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Resisting Age Bias in Digital Literacy Research

Through an eighty-one-year-old woman's literacy narrative, I argue that literacy researchers should pay greater attention to elder writers, readers, and learners. Particularly as notions of literacy shift in digital times, the perspective of a lifespan can reveal otherwise hidden complexities of literacy, including the motivational impact of affective histories and embodied practices over time.

On a visit to the home of a life-long family friend and research participant, I asked if I could use her computer to check my email. The eighty-one-year-old woman, Beverly, led me into her open, sunny bedroom where her computer sat on a tall wooden stand. Like the rest of her house, the computer station was immaculate and free of clutter. The monitor's screen was dark. As I sat down, I realized her chair was raised to its highest possible height. The adjustable back support was locked stiffly, so it did not yield an inch when I tried to recline against it. The chair seemed designed to eject my body by lifting me up and pushing me forward. Perched awkwardly on the chair, I reached for the mouse and gave it a wiggle. I waited for the computer monitor to "wake" from sleep mode. Nothing happened. Glancing down at the computer tower, I realized that the power light was not on; Beverly's computer was off, waiting in silence for its next use—a state of total rest that the computers in my world rarely enjoyed.

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The computer chair was not like the other sites of Beverly's literate activity, such as the cushioned chair at the kitchen table where she drank coffee and completed the newspaper's crossword puzzle every morning, or the couch where she nestled among her handmade afghans to read novels or the *TV Guide*. These spaces were comfortable. To me, a writing researcher and teacher who is rarely apart from her computer for more than an hour, Beverly's computer station seemed eccentric, bounded, and counterproductive, a space that I initially believed marked the limitations of her digital literacy. In my own scholarship, I take seriously the theoretical work of literacy researchers who place value on contextual studies of literate practice; however, in my first thoughts of Beverly's computer station, I found myself subscribing to a decontextualized, ahistorical ideology of literacy: one that privileges the literacies and literate activities of younger people and figures elder adults as digitally deficient. Beverly's embodied habits at the computer, made evident by the careful arrangements of her physical environment, seemed (at first) like signs of old age, rather than signs of thriving literacy. Following further study, however, I found that Beverly's bodily history—including her affective experiences over her lifetime—has in many ways supported her forays into digital literacy practices in later life.

My initial read of Beverly's computer station was not atypical. Despite mounting evidence in the last several decades that literacy must be understood as a situated, social practice, an age-based ideology persists in public discourse on literacy—though sometimes in subtle ways. The ageist ideology of literacy appears, for example, when the Pew Internet and American Life Project acknowledges that Internet users born in the 1930s and 1940s are “competitive” when it comes to email use, but then adds that “teens might point out that this is proof that email is for old people” (Jones and Fox 1). Despite reporting evidence of elders' increased engagements with digital literacy, Pew dismisses the commonest Internet-based literacy practices among elders as outdated and thus not really competitive after all. Even among organizations actively promoting positive images of older adults, such as AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons), an age-based ideology maintains its grip. In part drawing from Pew research, AARP also acknowledged the increased presence of aging adults online in its magazine, proudly insisting that older Internet users were “doing a lot more than just e-mailing their grandchildren and looking

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at family photos” (94). Why, though, would sending email to grandchildren or viewing family photos be insufficient evidence of elders’ technological literacies?

By uncritically dismissing elders’ commonest digital activities as antiquated, anachronistic, or primitive, both reports advance age-biased rhetorics of literacy, which privilege the practices and activities most common among young people. The rhetoric of these reports suggests that email and looking at family photos are too basic, too “Web 1.0,” and thus mark elder Internet users

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as less active members, even *nonmembers*, of online culture. As do many literacy researchers and educators, I value the Internet as a productive, participatory space, qualities sometimes credited to technologies and practices labeled “Web 2.0.”¹ However, I have also come to think of Web 2.0 spaces as traditionally tied to youth culture and the practices of younger people.² In discussions of Web 2.0 technologies and practices, there is little acknowledgment that the conversation bears age-based assumptions about what literate practice should look like.

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To be fair, Pew and AARP (both organizations that have done good work to uncover generational patterns in social and literate activity) are not alone in forwarding youth-centered rhetorics of literacy. The interpretive work of these reports replicates durable and pervasive ageist rhetorics within consumer culture. Robert Butler, who claims to have coined the term *ageism* in 1968 (11), sardonically describes ageist views of elders’ failure to learn and change: “Tied to his [sic] personal traditions and growing conservatism, he dislikes innovations and is not disposed to new ideas. Not only can he not move forward, he often moves backward” (7); in its more familiar phrasing, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” remains a durable stereotype in digital times.

While blinded by youth-centered understandings of digital activity, messages from the mass media often position elders as an abstract group of deficient writers and readers. Meanwhile, literacy researchers have argued that literacy must be understood as embedded within everyday contexts, as

distributed across social domains, and as developed and evolved over time (see, for example, Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanič; Heath; Street); further considering the long-term pathways of literacy, studies of life stories both in and out of the digital realm (Brandt, *Literacy*; Duffy; Selfe and Hawisher) have explored generations of literacy practices across recent decades. Particular to studies of older adults and literacy (Crow; McKee and Blair; Ray), a situated approach has meant examining not only the physiological and cognitive barriers to literacy but also the impact of affective experiences (such as feelings of desire or anxiety) in which literacy practices can thrive or become mired.

Affect and emotion, however deeply felt, cannot be read apart from the cultural dispositions that shape the lives of individuals (Micciche 77). In their study of older adults and digital literacy in community learning centers, Heidi McKee and Kristine Blair address cultural anxieties related to technology use, observing that “[o]ur society . . . certainly fetishizes young people—you don’t see grandma dancing with an iPod, for example—and the message that technology is for the young is something that many older adults seem to have internalized”; the result of that internalization is often a fear of learning to use technologies (25). Of course, stereotypes of old age do not predictably result in fear, anxiety, insecurity, or other feelings that can (and often do) discourage literacy, but affective experience is always deeply enmeshed within literacy and learning. If some elders feel inadequate as learners because they have been moved by pervasive public messages that digital literacy is something only young people do, such feelings can impact powerfully their motivation to pursue literate practices with digital technologies. Although some older adults do experience anxiety and reluctance when learning to use new technologies (McKee and Blair 24–26), this idea is regularly circulated as a universal, static truth (Morrell, Mayhorn, and Echt 74), often masking the rich literate practices already underway by many elder adults.

Building on this interest in the ideological, affective, and motivational dimensions of literacy in my research with elders, I contend that before we can identify and acknowledge elders who are digitally literate, as Pew and AARP attempt to do, we must first understand what digital literacy actually looks like in situ—within embodied experience now and over the lifespan. In exploring the actual experiences of what Paul Prior calls “literate activity” (138), an attention to motivational scaffolding can offer a robust sense of what digital literacy means in the lives of elders.³ In studies of aging adults and digital literacy, attention to personal motivation is crucial, as elders do not necessarily share with younger people many of the same motivations or social imperatives

to learn and use literacy technologies. For literacy researchers and educators, particularly in the subfield of computers and writing, affect-based motivation proves to be especially powerful in technological literacy development

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among learners of all ages. Angela Crow, for instance, addresses personal motivation in her suggestion that the development of technological literacy among some aging faculty may be best learned when motivated by personal curiosity (109).⁴

Following Kristie Fleckenstein's contention that literacy depends upon "feeling sufficiently at home in a place that we will speak and write" (62), this study's interest in Beverly's motivation for digital literacy is both a move toward understanding the affective forces that support literacy (or not) over time, as well as the sociocultural, historical, and material arrangements that grant new literacies a home-like familiarity. By taking a dual focus on Beverly's present activities and accumulated histories, I hope to reinforce the idea that digital literacy can only be understood in relation to broader sociohistorical contexts, including nondigital literacies and technologies—what Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher identify as "cultural ecologies" (31–32). With Selfe and Hawisher, I argue that we must look to the stories individuals tell about literacy and how those stories are embedded within evolving social, technological, and cultural histories over time. We must also attend to the long-term embodied and affective experiences that individuals have with literacy, which can help us understand something more about older adults and about literacy, digital and otherwise. Resisting the compulsion to position elders as digitally deficient by default, we may find their stories useful in understanding how embodied, affective sources of motivation endure and support literacy practices across the life course.

"You'd Better Do Your Work": Literacy Affinity in Beverly's Life History

To find out what counted as literacy in Beverly's life, I needed to talk to her, to see her literate world with new eyes, and to bring her stories into play with my own understandings of her literate activity. My interest in working with Beverly began with her recent experiences developing and running a private competitive photo exchange on Flickr, a Web 2.0 photo-sharing service. I wanted to know how an eighty-one-year-old widow, who had never expressed much interest in Web 2.0 practices before, had found reason and motivation

to take on the struggles of developing a new digital literacy. I soon realized that to truly understand what had brought Beverly to Flickr, I would need to reach further and deeper than accounts of her online activity, most obviously because much of Beverly's literacy history had occurred before the wide spread of digital media. I quickly expanded the study to include life story interviews and observations of Beverly's literacy practices at home.⁵

During our talks, Beverly described a fairly happy life story. She was born in Maine in 1927, the fourth of six (four of whom survived into adulthood) born to a Scottish-American father and an Irish-American mother, who had met during World War I. Raised during the Great Depression, Beverly and her family escaped the worst conditions as her father maintained steady employment as a boiler engineer at a paper mill, working on the side as town clerk. Beverly's mother, a former telephone operator who was not formally employed after marriage, produced a homemade filter system that Beverly's family sold to the paper mill for extra income. Beverly was a happy tomboy until her teenage years, and her early childhood was marred only by the stillbirth of her youngest sister and the tragic death of her only brother during a boating accident. She otherwise led a relatively comfortable middle-class life, learning to play the piano, reading Nancy Drew mysteries borrowed from the public library, and completing high school with high marks in 1945, just as World War II came to an end. After completing secretarial school in Boston, Beverly returned to her hometown in Maine to accept a comparatively high-paying job as a secretary at the paper mill where her father worked. There, she rekindled old affections with a local man, whom she married in 1948. The couple built a house, had two children and five granddaughters, and led secure and contented lives together until her husband died of cancer in 2006. Today, Beverly still lives at home and is visited regularly by her daughter, her son, and her friends; she "keeps tabs" on her grandchildren by phone and email.

In telling her story, Beverly revealed a significant affective disposition toward literacy in general—and technology by association—which in many ways motivated literacy development throughout her life. In their study of literacy in one community, David Barton and Mary Hamilton found that participants often wanted to talk about the "ruling passions" of their lives (rather than specifically about literacy), and that hearing about these ruling passions often brought better understandings of participants' literacy (83). In my interviews with Beverly, literacy and the dedication it took to learn seemed

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to be her own ruling passions, not only in her accounts of current literacy practices but also in the stories she told about her life. I label this disposition a *literacy affinity*, which describes an enduring attraction toward literacy, expressed and reinforced by affective and bodily experience. The concept of a literacy affinity draws in part on Bourdieu's *habitus*, an embodied disposition toward a particular cultural field—in this case, literacy—that is observable, as Katherine Hayles summarizes, in “the orientation and movement of the body through cultural spaces and temporal rhythms” (“Materiality” 160). For Beverly, the movements toward developing a literacy affinity were in part observable through her literacy narrative, which revealed the consistent development of a literacy affinity: the lasting pull of literacy in her life, in part as an asset to cultural and socioeconomic improvement.⁶

As do most people, Beverly located the foundations of her attitudes toward literacy in her childhood—specifically in her parents' valuing of literacy and education. Beverly remembered that attending school beyond the eighth grade was not guaranteed during her Depression-era childhood. She explained:

If you could go through high school, you were lucky. Because you could be smart as a whip, and still [your family] couldn't afford to let you. Because they were big families and they needed you at home. . . . So if you were lucky enough to be in school and you wanted to stay in school, you'd better do your work.

The belief that literacy is a privilege was prevalent in Beverly's literacy narrative across the overlapping cultural spaces of home, school, work, and community, upholding her literacy affinity across those spaces. Beverly's affinity for literacy and education became so powerful, in fact, that her faith in its benefits exceeded her parents'. For instance, her heightened belief in the financial potential of literacy in part motivated her decision to attend college and earn a secretarial degree, despite her parents' wishes that she marry or join the workforce immediately after high school. This decision paid off (literally) when the degree helped Beverly to secure a career as a relatively well-paid secretary.⁷

Beverly's literacy affinity became so powerful, in fact, that she had difficulty understanding how anyone would not share her motivation to pursue literacy. In her retirement, she organized a reading program in her community and volunteered in an elementary school library to encourage students to read and write. Beverly believed that literacy development was a matter of attitude, and that struggling adults had not adopted the requisite *you'd-better-do-your-work* stance: “In my experience in Literacy Volunteers, every person except one of the people that we tried to help learn to read dropped out because it was

too much work. And that's pathetic." In both her decisions to pursue a college degree and to support local literacy efforts many years later, Beverly demonstrated a lasting belief in literacy development as both privilege and economic necessity and never questioned the importance of acquiring or promoting literacy development.

This long-held value in literacy's potential to enrich her life emerged in Beverly's description of her motivations for developing digital literacy in the computer age. By the time Beverly retired from working in the business office of a paper mill in 1990, she had learned how to use a personal computer at work. Programs like Lotus 1-2-3 helped her to manage data more efficiently—efficiency that confirmed Beverly's belief in the value of learning to use new technologies. In her fifties, Beverly purchased her first home computer, likely the highly popular Commodore 64, although she couldn't remember with certainty. Before retiring, Beverly bought an IBM and has since always owned a PC. Initially intending for her home computer to extend workplace efficiency into managing her personal finances, Beverly quickly found that her home computer was equally useful for cultural and social enrichment. In particular, the computer helped to fill her time while her husband (who never learned to use a personal computer) watched evening sports on television—a pursuit that the couple did not share with equal enthusiasm. By the time she turned eighty, her home computer had become a hub of her literate activity. Widowed and increasingly housebound, Beverly intensified her value in creative and social projects that almost always involved the computer. Whether she used it for searching for crochet patterns online, researching and compiling a writing project on local history, or emailing distant friends, the computer became deeply embedded in Beverly's everyday life.

In September 2007, Beverly found herself desirous of a new creative project. Following a sleepless night, she emailed several of her family members, explaining her plan to create an exclusive digital photo club in which members' entries would compete for the title of "photo of the month." The request was met with resounding support. During the planning exchange, one of her granddaughters recommended that she find and use a photo-sharing website. Persuaded by her granddaughter's positive experiences with Flickr, Beverly registered on the site and immediately saw the benefits of posting photos and comments rather than exchanging emails with image attachments that would "clutter everyone's inboxes." Within weeks, the private group, which I call the "Friends and Family Photo Club," was up and running with eleven participating photographers (all of whom were Beverly's close friends or family members). Since the group began,

Beverly has used Flickr neither to search for photos outside of the group nor to network with people beyond her closest friends and family, yet the group became a reason to learn the digital literacy practices involved in moderating a Web 2.0 space.

As with all of her at-home computer work, the literacy affinity Beverly had developed over the course of her life kept her motivated to address the many challenges that came with her effort to achieve the cultural and social enrichments afforded by the Flickr competition. Having long understood that she would have to “do the work,” Beverly approached what she called the “learning curve” of digital literacy with fierce determination derived from her consistent success with problem solving through sheer grit. While Beverly acknowledged the stereotypes that position elders as “illiterate” or “afraid” when it comes to computers, she firmly believed that any discrepancy in digital literacy among

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older adults was simply the result of a motivational difference. As she succinctly explained, “If you’re a busy senior citizen, you don’t want to be bothered.” For Beverly, however, a lifelong literacy affinity provided the necessary motivation. “I’ve always liked a puzzle or a challenge,” she claimed. “It’s always been a puzzle to me. I can do this, darn it.” Beverly has internalized

her parents’ command, “You’d better do your work,” and believes her hard work pays off online. While it remains important to think about how motivational scaffolding might work in the immediate teaching moment (for example, how teachers and tutors can foster affective support through interactions with learners), Beverly’s case demonstrates the importance of understanding that affect-based motivation has a history. What might appear, at first, to be a surprising display of motivation—such as an older woman deciding to learn how to use Flickr—may in fact be in response to a long history of experience and literacy affinities.

Affective Alliances: Literacy, Work, and Friendship

While Beverly’s belief in hard work supports her continued literacy affinity in digital media, she is aware that she could not acquire literacy of any kind all on her own. In many cases, her literacy development has been enabled, materially speaking, by what Brandt calls literacy sponsors, or agents who provide beneficiaries with the resources to develop literacy in exchange for some kind of economic gain (*Literacy* 19). These sponsors provided Beverly with access to both traditional alphabetic literacy and technological literacies. For instance,

her college degree, which provided literacy in business-related technologies and practices such as typing and shorthand, was made possible almost entirely by a scholarship secured by her high school principal, who had hired her to work in the school's main office. While literacy sponsors aided in Beverly's lifelong pursuit of literacy by offering access to knowledge and material resources in exchange for her time and labor, emerging from *within* the system of sponsorship were other kinds of social exchanges: friendships. The occasional blurring of boundaries between literacy sponsorship and friendship acted as a source of constant renewal within Beverly's life-long literacy affinity.

While it cannot be disputed that literacy operates within economic systems, and that literacy is often a form of currency and exchange between sponsors and the sponsored, the encouragement and payoff of literacy does not occur in solely economic terms. Emotion may also act as a motivator of literacy, enticing learners with the "lure of feeling literate" (Strickland 47) or motivating literate activity through a "desire to know, to connect, to communicate, and to share" (Radway 7). Despite a tenuous connection with social mobility and economic well-being, literacy remains highly valued when it supports positive affective connections (Mortensen and Daniell 24). Social connections can thus become affective allies of literacy—the acquaintances who aid in supporting literate activity through and because of a mutual exchange of friendship.

Several of these affective allies emerged during Beverly's description of her unexpected promotion in the 1970s from secretary to purchasing agent at the paper mill, a move driven in large part by new affirmative action policies. The new job demanded that she know something about the discourses and literate practices of chemical engineering and business finance, knowledge she gained (in part) through cursory company-sponsored training at the state university. However, Beverly's social networks contributed more to her training than did official support from the company. In addition to seeking at-home lessons from her daughter's partner, who was a chemical engineering student, Beverly used her rhetorical savvy in the workplace—previously developed during her work as a secretary—to forge beneficial friendships with knowledgeable mill employees, who could offer their advice and contribute to her workplace literacy. In several cases, she established unlikely friendships that simultaneously served as invaluable alliances:

[T]he good thing was I knew a lot of people in the mill, and one of the people that helped me the absolute most was a very smart guy that nobody liked. . . . He was brilliant, and if I had a problem and didn't understand what I was doing, I'd call him and he'd give me a heads-up and tell me what to do.

Among the various literacies Beverly began to develop in her new position, technology was central, since the paper company where she worked—as did many other large companies in the late-twentieth-century United States—adopted computer technology to streamline and centralize production and sales. Needing computer programs to assist with tracking supply inventories and preparing and tracing material orders, Beverly relied on a company programmer assigned to her department. While the programmers knew how to program the mainframe computer, and purchasing agents knew what information they needed from the computer, the two departments often struggled to communicate. However, Beverly’s rhetorical know-how helped her to locate both effective and affective sources of technological support:

I was lucky to befriend this really odd duck who walked around with . . . a big jug of Coke all the time, and [he] would come and sit and chitchat with me. And then [when another employee] who was assigned to do what I needed . . . screwed things up, I would tell the guy with the Coke bottle what I really, really wanted, and he understood perfectly. He’d do some finagling and get it to work the way my particular part of purchasing needed it.

In addition to relying on friends as literacy teachers, Beverly’s value in friendships sometimes sparked early adoption of technological literacy, such as her refusal to heed her supervisor’s advice, when she became manager, to require her secretary friends (all women) to type for her—a decision that put her at the front lines for learning to use the personal computer when it arrived in her office. In telling me these stories of her sudden demand for technological literacy at the workplace, Beverly was clear about her affective attachments both to the technology she learned and to the friendships she cultivated.

This affectively motivated value in literacy extends to Beverly’s current digital practices, as she continues to understand the exchange of literacy sponsorship as part and parcel of her social relationships. As with her workplace literacies, her at-home computer literacies are supported not only by institutional sponsors (such as her Internet service provider’s technical support call center) but also by the social networks of expertise distributed among friends and loved ones. When something goes awry with her computer, as she says, “I call Ghostbusters.” She calls or emails her children, neighbors, grandchildren, and so forth, and while they assist her with technical concerns, both Beverly and her “assistants” benefit from shared moments of camaraderie. Just as my own interviews with her were woven seamlessly into our meandering chitchat,

Beverly's requests for help are as much about catching up with friends and family as they are about computer glitches.

Although Beverly was (and is) often in need of others' help with technology and literacy, the pleasure she has gained by learning from others has not locked her into a stable position of the novice forever in search of an expert's help. In the same way that good friendships are not one-way sources of support, she identifies as both teacher and learner in digital times. For instance, she often provides impromptu training sessions to her elder friends who buy computers. Being one of the only Internet-savvy members of her social circle of older adults, Beverly frequently serves as a Google jockey during social and community volunteer gatherings, providing instant answers to her friends' and co-volunteers' questions—a role she performs with relish.⁸ She also serves as a rhetorical educator of sorts even in working with younger friends in online literate activity, such as her heavy editing work to “temper” a much younger Flickr group member's “literary language” to make collaborative postings more suitable for Beverly's intended online audience (her small group of friends and family members), which represents a broad range of ages and experiences with literacy.

It is important also to note that the people in Beverly's life—even the ones she loves and who are supportive of her literacy—do not always serve to usher her into digital literacy advancement. For instance, her use of more popular social networking sites like Facebook has actually been forestalled by her relationships with loved ones, rather than encouraged. Although Beverly enjoys keeping in touch with her children and grandchildren (two of whom keep regular family blogs, which they share with her), she has refused to join Facebook, even though one of her children, all five of her grandchildren, and all of her sons-in-law use the service. In fact, it is precisely because her grandchildren use Facebook that she refuses to do so: “I'm afraid that I will see things that would upset me about my grandchildren, and I'd rather not know.”

From Beverly's accounts of her workplace literacy and her current digital activity, I see a literacy affinity that is both economically and affectively motivated—evidence of the ongoing pull of literacy throughout her life. In her own studies of older adults' life stories, Ruth Ray finds that older women's narratives are usually “heavily peopled,” while those of older men typically center around

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career and personal success (80–88). Yet Beverly’s literacy narrative, like her literacy affinity, is driven by a rising career in a world heavily peopled with affective allies. Perhaps in part due to her gendered and classed experience of the world, Beverly expressed her value in literacy as a source of affective connection as much as economic gain, and her literacy affinity allowed her to fit in both at work and in the digital age. Attention to Beverly’s affective and material histories reveals that affective alliances, working within functioning systems of economic sponsorship, are highly valuable for literacy development across the lifespan.

Copy, Paste, and Remediate: The Interplay of Print and Digital Literacy

During one of our many conversational tangents about our daily lives, Beverly alluded to an upcoming convention for scrapbooking enthusiasts, where she and other scrapbookers would pack up their paper, scissors, stickers, and hole-punchers and devote a weekend to colorfully arranging photos of families, travels, weddings, holidays, and other memorable subjects. Beverly had been scrapbooking for many years, most notably producing five scrapbooks documenting the first eighteen years of each of her grandchildren’s lives, given as high school graduation gifts. To my astonishment, Beverly told me about her plans to make a new scrapbook about her Flickr group. She initially explained that she wanted each page of the scrapbook to document one month of the group’s activity, displaying photo work and the surrounding commentary. She described her plans to selectively preserve the online competition’s monthly photography and commentary exchanges, produced by Beverly and eleven of her closest friends and family members:

It’s just an organizational thing. What I’ll have, hopefully, will be the month, the theme, all of the pictures submitted, who won or who got the most votes, and who else got votes because I don’t want to let that fly by. And also the comments, but not all the comments. You know, the hilarious comments. The outstanding comments.

Intrigued by the idea of a print archive of her online activity, I asked her to keep me apprised of her scrapbooking project.

At first, the scrapbook served in response to shortcomings Beverly found in the Flickr interface. Primarily, she felt that the scrapbook provided her more authorial control through a print-based editing process, rather than the cumulative, participatory design of the digital medium. With full control over the selection of text and images, she could create a record of the Friends and Family

Photo Club activities, carefully selecting what she deemed the best photos and comments for posterity. As a writer-designer of scrapbooks, Beverly was able to further expand her audience across space and time: she wanted to share the photos and conversations occurring on Flickr with friends who did not have access to the private photo competition, either because they weren't invited to be members of the group, or because they did not have online access. Further, the scrapbook could aim toward an imagined future audience, who might be in search of a historical record of the Friends and Family Photo Club. For Beverly, the unfixed space of Flickr did not appear to provide a sufficiently reliable or customizable space to meet her rhetorical purposes, but armed with scissors, adhesives, and colored paper, she felt confident that the Flickr group's activity would not "fly by" unrecorded.

Seeing other, more durable purposes for the work of the Friends and Family Photo Club, Beverly's scrapbooking work might be recognized as an act of remediation—a concept originally descriptive of material artifacts referencing previous media (Bolter and Grusin), recently extended to considerations of chains of semiotic activity, including the literate activity of people (Prior and Hengst 7–10). Yet, encountering Beverly's scrapbook plans while embedded within age-biased ideologies of literacy, some might read her actions as proof that she is not digitally literate—or at least not sufficiently so. Her remediation appears to work backward, away from the new and back into the old, as she must ultimately rely on print-based literacies to rewrite digital texts. On closer inspection, however, her practices are more complicated than that. A further reminder that multimodality was not created by digital media but has, in fact, "always been there" (Hawisher et al. 255), Beverly's scrapbooking practices denote a long-term interest in multimodal forms of expression and archiving. It is in part because of her interests in paper-based multimodal composing that she was able to appreciate digital modes of Flickr (asynchronous commentary, hypertext, video, etc.) in their own right. As she continued working on her scrapbook alongside Flickr, her literate activity began to suggest a convergence of the two practices. In other words, Beverly's remediation was not backward, but reciprocal.

Initially understanding Flickr as an ephemeral space of temporary display, Beverly used her group moderator's authority to delete the collection of photos at the end of each month to "make room" for the new batch of submissions. At the same time, she would also delete her own entire photo stream, which at first contained only photos connected to the monthly subject- or genre-based theme, such as best self-portrait, best black-and-white photo, and best image

of “writing on the wall” (photos of letters or numbers). As she began her scrapbooking project, however, Beverly began to rethink this cycle of uploading and deleting. Soon, she treated the Flickr site as a complement to her preservation efforts in the scrapbook. In more recent Flickr work, Beverly stopped deleting her photos, using them instead as a cumulative digital record of her creative work. Once she allowed herself this kind of archival approach to Flickr, she soon began using it to document other parts of her life, posting often-beautiful photos that were not related to the competition’s current theme, but to her own life and experience: photos of snow climbing the fence around her yard, her dog entangled in yarn on her living room floor, and friends bowling in her senior league. Flickr became a way of further reaching out for affective connections with distant loved ones, beyond the four walls of her house and past the boundary of her small town.

Persuaded of Flickr’s usefulness by its comparability to familiar practices Beverly knew and valued, she quickly became more curious. Imagining the

Beverly’s account of her Flickr scrapbook and the subsequent shift in perspective that occurred shortly after the scrapbook project began reveals the ongoing interplay between old and new media, as well as old and new literacies.

possibilities of a medium that could accommodate high-quality photos and new media, and that could be organized in a way that she found personally compelling, she thinks that “maybe somewhere down the road we’ll find a place to make an album—a digital album.” While she professes that she will never fully replace her handmade practices of scrapbooking, she hopes

that a digital practice might provide another avenue for creative expression and friendship. Beverly told me that she had already been discussing this hope with her friends and family.

Beverly’s account of her Flickr scrapbook and the subsequent shift in perspective that occurred shortly after the scrapbook project began reveals the ongoing interplay between old and new media, as well as old and new literacies. As an older adult redesigning and reinventing processes of scrapbooking with digital media, she reminds us of Lisa Gitelman’s assertion that despite common perceptions, media do not develop along a predictable, linear path toward progress and improvement. Instead, “new” media are sites of ongoing social development of meaning, and it is only through cultural readings of media history that we mark distinctions between old and new (6). Finding that *remediation* as a term implies a starting point (some existing thing that is then re-mediated), Hayles has suggested a new term, *intermediation*, as a similar model for understanding such nonlinear development of digital technologies,

texts, and subjectivities—a model that seems particularly instructive in light of Beverly’s activity:

Complex feedback loops connect humans and machines, old technologies and new, language and code, analog processes and digital fragmentations. Although these feedback loops evolve over time and thus have a historical trajectory that arcs from one point to another, it is important not to make the mistake of privileging any one point as the primary locus of attention, which can easily result in flattening complex interactions back into linear causal chains. (*My Mother* 31)

Although Beverly’s continued interest in the paper-based scrapbooks might to some suggest obduracy in digital times, the endurance of her older literacy practices does more to support her new digital literacies than it does to hinder it. The intermediation of her scrapbooking and Flickr work illustrate the importance of seeing literacy in the terms Hayles describes—not as linear, causal trajectories, in which new should replace the old, since clinging to the old might somehow prevent adoption of the new. Seeing literacy (as we know it to be) in terms of scaffolding what is new with what is familiar, we come to appreciate the older, taken-for-granted practices that continue to hold meaning and value in newer literate contexts. For Beverly, scrapbooking was a way both to extend and rethink her print literacy practices and to make sense of digital texts through print media. In the process of sensemaking, she discovered newer, more durable ways into digital literacy.

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Sitting Up Straight: Beyond the Digital in Digital Literacy Research

Having spent so much time talking with Beverly and learning about her past and present literate activity, I began to recognize the cultural scripts of aging informing my view of her literacy. At one point, initially assuming that the configuration of Beverly’s computer station was a sign of her advanced age and illiteracy, I naively offered to make adjustments to her computer chair that was so unpleasant to my body—an offer that she resolutely rejected. “What, are you trying to break my back?” she accused. The chair, and the way it held her body as she worked on the computer, were clearly important to her. Later, I asked her about it over email. Seated in the same chair, Beverly wrote her reply:

One of the criteria for a good typist (like a good pianist) was to sit upright with hands poised perfectly over the keys and exercise, exercise, exercise. Even in my car I am most comfortable with the seat raised to its highest position with the back straight. Guess it adds to my concentration in some convoluted way. Also, since I don't have arms on my computer chair it [the height of the chair] helps greatly in standing easily.

Beverly's chair, and her awareness of its position as an important part of her literate activity, reveal the value of the backward glance in literacy research. The chair, like her body, has a history. That literacy history (as told by Beverly) is carried by enduring affective experiences and alliances, which form and reaffirm literacy affinities. Her body is inextricable from her literacy affinity, work ethic, and sense of self. With the proper (and, I acknowledge, gendered) body position developed many years ago as she trained in secretarial school and perfected during her many years as a typist, she feels at home even in digital literacy practices.

Through recognition of the ways literacy is part of our emotional and even physical selves, we can recognize the richness of what literacy in digital times really is, what it does, and what it means—at any age.

Beverly's embodied account of literacy reaffirms that literate activity is at once old and new, and that only by paying attention to the intermediation between the two can we begin to see what literacy might mean for the present.

Seen this way, Beverly is not just an older woman with an uncomfortable chair and a computer turned off when not in immediate use; she is also a trained secretary and a penny-wise child of the Depression. Her story reminds us of the entangled histories borne by individuals as they move from one context of literacy to another, histories that “emerge, accumulate, and compete with other literacies, and . . . also fade” (Selfe and Hawisher 5). Beverly, like so many others, draws on a rich literate past fraught with emotional and embodied experiences that carry her forward into new literate contexts. Through recognition of the ways literacy is part of our emotional and even physical selves, we can recognize the richness of what literacy in digital times really is, what it does, and what it means—at any age.

With Beverly's story, I hope to extend and promote emerging work on the literate practices of elders (Crow; McKee and Blair; Ray), a group too often left out of discussions of literacy—especially digital literacy. By paying closer attention to the work of older adults, whose literacies are undervalued by default, we begin to make transparent the ageist ideologies that infuse our professional and public discourses on literacy, learning, and technology, and

to move beyond such youth-centered understandings. Through continued attention to elders' literacies, and through continued challenges to the modern amnesia that constructs technological literacies as wholly distinct from, or somehow better than, older print literacies (Selfe), we might see literacy less in terms of measuring up to the most recent technological innovations and more in terms of how individuals regularly innovate in order to make meaning in their everyday lives.

While it is necessary that we include more studies of older adults in literacy research, we must also take the more difficult step of going beyond a literacy-studies-plus-elders move. Such an additive measure, while no doubt presenting challenges to the current age bias, would not necessarily result in deeply infusing later life into the schema of literacy. As we have learned from similar calls to pay attention to overlooked dimensions of literacy, the result has not always been to fundamentally transform our definitions of literacy outright: for instance, calls to pay attention to technologies in literacy (Selfe, for example) have been answered by rich and growing deposits of research, but such work remains frustratingly marked as other (Porter). *Literacy* is still widely understood in print-based terms, only recognized as otherwise when it is labeled *digital*, *technological*, *multimodal*, and so forth.

In the case of extending our scope in literacy research to include older adults, we should aim for more than the appearance of a subfield of elder literacy studies. Instead, we need to actively consider the transformation of literacy research that might occur—*should* occur—if we were to frame literacy studies as an exploration of literacy across the life course, including schooled literacies, workplace literacies, and the literacies developing beyond a full-time, wage-earning phase of life. We must recognize literate activity as always on a lifelong continuum, from birth to death and extending across generations. Only when the age continuum is recognized in full can we sufficiently appreciate the active and changing nature of literate lives.

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Notes

1. “The latest evolution of the Internet, the so-called Web 2.0, has blurred the line between producers and consumers of content and has shifted attention from access to information toward access to other people” (Brown and Adler 246). “Web 2.0” thus includes social media (Facebook, Twitter), blogs, wikis, and other Web platforms and services in which users create the site’s content. See also Day, McClure, and Palmquist (Introduction); for a critical stance of Web 2.0, see *Computers and Composition’s* March 2010 special issue (Day, McClure, and Palmquist, *Composition 2.0*).
2. Although adults over age sixty-five are a fast-growing population in social media use, particularly in the recent “boom” among adults over age fifty (Madden), teens and adults well under the age of sixty-five are still more likely to use social media and are also more likely to be the focus of public discussions of social networking in the media and in policymaking (Lenhart). It is not insignificant that Facebook was originally designed exclusively for college students, and only later was the service made available to adults. It is also significant that Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg has demonstrated a propensity for hiring and trusting younger employees, who play a pivotal role in shaping Facebook (Kirkpatrick 166, 331).
3. The term *motivational scaffolding* generally describes in-the-moment feedback from the expert-teacher; examples include “acknowledging that the task is difficult; using humor; providing negative or positive feedback” and so forth (Thompson 428). My study expands this notion of motivational scaffolding to contexts outside of the classroom or writing center and beyond the immediate teaching moment to consider the sustained affective connections that foster Beverly’s literacy development over time and across a variety of literate contexts.
4. This interest echoes knowledge common among digital literacy scholars, who value informal, curiosity-driven, and experimental methods of “tinkering” as important pedagogical tools, as discussed by Jenny Edbauer Rice in *College Composition and Communication* and most recently in the emerging work of Anne Balsamo.
5. Amassing data over a period of two years, the study involved a three-frame approach: 1) life story research, in which I interviewed Beverly on several occasions about her past and present experiences with literacy, education, and learning, with a special focus on her history with computing—the resulting data comprises what Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen have called a “literacy narrative,” a genre that has become useful in unearthing the affective and material histories of literacy development; 2) ethnographic observation of Beverly’s literate activity at home, where most of her literate activity currently occurs; and 3) participant-observation of her activities in the Flickr group online. This triple view allowed me a way to understand Beverly’s current literacy development on Flickr within the context of her life prior to and now apart from digital technologies.

6. In describing Beverly's literacy affinity, I am mindful of what Harvey Graff calls the "literacy myth" and that literacy does not always result in economic gain. However, partly because of Beverly's status as a white, middle-class college graduate, the literacy myth remains a deep-seated attachment that is consistently reaffirmed by the social and economic advantages that Beverly attributes to literacy.

7. Beverly's decision to complete high school and attend college in the 1940s—unprecedented in her family—situates her within the twentieth-century shift toward an information-based economy of human capital, a shift that intensified cultural and economic value in literacy, though this value did not usually translate into individual economic gain (see Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*; Goldin and Katz). The large number of women entering clerical and secretarial careers during this period is part of this shift and marks Beverly's participation in a gendered labor system, in which the most readily available career did not necessarily match her abilities. However, as Deborah Brandt ("Sponsors"), Janine Solberg, Anne Ruggles Gere, and others have noted, clerical work (transcription, note-taking, letter writing, etc.) became not only an important activity among women for the negotiation of gender identity but also an opportunity for innovative appropriation of office- and organization-based literacy for use beyond the workplace.

8. *Google jockey* is a term normally used in education settings to describe a participant who synchronizes Web searches to a classroom lecture or discussion and shares the search results with members of the class (Educause).

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