

Roundtable 1

Status Update to Term Paper: Social Network Sites as a Medium for Collaboration

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As writing instructors working at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have been taught how to teach writing through the understanding of the process method. We organize classes into units, which emphasize all the steps writers take to compose: brainstorming, freewriting, researching, note-taking, drafting (and its subsequent stages: rough, first, second, etc.), revising, editing. We stress that all these stages are active, and we emphasize the choices that the student writers must make at every step to demonstrate the participatory nature of writing. Finally, we have them work with others (their peers, tutors, other instructors) to make clear that writing is also not a singular, solitary practice or set of actions. Writers constantly select from and incorporate into their work these various voices they encounter through these myriad steps, those actually spoken through their peers or those figuratively heard in their minds as they read the work of others.

At the end of the semester, our hope is that we have, through every reflective in-class freewrite, every peer critique, showed *why* understanding writing as a process is useful, perhaps even necessary, for writers to be more effective communicators. Breaking down the act of writing in this manner demonstrates that our daily communications are fundamentally social and constantly negotiated with those around us, a kind of trial and error to understand others and help

others understand us. Why should writing within the classroom be any different? When we make clear the relationships inherent to writing, the active and social means of creative communication that writing is, it loses its mystique of “writing class assignment.” Writing moves into a realm of the everyday; students can think, “Yes! I do this all the time. It’s not painful. Why should it be now because I’m being asked to do it within a classroom setting?”

One the most important benefits of teaching writing through the process method is that it makes visible the implicit sociality of writing, a characteristic of writing that is so fundamental to its nature that it has become invisible.

To completely reveal the sociality of the writing process within the classroom, writing instructors can choose to include newer online technologies, ones that the students themselves are familiar with using and that help to show writing as a social activity. In this paper, I will briefly outline a freshman composition class I structured around the use of a classroom blog, looking at a few sample blog posts and outcomes. As a conclusion, I will then briefly discuss additional digital technologies and possible ways to incorporate them into a college writing classroom. My focus in my conclusion will be on social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook and Twitter, and how they incorporate a variety of features, such as comments and user profiles, where users’ everyday interaction with the site enacts the kind of sociality of writing that our use of the process method hopes to make clear. Bringing digital technologies, like blogs and SNS, into the regular parameters of the writing classroom can help make visible again the social, collaborative, and community-oriented nature of writing and communication, thus helping our students to view themselves as experienced communicators.

Classroom Blogs: A Safe Place to Post Reflections

In the 2011 Spring semester, I was given a unique teaching opportunity. I taught an English 100 class, the first of a two-class Freshmen English sequence, at a small liberal arts college located in the suburb of a large Midwestern city. The class only had five students. Two of these students were au pairs from Germany, and as part of the exchange program that brought them to the United States they had to complete a certain number of college credits every year. Both of these international students fluently spoke and wrote in English. The other three students were all native to the United States, with one of them returning to college after living in Italy for a year. The other two students were both the first in their families to attend college. Given the class size, the background of each student, and the particular goals of the class—to prepare students for the rigors of college-level expository writing—I knew that it might be a challenge to create a class that would meet these goals but also the students’ individual needs. Because our group was so small, I thought that one of the most effective means of doing this would be to have the students share their writing weekly with each other. To reinforce the community of the class, I created a private Wordpress blog for the students to respond to reading prompts and to one another.

For most of the students, this was their first experience using (and even reading) a blog. There was an introductory period where I showed the students examples of other blogs, and we discussed the variety of purposes that someone (or a group of people) may keep and update a blog: entertainment, persuasion, education, etc.. Then I explained how I would create a blog using the Wordpress content management system and tools, keeping all the posts private to just our group of six. The decision to make the blog private was collaborative; I asked the students if they wanted others from the Internet at large to be able to access, read, and comment on their

posts, and they said no. I agreed with their decision, as this was a basic composition course, and for most of them it would be their first time blogging. More than exposure, I wanted each student to feel at ease and comfortable with the technology, and feel as though they could express themselves fully. The blog was not meant to increase their anxiety and thus prevent them from writing, but was meant to enhance the community I hoped to establish given the small size of the classroom. Making the blog private accomplished both of these goals.

Because the blog was intended to be both a supplement and an extension of our classroom community, this level of comfort was vital. We spent class time before the first blog post was due creating accounts and going over how the site worked and how to post a comment. To reinforce the expectations I had for each student, I wrote the following on the blog's homepage:

This is the blog that we will use to post responses to prompts throughout the semester. This blog is private, so only those in our class will be allowed to read and respond to any posts.

Please remember to be considerate of your peers and their thoughts and ideas as they present them in their blog posts. This blog should be a safe place to explore ideas freely so, just as in the classroom, please respect what your peers write.

In all your blog posts, feel free to incorporate images, sounds, videos, or other links when 1) appropriate to your blog response and 2) appropriate for our classroom setting.

Remember when choosing additions such as these that they should have a logical reason

for being there; do not, for example, include an image just to have one. Even if you do not explicitly discuss any additions to your post, your readers should be able to infer why you chose to include them.

Finally, please begin conversations with your peers by responding to their posts.

These stipulations were meant to help guide students, especially in the first couple of posts, so that they learned what was appropriate in the means of communication between one another on the blog and also within the face-to-face conversations of the classroom. By reiterating the idea of being considerate of each other's ideas and opinions, I stressed that part of the goal in using the blog was to be open to others' thoughts, to consider how they might shape our own ideas. I also permitted and encouraged the students to include images, videos, and other types of links in their posts if it added something interesting or important to their comments. On the "About" page, I explained my rationale for using the blog was in part for the flexibility it added to the class by means of allowing different types of media into the classroom conversations:

Because technology does and will continue to play an important role in how we communicate with one another, it is important to gain practice in using to the utmost the Internet tools available to you. Writing done in an online medium can be especially effective as it can (rather) effortlessly incorporate images, sounds, videos, and other kinds of information links to enhance and support your ideas, opinions, and arguments.

I wanted the students to understand that the ways in which the technology supported the presentation of their ideas actually *enhanced* their ability to communicate, to make connections with their peers. For example, in a formal paper assignment about each student's favorite place, I

had the students bring in one image to help intensify their descriptions. One student brought in a photograph of a beautiful, snow-drenched ski slope he visited every year with his family; another student brought in a photograph of a smoke-filled café, the interior filled with mahogany wood accents. The students as both writers and readers of their peers' work *experienced* the rationales for why these places were each other's favorites much more because of the addition of the photographs. When writing for each other on the blog, they had even more freedom to choose different means of communication to strengthen their arguments and ideas.

The students' posts came in the form of responses to prompts I posted on different pages of the blog. The nature of these prompts varied from questions about assigned class readings to broader questions about the students' experiences with writing to asking the students to respond to their peer's posts. These blog posts became important to the class discussions for the week they were assigned, and some of the students chose to use writing that started in a post for their formal writing assignments. Through the students' responses to each other, both on the blog and in person, it was clear that they started to form a community as they learned to communicate through different modes: online writing, in-person conversation, and more polished, developed writing brought in for class-wide peer critiques. As one student put it in a blog response to his peer's post, he enjoyed reading his classmate's writings because they were always "creative and vivid in [their] descriptions." This student then explained the effect this kind of writing had on him: "He is able to take me along a journey with him and to show me the way that he sees the world. I am able to understand just for a second how the world looks through his eyes and I am able to both get a look at his innermost thoughts, stream of consciousness and it also helps the rea[d]er to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the writer through his work."

In all the assignments for this class, the students not only got to know each other better through the interactions on the blog, but they also created a better understanding of how the writing process works to increase their own communication's effectiveness. The blog functioned as a prewriting and brainstorming generator, one that was always available for the students to return to to read each other's writing. Being immersed in their peer's writing helped to strengthen the sense of community, and the blog provided constancy for that community. As students worked through their ideas with each of their peers, the task of writing became less about work and more about maintaining their connections with each other. When students stop seeing writing in any of its stages as solitary and instead view it as a socially-rich act, one that they have much experience in participating in, then writing becomes less anxiety-producing, and more pleasurable for everyone.

Social Network Sites: More Visibility to Writing's Sociality

Blogs, then, can be successfully adapted into the college writing classroom to get students writing in a way that they may be familiar with already and as a means of making the sociality of writing visible. But blogs have some platform limitations that other forms of digital technologies, such as social network sites (SNS), do not have. I would like to now briefly outline the potential use of SNS in the college writing classroom as an even stronger means of establishing and maintaining community and making clearer that the writing process is a social one. In order to understand how this might be achieved, I will use M.M. Bakhtin's theory of communication chains, which provides a useful framework for understanding how writers' communication

through SNS and their hyper-awareness of the collaborative nature of the technology work to enhance writing's inherent sociality.

Bakhtin's theory of communication chains identifies two key components, the first being that "communication is an *active process* involving collaborative partnerships," and the second being that these "collaborative partners are linked through a chain of *responsive reactions*" (Thralls 65, emphasis original). Charlotte Thralls believes that Bakhtin's communication chains helps to make clear the social nature of all writing. While she uses his theory to explain the collaborative nature of a seemingly single-authored journal article, her reading of Bakhtin is now helpful in understanding the ways in which social technologies, like blogs and SNS, can make writing's sociality more explicitly visible for student writers.

All communication, according to Bakhtin, is inherently collaborative and active; it is a sequence of exchanges that build off of one another. Bakhtin's understanding of how communication works—links of utterances that form the basis of speech genres within specific spheres of communication—emphasizes the importance of how we establish communities through our spoken and written discourses. Because these speech genres become such an ingrained part of our life, he argues that "We use them confidently and skillfully *in practice*, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence *in theory*" (78, emphasis original). This is particularly true of what he calls "primary" speech genres—greetings, small talk, other casual pleasantries we engage in daily—that tend to get overlooked in favor of "secondary" speech genres, like literature and other highly-specialized forms of communication. However, all communication, even the most forgettable, the most often repeated to the point of losing its

value, in fact has a purpose and is part of a much larger communication chain that ultimately brings together all humans through our needs and desire to speak or write to one another.

On SNS, like Facebook, this communication chain can be traced visually as well as verbally. SNS incorporates a number of asynchronous communication options, such as comment boxes on users' profiles and on the user's updates. As users participate in these different types of communication spaces, they contribute to different communities' ever-growing bodies of speech genres. Every new comment (utterance) contributed to a discussion on a user's status update, for example, incorporates the "worldviews and meanings of other" users who have already left their comments. Through the repeated use of certain important and specific words or phrases, communities form. A common language to all the users comes about and gets constantly reassessed, modified, and adapted through repeated use.

What makes these social technologies important is their literal *visualization* of the communication chains that can develop. On the classroom blog I used, when students responded directly to their peers' posts, those responses acted as a visible aside in the more linear conversation. They brought in a new voice that added additional thoughts and ideas to another student's ideas. However, one potential drawback to using a blog-format is that the prompt-focused responses usually necessitated longer answers, which limited in some ways to the engagement of the class as a whole. A benefit to creating a private classroom group on Facebook, then, would be that students can still respond to prompts, but in a more conversational way, using the kinds of primary speech genres spoken in our daily communication. Using such common speech genres would meet students where they are currently, and allow more students

to participate more frequently. A sense of community could be built even quicker through this incorporation of SNS technologies.

Another consideration to weigh in favor of SNS would be that they would be more manageable for larger classes. When I created my blog, it worked because I had so few students. With a class of twenty or more students, blogs may not be the best technologies, especially for more sustained conversations outside the classroom space. Incorporating an already-popular SNS, such as Facebook or Twitter, would give the added advantage of many, if not most, of the students having established profiles. This would mean that students would be familiar and comfortable with the means of communication on the site, and they could more easily get to know their fellow classmates. Also, with a private Facebook group or private class Twitter feed, many students at a time could post to a prompt, nearly mimicking synchronous conversations as they happen on messenger programs but with the benefit of allowing students to return to these conversations if they want or need to. Again, their posts would form visual communication chains, thus reinforcing the notion that writing is a social act in all forms.

Both the incorporation of more common and casual speech genres and the overall condensed nature of the writing allow SNS to let students form closer communities. The mirroring of conversations they have all the time—as well as their familiarity with these means of communication across this technology—makes SNS an excellent means of forming communities in the classroom. Students can have more opportunities to discuss topics casually with one another, brainstorm ideas and topics for assignments, and even ask each other more general questions about the class. The sense of constancy is still there, like the blogs, but the potential for anxiety is reduced even more as the writing is so casual. Finally, through the visualization of the

communication chains, students can see how even the earliest stages of the writing process are always social. With the scroll of the page, they can trace their connections with others and see how those connections lead to writing.

Works Cited

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