IT’S no longer an exaggeration to say that writing has changed more dramatically in the last two decades than during any previous time in the last 2,500 years. Like many others, I have been invested in tracing such changes in the biggest literacy revolution the world has seen in a very long time, a revolution that is affecting all of us and our ways of communicating, especially our ways of writing and reading. To do so, I followed a group of Stanford University undergraduates, tracking their writing and learning and interviewing a subgroup of them at least once a year for six years. I have learned more than I could ever have imagined at the beginning of this research, and certainly more than I can easily summarize. But I can focus on some of the most significant findings about student uses of literacy today and consider the implications they hold for us as teachers of writing and reading.

To begin with, this group of students embodies what many are calling the “new literacies,” as opposed to the “old literacy” that I grew up with and still value. What are these new literacies? Most researchers agree with Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear, who argue that new literacies—those encouraged by Web 2.0—are “more ‘participatory,’ ‘collaborative,’ and ‘distributed’ in nature than conventional literacies. That is, they are less ‘published,’ ‘individuated,’ and ‘author-centric’ than conventional literacies. They are also less ‘expert-dominated’ than conventional literacies” (9). One way to sum up the shift Knobel and Lankshear describe is to say that student writers today are turning from consuming texts (often those deemed most worthy by schools and other institutions) to producing texts. Thus new literacies involve a different kind of mind-set than literacies traditionally associated with print media. In their introduction to A New Literacies Sampler, Knobel and Lankshear contrast what they refer to as a “physical-industrial” mind-set—the mind-set that I certainly grew up inhabiting—with a “cyberspatial-postindustrial mind-set” (10).

According to Knobel and Lankshear, those whose experience grounds them primarily in a physical-industrial mind-set tend to see the individual as “the unit of production, competence, intelligence.” They also identify expertise and authority as “located in individuals and institutions.” Those who inhabit a cyberspatial-postindustrial mind-set, in contrast, increasingly focus on “collectives as the unit of production, competence, intelligence” and tend to view expertise, authority, and agency as “distributed and collective” (11).

Students in twenty-first-century universities exhibit the mind-set Knobel and Lankshear describe: they work in teams on everything; they work effortlessly across genre and media; they tell us that good writing is writing that makes something happen in the world, that is performative; and they no longer hold to traditional notions of copyright and textual ownership (see Lunsford and Ede). I’d like to introduce you to a few students and their work, stressing another important finding from
our longitudinal study: the literate practices about which students are most passionate occur outside class. Meet “sparker2,” for example, an avid contributor to Twitter:

Rain’s over, going to Trader Joe’s to buy some Healthy stuff to fight this cold . . . suggestions?  
(13 Mar. 2010, 9:21 a.m.)

Watching Queen Seon Duk 선덕여왕 on @dramafever, love it so far! Your assessment?  
http://www.dramafever.com/drama/56/#nowplaying  
(10 Jan. 2011, 1:16 a.m.)

Here sparker2 tweets with a purpose, whether it’s to get or to give information from those who follow her. An avid fan of Korean cinema, she tweets every day or two with what amount to 140-character film reviews. Her writing is performative and collaborative and aimed at action.

A second example comes from Stanford’s required second-year course on writing and rhetoric. Not content with doing the course assignments, which were hefty enough, these students set out to use the skills they were learning to create ads of their own—ads that would, in turn, parody their course, PWR 2.

This spoof ad was created by a group of students working together on their laptops and making use of programs like Photoshop—and they were producing discourse rather than analyzing advertisements or reading what others have to say about them. They were doing such analyses in class, but they also insisted on creating advertisements of their own. And they certainly were practicing new literacies, that is, literacies that are participatory, collaborative, and performative. Note also that these
students don’t blink at using photos from the Web. Indeed, no finding was more interesting to me in our longitudinal study than the complex notions students held about textual ownership. In short, we found that deeply participatory electronic forms of communication provide new opportunities for writerly agency, even as they challenge notions of intellectual property that have held sway now for over three hundred years, leading to diverse forms of multiple authorship and to the kind of mass authorship that characterizes sites such as Wikipedia and Google News.

To make this point, let me introduce you to Mark, a student who wrote and performed a spoken-word poem during the first weeks of his first year. Titled “The Admit Letter,” this poem was performed at the Writing Center’s annual celebration of writers held during Parents’ Weekend. It opens with a “so-called friend” saying to the writer of the poem, “Oh sure, you got into Stanford; you’re Black.” What follows is Mark’s imagining of what his “so-called friend” thought his admission letter to Stanford might have said. The two imaginary versions of the letter are biting—and very, very funny. Together, they not only put the so-called friend in his place forever but manage to send up the university as well. On the Stanford campus, news of this poem spread like proverbial wildfire, and Mark was called on to perform it in numerous venues. During one such performance, the poem changed significantly: now it was performed by Mark and a Chicana student, who powerfully wove together versions of their “admit letters.”

“The Admit Letter” went through additional permutations over Mark’s college career, and during one of the interviews with him I asked, “So is this poem yours? Do you own it?” In a lengthy conversation, Mark said that he considered the poem to be his—but not exclusively his; in fact, he said, his work is usually written and performed collaboratively, and he sees it as part of a large poetic commons. He was already effectively moving into new media literacy and into new territory regarding textual ownership. Mark’s poem also illustrates what students have told me over and over again: that “good writing” is performative; it makes something happen. Mark’s poem certainly did that (in fact, it is still being performed on campus).

But students are using writing and rhetoric to make things happen in many other ways as well. Amrit made a poster as part of the work he and fellow students were doing to support AIDS research. Anna and her colleagues in the Stanford Labor Action Coalition designed a Web site to call attention to the plight of temporary workers on the Stanford campus and to convince campus administrators that these workers deserve a living wage. Another student resisted writing a traditional essay in favor of producing a film and using it as a way to raise issues he felt he could not address as tellingly in print. After a series of negotiations with his teacher, this student went on to make the film and then to present it along with an analysis and a set of recommendations to the campus community. In this instance, the student was able to satisfy both the demands of old literacies for analysis and academic argument while also embracing the new.

What we learned from these and many other students and their uses of literacies challenged us to rethink our curricula and, in fact, to focus the second-year writing course at Stanford on the oral and multimedia presentation of research—that is, to try to combine the best of the old literacies (academic argument and research) with
opportunities for engaging in new literacies and to do new media writing in the way that the student making the film did. In this course students move from articulating a research question and doing the research necessary to answer it in a traditional academic essay to “translating” that essay into other media. Thus this course focuses on the fifth canon of rhetoric, delivery, recognizing the many choices that student writers now have available to them.

At the same time that we are looking at how writing is changing, we are also tracking changes to readers, since new literacies and new media writing are influencing reading practices as well as the texts students read. In addition, new literacies are challenging us to rethink what we mean by literature and to entertain broadening that term to mean letters, as it did in earlier times. Moreover, we might expend the kind of effort we have given to high literary texts to other texts as well, the kind of attention Michael Armstrong displays so brilliantly in his reading of stories written by children. Most of all, our findings suggest that the new literacies ask us to diversify our notion of texts. As Juan Poblete argued during the 2011 ADE Summer Seminar West, we urgently need to pluralize reading (“What Is a Reader?”).

In my graduate seminar The Future of English Studies, we have been investigating these claims, and recently we have been trying to monitor and describe our different ways of reading. Our findings match in some ways what the students in the longitudinal study have told us about how they read, and on that basis we’ve been talking about five particular ways of reading:

- The **informational reading** students do every day—such as searching the Web to look for some particular fact or date. This kind of reading is similar to that which Louise Rosenblatt labeled “efferent” in her groundbreaking *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, opposing it to “aesthetic” reading for pleasure.
- The **ludic or playful reading** students also do daily, from checking status updates and Twitter feeds to “reading” games and films.
- The **rhetorical reading** students do when they want to know not what something means but how it means, that is, how it creates its effects on readers. This kind of reading also often aims at action, at making something happen in the world, to make or support a case or claim.
- **Hermeneutical reading**, the kind of close reading students learn to do in school. While my students often say this kind of reading is “nit-picking” and “hunting for symbols and other hidden things, especially in poems,” they value the ability to read between the lines.
- The **creative reading** students do when they use reading to make something of their own. As Richard Miller put it during the 2010 ADE Summer Seminar East, in this kind of reading, “the value of the aesthetic object is to invite readers to create on their own.”

This list only gestures toward the many kinds of reading we and our students might identify, but it suggests the need to broaden our understanding of reading practices in general and to pay more careful attention to students’ ways of reading in particular.

If we need more expansive ways of understanding and describing our students’ reading practices, I believe we must also engage a broader range of texts students are
reading. I try to follow this advice in my courses by including texts such as Lynda Barry’s *What It Is*; Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*; Apostolos Doxiadis, Christos Papadimitriou, Alecos Papadatos, and Annie Di Donna’s *Logicomix*; Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes*; Gilbert “Beto” Hernandez’s *Chance in Hell*; Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*; David Mazzucchelli’s *Asterios Polyp*; Dwayne McDuffie’s *Icon*; and Steve Tomasula and Stephen Ferrell’s *TOC: A New Media Novel*. This selection includes comic books, hypertexts, and works that mix media or play with format in other ways, and one (*Tree of Codes*) is a “remix” of the author’s favorite book, Bruno Schulz’s *The Street of Crocodiles*. Reading these texts calls for all the kinds of reading I mentioned above—and then some—and for recognizing that literature is a category capacious enough to include these texts in provocative and productive ways. I find that reading together with students challenges all of us to work together, to do a kind of social, group reading that opens the texts up to us in ways that individual reading does not. Thus if writing is increasingly collaborative, participatory, and social, so I would argue is reading.

To sum up, the research and teaching I have done over the last decade convince me that students today are reading and writing more than ever before and that they are increasingly insistent on producing as well as consuming texts. They are accustomed to and comfortable with mixing media and genre, with producing remixes and mash-ups, with transforming what they find (usually online) into still other kinds of texts. Unlike those who think that literacy is on the decline and that today’s students are the dumbest generation, I am struck every day by the intelligence and creativity of the readers and writers I see at work. They have a lot to teach us about what it means to be a reader and a writer today.

**Works Cited**


Miller, Richard. “Undergraduate Study in English: Where Do We Go from Here?” *ADE Summer Seminar East*. Univ. of Maryland, College Park. 6 June 2010. Address.

