

The Literate Practices of a Division II Men's Basketball Team

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J. Michael Rifenburg argues that one way Division II men's basketball players learn complex texts (i.e., plays) is through the cognitive process of spatial orientation, which is how a player positions himself in regard to others and areas of the court. Rifenburg's study considers the role of spatial orientation in the literate practices of a basketball team and how such a role helps writing researchers expand their understanding of what writing is and how it's accomplished.

A Wednesday night. I am standing in the men's locker room surrounded by players, managers, coaches, trainers. It's halftime and I'm in the losing team's locker room. The head coach is screaming, sweating, and imploring his team a more impassioned performance during the second half against their rival Young Harris College. While the team has largely struggled throughout the season, this is the first time I have seen the head coach *this* mad. I'm holding my digital recorder with my right hand, my notebook with my left, and staring at the ground. I feel I don't belong. Even though I've followed the team for the season and have the support of the coach, the players, the athletics director, my boss, and my boss's boss, I tell myself I shouldn't be here, that I'm trespassing. I hear the coach drop the f-bomb; with his slight southern drawl, he elides the g.

Then silence.

I look up.

The coach has turned his back to his players, picked up a dry erase marker, and is writing on the board. I crane my neck to see around his large

shoulders to his markings on the board (Figure 1). He's composed an offensive play the team commonly runs. At this point—with only six games left in the twenty-six-game season—the players most assuredly know the nuances of this play. I wonder what he is getting at.

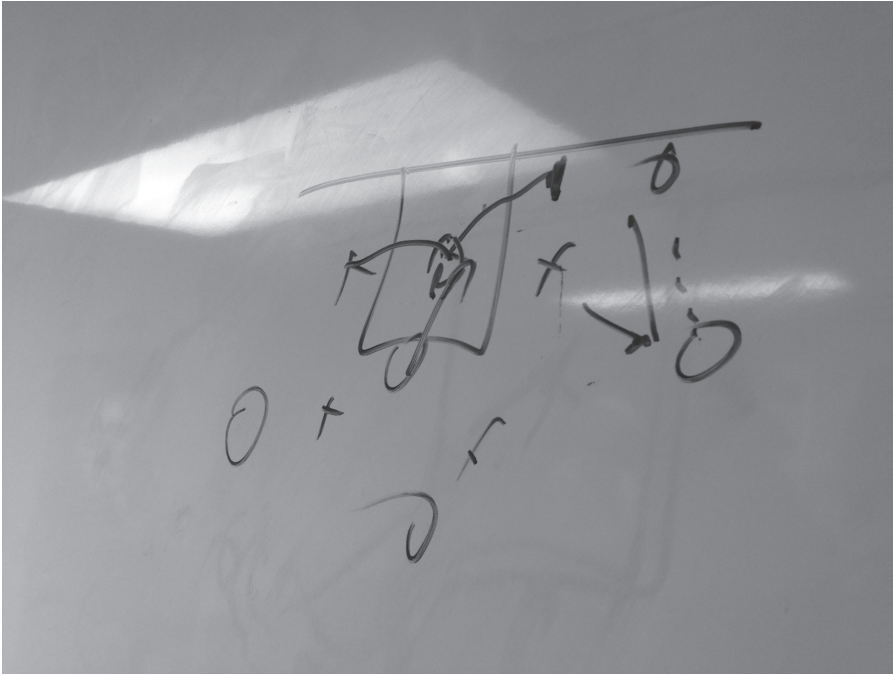


Figure 1: Hand-drawn play by head basketball coach Chris Faulkner. Photo by author.

He takes a breath. All are able to hear the steady in and out of his breathing in the silent but smelly locker room.

Then he speaks. His tone is even and resolute.

“OK, guys . . .” he begins.

Coach starts teaching.

During the 2014–2015 basketball season, I followed the men’s basketball team at the University of North Georgia (UNG), a Division II school competing in the Peach Belt Conference. After receiving the permission and support of the Faculty Athletics Representative, the Athletics Director, and the head basketball coach, I completed an Institutional Review Board (IRB) proposal in which I explained to my university how and why I was planning on gathering data for my research. Once the IRB approved my proposal, I began data collection and had the coaches and players sign consent documents granting me permission to talk with them and then publish my findings.

As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in capturing the voices of my participants and developing a strong sense of how they use and understand writing for their sport. For this project, I wanted to observe the team using plays and then spend time looking at plays with the players and coaches. I attended practices, traveled with the team, sat on the bench during games, and listened in on film sessions and locker room talks. I was given access to the coaching staff and the players, so I could understand how players learn the complex plays they embody during practice and games.

For the past decade, I have undertaken similar research across a range of NCAA member institutions. As a former high school soccer coach and now as a college sports literacy researcher, I have grown increasingly weary of the deficit model of student-athletes broadcasted by mainstream media and, frankly, many college teachers: here is what the student-athlete *cannot* do, here is what the student-athlete does *not* know. And this line of reasoning makes its way into my college writing classroom, albeit in a different guise. I see students who excel at non-school writing and reading (who might, for example, write song lyrics, fan fiction, blogs, or memorize baseball stats) but struggle with school writing and reading. Therefore, they tell themselves or listen to others who tell them that they are poor writers and readers and deficient in literacy. Because I am frustrated with the pervasive myth of academic reading and writing as *the* standard level of literacy, I seek out non-school forms of literacy in hopes of gaining a more complete picture of what writing is and how it works.

I am not alone in this approach, as many other writing researchers are now looking at non-school writing practices. Articles in *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, for example, are evidence of such research: analyses of documentary films (Steiner), Facebook (Marshall), mixtapes (Kampmeier), and many other locations of writing that expand, refine, and problematize long-held notions of what writing is and how and where it's accomplished.

Focused more directly on sports, my larger research agenda starts from the premise that student-athletes—particularly those competing in basketball and football—operate in a space marked by constant engagement with text. During practice and games, many student-athletes engage with a wide variety of texts, traditionally called *plays*, created with and for the body. Going one step further, I believe players learn plays through the cognitive process of spatial orientation, which is how a player positions himself in regard to others and areas of the court. I start with how I understand the term *literate practice* and then offer a narrative from a November basketball practice that speaks, I believe, to a central way text operates within basketball. I end by considering the role of spatial orientation in the literate practices of a Division II men's basketball team and how such a role helps writing researchers expand their understanding of what writing is and how it's accomplished.

Literate Practices and Basketball

What writing is and how it's accomplished are not concretely defined. As such, scholars all around the world dedicate their research and teaching careers to thinking about these ideas about writing. One concept that writing researchers in the UK and the US have thought much about is the concept of *literate practice*. New Literacy Studies scholars working largely in the UK suggest *literate practice* refers to specific ways a community uses literacy. Such a general understanding that connects literacy with utility is a helpful foothold. More recent work by US writing researchers Paul Prior at the University of Illinois and his mentee Kevin Roozen at University of Central Florida enlarge this foothold by offering an additional term: *literate activity*. Related to literate practice, literate activity attends to what Roozen refers to as the “broader spectrum of action of particular communities” (569). Channeling Prior’s helpful definition of literate activity as “not located *in* acts of reading and writing, but *as* cultural forms of life saturated with textuality, that is strongly motivated and mediated by texts” (138; emphasis in original), Roozen argues literate practices are “situated in and mobilized across broader literate activities” (569). In other words, many literate practices give rise to a literate activity. For our purposes, we can understand the literate activity of basketball as composed of a wide variety of literate practices, such as reading and running a play. These literate practices are, as Prior suggests, “saturated with textuality” in that they anticipate and enact bodily action through a reliance on text.

It’s an odd read to see “saturated” and “textuality” paired; I know I am still scratching my head over some of Prior’s thoughts. But I understand Prior’s quote this way: when basketball players prepare for a game, they run endless plays in practice. These plays are scripted and written down performances. Basketball players are enacting lines on a page through bodily movement on a field. Think about it this way: an architect works from a set of blueprints to construct a home, so that the lines and dimensions captured in writing on the blueprint are then realized as physical, tangible objects constituting a home. Returning to basketball, whoever drew these plays—a head coach, assistant coach, player, or graduate assistant—anticipated how a player would be able to perform the play through bodily performance just as an architect anticipated how her blueprints would be realized by a builder. When the player runs these plays during a game, viewers are able to watch a body enact a scripted text. While not able to see these plays as a traditional physical text, viewers do watch a body perform an action undergirded and situated in a text. Finally, with the term *literate practice*, I hope to signal the tight connection between body and text. This connection is very much a part of how the men’s basketball team at the University of North Georgia make sense of their plays as text.

A November Practice and Spatial Orientation

It's Friday afternoon, November 7. The first game is eight days away. The head coach of thirteen years, Chris Faulkner, stands in the center of the court, staring at sheets of papers, periodically looking up and around at the action surrounding him.¹ He blows his whistle seven minutes after 3:00 pm, and the team huddles around him. Basketballs quiet fast. He provides an overview of the practice and the team breaks with a collective shout of "1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . Hard work!"

The coaches run the players through a five on zero transition: five players on offense without defenders. Faulkner tells his players to emphasize the dribble drag both ways. The assistant coach, Josh Travis, shoots the ball off the backboard, intentionally trying to miss. A player rebounds and leads a fast break in the opposite direction. Again and again, the players go. According to the scoreboard operated by the graduate assistant, Jared Hawkins, the drill only has three minutes left. The players and the ball are whipping around the court with the frenzied squeak of rubber-soled shoes. Suddenly, Faulkner sees something he doesn't like. He blows his whistle. The players stop.

Faulkner walks over to the players and picks up the ball. He says he was thinking about this play last night and then watched how players ran it today. He takes sophomore guard Shaquan Cantrell by the elbow and moves him slightly and says, "I don't think we need to screen him [the defender]. I think we can just cut." The players are breathing heavily but listening and nodding.

Travis Core, a senior on the team, speaks up and suggests doing the same thing with a different play. Faulkner agrees and makes the change to that play. These changes are not inscribed into a document or even scribbled on a loose sheet of paper but are verbally stated. The impetus for this change arose from Faulkner watching how his players physically moved through the play during practice and allowing a player's voice to be heard. By physically moving players around him, he saw that this adjustment would be effective.

Faulkner steps to the side, blows his whistle, and the practice begins again.

As the season unfolded, I found myself returning to this moment often in my thinking and writing. I was and still am struck by the boldness of Travis, his ability to suggest adaptations to additional plays and vocalize these suggested adaptations in front his teammates and coaches. Part of what strikes me was Faulkner's rapid acquiescence. It's not a power struggle for Faulkner as it is for many coaches. In my decades of working in college

sports, I have come across many coaches who would have ignored or turned down Travis's request simply because the idea offered came from a player and not another coach. Finally, not only do the sender and receiver of this message still strike me, but so does the message itself and how rapidly a verbal query can morph into written text. While Faulkner did not physically make the alternations to the play by getting out his white board and marker, his verbal acceptance will lead to an assistant coach later making that physical written alteration. Text, for this college basketball team, is fluid and collaboratively constructed.

And here I think of Jeff Rients's smart piece in the Spring 2014 issue of *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* where Rients offers a close reading of the genre sets comprising the popular—and lucrative—game *Dungeons & Dragons*. At the end of the article, Rients is musing on the text comprising *Dungeons & Dragons* and how players modify these texts through the course of gameplay or during later reflection. Rients writes, "Such texts need to be dissected and examined by the end user and, if found wanting, redesigned" (16). So, too, with basketball plays. The end user of these plays is, of course, the player. Players are the ones who will embody the text, the play, on the court. They are the ones who physically feel how the play unfolds and feel if the play puts them in an effective position to do their job. Travis here is the end user, to borrow from a phrase from Rients, and Travis suggested modifications to a text based on his end user experience. Moreover, and this point leads to the final section, Travis suggested this alteration based not only on felt sense but also on where his felt sense would or should occur. In other words, players' location on the court is central to them effectively embodying a text.

Spatial orientation is vital to how UNG players engage with and use the literate practices of basketball. For the players I studied, spatial orientation took the form of their spatial relationships to others (teammates and opponents) and areas on the court. When I asked players in my office to draw and explain to me some basic plays they are running this year, all drawings started the same way: with graphic representations of the basketball court. While some players added additional details, all included a circle for the basket and a semicircle for the three-point line. Before they moved into graphically representing themselves, their teammates, the opponent, or physical movements—such as passes and screens—all players orientated the play in regard to the spatial location of the court. And Faulkner did the same. The white board he scribbles on during time-outs in a game has the black outlines of a full court imposed on it (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Head coach Chris Faulkner draws a play during a time-out. Photo taken by author.

When he sketched out formations and plays in the locker room during that heated halftime talk I observed, Faulkner began with drawing the basket and the three-point line (see Figure 1). He went the additional step of adding the paint but no other details, like the out-of-bounds line, the half-court line, or the opposing teams' basket. Faulkner began teaching by orienting himself and his players to specific areas on the court. The players' movements are intertwined with their location on the court. For players to understand a play, and for Faulkner or any of the assistant coaches to teach a play, the players and the coaches must first begin with the location where the play will be enacted and where the players will stand on the court to begin the play.

Location also figures into how players and coaches brainstorm and develop plays. During the November practice, Faulkner saw how the play unfolded on the court and knew he wanted to make a change. It wasn't enough for him to run through the play in his head or even on a sheet of paper; he needed to see how the play spatially developed. The genesis of this play comes from watching how opponents spatially oriented themselves on the court. When the team looks to develop a new play or add a wrinkle to an existing one, location factors into invention.

Finally, the spatial arrangement of teammates can help players remember and then implement the correct play in a game. I asked sophomore forward T.J. Williams if he ever forgets a play during a game. He responded,

I feel like that happens sometimes because like when [another player] moves, you know that the spot that they just moved from is where you are supposed to be or in the general area. Like if someone is near me I will be like ‘Oh, crap, I gotta set a screen for them.’ I feel like that happens sometimes. Because the speed of the game sometimes you might call something and be like ‘uh’ and taking a minute and then you go right into it.

As a forward, one of T.J.’s jobs is setting screens for guards. If he forgets a play, he looks to those around him. If a guard is near him then, in his words, “I gotta set a screen for them.” T.J.’s basketball literate practices, the literate practices of the entire team, hinge on spatial relationships.

Spatial orientation is just one way these student-athletes hone the literate practices for their sport, but we—many of us non-student-athletes—often don’t directly think of spatiality when we sit down to write. Yet in her book *Geographies of Writing*, University of Rhode Island professor Nedra Reynolds argues that the “*where* of writing” (176; emphasis in original) impacts the *how* and *what* of writing. Such a declaration might be easily accepted by readers now, but for a long time, writing researchers would often divorce location from writing and believed that good (or bad) writing wasn’t impacted by the when and where of writing. Now writing researchers understand the centrality of location in the writing process. What a study of a men’s basketball team teaches us is that location extends beyond our location in regard to external objects and our location in regard to others. As we move and write in this world, we do so in relation to a host of external variables impacting the how and the why of our writing. Looking at the complexities of student-athletes’ literate practice, then, not only helps us rethink the deficit model unfairly leveraged against student-athletes but also helps us rethink how the people and places we come in contact with facilitate the how and the why of the words we write. Within American higher education, college sports and academics often struggle to coexist. And while there is solid historical and contemporary fodder for this struggle, writing researchers can learn a great deal about what constitutes writing and how it is accomplished by turning attention to the nearly half million student-athletes currently competing in NCAA sports.

Endnotes

¹All names are people’s real names, used with permission. I collected data in accordance to IRB protocol and guided by the CCCC Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Research in Composition Studies.

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