomplish reading and writing.

Deeming environmental staging irrelevant or transparent, the myth of the transcendent composer interferes, according to Stacey Pigg in her article, "Distracted by Digital Writing: Unruly Bodies and the Schooling of Literacy," with students' abilities to envision new, materially attuned strategies "for navigating the complex environments in which contemporary literacy is practiced" (3). As such, we believe students should be explicitly encouraged to engage with and reflect on the dynamics of their composing environments through *practicing mindfulness, self-awareness, and metacognition*. Habits of mind like these, as well as flexibility, curiosity, and engagement, have become prominent in scholarly conversations about 21st-century literacy education identified as "critical for college success" by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Writing Project (1), an implication we address in more detail in our conclusion. Through our purposeful attention to where reading and writing happens, we can better position our students to hone their composing environments responsively in order to create optimal outcomes.

One way to build self-awareness in students is through *the practice of informal research*. On one hand, we are arguing for a teacher-research ethos, a call to encourage teachers to research their curiosities regarding literacy and perception, as we have done. On the other, students can benefit from assignments that target self-inquiry and reflection. For example, Hannah regularly asks her students to video-record sessions of writing and watch them back in order to interpret and change practices. Janine offers a reading "selfie" assignment in which students photograph their reading environments to uncover recurring, but previously subconscious, environmental habits. Observing their environments and actions through various media encourages students to become more thoughtful, self-aware actors.

Our poly-vocal essay proceeds in three parts. First, Kelly shares data from open-ended surveys that ask students to imagine a scene of reading. Suggesting that such scenarios reveal hidden orientations to reading, she

demonstrates that students present themselves as productively engaged with a wide range of environments in often unpredictable ways. Echoing Kelly's focus on environment and perception, Hannah employs case study research to question the unrealistic conception of "focus" perpetuated by cultural anxiety about distraction. She argues for more nuance in how non-writing activities such as reaching for a drink, getting a snack, or taking the dog out are understood by introducing the concept of "romping." Finally, Janine presents survey data about student digital reading processes and argues for an emergent pedagogy that encourages student mindfulness and employs both print-based and multimodal approaches to text annotation. Taken together, our interventions use primary research to offer snapshots of both imagined and experienced composing environments.

Kelly: Imagined Reading Ecologies—and Why They Matter

In the preface to *Ways of Reading*, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky write, "We learned that if our students had reading problems when faced with long and complex texts, the problems lay in the way they imagined a reader" (vii). For Bartholomae and Petrosky, the students' failure of imagination prevented them from understanding the roles a reader plays while reading, or even why a reader chooses to read. Their consideration of how student perception shapes textual engagement resonates with me. But rather than exploring how students imagine a reader, I aim to uncover how students imagine the act of *reading*.

Reading—whether perusing or scanning a text—is a solitary and seemingly imperceptible process. As Robert Scholes once commented, "We do not see reading" (qtd. in Carillo 116). Students make sense of texts invisibly before class and then demonstrate their understanding through group discussion and writing. Bartholomae and Petrosky describe ideal reading as "strong, aggressive, and labor-intensive" (5), yet they do not describe how these (decidedly masculine) abstractions find their way to the reader in the dorm room or the library facing a lengthy text. All this makes me wonder: How can reading be studied as an active, situated process rather than a passive one that functions as a justification for writing?

One answer to my question would be to ask students about their reading practices, as Janine does in the third part of this essay. Yet, studying practice can be complemented by other approaches. Two students sitting side-by-side at the library might seem identical in their textual engagement when, in fact, one is reading more effectively than the other. Invisible orientations to reading underlie practice. These orientations are influenced by self-perception, purposefulness, and what I call "ecological engagement." Ecologically engaged students have a positive orientation to their environment. They are able, in other words, to utilize the affordances of their environment to promote effective reading.

I came to the term "ecological engagement" after reviewing responses to a survey about reading that I administered last fall to undergraduate (n = 176) and graduate students (n = 24) at a large Midwestern university. The survey was composed of 14 open-ended questions, the first seven of which asked students to imagine a scene of pleasure reading in detail:

> Imagine reading something—anything—you want to read that will require more than ten minutes of sustained attention. What is it? Now, imagine yourself reading it. Where are you? What time is it? What are you using to read it? What's around you? Of all the things around you, what's the most important and why? Why did you choose to read this way—on this material, at this time of day, in this place?

Imaginative exercises like this can be particularly useful for uncovering what I am calling hidden orientations to reading; however, they also present complications. The term *imagination* "sprawls promiscuously," as Leslie Stevenson reminds us (238). Beyond the difficulty of pinning down the definition, figuring out precisely how our imaginings intersect with reality is a challenge. While acknowledging this philosophical and practical ambiguousness, I also want to suggest the "promiscuous sprawl" of imagination is useful, even generative, because it foregrounds students' perception of and engagement with environments of their own creation. In the case of this survey, the two imagined scenes of reading (pleasure and school) present an intriguing contrast.

Like the writers Syverson studied who had to "interpret their environments and use their interpretations to engage in purposeful activities and actions" (26), I aim to see how survey respondents interpreted their environments and then whether they engaged in purposeful action. The savvier students are in linking the affordances of their environment to their reading goals, the more ecologically engaged I consider them to be. Perhaps it is not surprising that undergraduate readers tend to be more ecologically engaged when reading for pleasure than for school. In fact, when some undergraduates imagine reading for school, they actually invite interference into their environments to disrupt their reading. Still others seem unaware that environmental affordances can be linked with reading purposes at all.

The following paragraphs will provide some examples from the student-survey responses. It is my hope that by sharing these miniature scenes of imagined reading, teachers will be persuaded of the value of making hidden orientations to reading more visible. Let us begin by considering the responses of a student, Respondent 118 (see Table 1):

Table 1. Imagined reading scenes of Respondent 118

Self-Sponsored	*School-Assigned*
A novel or book. Quiet, comfortable place, a nook. Afternoon or early evening. Surrounded by other books, fireplace, my dog to keep me company. I think getting cozy by the fire gets me into this mood where I could read all day.	Articles for literary theory. Dorm, night, 7-12 pm. Using my laptop or tablet. Surrounded by bed, kitchen, etc. My computer is most important because it stores all my projects. I read that way mostly because I get home at that time and it is most convenient to read on my laptop.

This student, a female sophomore architecture major, goes out of her way to scrawl a note at the bottom of her survey that reads "I love reading!" and structures her pleasure reading environment far differently from her school reading environment. She is surrounded by dogs and other books and the fireplace, which helpfully induces the kind of mood that will enable her to "read all day." Thus, her response demonstrates Syverson's claim that subjects must use their environmental interpretation to engage in purposeful activities and actions (26). Aiming to lose herself in her books, the student visualizes spatial, temporal, and material possibilities that will achieve her goal. The contrast with the school-assigned reading is evident. She says the laptop is the most important object for her school reading, but her stated reason is that "it stores all my projects." The storage capability of the laptop, a school appliance, has little bearing on her ability to read effectively. It does not, in contrast to the fireplace, set the mood or enable her to sustain reading. For this student, and for others who responded to the survey, pleasure reading environments can teach something important about how to read better.

Insight about the architecture student comes with an important caveat: I am not endorsing that students pretend dense academic essays to be young adult novels or, to use an image from Karen Rosenberg's popular essay for student readers titled "Reading Games," suggesting that all students run off to find a cushy red chair. Rosenberg's red chair, which she found in the fall of her first year as an undergrad, enveloped her "like Santa in a department store" (210). She liked the chair, for she felt within it "deeply, unmistakably collegiate" (210). Yet, in the chair, she often fell asleep. Eventually, Rosenberg recalls opting to read in the library basement in a hard chair, armed by a rainbow of highlighters and a big cup of coffee (211). The ecological model I have been discussing indicates why this basement worked for her: she was able to link caffeine to her desire to stay awake, the uncomfortable chair and bright lights to an ability to sustain

concentration, the highlighters to an annotation system that physicalized her mental engagement with the text. No, we do not all need a red chair—and we do not all need to go to the basement, either. My point is that self-awareness and intentionality are keys to successful reading.

Graduate students might be expected to be more perceptive regarding their engagement with their school reading environments. One graduate student certainly suggests this to be the case. Unlike Respondent 118, who was more in tune with her pleasure reading environment than her school environment, Respondent 10 demonstrates purposeful engagement with her reading environment across both scenes (see Table 2):

Table 2. Imagined reading scenes of Respondent 10

Self-Sponsored	*School-Assigned*
A book. Clothbound. Metanarrative of *Tristam Shandy*, but not ostentatious. On the couch at 7:30, or 3pm-5pm, minutes after having made tea. Cup of tea. Slippers. The trappings of coziness. The environment needs to be comfortable, but not sleep inducing. I think structuring my physical environment for pleasure allows me to read slower and savor language.	Lit theory. A coffee shop. Noon. A giant anthology. Surrounded by coffee shop patrons and social pressure from other people to actually read. At home, I would closely work on something more . . . fun? Also, the anthology is literally too heavy to hold up while reclining.

There are startling similarities between the sophomore architecture major and the graduate English student: both imagine reading a novel for pleasure and literary theory for school. But unlike the undergraduate, the graduate student has chosen a very purposeful reading scene—a public location to provide "pressure from other people" and a prime time to ensure some bustle. She is also reading at a table to accommodate her formidable anthology. If this is a typical graduate student response, then it is encouraging that many undergraduate students are doing similar things when reading for school. Ecologically engaged undergraduates imagine reading for school at certain times to maximize productivity and envision snacks on hand to help them focus. They visualize using tools to help them respond to the reading and being in the presence of animals or friends who make them feel comfortable while they read.

Though a rarer phenomenon, some undergraduate students also rely on their environments to force them to continue reading when they do not want to do so. Like the graduate student who relied on peer pressure

to stay with the activity of reading, many undergraduates report working in "school environments" to help them stay focused. They like to be surrounded by students studying because, as Respondent 63 says, they are "in the same boat." Like graduate Respondent 13, who wants to be "comfortable, but not too comfortable," some undergraduates report arranging their environment so that *productive discomfort* will keep them on task (Respondent 112 writes, "I need an uncomfortable chair"). In a sense, then, many students have their version of Rosenberg's "basement," but they are not so extreme. Their reading processes are highly idiosyncratic and individualized—but purposeful, on task, focused.

In contrast, other students actually invite interference into their school reading environments. A male senior marketing major wrote, "When I envision reading something that is required, I envision doing it in an environment I would not enjoy." The objects this student picked across his two reading scenes are telling: when reading for pleasure, he values his cats because they provide "a sense of comfort"; when reading for school, he focuses on his phone, which he uses "to distract me from reading the book." Other objects featured by undergraduate students similarly physicalize negative orientations: clocks to mark out the monotony, TVs whose chatter would drown out the reading, friends to suggest avenues of distraction, pillows to induce sleep. One undergraduate seems to summarize the gist of these responses: "I probably don't have any interest in [school reading], so I don't read in ideal situations." Unproductive prophecies become self-fulfilling.

Teachers should embrace the multiplicity of potentially productive reading processes. Consider three students' discussion of the television. One, Respondent 133, indicated the noise of the television was productive because without it she would "fall asleep when reading this book." Another, Respondent 159, indicated that the silence of the TV was productive because it enabled her to "focus." A third student, Respondent 67, indicated that the television was the most important object in the room to her, but said she "didn't know why." As a teacher, I am encouraged by the first two approaches to the TV and puzzled by the third. It is not up to us to dictate whether the TV is on or off but rather to encourage students to try different environments to see what will work for them. Readers of *Critical Intellectuals on Writing* might recall that Stanley Fish writes literary criticism with the television on in the background ("This is a very old habit," he explained [88]). A simple list of directives for successful reading will not suffice. Far more important than the object was the way students intended to use the object—that is, their purposefulness and intentionality that led to successful ecological engagement.

Ellen Carillo, in her *Securing A Place for Reading in Composition*, describes the importance of emphasizing context when teaching reading. She writes, "Teaching reading within the metacognitive framework . . . means sensitizing students to that particular context and encouraging them to reflect on the present moment, how far a reading takes them, what aspect of the text it allows them to address and what readings it enables and prohibits" (124). I agree with Carillo that context is important and share her pedagogical aims of metacognition and mindfulness. But I think we should expand her use of the word "context" to encompass the spatial, temporal, and object-riddled world in which our students study the texts we assign. Invisible orientations to reading environments are causing some students to read better than others. Making these invisible orientations visible is part of what we should be doing as teachers of reading. I am reminded of one of my respondents who imagines sitting at a long table in the university library with a hand on her personal computer to avoid its theft. She worries, in her mind's eye, about the security of her property rather than focusing on the reading material at hand. It is not just the particular environment, or ecology, that is significant here. Instead, it is her ineffective orientation to her environment that holds her back. By first becoming aware of their orientations to the environments, and then by purposefully engaging those real-life environments—through highlighters, coffee, applications on their phone, a long gaze out the window, and many other strategies that are far too idiosyncratic for anyone but they themselves to understand—our students will become more mindful readers. We need to help them imagine these productive possibilities.

Hannah: Non-Writing is Not Always Distraction: Making a Case for Romping

As they engage their myriad "real life" environments for writing, our students are likely to feel at some point "distracted." Distraction seems to be our collective default state—a perpetual condition that has not spared our understanding of reading and writing. Nick Carr, for example, has for years observed that the Internet has permanently altered his capacity for deep reading. While Carr recalls how he used to "spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose," now his "concentration starts to drift after a page or two" (5–6). Fear of distraction has also wormed its way into our everyday writing software. Familiar word processing environments such as Microsoft Word and Wordpress now offer "Distraction Free Writing" options, externalizing our self-regulation just in case fiddling forever with the formatting bar becomes too irresistible.

On one hand, all this cultural focus on distraction is warranted. The research on multitasking, for instance, shows rather clearly that we cannot do two informational tasks at once.[3] On the other hand, as a writing teacher, I remain concerned about what distraction—understood as a blanket, perpetual condition—is doing to students' expectations for their writing processes. I have come to this concern especially through an assignment I teach in an intermediate writing course. I ask students to take and

watch video of themselves while they are writing something: they record the minutia of their physical behavior and surrounding environment and then try to interpret some of what they have seen. They report a terrifically wide range of behaviors: talking to a roommate, patting their dog, changing the music, adjusting a pillow, tapping their fingers, darting their eyes to a silent or blaring TV, looking out the window, quickly thumbing through Twitter posts, staring into space, twirling their hair, staring at the writing screen, running to the kitchen for a quick snack, or "checking" their phone. These actions no doubt sound familiar to us all, though much of them likely go without notice. However quotidian or innocuous are at least some of these behaviors, students most often perceive all these activities—anything that is not typing, it would seem—as "distractions."

But are all these detours in the composing process necessarily distractions? Might there be other ways of understanding the varied activities that surround composing? Certainly, contemporary writers can be distracted (for example, some of Kelly's data suggest that writers sometimes intentionally invite activities or objects into their composing environments *for the express purpose of* not *writing*). But not all non-writing is distraction. Non-writing can instead be purposeful, formative, and necessary. The challenge is to help writers become more aware of their composing environments and attention such that they can better tell when they are fully distracted and when they are not. And central to this challenge is that, outside of distraction, writers do not really have any concepts for understanding these seemingly cursory activities.

I offer romping as such a concept. *Romping* is a name I have given to the environmental movement around writing, the range of non-writing activities that get wrapped up in, and even become indistinguishable from, composing—pushing away from the desk, changing the laundry, reaching for a drink, staring into space, and more. Working with it as a concept in the writing process, romping can help writers more effectively partner with the dynamics of their increasingly complex, and sometimes demanding, material writing environments.

Getting ourselves and our students to perceive romping in their own processes first requires a reorientation to our theoretical assumptions about "where" writing happens. In everyday understanding, most assent to the myth of the transcendent writer, assuming that creativity and writing are contained "in the mind." Compositionist Linda Flower amplifies this idea in her textbook *Problem Solving Strategies for Writers*, suggesting that our students tend to perceive composing in a Romantic way: an effortless, mysterious, and *interior* process of a singular genius (42). For Flower, Coleridge's famous story about the composition of "Kubla Khan" exemplifies this belief. As he recalled in his 1816 preface to the poem, Coleridge returned to a farmhouse and, feeling under the weather, took some prescription drugs ("anodyne") and fell asleep while reading *Purchas's*

Pilgrimes. During three hours of sleep, he instantly saw 200 or 300 lines of the poem, all, he says, "without any consciousness of effort." He awakened and began capturing this word vision, only to be interrupted by a knock at the door from the person from Porlock, who detained him "on business for an hour." When he returned to the paper after the visitor's departure, the words were lost, only the captured fragment remaining.

Flower and others see in Coleridge's story the idea that compositions come instantly, effortlessly, inside the mind. Yet, the story also describes a lot of activity *outside* Coleridge's mind, in his material ecology of writing: the farmhouse, the drugs, the book, the long sleep, the person from Porlock. These are all environmental forces that can *equally* participate as compositional activity. Recent new materialist scholars would notice, as I do, the vibrancies of Coleridge's environment: Thomas Rickert, for example, writes about the ambient material factors of rhetorical action. Perceiving the vital but under-recognized role of composing environments, he grants "an interactive role to what we typically see as setting or context, foregrounding what is customarily background to rhetorical work and thereby making it material, complex, vital and, in its own way, active" (xv). Jane Bennett, too, argues for the "vitality" of material things, "the capacity of things. . . not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces" (vii). The vitality of material things (as opposed to their supposed passivity or mere "tool" status) is a meaningful force, Bennett asserts, in a range of social processes, including writing (23).

Though viewed by Coleridge as an interruption, a distraction of modern life perhaps, the person from Porlock is ultimately the very force that shapes Coleridge's composition into the famous 54 lines we know today. Coleridge's story, read through a new materialist framework, suggests that composing is always inevitably implicated in, not separate from, the object-ridden world that twists and turns around us. Writing is not contained in the relay between mind and page; it instead spreads out while environmental forces spread in. Sometimes, those forces are enabling, sometimes neutral detours (a condition of writing in the material world), and sometimes distractions (an insistent child, a buzzing cell phone). Rather than letting students believe that writing is "all in their head" and should come out effortlessly and fully formed, we ought insist instead that writing is not mind over matter; rather, writing is mind *in partnership* with matter.

Becoming more aware of and attuned to the environmental contingencies of composing can be in part accomplished by seeing ourselves at work, especially through visual media such as video recording and photographs. I investigated this method and garnered further evidence of romping through a multimodal case study I conducted with seven graduate-student writers. Working from this new materialist framework and guided by the broad question, how do writing environments and writing objects matter to writers? I asked participants to make a variety of media—photographs,

video, drawings, and talk (both written and semi-structured interviews)—that represented their writing environments and practices. One particular case from this study demonstrates well the subtle action of romping—in this case, the writer's interactions with her dogs—and the ways writers can assume that their non-writing activity is distraction.

When I asked participant Andrea what she had discovered about her writing environment by being a part of the study, she said she foremost noticed "how often I get *distracted*. . . by my dogs." Indeed, the dogs were everywhere in her representations—as demonstrated in Figure 1, the dogs are drawn snoozing in the background of her dining table writing space and captured regularly in the videos of her writing sessions asking for attention. In response, Andrea regularly and quickly talks to the dogs, corrects them, reaches down to pat them while engaged in her writing. But, while Andrea repeatedly refers to the dogs as distractions, her videos show that interacting with them is never more than one or two seconds of interruption—she deals with the dog and then turns back (is being interrupted the same as being distracted? What do we assume as writers about what constitutes "focus"?). She reported that caring for the dogs keeps her at home (instead of working at her school office or a coffee shop), putting her in a more "distracted" but "happy" state. She also revealed how her invention processes often happen when she's out taking the dogs for a long walk or when she spends time sweeping the floor and tidying the dogs' toys. There is no doubt that the dogs interrupt Andrea. And that the dogs meaningfully shape Andrea's composing sessions. It is interesting, though, that *distraction* is how Andrea interprets the roles of her dogs, given all that she reports the dogs do for her. It is possible to see the environmental role of the dogs in a more nuanced way than simply distraction.

Andrea's description of her dogs—especially the ways she describes the walks and clean-ups as a ritual—has parallel to a qualitative study conducted by Paul Prior and Jody Shipka that uses cultural-historical activity theory to understand the material, social, and temporal forces of four writers' composing environments. The researchers describe the way one participant, a Psychology professor, responds nearly automatically to the buzzer of her dryer while she's writing. She stops writing, pulls the warm laundry out, and methodically folds it. The buzzer is a repeated and regular interruption to the participant's writing, but it is far from a distraction as "the disengagement from focal action at the site of the text and the reengagement in the domestic chore. . . become[s] a space for productive reflection on the text, a place where new ideas emerge and older plans are recalled" (181). The dryer buzzer provides a regular, ritualized routine, a productive break where the writer can think about the writing through a different material configuration. Andrea's dogs, it seems, are a more unstable environmental force (that is, their demand for walks or attention does not occur at regular intervals like the buzzer) even while they often

Figure 1. Andrea's representations of her dogs

serve the same function: a disengagement from the focus on the writing, followed after by re-engagement. Not every time would we assume romping like this is revelatory, but this kind of environmental moving around writing is at the very least not deviant.

Writers benefit from being more discerning about what constitutes focus in their writing environments, an important skill especially given the material complexities entailed in technologies of composing. For example, Andrea is occasionally seen in her videos quickly "checking her phone": picking it up or glancing at it, checking the time or for messages, responding to a text. While the phone has the potential to distract or divide attention, it appears as a rather innocuous force in Andrea's videos. Nevertheless, the phone goes missing in her drawings of her space (see Figure 2), replaced by more writerly objects—a book and notebook. Andrea commented about the phone this way: "My phone sometimes is by me, which is really silly because I'll check my e-mail on my phone but I'm also sitting in front of my computer." Indeed, the phone is redundant to the computer screen, but not so if thought of as a potential site of romping—a quick check of email can serve as a short attentional break, a way out of and back in to the writing. This is not to say, however, that the phone will always serve as a productive site of romping. At any moment, the phone may shift into a site of sheer distraction. This instability is precisely why we should help writers become more aware of and responsive to the dynamics of their material environments.

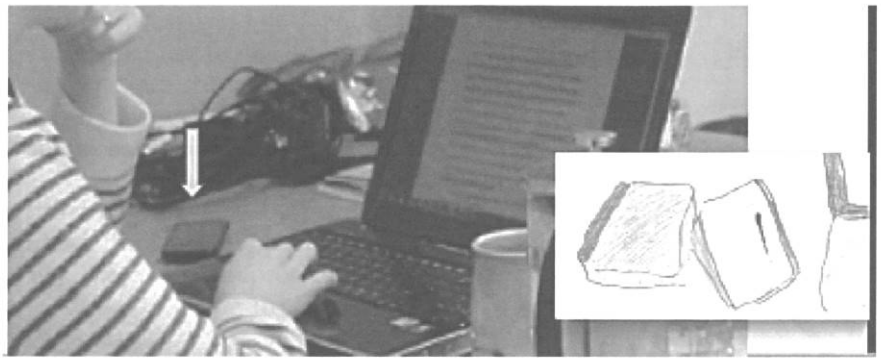

Figure 2. Andrea's video showing her phone; her drawing showing books and a notebook

Pigg encapsulates the dangerous effects of the rhetoric of distraction: "By constructing students as pervasively distracted, we risk participating in discourse that positions students as lacking agency with respect to their own habits of engagement" (20). As the primary concept writers have had for understanding non-writing activities, distraction has created a wholly unrealistic expectation for what a focused, environmentally-engaged, and intentional writer does. To have focus is not to stare, immoveable, engaged with only fingers typing. The detours are a part of it, not something necessarily to avoid. To help restore our students' sense of agency to act with discernment, we should have them closely examine their varied writing environments, not only armed with concepts of romping and distraction but also Prior and Shipka's "environmental-selecting-and structuring practices" (219) or Susan Wyche's "writing rituals." Have students take video of themselves and try to interpret what they see and draw pictures of their spaces and writerly objects. Encourage them to develop intentional writerly practices and rituals as well as to attune themselves to the energies of their environment so they can feel when to get up, when to click out, and when to buckle down.

Janine: Capitalizing on Students' Digital Reading Practices

Both Kelly and Hannah discuss the importance of cultivating mindfulness on the part of our students, encouraging ecological engagement and agency within their reading and writing environments. Building on Hannah's view of non-writing and environmental interaction as necessary part of the composing process, I argue we need to look more closely at the everyday conditions that position our students and their technologies in seemingly uncomplicated ways. Instead of assuming that all interaction with technology is distracted, unengaged, or fleeting, like Kelly, I maintain

that digital reading, too, is an active and situated process. As instructors, how can we take advantage of what our students are doing to encourage more purposeful reading? How can we use romping and effective orientations towards environments to help our students become better readers? While instructors might feel intimidated or underprepared by the thought of teaching reading, as Carillo's national survey of reading in the composition classroom indicates (21), it is necessary for instructors concerned with the shape of their students' literacy practices to overcome those fears. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the digital landscape, I propose that we begin locally, with what our students are doing already. Focusing on the physical environments where reading takes shape is one place to start. This closer look at student practice will, N. Katherine Hayles writes, allow us as instructors to "start close to where they are, rather than where we imagine or hope they might be" (65). Building on Hannah's and Kelly's suggestions for students to become more conscious of their composing practices and rituals, I propose that those of us in English look more closely at how students actually use digital devices to read in order to more effectively shape our teaching.

One of the challenges of reading instruction comes with actually naming what we want from students when we ask them to read, which is often more than just decoding words on a page. Alice S. Horning and Elizabeth W. Kraemer define reading as going "beyond just getting meaning [from a text]: Readers must be able to analyze texts to see how parts fit together. They must also be able to synthesize different readings on the same topic or issue so they can see a range of perspectives and/or research on the topic or issue" (10). Reading, then, is a complex act composed of multiple cognitive tasks. Our ideas of reading are further complicated when performed in digital landscapes. Many theorists view digital texts—including those with audio, visual, web-based, and multimodal components—as considerably different from print-based ones, and, as a result, call for new pedagogical approaches (Ball and Kalmbach; Drake). When we consider the many, many ways that we use and engage with both print and digital texts, there are clearly multiple approaches to "reading" them. In our role as instructors concerned with the state of literacy today, it is necessary both to articulate the kinds of reading we want our students to perform and to help them know how to engage with the different types of texts we assign appropriately.

Of additional concern for instructors wishing to enact reading pedagogies are issues of student recall and comprehension as they read. Within existing research on digital reading, there are conflicting views of how well students can recall or remember material read using digital devices. Anne Niccoli notes in "Paper or Tablet? Reading Recall and Comprehension," "[r]esearch yields conflicting results in learning between digital and paper reading in part due to advances in technology and design features." In

addition, new studies about reader comprehension and recall indicate that the differences between print and digital reading are not so great as earlier research indicated. Niccoli's own research studying the recall and comprehension of tablet versus paper readers at the Coast Guard Leadership Development Center challenge her hypothesis that print readers would perform far superior in comprehension and recall compared with digital readers. Instead, she notes, her "[r]esults did not show a statistically significant difference in group means between paper and tablet readers for either multiple-choice or short answer items." What this means, she continues, is that participants reading an article on paper did not "have a statistically significant difference in greater recall accuracy" or "reading comprehension" compared with participants who read the same article using a digital device. While these studies offer important insight into the complexities of studying reading, they also fail to consider the different situations, contexts, physical locations, and material conditions where reading happens.

Within the existing landscape of reading research, attention has been scarcely paid to the environments where reading takes place. While highlighting the importance of reading environments, my section will also provide a closer look at what students are doing in our classrooms, what kinds of texts they read, and the instruction they receive. I draw from survey data of undergraduate students (n = 56) at a Midwestern university and provide a closer look at student digital reading practices, offering two activities that can increase reflexive, digital reading. These assignments call attention to both the physical scenes and environments of reading as well as to the material engagements possible with digital technologies. My survey participants indicated that digital reading is a pervasive part of their education, yet experience with reading instruction is not consistent for all students. Ultimately, I highlight that making our students more aware of their device use, and teaching specific reading strategies, can help them become more mindful and purposeful in their technological use.

The survey I performed examined a range of daily digital habits by participants. What is notable from this is the extent of digital reading taking place in the classroom. The survey respondents indicate that they frequently use digital devices to read for academic purposes and that instructors often make classroom material available to them digitally. Of the 56 respondents, all indicated that their instructors made course material digitally available at least sometimes, and only two indicated that they never read course material using a digital device. What this means is that 100% of these respondents' instructors *at some point* assign them something to read digitally and 96.4% of them read assigned course material using a digital device *at least sometimes*. Beyond knowing that students are reading digitally, we also need to know what types of texts are being taught so that we can use the differentiated reading strategies, detailed above, accordingly (see Figure 3).

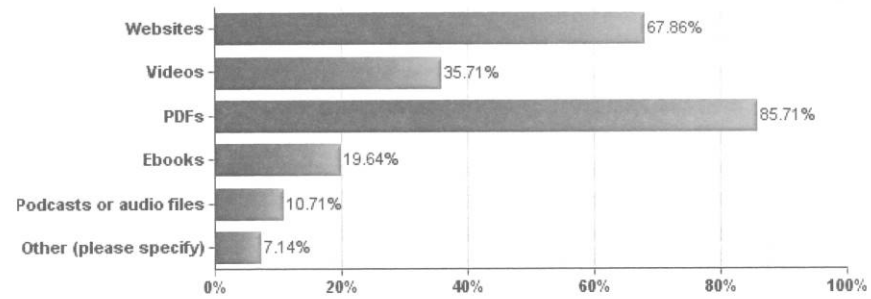

Figure 3. Types of texts being digitally assigned

Of the types of digital texts instructors most frequently assign, PDFs followed by websites and videos were assigned more often than other digital texts (such as e-books, podcasts, or other). Because instructors continue assigning text-based PDFs, we cannot exclude text-based critical reading instruction. However, because instructors also assign multimedia texts such as videos or websites, students require reading strategies that reflect the affordances of those genres as well. Giving students greater access to genre-specific strategies for analyzing classroom material is one way to encourage them to adopt the critical reading practices outlined above.

In terms of reading instruction itself, 23% of respondents indicated receiving instruction with specific strategies for reading print-based texts, and 41% indicated receiving specific instruction on reading print and digital texts. However, 23%—almost *one quarter* of the respondents—indicated never receiving any reading instruction. From this data, I came away with the sense that there is not much consistency with students' reading instruction. Even when students are taught reading strategies, the strategies they report using vary. If the reading experience of this small sample of students is indicative of digital readers more broadly, it makes sense that research on reading recall would be so varied because there is a large variety of what students know about reading and interacting with texts. As a result, I suggest that we give students access to tools (such as those for digital annotation) that would allow them to engage with what they read and capitalize on the reading strategies they are most comfortable using. I believe that explicitly instructing students in annotation and developing classroom assignments that promote active and engaged reading (that can be used across types of digital texts) will encourage them to make better use of these strategies in other contexts.

In our work as instructors, it is important that we think more critically about how we define reading, what types of texts we ask our students to analyze, and how we teach them what tasks they should perform as they read. Beyond becoming more aware of our own teaching, it is equally

important that our students become more aware of what they do as they engage with the texts they read. Both Kelly and Hannah demonstrate the importance of students mindfully engaging with the environments where they work, and the assignments I offer continue along that route. The activities I offer here point us toward the types of reflexive and critical reading I argue we should promote in our classrooms and expect from our students. Focusing on digital annotation technologies is one way to get students to engage with their texts more critically, for, according to Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue, "when carefully guided rather than left to chance, annotation can work as a record of reading and a site of reflexivity" (82). Furthermore, giving students specific instruction on digital annotation[4] is useful in other contexts and adds to their repertoire of both print-based and multimodal[5] reading strategies.

This first activity I offer builds on the reflexive and classroom based annotation practices Salvatori and Donahue outline in "Tracing the Moves," bringing their work into a digital context. In my class, after discussing different annotation strategies students use already and introducing an annotation program, I ask students in this first assignment to read and annotate one article (or multimodal text) together in small groups. Because many digital annotation programs encourage group collaboration, the students could see one another's comments and we could review them together afterwards as a class. This group commenting could then lead to further discussion and reflection on note-taking practices and what the students found important to highlight, thus making reading a more visible, social experience. This activity calls attention to the types of information that are worth noting and what reading practices are valued in academic settings, ultimately highlighting the social nature of academic work.

The second assignment I offer, which I call "Reading Selfies," considers what Salvatori and Donahue observe as the importance of reflection in the reading process to help students become better readers and to help us become better instructors (83). This assignment, furthermore, has the potential to orient students positively towards their environment and encourage more purposeful reading. Asking students to capture the physical environments where they read is one way to make literally visible the spaces and contexts where reading occurs. This assignment has students consider how the contexts (locations, times of day, moods, emotions, devices used, texts under consideration) in which they read affect their reading practices.

The Reading Selfies assignment asks students to stop periodically throughout their day what they are doing and take an image of the spaces where they are reading. Students are then be asked to caption the image by using some sort of descriptor that makes visible their reading practices at that particular moment and in a way that jogs their memory when later looking at that photo. Students might note the time of day, where they are,

their mood, what they are reading, and how they are interacting with the text. Students then collect and share these images with each other by using a class hashtag (#) on social media such as Twitter or Instagram or on a class blog or website. From this general assignment, a possible secondary assignment could ask students to use the images to write reflectively about the different ways they read and discuss how the contexts of their reading affect their practices. In class, the collection of reading selfies sparks a larger discussion of the reading trends students notice and what about their current practices they like and what they might do differently going forward.

My hope is that this discussion of preliminary survey data and sample assignments will push instructors toward further insights into student digital reading trends that were apparent at my institution as well as with some tools and assignments that might promote more critical and purposeful reading. Navigating student (and our own) reading is hard yet necessary work if we want to prepare students to communicate adequately in today's world. By looking at what our students are doing and asking them to think more about their own practices, we can make visible the challenges of reading and address some of the needs that arise when reading digitally.

Conclusion: The Materiality of Literacy and 21st-Century Skills

Our studies have emphasized the importance of materiality and perception in shaping reading and writing, a focus we see as particularly pressing in light of changing technologies. While it is tempting to draw a sharp line between the "physical" world of books, paper, and highlighters and the "virtual" world of track changes, web-surfing, and annotation tools, we perceive a more diminished separation. As Christina Haas points out, "Questions of technology always and inescapably return to the material, embodied reality of literate practice" (xv). Likewise, the material embodiment of practice entails cognition and perception, a connection echoed by Nedra Reynolds: "Material tools for writing are embedded in the culture that develops them and they, in turn, shape mental processes" (42). Relationships between perception and practice, though, are not predetermined but constantly shifting because readers and writers negotiate literate tasks in time and space. Recall Hannah's case study participant, Andrea, whose phone appeared alongside her computer in a video recording but went missing in her drawing of her composing space, replaced, as Hannah says, "by more writerly accessories" of a pen and a notebook (see Figure 2). The phone carries with it shared perceptions about distraction (assumptions likely on her mind when Andrea drew her picture), but the phone is not *automatically* or always a distraction machine. That is, the mere presence of the phone (or a roommate, or television, engaging a print rather than digital PDF) does not determine engaged practice; perception, use, and purposefulness does. Perception is also at play among the students

who responded to Janine's survey when they try to apply print-based reading strategies to multimedia genres: 100% of them have read class materials digitally, yet only 23% of them have received instruction on the best practices for reading on a digital platform. Many of Kelly's survey participants emphasized the significance of certain technology in their school reading environments, but were unable to decide why it mattered (unlike, say, their intentional human companions which seemed to hold more obvious import for their emotional and intellectual processes). Readers and writers today are surrounded by remarkably powerful tools which can equally lure us away from our work or push us more deeply into it.

This is why students must become more curious about and aware of their complex composing environments. Our call for material attunement resonates with the NCTE, CWPA, and National Writing Project's recent "Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing," which emphasizes that students need "twenty-first-century skills" in order to succeed in college (5). As the time-stamp on this skill set suggests, pedagogy must be responsive to shifts in literate activities that result from technological change. One 21st-century skill, for instance, is described as an "ability to compose in multiple environments" that range from "traditional pen and paper to electronic" (5). Also foregrounded are habits of mind, such as metacognition and flexibility, and something as wonderfully unmeasurable as curiosity, defined in the "Framework" as "the desire to know more about the world" (8). Our studies, varied in method and scope, take curiosity about the material world of literacy as a starting point with the shared goal to promote increased reflexivity and engagement for both students and teachers.

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Notes

[1] All the studies discussed in this essay received appropriate IRB approval.

[2] The material situatedness of literate and rhetorical acts has been established in composition studies by scholars such as Cooper; Prior and Shipka; Reynolds; Rickert; Syverson. Bennett's work on vibrancy and distributed agency is also a touchstone of this recent perspective.

[3] See Mark for a nuanced discussion of multitasking and Tells for a summary of research that suggests the impossibility of multitasking.

[4] There are presently a number of text annotation apps and websites that help readers engage more fully with digital texts in ways that we do with print-based ones. These programs allow users to mark-up text-based files such as books, PDFs, Microsoft Office documents, and html files that are shared and uploaded to sites such as Dropbox and Google Drive. iAnnotate, GoodReader, and PDF Expert are all Apple-based programs that allow users to import, mark up, annotate, sync, and share digital files using cloud storage. Both Diigo and Google Drive are web-based applications that are not limited to a particular platform where users can share and comment on one another's files.

[5] There are a number of programs and websites that also allow for annotation and commentary on digitally based multimodal texts such as audio files or videos. For example, the web-based app Genius allows users, according to one review, "to add line-by-line annotations to any page on the internet" ("Web Annotator"). While users cannot comment on videos or podcasts themselves, they can take advantage of annotating existing webpages and content, potentially looking towards the multimodal elements of a site. Audacity, a free and open source audio recording and editing application also has options for annotating files by adding comments to the files themselves ("Label Track").

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Tears, Fears, and Queers: Transgendering Black Masculinity in Daniel Black's *Perfect Peace*

Black masculinity identity endures a constant inscription whereby mainstream society constructs and reconstructs the gender and racial parameters within which we imagine or envision what it means to be a Black man in mainstream society. Michael Kimmel notes, hegemonic mainstream masculinity has served as "the standard against which all other masculinities are measured and against which individual men measure the success of their gender accomplishment" (139). Because mainstream accounts of manhood rest with a binary gender spectrum where one is either masculine or feminine, Black manhood has done as well, even when racism often denied(s) Black men the economic means to forge the "ideal male" that mainstream society privileges on the spectrum. W. Lawrence Hogue conversely acknowledges that the "very essence of racism in the United States required the bestialization and animalization of the African American male, which lead both American and African American authors . . . and others to treat African American men as pacific or passive, to define them according to the definitions and values of the middle-class American norm, or to depict them in some other romantic guise" (10). Normative definitions and values often reproduced Black masculinity as spectacle or caricature, predicated on or circumscribed by mainstream society's own fears and psychological projections of Black men. Literary representations of Black masculinity have followed suit at various historical moments in how they, too, have feminized, hypersexualized, Anglicanized, or nationalized "authentic" Black men who have no foundation in self-defined subjectivities. Until the 1960s, literary discourse seemingly reinforced such monolithic versions of Black masculinity that they negated any possibility for gendered plurality.[1]

With his provocative storytelling, contemporary fiction writer Daniel O. Black eschews mainstream literary projections of static gender identity as he demonstrates gender fluidity in his novel *Perfect Peace*. The plot rests on Paul Peace's dilemma: born male, he is reared eight years as Perfect, a female, before he "becomes" Paul. The family, influenced by mainstream gender perceptions, wrestles with both the mother's decision to commit the perceivably abominable act and Paul's inability to negotiate his transformation. From these contentious moments in the novel, however, we learn as much about the gender identities of other male family members

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