Chapter 4: Composing Social Potential: Ambient Sociability and Mediated Contact

> What is the place of those who are physically present and have their attention on the absent? At a café a block from my home, almost everyone is on a computer or smartphone as they drink their coffee. These people are not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence.
>
> –Sherry Turkle, 2011, p. 156

For the past several years, social psychologist and new-media theorist Sherry Turkle (2011) has noted a link among computing and social isolation that has grown into a common refrain. In the epigraph above, Turkle reflects on this connection in the context of a neighborhood café much like Gone Wired and the Technology Commons. Scanning the room she shares with other people and their technologies, Turkle interprets café-goers' use of laptops and smartphones as a lack of "presence." She imagines, in turn, that individuals like those she describes are spending time "alone together," a phrase now frequently circulated in the scholarship of humanist critics of public space as well as technical and professional communication researchers (Büscher 2014; Ellis, 2002; Spinuzzi, 2012 & 2015). Elsewhere in her popular text, Turkle uses a different metaphor to describe the social tendencies that surround networked mobile device use. She describes digital natives as "tethered": bound to connections they access through mobile technologies and their networked, digital reserves. Although critical of the generation's device fetishes, Turkle explains that the situation is complicated. Being tethered means keeping close ties like the one that enables her to converse in real-time with her college-aged daughter studying continents away; however, it also conjures images of restraint and lack of control. For Turkle, tethered people are "marked absent" from physical social surrounds when committed to mobile screens (2011, p. 155). To be absent in this way, for Turkle, is a tragedy for communities as well as for individual emotional wellbeing, which relies upon authentic relations with people around us.

Turkle's remarks highlight the complicated ways that mixed-use, shared social spaces initiate contact among people who might not otherwise meet, while

also reinforcing relationships that are close relationally but far-flung spatially: best friends, family members, significant others. These social overlaps must be negotiated through ongoing orientations toward and away from people and other objects. To use language that I have introduced throughout the book so far, Turkle laments how orientations toward digital reserves can represent orientations away from people sharing a place such as a café. She perceives the tendency to orient toward digital reserves in public places as abnormal, a deviation from healthy social behavior. In this way, Turkle suggests an unspoken norm: that people located in proximity to one another should first and foremost be oriented toward one another, and only after that spatial immediacy is achieved, establish geographically dispersed or remote connections.

I have focused on Turkle's example to open this chapter because her work has become well known in both public and academic circles, but the sentiment that she expresses is common. The perception that mobile device users should connect first with physically co-present people and secondarily with distant relations is a perceived norm worth further discussion as it intersects with how we interact in social environments that shape our mobile composing. While writing scholars have long argued that composing practices are affected by interpersonal contact, this chapter argues that networked devices necessitate a closer look at how we collaborate with social actors to compose the social environments that surround us, as well as how writers navigate the social potential that intersects when they use mobile technologies. This chapter is an extension and complication of my earlier discussion of commons spaces in Chapter 2. Positioning the social contexts of networked mobile device use only in terms of negative divergences can lead educators and researchers to misunderstand or stereotype mobile composers. As a result, the generation who has grown up with mobile, networked technologies is often generalized not only as the most distracted generation but also the loneliest one, charged with "attempt[ing] to substitute *real* relationships with *online* relationships" (Beaton, 2017, para. 13, emphasis mine).

To better understand how interpersonal contact intersects with the mobile surroundings of transient literacies, this chapter takes a closer look at moments of literacy practice that could easily be labeled as nonpresence or social isolation. By taking a granular lens to interpersonal interactions in these scenes, it is possible to see how individuals enact social proximities and social distancing that challenge traditional norms of public interaction as well as traditional understandings about how the forms of social interaction most valuable to writers should be mediated. At times, these new social arrangements develop as a result of a search for privacy. As I have introduced through the examples of Ed and Kathryn in Chapter 1 and Dave in Chapter 2, finding a place to write is a challenge for many of us even if we have dedicated of-

fice spaces. We seek places like cafés and coffeehouses to serve as what Kate Zabrowski and Nathaniel Rivers called "an oasis for weary travelers" (2015). These places offer moments away from the everyday social interactions that we want to have but that make it difficult to focus on text: conversations with our families, our colleagues, our friends, our pets. When sitting down in a coffee shop for composing, some of us do not intend to interact very much with those around us: we've come here to get things done while we can! However, even when writers are not actively seeking to distance themselves from those around them, people who write with networked mobile technologies are likely to end up facing surroundings that are saturated with people but that also invite impromptu interactions through incoming emails, text messages, and social media posts. The experience of dwelling among people while "marked absent" from them is central to composing in shared social places.

In order to draw out questions and challenges related to the intersections of transient literacies and sociability, the chapter first discusses the practical interactions through which social influences on composing were accessed and performed in my study. Next, the chapter turns to stories from research in the Technology Commons. By reading these stories through the concepts of materials and interactions introduced in Chapter 3, I describe how interactions of varying intensities across different social platforms are braided into the use of networked mobile devices in action, in turn producing unusual social dynamics within commons spaces. As a result, I argue that negotiating the interplay among salient social actors and those that fade to the background is central to information management practices of transient literacies and that this practice is meaningful for establishing connections among people who share commons spaces. Living among information not only means deciding how to attend to the generative and disruptive potential of physical social presence, but also requires negotiating the spontaneous and ephemeral social potential that lives in digital reserves, or what I call ambient sociability. Ambient sociability is characterized by dispersed potential social connection across physical and virtual platforms. Understanding this social atmosphere and its relationship to how we compose today complicates a simple reading of the mobile surround as positioning people as "alone," "together," or "alone together." The social interactions that support literacies proceed along multiple proximities and pathways, observable in how networked mobile composing's action often takes place across face-to-face, direct communication, and social media platforms.

Composing, Isolation, and Interactions

The idea that social influences matter to literacy practices is a belief that has so infused writing research that it usually no longer needs to be overtly articulat-

ed: it is often an unstated warrant behind more controversial claims. Because this is a longstanding issue, it is worth returning to a context for this development in rhetoric and composition studies that predates the current challenges of networked mobile technologies. We might recall, for example, Linda Brodkey's (1984) famous deconstruction of the modernist writing scene: the vision of a writer alone in a garret, closed off from the social world and jailed to the confines of language alone. Brodkey argued that the stereotypical vision of the writer working alone resulted from associating composition and authorship with literary production rather than the realities that accompany more diverse purposes for writing practice. For Brodkey, this modernist scene "places social life on the other side of writing, that which occurs before or after writing," rather than a more generative vision that imagine writers as "social activists" who are part and parcel of the worlds that surround them (1984, p. 397). Marilyn Cooper (1986) offered a similar often-cited deconstruction of the isolated "solitary author," who "works alone, within the privacy of his own mind" before he turns over his text to "the world of which he is not a part" (p. 365). In Cooper's model of writing as informed by and embedded in overlapping, dynamic social systems, it is "contact" that drives forward our writing: "ideas result from *contact*, whether face-to-face or mediated through texts" (1986, p. 369, emphasis mine). Cooper's statement emphasized that the social contact that matters to written invention can be mediated and practically achieved in different ways: through reading texts that provide access to contact, as well as through face-to-face talk.

The Practicalities of Social Interaction

Alongside Brodkey and Cooper, Kenneth Bruffee's (1984) well-known "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind'" also associated the social turn in writing pedagogies not only with theoretical shifts but also with the changing social needs and demands of university students. In the late 1970s, Bruffee suggested, college students were struggling and refusing needed support because the "kind of help provided seemed merely an extension of the work, the expectations, and above all the social structure of traditional classroom learning" (1984, p. 637). As Bruffee explained, university instructors and administrators responded to this situation by introducing new learning techniques that worked outside of the typical social setup of lecture classrooms. In Bruffee's history, peer learning, group work, and other forms of collaborative interaction first emerged as practical responses to students' needs and demands for new forms of sociability, and they were only later connected to and justified by theoretical developments emphasizing knowledge as a social construct.

Building on developing social constructionist theories of knowledge, then, Bruffee drew from his practical experience of successful social interactions in writing classrooms to argue that a particular form of social contact should be used to support composing practices. He argued that students learning to write should read texts that provide access to disciplinary knowledge, and then educators should be "engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and the reading process as possible" (1984, p. 642). Importantly, Bruffee positioned the social contact that mattered to composing as enacted through dual processes with different mediations for expert and peer interactions. In order to access experts, students would read texts, and in order to access peers, students would have conversations about those expert ideas. Bruffee was clear that the kinds of peer interaction supporting effective composing processes in classrooms were connected to the experience of talk about ideas, rather than collaboration on other aspects of composing processes: "What students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit or, least of all, read proof," and "What they do is converse. They talk about the subject and about the assignment" (1984, p. 645). For Bruffee, then, the conversation among peers that best supported literacy development in classrooms was direct conversation, conducted orally, among educated peer communities that invoked the "normal discourse" of that community. It was not, for instance, two students working in separate locations on a shared Google Doc, or carrying on an IM conversation in writing. By positioning collaborative learning as a way to overcome social isolation and access shared discourse of educated peers, Bruffee emphasized *talk* as a particularly important form of social contact that matters to composing.

However, other forms of practical social interaction were beginning to emerge as relevant to social theories of composing. For example, Karen B. LeFevre's (1987) *Invention as a Social Act* published a few years later named a range of interpersonal interactions that fueled invention, where that term refers to the creation of new texts and ideas. As pictured in Table 4.1, LeFevre articulated several perspectives on sociability that shape assumptions and attitude toward written invention. Platonic approaches, for example, often assumed the ideal of solitary authors much like those that Cooper and Brodkey critiqued. These theories, according to LeFevre, emphasized the usefulness of social isolation, emphasizing that an individual should turn inward to discover ideas. LeFevre's "internal dialogue" model fell in line with Bruffee's conception of writing as internalized social thought re-externalized through writing. However, LeFevre's "collaborative" and "collective" perspectives encompassed forms of social interaction that might extend

beyond direct conversations such as those Bruffee emphasized. For example, LeFevre's collaborative model was built on an assumption that social interactions are meaningful across relatively long spans of time in which texts are created and exchanged. Sometimes interlocutors who participate together in collaborative models are co-authors who talk or exchange while creating text together. However, LeFevre also emphasized that the social influences that shape invention may, from a collaborative perspective, be involved implicitly rather than explicitly. She captured this idea by referring to relevant social influences as "enablers, resonators, friends, sponsors, liaisons, or brokers" and by focusing in particular on "those who attempt to assist invention by bridging the distance between inventor and audience" (1987, p. 78). In addition, LeFevre emphasized the importance of direct interactions from readers and listeners who complete a chain of meaning that does not exist solely with the writer, including user feedback (1987). Finally, LeFevre's collective model of invention focused on the impact of social interactions that happen through tacit structuring forces in culture. Contact with these forces not only comes through face-to-face talk or text, but also through implicitly observing the norms of others' behaviors and action. For example, in this vein, LeFevre emphasized the impact of language as a social force, the role of local communities and disciplines as constraints, and institutions and ideologies as indirect but steady pressures.

Table 4.1. Karen LeFevre's schema for types of social influence on invention

Platonic	Internal Dialogue
Individual is an agent of invention	
Invent by recollecting or finding and expressing content or cognitive structures that are innate. Asocial mode of invention; internal locus of evaluation of what is invented.	Invent through internal dialogue or dialectic with construct of internalized other. Internal locus of evaluation, but influenced by social codes and values.
Collaborative	**Collective**
Two or more people interact to invent.	Invention influenced by social collectives
Invent by interacting with people who allow developing ideas to resonate and who indirectly support inventors. Listeners and readers receive and thus complete the act of invention. Locus of evaluation may be one person influenced by judgments of others, or a pair or group of people who invent together.	Invention is hindered or encouraged by the force of supra-individual collectives. Locus of evaluation is a social unit beyond the individual (e.g., an organization, bureaucracy, or socioculture).

I have provided a deep dive into the intersections of social contact and invention to suggest that many writing specialists have developed and internalized beliefs about what kind of social interaction writers should engage. Over 30 years ago, LeFevre's schema opened the door to acknowledging that different kinds of social interactions shape composing. Writers make contact with meaningful social actors through practices that include but extend beyond direct talk about topics of interest or reading accepted discourse of a discipline or profession. LeFevre emphasized co-writing, peer review, written audience response, as well as reading and listening to language. LeFevre largely left the audience to consider how interactions are established with "enablers" of literacy, those "friends, sponsors, liaisons, or brokers" that can be more informally connected than through academic or classroom networks. But what, if anything, happens to this contact when it is mediated by mobile devices or dispersed across geographies? Do these new developments that remediate social interaction matter to literacy practices and development? And, if so, how?

Remediating Social Interaction

How has the sociability of composing been affected by technological change since Brodkey, Bruffee, Cooper, and LeFevre theorized the importance of social contact? For example, would Bruffee amend his focus on "talk" that provides access to educated peer discourse to include the "conversation" of a chat room linking people at a great distance from one another? What about the complexities of social interactions such as those that Turkle describes as marking individuals absent from their immediate surrounds? Scholarship theorizing the impact of the internet and new technologies on social literacy has had to grapple with similar questions, although often in tacit ways. For example, the New London Group's (2000) framework for multiliteracies shifted common assumptions about what kinds of interactions matter to literacy performances in a world shaped by the "textual multiplicity" emerging from increasing linguistic diversity and competing communication platforms. For workplace life, the New London Group emphasized how an emphasis on teamwork and collaboration has given rise to the importance of "informal, oral, and interpersonal discourse" as well as "hybrid and interpersonally sensitive informal written forms, such as electronic mail" (2000, p. 12). In public and community life, they emphasized the complexity of social interactions in contexts where standards are no longer centralized and where understanding difference is more relevant than identification as a skill "to negotiate regional, ethnic, or class-based dialects" (2000, p. 14). Finally, they argued that personal lives would change as identities are more complex and performed through informal texts and everyday technologies. In place of the importance of "singu-

lar national cultures," it was increasingly the case that communication across "less regulated, multi-channel media systems . . . undermind[ed] the concept of collective audience and common culture, instead promoting the opposite: an increasing range of accessible subcultures" (2000, p. 16). In the world that the New London Group described, multiple channels for social contact were the norm, and the meaningful communicative interaction that enabled people to work, organize, and perform their identities took place across them.

The related New Literacies paradigm championed by Colin Lankshear and Michel Knobel (2011) took a step further in positioning the social contact afforded by the internet as central to literacy learning, by emphasizing how digital environments enabled self-motivated learning nurtured by persistent connection to people and information online (see also Gee & Hayes, 2010; Ito, 2009; Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). While the term social learning has a longer history with Albert Bandura's (1977) work in cognitive and behavioral psychology, Lankshear and Knobel advanced a conception of social learning dependent upon the internet and with foundations in contemporary workplace management theory. Drawing on John Seely Brown and his colleagues' (2011) "Situated Cognition and the Nature of Learning," Lankshear and Knobel called for teaching strategies that "embed learning in activity and make deliberate use of the social and physical context" (2011, p. 215). Lankshear and Knobel called these contexts "platforms": web architectures that they described as "arrangements" providing access to "people, websites, written texts, and any and every kind of helpful support—as and when they need it" (2011, p. 232). In this framework, initiating "contact" was largely understood to be the responsibility of the learner, who calls on individual ingenuity to effectively mobilize available resources. In line with their roots in management theory and workplace learning, Lankshear and Knobel argued that social learning builds on individuals' inclinations toward "innovation and productiveness," characteristics they believed individuals practiced most genuinely through their online interactions with affinity groups in digital networks (2011).

When relevant social contact is mediated by the internet and changing global interconnection, collaborative or collective literacy practices are emphasized. However, the historical categories used to describe the forms of social contact that matter to composing are limited in their ability to account for what Howard Rheingold (2012) called the changing "shape of the social" associated with having immediate access to distant people who may be closely or weakly affiliated. Sociologists such as Barry Wellman (2001) have long argued that many individuals in highly developed countries are moving from a close-knit community-based organization of social connection to one that is more loosely organized. Institutions that historically have grouped people into dense, highly interconnected social units based around identity catego-

ries like church, organizations, or neighborhoods still exist; however, their influence may not produce the same bounded sense of social groupness that it once did. In its place, Wellman recently joined Pew Internet Research Center director Lee Rainie in *Networked: The New Social Operating System* to discuss how an emerging paradigm of "networked individualism" shapes the forms and functions of social contact that shape workplace, community, and personal life. In their words,

> It is not the World According to Me—it is not a world of increasingly isolated individualists. Rather, it is the World According to the Connected Me, where people armed with potent technology tools can extend their networks far beyond what was possible in the past and where they face new constraints and challenges that are outgrowths of networked life. (2012, p. 19)

Where a scholar like Sherry Turkle saw social isolation, Rainie and Wellman saw a radically changed model of sociability: one that is networked rather than bounded. Recent social media scholarship also has used the term "networked publics" to describe a similar focus on how emerging social mobilizations form when networked individuals come together across geographies to address issues of concern (boyd, 2010; Ito, 2008; Varnelis, 2008). Digital rhetoric scholarship also took up this social context through a range of scholarship that outlines the changing nature of collaboration and crowd-based user-generated participation (DeVoss, 2018). This scholarship explored examples ranging from social bookmarking (Brooke & Rickert, 2012), to YouTube Composing (Arroyo, 2013), to textual curation in Wikipedia and other online systems (Kennedy, 2016).

The move toward networked individualism, networked publics, and networked collaboration has important implications for how networked mobile composing takes place. This understanding of social connection de-emphasizes bounded communities as the central organizing social units shaping contemporary life and brings more attention to fragmented, fast-paced interactions that build up over time and across collocated communities in digital platforms. For online affinity groups such as those described above, this model of social contact means that contributions from across millions of people and far flung geographies can be easily assembled. However, for individual learners, the experience of networked individualism means facing increased pressure to use networked technologies to initiate contact with these potentially far-flung contacts that might become their "enablers" of literacy, LeFevre's "friends, sponsors, liaisons, or brokers" (1987, pp. 75-76). Individuals bear an active burden for assembling social contexts and initiating social interac-

tions that support literacy goals across personal, workplace, and academic life, rather than relying on assembled and bounded communities with clear hierarchies and discourse norms. Digital and mobile technologies, along with the social platforms accessed through them, offer a means of reach through which social contact can be sought out, established, and maintained. However, that coordination is hard work and time consuming. As a result, the ties that hold the networked social together are the same ones that scholars such as Turkle identify as responsible for social disconnection and isolation among digital natives. This paradox is a central tension of the practical knowledge of transient literacies.

On the one hand, if the "isolation" observed by Turkle and others indicates that contemporary students experience difficulty connecting with others, educators have reason to worry about students' ability to access needed social resources. However, on the other hand, there is reason to believe that students in highly technologized societies are initiating—and bearing greater responsibility for—the interpersonal contact that provides them access to literacy resources. As digital devices and online resources become participants in connection, the mediated social interactions that support learning may contrast with those that supported traditional interactions in classrooms. Important learning contact may come through blogs written in cafés, emails composed on smartphones, or text messages to collaborators. To better understand contemporary literacy and learning, educators need to refocus on the role that interpersonal sociability plays in composing through the lens of multiple modalities and mediations of interaction, drawing not only on the importance of face-to-face talk but also on interactions associated with networked social arrangements.

Usefully, writing centers long have functioned with complex ideas about the kinds of social interaction that are meaningful to composing. In writing studios and writing centers, environments are often carefully cultivated to support social interactions among peers and mentors. For example, studio pedagogies have been described as "interactional inquiries" because of how they distribute learning across formal and informal social interactions in ways that many contemporary students find meaningful (Grego & Thompson, 2008). Multiliteracy centers that actively incorporate digital technologies often use similar methods, while also mediating support through online feedback and emphasizing the importance of digital genres as important sites of learning (Sheridan & Inman, 2010). Educators need new vocabulary to name and describe the range of mediated social interactions that matter to composing outside campus environments that actively cultivate literacy coaching, social support, and guidance. Furthermore, we need to understand how students negotiate the complicated terrain of balancing attention to both screen-based and physical social interaction.

Sociability and Transient Literacies in Two Case Examples

To take a step in this direction, let's now look more closely at how two students collaborate with people and technologies to compose sociability while spending time in the Technology Commons. As opposed to the prior cases discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, both stories here involve students "killing time," rather than purposefully working on coursework. However, both cases involve a range of self-sponsored literacy practices.

Micah's Story

The first student I'll discuss, mechanical engineering major Micah, entered the Technology Commons between two classes. This was his habit. As he put it, he would come here to grab a cup of coffee and use the power outlets to charge his technologies. While doing so, he would sometimes "study or do coursework, but more often . . . [he is] just killing time between classes." When "killing time," Micah still actively read and wrote on his laptop. On the day that I observed them, Micah and a friend were "geeking out," to use Mizuko Ito and her colleagues' (2010) term for social learning that makes use of online participatory culture. In this case, Micah and his friend across town (i.e., sitting in front of his own computer screen) were working together on an ongoing game development project. The project interested them because they enjoyed playing around and learning how to use new software development technologies. Micah described their purpose for the project as motivated by learning and participating in something together rather than by desire to produce an actual game for themselves or others. When I observed Micah, he was using his laptop to navigate a range of social-media and direct online communication sites: partially to discuss, plan, and work on this gaming project and also just to speak with his friends. Micah's literacy activity, then, aligned well with the self-directed, online collaborative social learning and literacy practices described by Knobel and Lankshear. However, as I will discuss in more detail, Micah was not completely shut off from the face-to-face social scene around him. He engaged with other students who were co-present in the Technology Commons.

Sal's Story

The second case discussed in the chapter comes from Sal, who sat alone in the Technology Commons with his laptop facing toward a group of students he did not know. He, like Micah, was taking a break between classes. In his case, killing time involved looking at his laptop and using it to shuttle through a site that aggregated new online memes. He was checking out the latest content posted on

the site and laughing along with what he found funny or surprising. He also used the opportunity to send a direct message through the online social marketplace, Etsy, to a product seller regarding a sticker he'd been considering purchasing for his laptop. Unlike Micah who was working on a particular project, Sal did not have any central objective for what he intended to accomplish during his time in the Technology Commons. He was not working toward course deadlines or projects. Sal's interactions happened in clusters associated with the smaller literacy tasks that he was performing, including reading online circulated meme content, perusing Reddit, and corresponding with a "social seller" on Etsy. Sal did not directly establish contact with those students around him, though he sat facing into their group conversation. Still it is possible to understand the students around him as direct participants in the mobile surround—and in Sal's use of networked mobile devices to make sense of the world around him.

Interactive Platforms and Sociability

I chose Micah and Sal as cases for discussing sociability because they might easily be described as socially isolated in the Technology Commons. Unlike many students who used that location to collaborate with others, Micah and Sal were both oriented primarily toward their laptop screens and did not appear to be interacting with students around them. However, taking a more granular look at the sequences of their interactions illustrates how they move across layers of social channels, while engaged in networked mobile computing in public places. To illustrate what I mean, I will discuss Micah and Sal's interactions by first introducing three kinds of social platforms that they and other students in the Technology Commons and Gone Wired negotiated simultaneously while using mobile technologies. These platforms do not represent all channels through which students access social resources (i.e., books, articles, or other assigned resources are not emphasized here). However, they name key social spheres that complicate traditional assumptions about how meaningful social contact takes place during composing.

Social Media and Platforms for User-Generated Content

Many participants in this research wrote with social media platforms frequently during their time using mobile technologies. Participants described social media platforms as central to their use of shared places and interweaved them with attention to materials associated with longer, goal-based literacy projects such as the kinds of projects discussed in the first three chapters of this book. This finding is not surprising, given what we already know about the high percentages of social media use among those with access to mobile, networked devices.

The more interesting questions for transient literacies revolve around why and how these platforms were used and what they represented for individuals. For participants in this study, social media platforms were only partially important for contacting already known peers, family members, or acquaintances to which they were "tethered." Many participants actively used social media to engage those beyond the boundaries of their known social connections.

Micah and Sal's examples of social media use during time spent in the Technology Commons illustrate this diversity. Micah primarily used social media platforms, first, to keep up with people he knew through offline affiliations: university friends, family, and high school friends. Second, he used them to access information related to specific personal interests such as fitness or game development. Micah browsed Facebook to check who was currently active online so that he could potentially chat directly with them. Alternatively, he browsed social sites for inspiration or humor. Sal, by contrast, exclusively sought encounters in virtual places where he did not already know those present. He did not have a Facebook page or Twitter account. Sal reported that he distrusted the ethic of "friendship" on sites such as Facebook that led to social surveillance at both micro and macro scales. In his own words, he reported learning that when he used Facebook, "I was the product and refused to allow myself to be marketed and bombarded by advertisements tailored 'just for me.'" Instead, he used social media platforms such as Reddit that assembled crowds who did not need to know one another to interact.[9]

As he put it, "I feel Reddit is the lesser of the [social media] evils, as it doesn't come with the promise of 'companionship' and 'friendship' that social media tries to offer. I can simply retrieve information from a variety of subjects via the subreddits, and be on my merry way." Sal further positioned his impulse toward Reddit as driven by (1) a desire for information, and (2) the unknown: "Since it's a site that is used by people around the world, it provides new perspectives and news that I may never have heard about. For example, when Edward Snowden first blew the whistle, /r/News and /r/Politics exploded with information about him, and within days, news was constantly being circulated about the questionable means of information gathering being done by the NSA." I will discuss the blurred lines among negotiating people and information in social media platforms. For now, though, it is important to understand that these channels support a diverse range of social "contact" that should not be generalized.

9   Reddit is a social news and entertainment site that is organized like a bulletin board system. Its threads are called "subreddits" and users post to and lurk in subreddits, most of which include links out to other sites. Often these links are links to photos or visual memes. Many of them are supposed to be funny, cute, or raunchy, while others are informational and link to breaking pop or political culture news.

Direct Electronic Communication Platforms

In addition to interacting through social media, participants also made social contact through online platforms that supported direct and often immediate communication. For example, students in the study used sporadic text messages with friends, family members, peer classmates, and significant others to make immediate and later plans. Richard Ling and Bridgette Yttri (2002) described how these shifts affect the use of mobile devices for microcoordination, or the orchestration and planning of meetings and other face-to-face interactions. This microcoordination leads to a state they describe as "hyper-coordination," where peer groups rely on short, mobile, networked interactions and the expectation for reciprocity for affective purposes to retain a sense of connection to peer and family groups. Additionally, email also should not be overlooked as a central online electronic communication platform—especially for students enrolled in universities. Finally, many participants on laptop computers used IM communication technologies, frequently choosing instant messaging (IM) packages connected to their social media or email accounts (i.e., Facebook Messenger and the Gmail chat). IM enables participants to directly engage with people that they determine to be present and active. They often checked in with these people after perusing their feeds or inboxes in order to determine whether there were updates to check.

Unlike with social media platforms, it is not surprising that participants used direct communication channels primarily to interact with people they knew (with the exception of email, which functioned for interactions with both known acquaintances and to receive information with unknown others, corporations, organizations, and institutions). In Micah's case, for example, the Gmail chat function enabled him to carry on an extended conversation with the friend collaborating with him on the game development project. The two friends used IM to exchange links to shared materials: the tutorials, explanations, and discussions of game development that they found on various social media and content aggregating sites. After watching or reading this information, they also used direct communication channels to discuss it and make plans. Sal also used direct communication to connect with his significant other, as well as to contact an Etsy seller with a question. Though most direct-channel use connected participants to known others, Sal again stressed using direct online communication platforms to interact with people he did not know while using his laptop. Following the same general philosophy that oriented him toward Reddit rather than Facebook, Sal was excited about sites like Omegle, which in the same fashion as Chatroulette, created a forum for accessing strangers. Sal explains, "Omegle is . . . its basis is you talking to strangers, it's, I don't know if I'd say it's a platonic sort of relationship. It's a

casual acquaintance, but not really, it's sort of like being stuck in a room with someone random for 30 seconds and saying hi." Direct communication platforms, however, were typically associated with social contact that took place in quick episodic bursts.

Face-to-Face Platforms

Finally, contrary to popular assumptions, participants spending time in social places with their mobile devices did interact face-to-face with others present. As with social media platforms, interactions with people in the same geographical location took place with both previously known and unknown peers. Interactions with known friends and acquaintances often followed one of two models that align with cases already described in this book. For example, students often met purposefully with someone they knew who was a close friend, significant other, or acquaintance to spend time. Sometimes these meetings were specifically related to course content, as was the case with many study participants such as those working together on a digital video project for a campus fraternity or students studying together for organic chemistry. Sometimes, instead, students met with others to spend romantic or platonic friendship time while also studying on the side. Finally, even students such as Sal and Micah who entered the Technology Commons alone interacted with co-present others; however, their interactions with surrounding people were subtle and nuanced, complicating the idea of being "alone together."

Participants who spent time alone in both the Technology Commons and the Gone Wired Café were highly aware of other people present in the room. Ed and Kim, to whom I referred in Chapters 1 and 3 respectively, both referred to this interaction with their co-present social surroundings as "people watching," and described it as a benefit of writing extended projects in a café rather than at home, which felt more isolating. However, these interactions did not take place in ways that might easily be identified as traditional conversations, certainly not in the sense in which Bruffee used the term. Instead, interactions were indirect, often more akin to curious but casual surveillance than direct interaction. Their social contact was not organized by shared affiliation within a community; instead, these were interactions of shared presence that only occasionally led to more in-depth conversations.

Micah and Sal, once again, provide examples of what this face-to-face interaction among co-present students entailed, as both interacted with others sitting near them in the café space. Micah appeared to be ignoring students around him who were organized into a group and carrying out an extended conversation—until he began to talk with them. The students had been discussing problems with their computer science coursework. While Micah was

studying to become a mechanical engineer, he had extensive computer programming experience as a result of his game development hobby and additional coursework in that area. After listening to students complain for several minutes about struggling in computer science classes, Micah interjected with advice from his own experience.

As the student responded, Micah tabbed back to Facebook and hovered his cursor over pictures of his friends listed on the right-hand column of the screen—looking more closely at those who were available for chat. Micah clicked another browser tab where Reddit was already open before he looked up and spoke more deliberately once again: "Well, you know maybe you're not . . ." He chose his words carefully. "I'm in those classes . . . and a lot of the projects we are given just aren't really covered in the book. You have to figure it out." When the student explained that he was having a difficult time relating his coursework to what he imagined himself doing later, he revealed that he wanted to be a video-game developer. He said, "I feel like game programming doesn't involve half the things I'm being taught in these classes. I haven't been taught a dedicated game programming class." Micah looked up at the student at this point in the conversation and continued: "Part of me thinks this is ridiculous, but then again in the workforce, when you get out and get a job, they are going to give you an assignment and you have to figure out how to do it." Micah was looking down at Reddit as he spoke. "And this is kinda . . . you know . . . teaching you how to figure things out." Figure 4.1 illustrates how these moments of his discussion with other students were layered with his ongoing use of both IM and social media platforms.
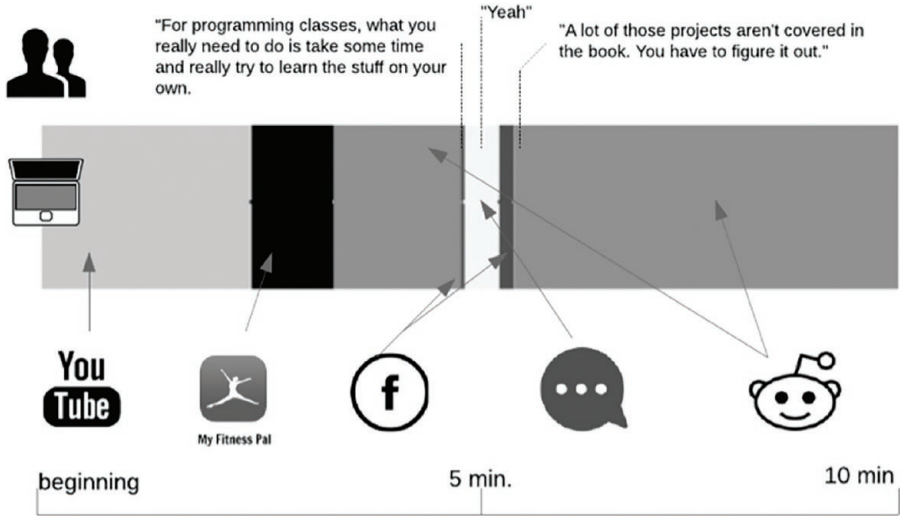

Figure 4.1. When Micah interacted with other students face-to-face.

For Sal, interaction with co-present others was more passive and indirect, but still observable. As the group around him simultaneously explored Reddit and discussed a number of recent news items they encountered there, Sal listened intently. As their conversation turned abruptly from a recent college basketball star's season-ending injury to animal decomposition to sushi, Sal responded with non-verbal cues—sometimes by wincing or visibly reacting, other times by looking up information on his laptop that corresponded with their conversation. As the group took conversational topics and cues from Reddit, he listened and visibly reacted. He read Wikipedia entries that aligned with their debates, his laptop screen evidence to his spectator involvement and the integration of their debates into his own thinking. This interaction with the group's conversation was persistent through Sal's session. When Sal and I later discussed his time in the Technology Commons, he opened our conversation by saying that he'd been listening to the conversations of students around him.

Sociability with/in the Mobile Surround

To return to questions about the mobile surround, what are we to make of the interpersonal interactions that are central to everyday transient literacies but fall outside the norms of direct communication, such as what Turkle might expect, or collaboration, such as what Bruffee might expect? These interactions are not easily separable or discrete in terms of when and how they take place; they are messy and overlap in the space/time of sequences of interaction. Like other students I have profiled, Sal and Micah were comfortable interweaving a range of social interactions that expanded the scene of their learning (i.e., Micah's hunt for online gaming resources) or that made it possible to inch toward multiple personal and/or professional purposes in short spans of duration (i.e., both students' combining of multiple leisure activities while "killing time"). With so many social materials across platforms in close proximity, not all could be at the forefront of their perception at once. As a result, an important part of Sal and Micah's basic negotiations when using mobile devices involved practices to prioritize when to foreground each of the multiple, overlapping social platforms that existed around them simultaneously. Sal, Micah, and other students created dense social arrangements that brought unrelated contacts into proximity. Figure 4.1, which illustrated how Micah interacted with IM, social media, and face-to-face peers in the span of just a few minutes, provides a good example of this thickness. While working on his game development project, Micah used the IM function associated with Gmail to talk about the task with his friend; he accessed two development platforms to view and manipulate code; and he watched a YouTube video featuring a professional game developer discussing a new game released at a recent conference.

Micah used the game development engine, Unity. While manipulating objects in the visual view and opening internal files related to the project, Micah interspersed his activity with discussions with his friend and game development partner in Google Chat. Although Micah was already alternating between the metadiscussion of the project with his friend and the actual manipulation of it within the development platform, he needed still more software to make the changes that he had in mind. Thus, he opened a program called StarUML, a modeling tool that works in unified modeling language. The program creates diagrams that can also generate code to import when building different kinds of computer programs. While StarUML began to open, he quickly tabbed over to Google Chat and typed in the message box. Micah also needed to manipulate code directly, so he opened a text editing program and began typing code, using the drop-down menus that appeared on screen to add tags directly to the document. During the next several minutes, he tabbed between Unity, StarUML, and his text editor.

Sal, too, floated from Tumblr, to Reddit, to his phone, all the while listening to the students around him. The kind of social contact that influences students' composing processes outside the classroom very often involves movements across different social platforms nearly simultaneously. I refer to this dynamic by the term ambient sociability.

Ambient Sociability

I use the term ambient sociability to describe a context in which potential and actual interpersonal interaction exceed the level to which an individual can attend at a given time. Literacy researchers and video game designers have used the term ambient sociability to describe social presence and awareness cultivated through the use of massive online social systems (Gillen & Merchant, 2013; McGonigal, 2011; and "ambient affiliation" in Zappavigna, 2011). When social media researchers use the term ambient sociability, they describe the experience created within virtual game play or the use of a massive online system like Twitter. I build on this research, but position the term ambient sociability to refer to relations unfolding across offline and online places. Within rhetoric studies, Thomas Rickert has described ambient rhetoric as encompassing the agential conditions of rhetoric often too ephemeral to rise to human salience (2013). Rickert explores ambience as a theoretical problem for rhetoric studies, theorizing how rhetoric's emplacement creates new possibilities for invention through its own activity.

Through my concept of ambient sociability, I bring attention to the ambience in commons spaces when networked mobile devices are used. Under these conditions, some form of potential social exchange must always be ren-

dered to the background when another form or platform becomes the focus of attention. Ambient sociability is key to the negotiations of transient literacies, as well as to the ways that the passive social interactions that happen in the background of mobile surroundings become relevant to learning and development. Ambient sociability provides a new frame from which to read to interpret the social interactions that take place when we write with mobile devices, often even when students appear to be "isolated."

Sal and Micah's stories illustrate ambient sociability. Their interactive sequences suggest that they constantly negotiate interactions across multiple social platforms to which they have access. That includes people who enter the Technology Commons by walking through the door, but also those that enter through phones, laptops, social networks, and mobile messages. Neither Sal nor Micah entered the Technology Commons to find solitude or privacy because they needed to complete a writing project. Instead, they were happy to engage others during their "down time," but saw the primary locations for this interaction as online social media and direct communication channels. While both students directed attention primarily toward screens, they also frequently were aware of social potential outside their laptops and smartphones. Though they did not always attend to people within the space in ways that would be immediately recognizable as conversation, they were in tune with and often responsive to them. Observing their time spent in the café revealed a movement across layered and often competing social interfaces. Their movement across these platforms while using their mobile devices produced a rhythmic set of social interactions. Across the Gone Wired Café and the Technology Commons, participants used a rhythm of monitoring, contributing, and disengaging with people and other social resources surrounding them, creating a cycle that is visualized in Figure 4.2 and discussed in the following section.
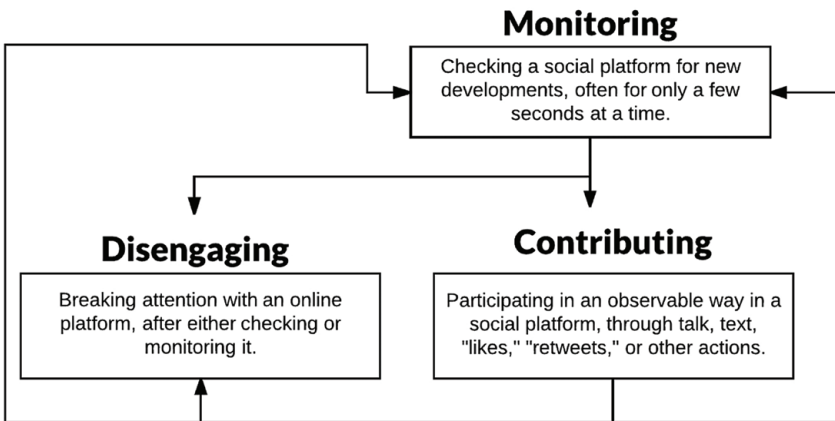

Monitoring
Checking a social platform for new developments, often for only a few seconds at a time.

Disengaging
Breaking attention with an online platform, after either checking or monitoring it.

Contributing
Participating in an observable way in a social platform, through talk, text, "likes," "retweets," or other actions.

Figure 4.2. A Cycle of attention to social platforms.

Monitoring, Contributing, and Disengaging

The literacy demands associated with networked individualism and partici-pating in networked publics shifts the requirements of how individuals ori-ent to other people. In order to participate in quickly shifting networks (as opposed to more durable communities), it is necessary to be able to move quickly, to adapt, and to find ways to interact at once with crowds, parochial or close-knit groups, and known close connections. As a result, people who participate in online networks tend to shift among and engage different plat-forms constantly. During this process, interacting with a given social platform often moves through phases of monitoring, contributing, and disengaging. By monitoring, I refer to an interaction that enables an individual to keep informed about the status of a social platform that is frequently updated with new information. Monitoring a social platform might involve frequent checks of an open browser tab in order to check for new information or notifications in a social media feed. However, it might also involve continually "tuning in" to the conversations of people located around someone sitting in a shared social site. By contributing, I refer to interactions that perform a contribu-tion to unfolding conversation in a social platform. Again, contributing might involve writing a social media comment or "liking" or "retweeting" a social media post. However, it might also mean answering a text message or joining in a social face-to-face conversation. Finally, by disengaging, I refer to inter-actions that signal moving one's attention from a particular social platform in order to turn toward another kind of social material. Disengaging might be accompanied by a practice that signals actively moving away from a platform. For example, an individual might close an active browser tab. Or, disengaging might simply mean moving attention away from one given platform and to-ward another one. For example, for Micah, disengaging from the face-to-face conversation around him was as simple as looking down to his laptop with a nonverbal gesture. In turn, this allowed him to resume working on his game development project.

The linked practices of monitoring, contributing, and disengaging may be most familiar as a way to think about how the practices of social media use typically take place. For example, social media use generally involves some combination of keeping up with changes in a social website's activity due to the influx of user contributions, providing content to a site or adding value to the contributions of others through an identifiable action (e.g., comment-ing, liking, retweeting), and then walking away. These forms of engagement are not unlike interacting with print-mediated texts through activities such as "consuming" and "producing." In social media exchanges, monitoring and disengaging are central to effectively contributing. For example, anyone who

has ever been part of an email list community can identify users who contribute without monitoring—often lumbering into the middle of an ongoing conversation without attending to how it had preceded before they arrived. Or users who fail to disengage, becoming obsessed with the incoming information flow such that they are unable to walk away from it.

These rhythms typically associated with digital participation, however, are not limited to how social interactions take place on social media platforms. The same kinds of monitoring, contributing, and disengaging take place across face-to-face and direct communication platforms as well. Just as if they were "tuning in" to Twitter briefly to get a sense of what others were saying, Sal and Micah both moved in and out of monitoring face-to-face conversations around them. As I suggested above, they also drew on materials offered by mobile technologies to disengage from interactions with strangers. Positioning those around them as potential points of information, Sal and Micah treated the social platform created by the face-to-face context surrounding them much like their social media platforms: as a feed that could be sampled and from which it was practical, and even necessary, to occasionally disengage. Sal's, Micah's, and others' passive interactions, when practices together in a social place like the Technology Commons, invited a kind of co-spectatorship. While their attention to people on social media and in present space was less purposeful than what might typically be called eavesdropping, Sal and Micah each monitored conversations around them.

As a framework for understanding the rhythm of social interaction associated with networked mobile composing, monitoring, contributing, and disengaging suggests an ongoing commitment to participation that unfolds over the course of time and involves incremental, dispersed attention distributed to particular platforms for social contact in small bursts. This looks different from the ideal of ongoing focused, direct conversation that is often assumed to ground interactions among strangers in shared social places. Instead, monitoring, contributing, and disengaging creates an iterative, reciprocal process of continued checking and occasional responding. When monitoring and contributing to social networks is conducted through mobile devices, the social contact that shapes literacy practices works itself temporally and spatially through the kitchen table, the bus, and the lecture hall in ways that are both incremental and continual. Importantly, this structure of interaction does not negate the importance of (or, I would suggest, the ability to participate in) the kinds of conversations that Bruffee and others associate with community sociability. However, the cycles of networked, mobile participation can begin to resemble an embodied mode of being. Importantly, monitoring in social media (and perhaps across social platforms) is a habit that is difficult to break, leading users through a "drift logic" in which

they begin to move without consciously intending to follow traces of online activity (Nunes, 2006). Because habits of movement are so important to this rhythm, proximities help explain why people develop orientations toward particular kinds of social interactions.

Negotiating Social Proximities with/ in Ambient Sociability

What does all of this mean for the interpersonal relations associated with and composed through transient literacies? Ambient sociability shifts the central keyword associated with the social influence on composing from "contact" to "potential." Where Cooper, LeFevre, Bruffee and theorists of the early social turn in composition studies focused centrally on direct social contact as a means for accessing resources and discourses, contexts of ambient sociability highlight the experience of cultivating and maintaining social potential: creating the possibility for social contact by constructing and then navigating the surroundings through which connections to others can be made. This work not only requires the direct contact of conversation or reading, but also indirect actions that include checking for updates in discourse and turning away from some platforms in order to tune into others. As we can see from the examples of Micah and Sal (but also from Kim, Kathryn, and Ed in previous chapters), students organizing and practicing composing negotiate an interplay between the social potential that is foregrounded and focal—the center of immediate attention—and social potential that is offloaded to the background, ready to be engaged more directly later. Proximities create familiarity or nearness that position particular kinds of materials as naturally in line with our immediate surroundings. As a result, composers often orient in familiar directions repeatedly as a result of their position relative to our habits of movement. This same dynamic is in play with people surrounding us: writers develop ways of moving and negotiating place with technology that orient them toward some and away from other forms of social potential.

To continue moving forward, I want to outline two implications of social potential for how we understand networked mobile device use. First, indirect social interactions increasingly should be understood as important to composing processes. Second, the social potential that enables mobile literacy practice increasingly exists in tension with social exclusion and isolation.

The Importance of Indirect Social Interaction

Whether "killing time" or working on focused projects, passive or indirect social interactions are important factors in composing with mobile devices.

Across social platforms in my study, participants spent more time monitoring than directly interacting with others, looking to social platforms as clouds of information that hold promise but incrementally demand attention. This describes both anonymous posters on Reddit that offer information on a topic of passing interest, as well as collections of bodies encountered because of the proximity in a room. While focused, persistent conversation among connected people remains an important form of interaction to developing ideas and texts, educators and researchers would be remiss to overlook the influence of more ephemeral and temporarily important social encounters that matter: some of these encounters involve listening and lurking rather than directly speaking.

Indirect interactions challenge many assumptions about the kinds of social encounters that are positive, useful, and necessary for successful composing. This is particularly true in dialogue with the model of conversation that Bruffee suggested be integrated into classrooms as the central pedagogical tool preparing students to externalize social discourse. The social resources described briefly by LeFevre as "resonances" and "enablers" are emerging as important to students in the practice of their everyday lives. Although metaphors such as Turkle's concept of "tethering" assume the net generation avoids unknown peer communities because of a preference toward more intimate social relations, both Sal and Micah's practices and perceptions hint at new motivations for why individuals seek social potential in common spaces—online and offline—that assemble unknown people, rather than in smaller affiliation communities.

Sal, for instance, articulated an ethic in which individuals understand their most meaningful or authentic interactions to happen outside of known peer networks because those relationships are so heavily subject to surveillance and the influence of networked systems. His purposeful strategies for social learning in crowds attempted to escape, if only in small ways, the algorithmic "filter bubbles" of homogeneity that come with life in a hypermediated and connected society (Pariser, 2011). By seeking out places that acted more as an information commons than building (and enforcing) strong awareness of known peers, Sal most highly valued interactions that pushed against the tendency toward forced consensus and groupthink that he found common in peer conversations. The result, in Sal's case, was to value indirect interactions with strangers and with online information that enabled him to apply his own information literacy skills when outside the classroom: scrolling through page after page of Reddit returns and listening in on the conversations of people around him was preferable to feeling bombarded by others' biases. In Micah's case, indirect contact was also at the forefront of out-of-school learning. Access to online commons spaces enabled him to work with his buddy on a

self-motivated learning project and his interactions in the Technology Commons suggest that he was interested in sharing his knowledge with people he didn't know well. Literacy educators and researchers should be thinking more about how these background interactions are formed and managed, as we continue to research how students engage more direct communication with peers, mentors, and others.

Social Potential in Tension with Social Exclusion

As the opening epigraph from Turkle highlighted, navigating social potential across multiple platforms often means appearing disengaged. This is particularly true when individuals attune to indirect, background social contact ahead of direct interactions. When social potential is distributed across multiple platforms and monitoring becomes just as important as contributing, it is easy to begin to imagine why students reading and writing in shared social places can appear isolated. The binary of alone/together, however, is misleading in its dismissal of the very real stakes associated with presence in online, participatory spaces. The roles and identities that students engage online are no less real and often just as high-stakes (and potentially risky and challenging) as the ones they inhabit in their life lived face to face. It is no longer useful to position online participation as a meaningless escape from the confines of physical presence: to do so is to undervalue the effects that online presence can have on learning, employment, and social relationships. Given Rainie and Wellman's emphasis on the steps individuals must take to coordinate relationships and construct social networks that will matter to their work, civic, and personal lives, it is no wonder that so many students appear glued to their phones. Those who do not take steps to understand the unfolding social potential around them or to contribute in meaningful ways may also be avoiding potential interactions with positive implications for their personal lives, careers, and civic lives. To focus only on any one social platform, whether the immediate face-to-face context or another channel for communication, is always a risk: it is a shutting down of possibilities incoming from other domains.

In response to the dominant refrain from scholars such as Turkle, it is important to emphasize that ambient sociability does not mean that students are solitary, and the interactions that take place as a result of this context also may not be motivated by an interest in avoiding opportunities for contact. Rather, ambient sociability means that keeping up with cultivating the potential for contact also always means the risk of being inundated with social interactions—so much so that some form of potential exchange is always relegated to the background or reserve. This might be the ubiquitous Facebook feed or

SMS text barrage entering through one's mobile phone that fades to the background during a collaborative work session or conversation, or it might be the in-person buzz of conversation that temporarily becomes the background when one directs focus to a computer screen. In both cases, it is necessary to move back and forth from one to the other and to adjust attention constantly (Stone, 2007). Even when attention is directed entirely toward a mobile device screen, social potential is divided among a collection of mundane texts from social outlets. Incoming messages shift continually and how to direct attention is not obvious. As a result, what may appear to be "social isolation" from the outside may actually be the mechanisms through which individuals deal with social abundance, enacting the attention structures that they have developed for moving back and forth among always layered social streams and different forms of engagement expected across social platforms. At the same time, it is important to maintain a sense of the problems and challenges that ambient sociability poses for students in everyday life: "FOMO" or fear of missing out on life shared on screen is a powerful material that many students carry through their experiences with mobile devices.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Sociability of Transient Literacies in Action

This chapter has focused on some of the social platforms, arrangements, and practices that are central to networked mobile composing to which students adapt and adjust as a transient literacy practice. These literacies are meaningful not only because they affect composing in the moment but also because they continually invent the social environments that surround networked mobile device use. Both within and outside classrooms, these social interactions are frequently invoked as evidence of the social isolation of mobile device users; however, educators and researchers have reason to challenge some of these assumptions.

As educators, we may find that students who have become habituated into network-centric social models may perceive direct, focused conversation as antithetical to the shuttling social movement across platforms that is central to how they must cultivate social potential. With faces downturned to device screens, a resistance to direct conversation may be inevitable. As educators and writing studies scholars responding to this moment, it is important to remember that actively managing social interactions is central to transient literacy practices. When using networked, mobile devices, the social surrounding comprised of both people and information is not an aspect of literacy practice that can be assumed but instead one that students must continually participate in co-constructing. The act of assembling social influence means

making difficult choices about how to orient oneself toward other people and information, and this is a risk that plays out across students' choices about participation in both online and offline spaces.

Locating oneself in an environment with high social potential is always risky, and this is the case for both online communities and local shared spaces. The dynamics of place, mobility, and technological mediation that intersect in the ambient sociability of shared spaces like cafés, coffee houses, and libraries heightens attention to less explicitly organized social influences that resonate: the social potential that exists around us but that it is our own responsibility to seek out. Rather than assuming that the only generative social actions are those that stem from direct connection with a given community of practice, ambient sociability implies a "nomadic thinking" (Creswell, 2006) in which resonances that influence may come from outside a community's accepted boundaries. We can see that students such as Sal and Micah interact across physically proximal and virtual places to which they connected through mobile devices. Sal and Micah's examples illustrate how social interactions with peers—distant and co-present, direct and ephemeral—are not only mediated by mobile devices and networked software but also by lived experiences in these kinds of places. Of course, these resonances can be distracting—in both the embodied and intellectual sense of the "noise" they create for writers, as well as for the common places that we share with others. In Chapter 5, I continue this discussion by focusing on composers' co-production of attention with their mobile devices and surroundings.