Molly’s experiences with her class are not ultimately surprising to me. Her students’ enthusiasm, as well as her claim that students actually wrote better in her class because of the focus on sex and sexuality, corroborates much of my own experiences, as I will detail throughout this book. But more broadly, Molly’s students’ interest in writing and sex/uality and in exploring sexual literacies parallels trends in “extracurricular” student writing—writing that takes place outside the classroom, in student newspapers and in a variety of online venues. As noted in the preceding chapter, discourses about sex and sexuality permeate our society, but we also need to keep in mind that the “ecologies” in which those discourses take place are significant in constructing their ideological contents and shaping their reception. Anthropologist Dorinda Welle notes that when we talk about the “transmission” of information about sexuality, we must think about the many different ways in which information about sex and sexuality is transmitted and the many different contexts and reasons for such transmission. For instance, sex educators working with youth may be particularly invested in transmitting information about health and disease, but many young people are much more invested in transmitting information about culture when speaking and communicating with one another (Herdt et al. 2006). As such, understanding the dynamics of the transmission of information about sex and sexuality can contribute significantly to our understanding of how discourses of sex are not only disseminated but also constructed. Where, how, and why people talk about sex says much about both their understanding of sex and their sexual literacy. In the broadest ways, information about sex and sexuality are transmitted both “officially” and “informally.” “Officially,” discourses of sex are shaped in educational, governmental, and religious contexts. “Informally,” such discourses are constructed in exchanges between individuals and groups in less structured settings.

Indeed, students learn a variety of literacies, not all of which are developed in school settings. Many are part of students’ “underlife,” the often-rich milieu in which students socialize, work, and learn from
one another, as well as popular culture. Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher’s *Literate Lives in the Information Age* is among the most important books in our field to advocate for studying students’ extracurricular literacies: “Today, the ability to write well—and to write well with computers and within digital environments—plays an enormous role in determining whether students can participate and succeed in the life of school, work, and community. Despite their growing importance, however, we really know very little about how and why people have acquired and developed, or failed to acquire and develop, the literacies of technology during the past 25 years or so” (2004, 2).

Scholars such as Selfe and Hawisher, among a growing number of others in the field of computers and composition, have done much to forward the study of young people’s literacies, particularly as such are mediated through the new communications technologies. In terms of literacies about sex and sexuality, such venues are a rich source of knowledge, opinion, insight, and literacy development. Without a doubt, the Internet in particular offers us a significant venue for examining a less formal exchange of information, ideas, insights, and beliefs about sex and sexuality—a venue frequently far less “regulated” and “disciplined” than more formal contexts, such as the classroom.

In the introduction and chapter 1, we examined some of the more compelling theoretical connections between sexuality and literacy, suggesting that sexuality studies offers us useful ways of thinking about their intertwining in contemporary Anglo-American culture and politics. In this chapter, I would like to move our attention to the “real world” in which discussions of sexuality take place. More specifically, I want to take a look at some of the venues in which many of our students—those most likely to take our college-level first-year composition courses—are likely to encounter, participate in, and engage discourses and literacies about sexuality. To do this, this chapter examines some student writing outside the composition classroom—in blogs, on Web sites, in student newspapers, and other forums—that demonstrates not only a profound interest in sexuality but an emerging critical awareness of the importance of “sexual literacy”—of developing a fluency with sexuality as an important set of “secondary discourses” through which individuals and groups understand themselves, question normalizations, and potentially find agency. Student writers are variously concerned with significant issues, such as sexual health, reproduction, sex and the media, and the possibilities and potential perils of polyamory. In contrast, I then turn
attention briefly to a variety of popular and frequently used composition textbooks and readers to demonstrate how our field overlooks the connection between sexuality and literacy in some of its primary pedagogical materials. The goal of such analyses is both to demonstrate the gaps in addressing sexual literacy in our current composition practices and to highlight some of the ways in which student writers themselves are showing us how to approach such a connection. I conclude with an example of an instructor trying to help his students—and himself—bridge that gap.

**STUDENTS WRITING (ABOUT) SEX**

A “column” in the mock newspaper *The Onion*, which offers completely fabricated and highly satirical news items, highlights concern about young people’s sexuality—and their willingness to talk, and write, about it. The article, entitled “College Sophomore Thinks She Would Make a Good Sex Columnist” (September 15, 2004; http://www.theonion.com/content/node/30713), depicts the view of “Lisbet ‘Lizzie’ Gilchrist, a second-year undergraduate at Penn State University, [who] told reporters that she has the makings of a good sex-advice columnist.” The report continues humorously:

> "Whenever I read a sex column in a magazine or newspaper, I always think, ‘I could totally write this,’” said Gilchrist, a 19-year-old undeclared major. “I’m always giving advice to my friends about what kind of condoms to get, or whether you should use lube or not. I’m not afraid to discuss things other people are too embarrassed to talk about.”

Although she isn’t old enough to drink alcohol, Gilchrist can identify the major kinds of sex toys, knows what “frottage” is, and understands the subtleties of bringing herself to climax.

> “Sex is as natural a part of life as birth or death,” Gilchrist said. “People shouldn’t be so weird about it. I lay it on the line. Penis, vagina—I’m not afraid to tell it like it is.”

The aspiring sexpert said she would draw from her own experiences to compose solid, reliable sex-advice columns.

> “I’ve been in some pretty crazy situations,” said Gilchrist, who is currently single but has had three relationships and five sexual partners. “So many college sex columnists—like the one who writes for *The Daily Collegian*—sound like they’re copying out of a human sexuality textbook. Well, I’d talk about real-life experiences. Believe me, I’ve had plenty of them.”
While obviously poking fun at concern over late-adolescent, college-aged students’ sexual activity, this satirical article rightly suggests that students do talk about sex and sexuality—and that many are eager and willing to do so. Campus newspapers are one source among many in which students discuss, debate, and share information and ideas about sex and sexuality.

Indeed, a number of venues exist in which a variety of college-aged students talk about issues of sex and sexuality. In the following survey, I can highlight only a few, and I do not at all intend this to be either a comprehensive or “scientific” analysis of the forums or their content. Rather, I hope to be suggestive of the extent to which many of our students are processing—and processing intelligently and in sophisticated ways—issues of sex and sexuality.

Several Web sites offer young people with Internet access the opportunity to discuss sex, ask questions about sex and sexuality, and share information and ideas. College Sex Advice, for instance, at http://www.collegesexadvice.com/, serves as a clearinghouse for information about sex and sexuality, while College Sex Talk at http://www.collegesextalk.com/ is, according to its site, “intended to be a serious forum on human sexuality for college students across the country. CollegeSexTalk™ provides students with a place to discuss what really matters to them.” Other comparable sites include Scarletteen at http://www.scarletteen.com/ and Teensource at http://www.teensource.org/. Of all of these sites, Campushook at http://www.campushook.com/ has an extended sex advice site, targeting teens and college-aged kids, ages thirteen to twenty-four, and seems as though it is run by young adults. In this case, then, other college-aged or near college-aged Web writers are helping to construct a usable, meaningful, and audience-aware sexual literacy for other traditionally college-aged students.

A bit more radically, Advocates for Youth at http://www.advocatesforyouth.org actually encourages students to become actively involved in promoting literacy about sexuality:

Feel passionate about reproductive and sexual health rights? Looking to become more engaged in student activism? Interested in organizing for comprehensive sex education and HIV prevention on your campus?

Then apply to be a Campus Organizer with Advocates for Youth’s Youth Activist Network!
Youth Activist Network Campus Organizers serve as activists, advocates, and spokespeople on issues of youth’s sexual and reproductive health. Campus Organizers work with the staff of the Youth Activist Network, running one Advocates for Youth’s Rights Respect Responsibility® campaigns on their campus and in their local area. Currently, the Youth Activist Network has two campaigns. The Keep it REAL Campaign focuses on securing comprehensive education in the United States that is science-based, medically accurate, and age appropriate. The Fix the GAP Campaign focuses on advocating for young people’s right, worldwide, to comprehensive HIV prevention and education. You can find out more about these campaigns at http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/advocacy/yan/index.htm.

One of Advocates’ campaigns, for instance, is a contest for youth interested in creating artwork that is effective in promoting and demonstrating correct condom usage. Such a site and contest attempt to increase students’ and young people’s sexual literacy by actively engaging them in the production of educational materials about sex.

Besides such sites, generally created by older adults and nonstudents, other sites, particularly social networking sites, provide forums in which students can post profiles, share information, create social networks, and construct a variety of ironic, satiric, parodic, or ludic critiques on a diversity of subjects in a variety of ways. Prominent social networking sites include Friendster, MySpace, and Facebook. Of these, Facebook is particularly targeted to and used by college students. (As of this writing, not all U.S. universities are represented by Facebook, but the site designers’ goal is to be as inclusive as possible.) According to the Facebook Web site at http://www.facebook.com,

Facebook is a social directory that enables people to share information. Launched in February 2004, Facebook helps people better understand their world by giving them access to the information that is most relevant to them.

Facebook’s website has grown to over 7.5 million people and, according to comScore, ranks as the seventh-most trafficked site in the United States. People with a valid email address from a supported college, high school or company can register for Facebook and create a profile to share information, photos, and interests with their friends. (http://uc.facebook.com/profile.php?id=21414242)

Angus Loten, writing for Inc.com, notes that
Two years ago, as a junior at Harvard, Zuckerberg developed software to help fellow students trade photos and jokes, rant on any topic they pleased, or just say “hi”—creating a searchable database of personal profiles exclusively for the college set.

It caught on. Facebook, the company he co-founded and ultimately left school to run full time, is now the seventh-most trafficked U.S. website, according to comScore Media Metrix. The site connects seven million (and counting) registered users at colleges and high schools across the globe—a full 80% of the student social-networking market. (http://www.inc.com/30under30/zuckerberg.html)

The success of Facebook is undeniable, and odds are that a majority of your students use Facebook at least to some extent.

To learn a little more about Facebook, I set up a Facebook page, using my university email account, and I was surprised that some students were eager to “network” with me. As I sifted through their pages, and their friends’ pages, I was surprised to find quite a bit of clever “sex talk.” Much of such “sex talk” involved ribald jokes and corny put-downs using sexualized language, but I was surprised to see how students would critique one another about a variety of sexual issues through message boards, on which users can leave messages for fellow students. While some sexist and homophobic language inevitably appears on such message boards, it was also interesting to see comments that would critique posted pictures and identified interests, asking fellow students to be more considerate in their self-representation. For instance, homophobic and sexist language, when it appears, will frequently elicit disapproving comments on message boards or in spaces in which students can comment on posted pictures. Such comments serve to develop, I believe, a discourse asking all of us to be more mindful about the way in which we use sexualized language.

Scholarly treatment of such social networking sites is just beginning, and interestingly enough, many of those writing about sites such as Facebook are particularly concerned with how such sites expose students to the possibility of exploitation, sexual and otherwise. For instance, Professor William P. Banks from East Carolina University, in a posting on TechRhet, offered the following cautionary example:

One of the more recently interesting things about Facebook to me is that it now allows users to have picture galleries, and you can post pics and link those pics to others on Facebook who are in the picture. As my students
noted the other day, they have no control over the pictures their friends put up of them. If they weren’t linked, that would be one thing, but since they are, seemingly anonymous friends in our pictures are now linked to lots of information. My student had complained that all the pictures her friends put up of her show her drunk—so yeah, funny to her friends, but not necessarily to her. And then the students mentioned that the campus police last semester had found pictures of students in dorms with bottles and clearly smoking pot or doing other drugs; they then somehow used that as evidence against the students to remove them from the dorms, possibly suspend them from school. This last part I never heard of, so maybe that’s urban legend, but I’m intrigued by how MySpace and Facebook are getting our students hyper-aware of their images and how they’re posted online.

Banks turns the potential personal hazard to pedagogical use, suggesting the “teachable moment” about visual rhetoric in students’ use of Facebook. Such attention to visual rhetoric has obvious connections to sexual visual literacy as well. For instance, a commentator for the online magazine *Computer World* notes one particular danger in representing yourself through Facebook in an overtly sexualized manner: “Search engines might not find your risqué profile on social-networking sites like Facebook.com, but that doesn’t mean it’s hidden from recruiters. Chris Hughes, a spokesman for Facebook, says he’s heard that recruiters with alumni e-mail addresses log in to look up job candidates who attended the same school” (http://www.computerworld.com/careertopics/careers/story/0,10801,107810,00.html?source=x10). Along such lines, others worry about the uses of social networking sites to post sexual pictures, to facilitate sexual stalking, and to promote various forms of hate speech. Facebook, fortunately, allows users to enable a variety of privacy features, and the reported incidence of criminal misuse of sites like Facebook is low.

Still, the sites are used to facilitate a variety of discourses about sex and sexuality. In one of the few scholarly articles on such sites, “Friendster and Publicly Articulated Social Networking,” Danah Boyd wrote in 2004 that “[w]hile Friendster users are typically 20–something, educated city dwellers, their social and sexual interests are quite diverse. As such, they bring vastly different intentions and expectations to the site.” Content of profiles on Friendster is determined in part by the site design: “A Friendster Profile consists of five primary elements: 1) demographic information; 2) interest and self-description prose; 3)
picture(s); 4) Friend listings; 5) Testimonials. While providing both the individual’s perspective of self as well as that of their Friends is beneficial, the Profile is still a coarse representation of the individual, which provides a limited and often skewed perspective.” Facebook is comparable, prompting students to provide very similar information, though my sense of the sites is different than Boyd’s, particularly when it comes to the representation of sex and sexuality. Facebook users, for instance, are required to choose either “male” or “female” as their gender and have only recently been able to select both “men” and “women” when declaring whom they are “interested in.” Further, there is no “relationship” option for “domestic partner,” so men and women in such arrangements (whether same gender or not) have to choose “married” or “it’s complicated.” Still, creative transgender and bisexual students, as well as those in domestic partner relationships, can find intriguing ways around such representational limitations, built into the template itself. For instance, students have wide latitude in posting pictures and making comments, so trans- and bi-erasure can be mitigated to a large extent. And students do post such pictures and make such comments. And inevitably, as Boyd points out, such sites are used to “hook up”: “In all online dating sites, people surf for hookups as well as potential partners. While the implied theory is that friends-of-friends are the most compatible partners, hookups use the network in a different manner. Many users looking for hookups prefer to be three or four degrees away so as to not complicate personal matters. In addition to in-town hookups, Friendster users tell me that they also use the site to find hookups when traveling.” I cannot help but believe that Facebook is used in comparable ways. But does Facebook help promote in any significant way students’ sexual literacy?

Some students have begun writing and publishing articles about social networking sites such as Facebook. In the Oxford Student, for instance, the article “Sex and the Net” offers telling and often satiric commentary about the potential sexual uses—and misuses—of Facebook-type sites: “Obviously sex has its own special place in networks. As there are the socially promiscuous, so there are also the sexually promiscuous. The boy who manages to maintain a high score and the girl who lets her defences down all too easily, have the hub-like role in a sex net that the socialite fulfills in society. Rather unfairly it may seem though, a male hub gains a reputation as a stud whilst a female hub is vilified as a slag” (http://www.oxfordstudent.com/ht2006wk5/Features/sex_and_the_net).
What I appreciate about this commentary is its attention to issues of representation and sexuality, and how representations of sexuality are inevitably double-edged. They can be both scintillating and dangerous, particularly as individuals are divided into sexually stigmatized groups, studs or slags. At the same time, users who are using sites such as Facebook to “hook up” need to know information about their potential partners. How does one—a user or a site designer—create a profile that will be true to one’s needs, interests, and potential deficits without reinforcing the use of sex to shame others—or, as the author puts it, “to ridicule one another.” Considering such question is a significant aspect of developing one’s sexual literacy.

Such thinking raises the issue of potential pedagogical uses of Facebook and other social networking sites in promoting sexual literacy, and some instructors are already thinking along such lines. Sydney Duncan at the University of Alabama reported that she has used Facebook pedagogically to help students interrogate gender issues and those promote their sexual literacy. In an email to me she reported: “I’ve been on the Facebook as a faculty member since Spring 05, when I realized all our FYC students were obsessed with it. I used it that semester in my 102 course to talk about gender, identity, and presentation of self. I had several pretty good papers using it to analyze representations of masculinity on the University of Alabama campus.” Along such lines, I have used Facebook myself in class to demonstrate potential bisexual and transgender erasure in Facebook’s requirement that users identify as either male or female. Other possibilities of using Facebook to examine, interrogate, and further sexual literacy remain enticingly open.

Besides such Web sites, which are primarily set up and run by older adults, a number of college and university newspapers, many available online, frequently present student-written articles on a wide variety of sex and sexuality issues and topics. It is in these newspapers that we find an increasing sophistication in the discussion of sex and sexuality. At first glance, sex advice seems a common and popular topic, and articles on such advice frequently include important information about safer sex practices. For instance, Ty McMahan reported in the February 14, 2006, Daily Oklahoman, “Student Newspaper Addition Promotes Safe Sex” (http://www.aegis.com/news/ads/2006/AD060273.html).

As part of National Condom Week, the staff of the University of Oklahoma’s student newspaper hand-placed about 10,000 condoms on Monday’s edition.
Oklahoma Daily staffers worked late into the night to tape condoms on the issue, which was complemented by stories about sex education and the need for condom dispensers in OU’s dormitories.

An editorial said the paper was not trying to promote sex by providing condoms. “In actuality, we are hoping to encourage students, faculty and staff to practice safer sex if they decide to have sex at all,” it read.

Other typical kinds of articles include such as those by Kate Prengaman, whose “Behind Closed Doors” advocates the importance of communication in keeping a sex life open, honest, and interesting (http://flathat.wm.edu/2003–11–14/story.php?type=3&aid=17):

We all know that communication is the key to healthy relationships. Amazingly, this is one of the few thing learned in middle school health class that actually matters in real life. A healthy, happy sex life is absolutely dependent on communication. This necessary skill comes in many essential varieties, but they all fall into two main categories: talking about sex and talking during sex.

Talking about sex tends to be slightly less entertaining then talking during sex, which is obvious, since there’s not actual sex involved. Even so, this is a critical part of any and every relationship. . . . Talk about your fantasies, your favorite positions, the best foreplay to get you going—the more you talk about sex openly, the better your sex will be.

Occasionally, more radical advice surfaces. In NeoVox, the “International Online Student Magazine” at http://www.neo-vox.org/, a recent article entitled “Psst . . . Pass the Handcuffs” offered advice on safe and consensual sexual bondage play. NeoVox, like many such efforts and other student newspapers, has as its primary stated goal “to allow students from around the world to learn from one another through new media while developing effective means of communication and design skills.” More specifically, as the site maintains, “NeoVox is a forum for world dialogue, bringing together college students from multiple international locations. Here, we show our artwork, share our poetry and short stories, comment on the political world, critique the arts, and discuss life.” Sex advice is an important topic for students, and students can “learn from one another” about a variety of safer sex and pleasuring techniques in such venues.

At times, such advice comes in the form of useful warnings. For instance, Mani O’Brien at Arizona State University reports on the
potential dangers of public sex in “Sex: Banging in the Bathroom” (February 2, 2006; http://www.statepress.com/issues/2006/02/07/arts/695524, ):

While some may be appalled by the thought of getting down in a dirty public restroom, . . . it has become the equivalent of joining the “mile-high club” for the college set. Maloney’s bartender Renee Miller says such encounters are common, especially on slow nights. “People get drunk and they’ll drag each other into the stalls,” says Miller, who has worked at Maloney’s for over a year. She says usually no one attempts to stop the couples, depending on whether other people complain about it.

“If it’s a good customer, then whatever,” she says. “But if it’s loud and out of control then we’ll knock on the door and ask them to come out.” According to art sophomore Aubrie Oliver, public restrooms are one of many popular sites for horny college students.

“I’ve seen people having sex in public, on more than one occasion,” she says. “They do it in all sorts of places; movies, parks, public bathrooms, parking lots, the list goes on.”

Such frank discussion about actual sex acts makes many people uncomfortable—and that discomfort is the subject itself of some newspaper reportage, particularly in the “adult” media. Martha Irvine recently wrote about “Sex Columnists Causing a Stir on College Campuses” (http://www.seacoastonline.com/2002news/09142002/world/24123.htm) and a report in USA Today by Mary Beth Marklein noted that “Sex is Casual at College Papers” (http://www.usatoday.com/life/2002–11–14-casual-sex_x.htm).

Certainly, the very act of talking in public forums about sex in direct, explicit, and even engaging ways seems boundary-pushing for many in our culture. These students are “outing” sex as a not-so-strictly private issue, and their open discussion suggests their investment in providing information about both sexual health and safety and sexual pleasure. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, when abstinence-only education essentially limits many young people’s access to reliable information about safer sex, contraception, and alternative sexualities in the United States, these students are resisting a seeming unwillingness to discuss sex and sexuality openly and publicly. Furthermore, their interest in talking about pleasure is not just licentious; I believe it signals a move in the discourse about sex and sexuality, as Gilbert Herdt puts it, from sexual identities to sexual rights (Herdt et al. 2006). In writing in
these ways about sex, these students are participating in the construction and dissemination of discourses about sexuality that advocate for open exchange of information about sexual health as well as the right to enjoy actively sexual experiences, desires, and encounters. Participating in the shaping of such discourses constitutes these young writers’ sexual literacy.

In some newspapers, we find articles that pick up directly on the subject of sexual literacy, and writers interrogate sex not just as a private exchange between individuals but as embedded deeply and inextricably in our conception of ourselves as social and political beings. For instance, student writers at Canada’s Dalhousie University are moving in their articles and columns beyond sex advice and speaking intelligently and sophisticatedly at times about sex in its social dimensions. In “Sex, I Say, Isn’t Just about Getting It On,” Chris LaRoche, editor in chief of The Gazette, Dalhousie University’s student newspaper, wrote on February 23, 2006, to introduce his paper’s annual “sex issue”:

A good chunk of this week’s issue of The Gazette, as you may have noticed, is dedicated to discussing, analyzing, and exploring sex.

So-called “sex issues” are a campus media staple. (To pull a totally random example out of my hat, The Gazette has been publishing one annually for at least ten years). Normally, the format has been simple: include a bunch of first-person narratives about relationships, put in a few raunchy articles painting differences between the sexes in broad strokes (include puns), and throw something on the cover that’s as Playboy as the print shop will allow.

With any luck, this year’s sex issue will be different. And while I haven’t decided to kill the cliché [sic] and forgo a sex issue altogether, The Gazette’s sex-mandate is certainly different this time around.

Instead of focusing on sex the verb, this issue adopts a broader definition of sex—in a social context.

It’s a definition of sex that includes gender identity, the changing nature of relationships, and the dangers of sexual harassment.

And it’s a definition that readers should take seriously—because in the face of our MTV/glossy mag-laden popular culture, it is not being given the attention it needs. . . .

Sexual attraction indeed has very real physical ramifications. But sex is ultimately derived from the mind, and how it combines physical and intellectual presence. Sex is a social phenomenon that follows us around as long as we interact with other human beings. How we define ourselves sexually be this through our gender, our attraction to others, how we dress, how we
think, or even how we kiss inevitably changes that interaction.

Books like *Tropic of Cancer* are important to this broader definition of sex—because it needs to be discussed more, in the open, and its adherents must not fear persecution.

In an age when homophobia is still rampant—despite Ang Lee’s best efforts—women are still not treated equally, and public sexual discourses are still widely discouraged, such a dialogue should not be forgotten and buried underneath stacks of *FHM* and *Seventeen*.

Audience, after all, is everything; an audience that prefers image over content and ignorance over discussion will eventually find itself in dire straights. Confused, it might end up banning *Tropic of Cancer* all over again. And we don’t want that, do we? (http://www.dalgazette.ca/html/module/display-story/story_id/917/format/print/displaystory.print)

Other student writers express concern with media literacy and its impact on sexual literacy. In *The Edinburgh Student*, “the oldest student newspaper in Britain,” “staffed entirely by student volunteers,” Gabrielle Koronka and Naomi de Berker exchange a debate about “Media Whoring”: “As naked bodies writhe on our screens and teenage pregnancy is on the up, we ask is there too much sex in advertising? Gabrielle Koronka argues that the media go too far, while Naomi de Berker says we should embrace this ancient tradition” (http://www.studentnewspaper.org/view_article.php?article_id=20040913135211).

Perhaps some of the most sophisticated and at times unusual discussions of sexuality occur in Harvard University’s controversial student journal *H Bomb* (http://www.h-bomb.org/). According to its Web site, *H Bomb*

[i]sn’t quite what you expected, is it? It isn’t porn, that’s for sure. We did say we were making a lit and arts magazine, after all—it’s just that nobody believed us. It seems that, in the popular conscience, smart is not sexy and sexy is not smart. Harvard students are obviously too busy overachieving to have or even think about sex. Likewise, a “magazine about sex” must obviously be some kind of euphemism for pages and pages of porn. If *H Bomb* has a philosophy (beyond a simple and naive wish to just exist), it is that somewhere beyond porn and beyond esoteric scholarly inquiry there is a happy medium where intellectual is sexy and hot is genius, where a “Harvard sex magazine” is not a mythical entity but a pleasantly tangible reality.

This first issue is full of art and probably contains a lot more text than anyone expected. And we hope that you’ll find it at least a little sexy. After all,
there’s more to sex than pictures of naked women—even if they are Harvard women, who can be pretty damn hot. And if you feel that there isn’t enough nudity in the magazine, we agree completely. We like naked boys and girls who are sexy and fun and in love with each other and each other’s bodies and don’t mind telling everybody so—just try explaining that to career-minded Harvard students.

Combining soft-core erotica with theoretically dense musings on sex and sexuality, *H Bomb* is often a bizarre mix of philosophy, personal narrative, and art. Discussions in articles range from the pragmatic (“better condoms = better sex”) to the sexual profile (“sexually-liberated urban twenty-something”) to philosophical discussion (“art vs. porn”). In many ways, *H Bomb* is among the richest examples of how students are engaging in complex sexual literacies to explore sex as highly personal, thickly cultural, and densely political.

Discussion of sex in college newspapers has caused some concern among faculty, administrators, parents, and even some students, leading some schools to ban issues on sex or to censor articles on sexuality. Of many possible examples of censorship, the following is fairly typical. Kavia Kumar reported in February 2006: “Avila U. Student Newspaper Removed Because of Sex Issue” (http://www.stltoday.com/blogs/news-random-play/2006/02/avila-u-student-newspaper-removed-because-of-sex-issue/print/):

The student newspaper at WashU didn’t receive any repercussions for its risque “sex issue” this week, but another student newspaper at a different Missouri university has.

According to news reports, Avila University, a Catholic school in Kansas City, removed copies of its monthly student newspaper, *The Talon*, from campus because of articles about premarital sex and birth control.

The cover apparently had a picture of unzipped pants. Other stories included items on one-night stands.

The university issued the following statement: “The newspaper is an institution-sponsored publication. After careful consideration, the publication was removed from circulation because it was inconsistent with the values of the institution.”

Competing discourses of religion and social conservatism often attempt to squelch or recast discourses of sexuality to demonize them.

While some writing in such papers may rankle conservatives and
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challenge social norms and boundaries, arguments in favor of publishing articles on explicitly sexual topics or sexuality maintain that open discussion is inevitably preferable to censoring. In “Students Debating the Issue of ‘Sex Talk’ in College Newspapers,” student writer Joseph Riippi considers a controversial case in which *The Flat Hat*, the College of William and Mary’s student newspaper, published an explicit article in its weekly “Behind Closed Doors” sex column, entitled “Balls: Lick ’em and Love ’em” (http://www.musicforamerica.org/node/76856). Apparently, the article was controversial enough to catch the attention of conservative thinker and author David Brooks, who has long taken an interest in the “liberalization” of American higher education, and the pundit mentioned the article in a column in the *New York Times*. Some opponents considered the article “obscene” and called for action based on obscenity laws, and some faculty wondered about the appropriateness of students offering sexual advice to others if the students are not professional experts. The article’s author neatly summarizes some of the opposing views:

Arguments against the column have always centered on the column as being too explicit, encouraging of pre-marital sex, or representing the College in a negative light. I myself became a topic of conversation when in several of my columns I used the word “fuck.” My boss at a campus job said some of her co-workers felt it was extremely inappropriate for a newspaper that prospective students read as an indicator of the school in general to contain any obscenities. It might paint for the prospective students a poor picture of the College. Later the Reviews section of *The Flat Hat*, in which my column appeared, received an email that read simply, “Dear Flat Hat—Fuck you.”

My attitude then, and my attitude now, is that, well, college students say “fuck,” they have sex, and if there is a student newspaper, it shouldn’t tailor to the needs of anyone but the students. Freedom of the press, Freedom of speech, etc. However, the faculty member who authored the letter to the newspaper seemed to think otherwise. . . .

I find it hard to believe that the Virginia State Legislature would revoke funding to one of its public universities because of a column in which a student gives sex advice to other students. And whether or not it does in fact violate VA’s obscenity laws is unclear. As for the science, I believe it only strengthens the fact that sex is not something to be taken lightly—never does the columnist advocate sleeping around, rather she has acknowledged that sex is something meant only for those deeply in love, and she advocates waiting for marriage if you believe in waiting. And in any case, the issue at hand
is not whether or not sex is a good idea, or whether or not “fuck” is a bad word. Rather it is whether or not they should be discussed in the print of a college newspaper.

At the same time, he notes that creating silence around issues of sex and sexuality can only serve to mystify sexuality, and thus reduce what I would call students’ critical engagement with sexual literacy: “I agree that a sex column, or the incidence of the word ‘fuck’ in a campus newspaper paints a somewhat negative light of a college for prospective students, or perhaps more correctly, for their parents. But I also believe that even if it is more negative, it is a more honest and more real picture. The College of William and Mary does not offer a journalism program, therefore *The Flat Hat* is run entirely by students, and is thus a reflection of the students’ lives, not an advertisement for the college. What should it be?”

We might expand the concluding question by asking, if *The Flat Hat* is a “reflection of the students’ lives,” then why should it not also be a reflection of their emerging literacies about their sexuality, one of the key components of contemporary personal, social, and political identity? Moreover, such writing shows us that students are making connections between discourses of sexuality and the kinds of literacy and critical thinking practices that will empower them to be agents in their own lives and their own communities. They seem intent on developing sexual literacy as an important “secondary discourse.”

**TEXTBOOK SEX, OR IS THERE ANY SEX IN THIS CLASS?**

My own experience as a writing instructor and as director of a large state university composition program is that issues of sex and sexuality are not widely—or well—represented or taken up for consideration in first-year writing courses. But this was just my hunch. In an effort to find out more, some colleagues and I undertook a research project investigating a variety of composition texts, believing that, in these books, we could see what kinds of subjects and topics writing instructors are most likely—and most likely not—discussing in their courses. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2006, Martha Marinara, William P. Banks, Samantha Blackmon, and I presented some of our initial research on the treatment of sexuality, particularly LGBT sexualities and identities, in first-year composition readers. To develop a sense of
Beyond Textbook Sexuality

how typical first-year composition textbooks present and treat issues of sexuality, we contacted the four major publishers of FYC texts (Pearson-Longman, Bedford/St. Martin’s, Houghton-Mifflin, and Norton) and asked about the “best sellers” these companies produce. Our initial goal was to examine the consideration of LGBT and queer content, but I also surveyed the texts to see how issues of sex and sexuality more broadly are covered. Our decision to focus first on LGBT and queer content arose from our collective experience that many readers primarily situate issues of sexuality as queer issues; that is, if we are in our society participating in discourses about sexuality, then we are most likely talking about nonheterosexual issues and people. My colleagues and I are preparing a report based on our larger survey, so I will summarize here some of our more relevant findings.

Specifically, we reported that “[o]f the 290 readers examined, only 73 texts included readings with identifiable queer content.” And indeed, as we suspected, that content accounted for nearly all of the references to sex and sexuality, with few exceptions such as a handful of articles on sex education (one written by a student, in fact). Moreover, queer authors are rarely identified as such—an omission we find disturbing since it contributes to the ongoing erasure of LGBT identities in our culture; while race and ethnicity are deserving of marking, queerness often isn’t considered as relevant—or as worthy. Our most important findings focused on how college-level composition textbooks, particularly readers, offer an increasing spate of texts on race and ethnicity, complementing diverse readings on gender, but readings on queer lives seem relegated to periodic “coming-out” narratives and debates about gay marriage. Further, we argue that

the placement of queer readings and texts, when they appear, is illuminating, particularly for how students are invited to understand such texts, and their issues, rhetorically. For instance, in The Bedford Reader, queerness appears in a pair of readings inviting debate on same-sex marriage. Katha Pollitt’s “What’s Wrong with Gay Marriage?” and Charles Colson’s “Gay ‘Marriage’: Societal Suicide” appear in a section designed to spark debate about this often divisive issue. Interestingly, such a strategy is not uncommon in many texts; gay marriage is positioned primarily as a subject for binaristic argument, with little room for compromise or negotiation.

As someone who has recently published a first-year writing textbook, including a set of readings, I was not especially surprised by these
findings. In fact, when my coauthor, Margaret Barber, and I were debating with our editor about what kinds of readings (including screen shots from Web sites and other graphics) to include, we were told that we had selected too many that had too much to do with sex and sexuality. We managed to include one student-written essay about gays in the Boy Scouts, screen shots from a student-composed Web site about AIDS and college students (a “prevention/information” site, actually), and other short essays about gender (women’s representation on the Web) and related images/visuals. But no more. We, apparently, had talked enough about sex, and we were warned that student and instructor resistances might negatively impact book sales.

If we compare the treatment of sex and sexuality in college newspapers with comparable articles in first-year composition texts, we see that students writing in newspapers about sex do so not only with greater explicitness, but also, in many ways, with greater sophistication. These student writers certainly offer at times explicit advice, but their willingness to discuss sex in its social contexts—including, for instance, issues of censorship, sex in the media, and ideological differences between erotic art and porn—reveals an awareness of what I have been calling sexual literacy, a sense of sex not just as a private act but as connected to fundamental dimensions of identity, issues of social ideology, and aspects of political reality. Further, the sheer diversity of topics covered suggests a rich engagement with sex, sexuality, and sexual literacy. In many ways, then, the treatment of sex and sexuality in composition textbooks seems impoverished by comparison. While a first-year reader might offer a relatively safe and inexplicit gay male coming-out story, an article in a college newspaper, written by a college student, might tackle in graphic ways the experience of gay bashing and the social dimensions of homophobia that enable one person to lash out viciously against another. Certainly the latter is a far richer exploration of the intersections among the sexual, the social, and the political, and it contributes more substantively to cultivating an ability to talk in informed, complex, and critical ways about sexuality—true “sexual literacy.”

For whatever reasons, however, sex seems a “taboo” subject in composition textbooks—as it is in composition courses. Moreover, connections between sex/uality and literacy are never broached, except perhaps in “coming-out” narratives, in which glancing attention is paid to naming sex and sexuality as one becomes conscious of sexual difference. Most
likely, such discussions are taboo because of our continued sociocultural conviction that sex is a “private” matter—despite the fact that discourses of sex and sexuality are everywhere. Indeed, as we saw in the previous section, while we and the textbooks we use may remain relatively silent on issues of sex and sexuality, our students are often quite voluble—and articulate—about sex. Paying attention to what they have to say—and how they say it—might inform both innovative pedagogies and a richer understanding of the connection between sexuality and literacy. At the very least, failing to acknowledge sexuality as a significant issue about which students must develop some sense of literacy is to shortchange our students tremendously.

MAKING ROOM FOR SEXUALITY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

In a recent article in *College English*, Jay Jordan argues that “[instructors] should encourage students to write to explore their own cultural affiliations, family backgrounds, and experiences with intercultural communication—even uncomfortable ones” (2005, 182). Clearly, many students are already engaged in this kind of writing outside of our composition courses, and such students are more than willing to tackle in their writing the “uncomfortable” subjects of sex and sexuality. As a writing instructor, when I think about what students such as the writers for college newspapers are doing in their examination of their own literacy practices, I am both impressed and desirous that we, as compositionists, learn from their interests, investments, and insights.

How can we take advantage of such energy, creativity, and critical thinking in our classrooms? How can we, as Jordan suggests, create pedagogical spaces to “encourage students to write to explore their own cultural affiliations, family backgrounds, and experiences with intercultural communication”—even when such explorations are uncomfortably about the sexual?

I can see such connections being made, such bridge-building between seemingly “private” literacies and the critical domain of the composition classroom in the experiences of one composition instructor formerly under my supervision, whose story I briefly turn to now. What I most appreciated about this instructor’s approach was his ability to be open to the kinds of questions—and texts—about sex and sexuality that his students wanted to explore. Unlike Molly, his intent was not to bring into the classroom texts that would provoke discussion of sexual literacy; rather, he was comfortable (at least eventually) in allowing students
to make connections across and through texts to the subjects that are important to them, such as sex and sexuality.

James was a second-year graduate student who was completing his master’s degree and working as a teaching assistant in our English Composition Program at the University of Cincinnati, where I served as his immediate supervisor as director of the program. James was an excellent, award-winning instructor; he had had previous teaching experience in English as a high school teacher, and he worked very well with students in our first-year required composition sequence. He had taught the entire composition sequence at UC twice, once in his first year and again in his second year of study. The sequence consisted at the time of three quarter-long courses: English 101, an introduction to argument and academic writing; English 102, an introduction to writing researched essays, with an emphasis on developing and supporting argumentative claims; and English 103, a “capstone” course in which students wrote argumentative, researched, and interpretive essays about “complex texts,” primarily literary texts, though some instructors chose to use film, long nonfiction works, or even graphic novels.

In his final term as a graduate teaching assistant, James chose to be a bit adventuresome and organized his English 103 course, in consultation with me and the associate director of the program, around literary texts written by Cincinnati authors. His texts included a book of poetry by Jeffrey Harrison, *Incomplete Knowledge*, and a longish young adult novel by Curtis Sittenfeld, *Prep*. A widely praised novel, *Prep* caught my attention because of its rather frank depictions of adolescent sex and sexuality. According to the author’s Web site, *Prep*

is an insightful, achingly funny coming-of-age story as well as a brilliant dissection of class, race, and gender in a hothouse of adolescent angst and ambition. . . .

Ultimately, [the main character] Lee’s experiences—complicated relationships with teachers; intense friendships with other girls; an all-consuming preoccupation with a classmate who is less than a boyfriend and more than a crush; conflicts with her parents, from whom Lee feels increasingly distant, coalesce into a singular portrait of the painful and thrilling adolescence universal to us all. (http://www.curtissittenfeld.com/prep.htm)

When I visited James’s class during a routine observation of our teaching assistants, James and his students were vigorously discussing whether or not the narrator of the novel is a lesbian. Given my interest in sexual
literacies, I was, needless to say, intrigued, so I made arrangements to speak with James about his text choices, assignments, and overall experience in the course.

James organized his course so that students would be spending quite a bit of time talking and writing about Prep. The students’ primary, research-oriented essay was to be about some aspect of the novel that they found engaging and wanted to explore in greater detail. Following our program’s overall guidelines, James encouraged students to pick topics about which they could stake and support an argumentative claim. Topics varied widely: “Some of the students wanted to do a research essay on boarding schools and they found interesting articles that seemed counter to the book’s perspective. I even approved Seventeen magazine as a source because of a particular article on boarding schools. Others wanted to look at Prep as far as clothes and fashion are concerned, and how that defines these young girls as belonging to particular groups or social and economic classes. Of course the other big issue that some students chose to write about is some of the sexual identity issues that the main character [Lee] seems to have throughout the novel.”

Clearly, though, issues of sexuality were at the top of the list of students’ interests in Prep. According to James, many students used the experience of writing about Prep to explore issues of sex and sexuality that were important or at least engaging to them: “A number of students have chosen that topic. They were interested in that. I felt from the discussions we had in class that the students were very hard on this main character and the choices she was making. Lee told us what she wanted but her actions were counter to her wants. The students became very frustrated with her. When we started to talk about sexuality, I think they finally got the picture that there might be a lot going on in her head, about the kind of person she wanted to be, about what kinds of intimacies she wanted to have. Maybe we need to look at it, and try to understand it, and ask critical questions.”

As noted, some students debated in class, and then in their writing, about the sexual orientation of the narrator. James prodded his students to move beyond this bit of “sexual orientation detection” and probe the reasons why it is important that we “know” someone’s sexual orientation. Why must one’s sexual orientation be known, and why do we feel deceived when we believe we have someone’s orientation pegged—and we are wrong? James noted how some students really grappled in their writing with trying to determine whether or not Lee is a lesbian. For James,
though, one of the benefits of * Prep as a narration about sex and sexuality is that it makes it very difficult to categorize characters, particularly Lee, the main character; Sittenfeld depicts sex and sexuality as complex, even somewhat fluid, and her interest as an author seems in promoting a rich and challenging understanding of sexual intimacy and sexual self-understanding—one that eschews pigeonholing people into fixed categories.

What is delightful about James’s approach to this novel and his students’ grappling with it is how they took very seriously Sittenfeld’s representation of sexuality as complex. Students took what for many of them was a very common approach to thinking about sexuality—what is your sexual orientation?—and wrote with increasing complexity about how sexual orientation is multifaceted. We all have complex emotional, psychological, and intimate entanglements with a variety of people, and our richness as people is often denied or elided through reductive categories. Moreover, students had the opportunity to explore why sexual orientation categories are seemingly so important. While James admits that such a discussion was only at its beginning stages, he appreciated the opportunity to connect students’ interest in sex and sexuality with more rigorous approaches to thinking, questioning, and critiquing.

James acknowledges that he didn’t choose *Prep in order to have students write about sex and sexuality, and that, in fact, some students seemed to need to ask permission to write about the sexual aspects of the novel. He was delighted, though, to grant such permission, and encouraged students to write about topics that they found of interest, including sex and sexuality. Still, James spoke candidly about some of the tensions he felt—and his students felt—when discussing such “sensitive” topics. One of his male students worried, for instance, if James, as a teaching assistant, would “get into trouble” for broaching topics of sex and sexuality in the classroom with his students. Such hesitation speaks powerfully, I believe, to many students’ continuing sense that sex is a “taboo” subject, not fit for public discourse. But James nonetheless responded enthusiastically when I asked him if he were interested in teaching *Prep again: “Yeah. I try to say, write what you want. It was interesting to me. I wanted them to go for it.”

The challenge facing an instructor like James, however, is not only in creating a pedagogical space in which sex and sexuality can be discussed openly and maturely, but in linking such discussion to complex, powerful, and important notions of literacy and literacy development. In questioning—and in coming to an awareness of the possibility of
questioning—sexual orientation categories, I believe that James’s students were beginning to explore a powerful way in which people’s lives are organized, their desires narrated, and their identities formed. Such a pedagogical approach helps students connect literacy practice to both personal and political dimensions of their lives—and as such reflects recent calls to make such connections more visible in our composition curricula. In *English Composition as a Happening*, Geoffrey Sirc nicely summarizes what he sees as the primary problematic characteristic of that vexed space, particularly the vexed space of composition in the academy: “What should be the central space for intellectual inquiry in the academy [that is, composition studies] has become identified as either a service course designed to further the goals of other academic units or a cultural-studies space in which to investigate identity politics” (2002, 24). In contrast, Sirc urges us to rethink composition in such a way that we begin “to address deep, basic humanity in this modern, over-sophisticated age” (31). It is exactly that “deep, basic humanity” that I want to annunciate in the term sexual literacy, a deeply personal exploration that doesn’t just advocate for particular identities but that links the construction of those identities to important but understudied discourses. Put another way, for our students, coming into sexual literacy is coming into critical fluency with languages and discourses that link their sense of basic humanity to overarching political structures and categories. All of the student writers discussed earlier, including those in James’s course, are addressing such issues, tackling them through the lens of sexuality—truly one of the more daring ways to approach complex issues and the intersection of the personal and the political.

For the next three chapters, I want to model how I have attempted to approach sexual literacy in the composition classroom and to use the concept of sexual literacy to promote greater awareness of the complex intersections between sexuality and literacy. Doing so, I believe, simply invites students to become more literate—and more critically literate. The approaches I describe have been informed by a strong desire to honor student literacies, to show students how to think more critically and complexly about their various literacy practices, and to help students make connections between the literacies they engage in outside the classroom and the literacies they are called to develop and practices in more formal settings, such as the academy, the workplace, or the sphere of public debate and discourse. I think that Susan Kirtley, writing in “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Eros in the Writing Classroom,”
nicely summarizes how I feel about this work: “I find eros everyday in the writing class, in even the smallest things. Eros is the essays students write and the letters I write in response. Eros is the palpable excitement in the writing class when we share our research projects, projects designed to draw on the students’ desires as well as my own. . . . We should not be afraid to address our desire and emotions, the feelings that inspire and limit us” (2003, 66). For me, addressing our “desire and emotions” is to begin the process of understanding how what we take to be among our most private thoughts and feelings are inextricably wound up in some of the most pressing public debates of our time.

In organizing my discussions in the following chapters, I have decided to focus on three key dimensions in sexuality as a “secondary discourse”: sexuality and its relationship to identity, gender and its relationship to identity, and marriage as a sociocultural and political construction. Each dimension of sexuality is richly loaded with discourses demanding our attention, particularly if we are to develop fluent literacies about them that help us think through, understand, and potentially revise our relationships with one another and with ourselves. To presage the following chapters, then: when we think of our personal identities, we are connecting with or resisting or complexly negotiating with dense public discourses about the complicated relationship between sexuality and identity. When we think about, feel, and experience our gendered bodies, we have the opportunity to become aware of how we are called into specific gendered and sexual roles, as well as how we call others, even unconsciously, into such roles. When we think about marriage and our intimate relations with one another, we inevitably evoke difficult debates about the connection between personal happiness and public citizenship, and whose lives and relationships are honored—and whose are not. In each case—how we articulate our identities, how we annunciate and inhabit gender roles, how we describe the personal and political nature of our relationships—we are engaging in complex literacies that are inevitably wrapped up in sex and sexuality. And we are inviting students to think with us about some of the more important “secondary discourses” through which we “think” ourselves, our society, and our cultures.