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The Effects of Social Media as Low-Stakes Writing Tasks

Roxanne Loving

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The Effects of Social Media as Low-Stakes Writing Tasks

by

Roxanne Loving

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Approved by:

Dr. Shana Hartman, Advisor

Dr. Jennifer Buckner, Reader

Dr. Shea Stuart, Reader

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Abstract

Inspired by a recognition of high school students' frequent disengagement during reading and their lack of comfort and confidence with finding ways to engage with texts, the purpose of this research was to examine the impact of social-media formatted low-stakes writing tasks in the high school English classroom. Drawing from research on writing instruction, reading engagement, literacy, and social media practices, the study utilized social media as a familiar writing format for high school students, bridging out-of-school literacy practices with classroom-based literacy practices. During the six-week study in a 10th-grade English course, student participants used Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook formats (character limits, multimodal writing, hashtags, etc.) when completing low-stakes writing tasks. Data analysis indicated that social media-formatted writing tasks fostered increased student engagement during reading and writing activities while also affording students the opportunity to gain valuable peer feedback from their classroom audience. However, student choice also impacted engagement, with some participants feeling limited by the requirements of the writing tasks. Furthermore, the study heightened some students' awareness of the differences between literacy practices outside of school and in school, emphasizing possible discrepancies between teachers' views of literacy and students' views of literacy despite social media formats being used in the classroom.

Introduction

A 2015 Pew research report found that 76% of teens use social media and 71% of teens use more than one social media platform (Lenhart, 2015). These statistics are no surprise to me; the teenagers who come into my English class each day are familiar with a range of social media apps and sites: Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and Tumblr, among others. Students use these platforms to communicate with friends, stay up-to-date with their favorite celebrities or sports stars, and participate in conversations that they feel are important to them. While these technologies have significantly impacted the way that students interact with information in their lives outside of the classroom, social media is also impacting the educational landscape by contributing to an evolving definition of literacy. For example, the literacy skills students use while reading and writing for school assignments can be compared and contrasted with the literacy practices they use when they send text messages to their friends and when they use social media to participate in conversations with a range of audiences and for a variety of purposes. The similarities in these literacy practices provide important implications about the ways that literacy is defined and approached in academic settings, and my inquiry stems from a desire to explore how the familiar formats of social media may provide an entry point into writing and reading processes in the English classroom.

The efficacy of social media as a literacy tool for classroom use became especially evident to me in my 11th grade English course in 2016. As the first grading period was drawing to a close, I realized that students needed more practice analyzing author's purpose and point of view. Even after examining numerous speeches, essays, and other informational texts, the connection between author's purpose and the individual points within the text just was not clicking for students. For example, students could easily determine that Red Jacket's purpose in

his 1805 speech in Buffalo Grove, New York was to defend Native American religion, but students struggled to pinpoint how and why he used individual points within the text to contribute to that purpose. In a class activity, when asked to consider why Red Jacket repeated the word “Brother,” why he chose to discuss the other requests of the missionaries, or how his discussion of the previous requests of the missionaries helped him to achieve his purpose in responding to this particular request, students failed to effectively analyze how those individual details within the text helped Red Jacket achieve his purpose. Students might respond that Red Jacket used the repeated word “Brother” in order to establish a connection with the missionaries, but they could not further that analysis to discuss why it was important for him to make that connection with the missionaries or how that connection helped him support and advance the purpose of his speech. The strategies that I had used in other classes to help students visualize these concepts, such as graphic organizers and outlines of the text, were not helping, and I wondered if finding a unique and more creative way to visualize the ideas would be more effective. I frequently use photographs to scaffold literary concepts (e.g. introducing theme by asking students to identify possible underlying messages/lessons about humanity, the world in general, etc. being taught in a variety of photos), and I considered the idea that using a series of photographs might help students focus on the concept of how individual details contribute to author’s purpose. However, I was unsure where to begin in terms of finding these photographs.

One evening, as I tapped the Instagram icon on my phone and began scrolling through photos, I realized that social media might be the missing link, as each user’s feed *is* a series of photos. The next day in class, I used Instagram as a way to review author’s purpose, and students quickly caught on that each individual post within a person’s Instagram feed supports that person’s purpose for sharing on social media and also supports that person’s point-of-view on the

topics that are important to them. Using the profiles of a range of Instagram users, including musician Justin Timberlake, technology company GoPro, and a variety of photographers, students were able to evaluate the purpose of individual photos within the profiles. For example, students understood that Justin Timberlake's main purpose on Instagram is to share his music, and they were able to analyze how each post helps him advance that purpose. Students noted that even the photos which seem unrelated to his music career (photos of him and his wife, for example) help him to advance his purpose by making him seem more relatable and by reminding fans that he has a life outside of his music career, which makes his success and commitment to music even more admirable. Students were enthusiastic about this assignment, and they were able to transfer these analytical skills to other classroom activities since they now had a firm understanding of the concept. In addition, I realized that using social media as a classroom tool was effective: students quickly jumped in to the work, asking if they could even analyze their own or a friend's Instagram feed in order to consider what message or purpose they were conveying. It seemed that by bridging the literacy skills required in the classroom to the knowledge and interest that students have in social media, I was able to engage students in an activity that allowed them to explore literary concepts through a format accessible to them.

While my 11th grade students seemed to benefit from an approach to textual analysis that utilized concepts from social media, students in my 10th grade English class presented another challenge. In the middle of a short story unit in my first semester English II classes during the 2017-2018 school year, I could tell that students seemed uninterested in the texts and activities, so I gave a survey to get input from them on how to improve the unit (a strategy that I use frequently in my classes). In the class survey, students admitted that they found the texts boring and difficult to understand and struggled to find ways to interact with the texts in order to

increase their understanding. In an attempt to foster more engagement with the reading, I implemented a variety of low-stakes writing tasks. In his essay “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing,” Peter Elbow (1997) explains that low-stakes writing tasks focus on content rather than the writing itself and are typically graded informally; students are able to respond to texts, explore their thoughts, and plan for discussion without the added pressure of grammar or organization in their writing and without the stress of receiving a formal grade for their writing. During the short story unit, I used journal entries, thinking maps, and exit tickets as low-stakes activities, and while many students reacted positively to the use of these writing tasks as ways to think through their thoughts and engage with the texts, some students still struggled to find the relevance of those writing tasks, and for that reason, continued to disengage from class work. I considered the option of choosing a different set of texts, but while I always seek to incorporate texts that my students find relevant and important, reading a range of complex texts is a skill that students must master in order to meet the demands of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, standardized tests that measure course proficiency and college readiness, and more importantly, the general demands of information literacy in the 21st Century.

In light of these challenges, I wondered how re-packaging social media as a writing tool for reading engagement might provide the same bridge that Instagram provided for my 11th grade students the previous year. Specifically, I became interested in learning more about how social media as a tool for low-stakes writing may impact reading comprehension and analysis. Because it functions as an intersection of reading, writing, and because it is a format that students are typically interested in, I felt that social media—when packaged in a similar format as a low-stakes writing task—may encourage students to engage with complex texts. Even though access

to social media websites and apps is prohibited at school, the use of social media writing formats, when transported out of an online context and into the classroom (e.g. using a word processing program or journal to create Twitter-style posts), might still activate the relevance that students often struggle to find in more traditional writing assignments. This study speaks to how social media might provide a relevant entry point into texts and activities which might seem irrelevant to students otherwise. For example, responding to a text through a series of Facebook-style posts, tweets, or through video and/or images in a format similar to Instagram or Snapchat, may help students find connections not only to the content they are reading but also between the literacy skills they use outside of the classroom and those required of them in an academic setting, contributing to a greater sense of relevance and engagement for students.

In an effort to examine the impact of the conventions of social media on classroom literacy practice, I conducted research in my own classroom during the 2017-2018 school year. For this research, I implemented social media-style tasks as low-stakes writing activities in response to reading assignments. While the significance of low-stakes writing, digital literacy, and social media are all frequent topics of research, my inquiry functions within the intersection of these three topics to explore the specific impact of social media conventions (e.g. hashtags, multimodal writing, post length, and general formats for each platform) as low-stakes writing tasks on students' reading processes; in addition, by using a literacy practice familiar to students outside of the classroom, my inquiry explores the role of social media as a way to bridge the disconnect between students' perceptions of literacy practices inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. For these reasons, my research questions are as follows:

- What happens, if anything, when social media conventions are incorporated into low-stakes writing activities in an English classroom?

- How, if at all, does the use of social media-style writing tasks impact students' reading processes?
- How, if at all, do social media-style writing tasks impact students' perceptions of the similarities and/or differences between their personal literacy practices and the tasks required of them in school?

Literature Review

My inquiry is situated within an intersection of literacy, social media, low-stakes writing, and reading processes. In order to explore the assumptions of the crossroads for these topics, I must first discuss the historical and modern conversations surrounding each. This literature review works to examine the body of research which supports social media writing as a literacy practice and rationalizes the use of low-stakes writing as an element of the reading process.

The position of low-stakes writing in writing processes

While I have chosen to focus specifically on the use of social media conventions, the cornerstone of my research question is low-stakes writing and its role in the reading process. To understand the possible implications for this research, the function of reading and writing as processes must be further explained. As noted by Chris M. Anson in “Process Pedagogy and its Legacy” (2014), author and professor Donald Murray’s 1972 work “Teach Writing as a Process, not Product” put into words the paradigm shift from a product-based writing pedagogy to a process-based approach happening within the field of composition pedagogy during that time (Anson, 2014, pp. 215-216). Murray asserted that embracing writing as a process, rather than a product enhances “discovery through language” and an “exploration of what we know and what we feel about what we know through language” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). In addition, Murray wrote that a process-based approach to writing encourages writers to “us[e] language to learn about our world, to evaluate what we learn about our world, to communicate what we learn about our world” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). As Murray posits, this approach positions writing as *part* of the learning process rather than placing writing as a product created at the *end* of the learning process. Anson (2014) further explains this idea by noting that early in the history of process pedagogy “an obvious consequence of a new focus on students’ processes was to shift the

orientation of learning away from expectations for a final text and toward developing the knowledge and abilities needed to produce it” (p. 217). Essentially, a process-based approach focuses on writing *for* learning rather than writing to demonstrate what *has been* learned.

Low-stakes writing is embedded within the idea of writing *for* learning because low-stakes writing is a method focused on content knowledge development rather than the technicalities of writing itself. Peter Elbow (1997), whose ideas on writing processes are widely acknowledged in modern composition pedagogy, explains the difference between high-stakes writing, which is usually evaluated and/or graded, and low-stakes writing, which helps “students involve themselves more in the ideas or subject matter of a course” (p. 7). Elbow (1997) summarizes the use of low-stakes writing assignments by explaining:

The goal of low stakes assignments is not so much to produce excellent pieces of writing as to get students to think, learn, and understand more of the course material. Low stakes writing is often informal and tends to be graded informally. In a sense, we get to throw away the low stakes writing itself but keep the neural changes it produced in the students’ heads. (p. 5)

Elbow (1997) also explains that low-stakes writing typically takes shape in the form of assignments like quick-writes, free-writes, and letters. Sometimes low-stakes writing assignments can function as building blocks for more formal, or graded, high-stakes writing. For example, before reading a chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, students might create a quick-write, which is a 1-3 minute response written as a type of brainstorm (Rief, 2002, p. 50), that allows them to ponder their thoughts on the American Dream, or students might write a journal entry at the end of a chapter to think through their thoughts about a character. Students use these low-stakes writing tasks as ways to develop their ideas connected to the novel, but they might also

eventually build off of these activities to create a formal, graded writing assignment or project. In this way, low stakes writing focuses on the learning process—either of the content at hand or of the writing process itself. While I already used low-stakes writing in the classroom prior to my inquiry, understanding the connections between low-stakes writing and overall writing processes helps to situate low-stakes writing within the broader learning processes. Thus, this information laid the groundwork for my inquiry into the impact of low-stakes writing.

In her book *Using the Workshop Approach in the High School English Classroom*, Cynthia Urbanski (2006) adds to the foundation for my research and my expansion of low-stakes writing to include conventions of social media. Urbanski (2006) explains that comfort is the key in low-stakes writing because “students need to know that we [teachers] are there to help them write something they are proud of rather than waiting in the wings with our red pens to point out their failures” (pp. 61-62). In my research, this comfort was present not only through the process of low-stakes writing that students participated in but also in the comfortability of the familiar conventions of the social media genre.

Writing as part of the reading process

While the ideas of Elbow, Murray, and Urbanski help to justify my use of low-stakes writing within the content of my course, the specific connections between reading processes and low-stakes writing can be further examined. In *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, Dawn Kirby and Darren Crovitz (2013) explain, “reading and writing are reciprocal processes” and “writing helps us make sense of a text we have read” (p. 251). This notion reflects Louise Rosenblatt’s (1978) transactional theory of reading, which created the framework for a reader-response theory of literary criticism by claiming that the meaning-making process while reading is a transaction between readers and the text. Rosenblatt writes, “the transaction will involve not

only the past experience but also the present state and present interests or preoccupations of the reader” (1978, p. 20). Low-stakes writing in response to reading aligns with Rosenblatt’s transactional theory because low-stakes writing allows students to “find their own language for the issues of the course” (Elbow, 1997, p. 7), which encourages them to consider their own past and present experiences in relation to the content they are reading, as Rosenblatt suggests. By encouraging readers to express their transactions with the text through low-stakes writing, the meaning-making processes inherent in those transactions is highlighted. My inquiry takes this theory a step further by combining social media, as a familiar source of transactional meaning-making for students, with texts that are unfamiliar to them. As my study shows, this combination provided entry points into comprehension and analysis that were otherwise difficult for students to conceptualize.

A conversation about the connection between reading and writing must also address a misconception about these processes. In “Not just for writing anymore: What WAC can teach us about reading to learn,” Mary Lou Odom (2013) discusses the impact of writing across the curriculum—a movement to encourage the use of writing throughout various disciplines—on students’ reading skills. Odom describes a frequent misunderstanding about the connections between reading and writing processes, stating that many teachers “assume requiring students to write about reading would insure more students read more of the reading more carefully” or “would automatically help students engage with the reading in more critical and meaningful ways” (p.6). However, Odom reminds readers that “the requirement to write on its own does not necessarily provide sufficient motivation for students to read—or at least not to read in the ways faculty may desire” (p. 6). Not only does this statement suggest that faculty should reconsider their assumptions about the role of writing in reading processes, but it also suggests that there is

a disconnect between teachers' views of literacy (what "faculty may desire") and students' perceptions of literacy, as well as how literacy is defined both inside the classroom and outside the classroom.

Odom goes on to discuss how these conflicts might be remedied by explaining what works and does not work in terms of connecting reading and writing processes. Odom notes "WAC is most successful in terms of enhancing student reading when faculty made changes not just in how they assessed student reading compliance but rather in how they asked students to approach their reading" (p. 9). For example, rather than presenting students with a list of questions to "test" that students had read the material (a common practice in ELA classrooms), teachers who asked students to blog on their reflections on the text in a "casual nature" noted an increase in student interaction in class discussions about the reading "since [students] had already posted their initial reactions to the blog and were able to better articulate what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about the reading" (p. 9). While this particular assignment allowed students to consider their own connections and feelings toward the text as a way to increase student engagement and enhance the interaction between reading and writing processes, Odom notes that connecting coursework to the "real world" (through assignments which ask students to read and write about current event articles, for example) is also a successful way to enhance the reading process through writing. In each of these connections (text-to-self and text-to-world), teachers work to recognize and embrace definitions of literacy that value student voice and recognize the importance of interacting with literacy skills outside of traditional classroom coursework. My study speaks to both of these methods by encouraging students to use their writing as a tool for reflection and thinking (low-stakes) and by incorporating social media as a "real world" literacy practice.

In *You Gotta Be the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents*, Jeffrey Wilhelm (1997) also addresses misconceptions about reading and writing processes and the downfalls of a pedagogy that limits the active and interactive nature of reading. Wilhelm writes “once students have learned how to read, and move through middle and secondary school, reading is still regarded as a passive act of receiving someone else’s meaning” (p. 13). This is often the issue that my students complain about—not being able to understand what a text means, and consequently, not being able to determine the “right answer” for textual analysis. These frustrations lead to a general lack of engagement with reading and highlight the fact that students are unfamiliar with reading processes that privilege their own voice and thoughts in transaction with the text. To rectify this, Wilhelm proposes that educators utilize reader-oriented approaches, like those suggested by Odom, and also like Rosenblatt’s, which “regard reading as the creation, in concert with texts, of personally significant experiences and meanings” (Wilhelm, 1997, p. 16). By operating within the intersection of the ideas of Rosenblatt, Wilhelm, Odom, Elbow, and Murray, my inquiry uses low-stakes writing as a student-centered approach to foster student interactions with texts. These interactions are marked by a privileging of students’ voices and a greater appreciation of the meaning they develop rather than a reliance on a prescribed interpretation of the text.

New literacies and social media

Even when the disconnect between teachers’ views of reading processes and students’ understanding of those processes has been mediated, there still exists a misunderstanding in the role of digital technologies in writing and reading processes. This misunderstanding is highlighted in works such as Mark Bauerlein’s 2008 book *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future (Or, Don’t Trust Anyone*

Under Thirty), which assumes that the digital environment that dominates the lives of teenagers and young adults is creating a generation of Americans who lack critical thinking and reading abilities. Although written before Baurlein's book, Dennis Baron's (2001) "From Pencils to Pixels," responds to similar questions about how computers and digital technologies may impact literacy. Baron writes, "...as the old technologies become automatic and invisible, we find ourselves more concerned with fighting or embracing what's new" (p. 82). For example, Baron (2001) explains that telephones initially threatened people's privacy because anyone could call at any time, math teachers feared that calculators would limit students' ability to learn arithmetic, and even erasers were scrutinized when they were first added to the ends of pencils because they encouraged work that was less precise or less planned (p. 82). These examples highlight the fact that new technologies are often resisted and their worth questioned, just as the possible positive impacts of social media are often overshadowed by publicized negative connotations.

With Baron's ideas in mind, educators can begin to consider how social media as a writing form may fit within current definitions of literacy or contribute to the development of new definitions of literacy. This consideration responds to misconceptions of social media and digital literacies as "unfit" for academic settings and provides support for my use of social media as a writing genre in this inquiry. In their research surrounding changing definitions of literacy, researchers and scholars such as Beers (2007), Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu (2008), and Gee (2008), have worked to define and emphasize modern notions of literacy in light of evolving technologies and the demands that the digital age presents to teachers and learners alike. In "The Measure of Our Success," Kylee Beers (2007) traces the history of literacy in America, from the Revolutionary period's "signature literacy," which focused on a person's ability to sign his or her name, to the Civil War period's literacy based on penmanship and reading skills, mainly

focused on keeping literacy away from slaves (p. 7). Through World War I, people practiced recitational literacy, and then literacy skills grounded in textual analysis grew in popularity, reaching a peak in the 1990s (Beers, 2007, p. 7-8). Just as definitions of literacy have historically been shaped by societal needs and expectations, the focus on digital communication and technology in today's society requires our acknowledgment of a new definition of literacy and, consequently, a shift in literacy pedagogy. In *Social Linguistics and Literacies*, James Paul Gee (2008) supports a new perspective on literacy, warning that relying on the traditional definition of literacy as only a person's ability to read and write "situates literacy within the individual person rather than in society," a move that ignores the impact of society and culture on literacy and ignores the historical connections between literacy and society (Gee, 2008, p. 31). Based on Gee's ideas, educators can understand that new definitions of literacy must account for the growing presence of digital technologies and the demands those technologies create in terms of the way people read, write, and interact with information in today's society.

My research responds to Gee's ideas by recognizing that social media, as a major social and cultural practice for today's teenagers, can be incorporated as a literacy practice in the high school English classroom. In doing so, my inquiry builds off of new definitions of literacy such as that offered by Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu (2008), who explain in the *Handbook of Research of New Literacies* that based on the ubiquitous nature of the Internet and the fast pace at which technology continues to evolve, literacy acquisition may now be defined as "the ability to continuously adapt to the new literacies required by the new technologies that rapidly and continuously spread on the Internet" (p. 5). In addition, new literacies also include "knowing how and when to make wise decisions about which technologies and which forms and functions of literacy most support one's purposes" (Coiro et al, 2008, p. 5). Social media easily functions

within these definitions of literacy as users must adapt to new conventions for writing and receiving information (the logistics of the digital technologies themselves) and must also navigate a variety of platforms in order to choose the best way to convey their ideas. For example, in this research my students participated in a choice process assignment in which they navigated between and made choices among Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram based on their understanding of the audience and purpose of their work.

In addition to the skills involving audience analysis and purpose in social media, media literacy involves a variety of other skills which can be compared to skills traditionally used in classroom settings. Jenkins et al. (2006) identify these media literacy skills, including research skills, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, argumentative and persuasive skills, the ability to read maps, charts, and other visual representations of information, and technical skills needed to create and access information through digital technologies. While these skills emphasize the connection between traditional literacy skills and new literacy skills, other examinations of social media writing from Turner and Hicks (2015) help to draw a stronger connection between social media and low-stakes writing. In *Connected Reading: Teaching Adolescent Readers in a Digital World*, Turner and Hicks (2015) explain that short-form texts, such as social network posts, text messages, and short summaries or titles (such as search engine results or online headlines) can be considered drafts of longer “mid-form” or “long-form” digital texts, such as blogs, online journals, ebooks, or academic articles (p. 62). This categorization of digital text forms helps to position social media writing as an inherently low-stakes form of writing, and because of this, supports my implementation of social media as a literacy practice, as a method of low-stakes writing, and as part of reading and writing processes. Furthermore, my research creates a bridge

between the work of Jenkins et al. (2006) and Turner and Hicks (2015) by seeking to connect the relationship of media literacy and traditional literacy skills with the benefits of social media as a low-stakes element of reading and writing processes.

Along with acknowledging social media as a literacy practice, my inquiry also requires an understanding of pedagogy that embraces social media as literacy. In 1996, the New London Group, comprised of educators and scholars, argued that “literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (Cazden et al., 1996, p. 61). In 1999, digital technology and literacy researcher Cynthia Selfe also encouraged composition studies faculty to “pay attention to how technology is now inextricably linked to literacy and literacy education in this country” (p. 414) and called for research on how “teachers might better use technologies to support a wide range of literacy goals for different populations” (p. 431). Researchers like Kristen Turner and Troy Hicks (2015) have answered these calls by discussing the need for educators to consider students’ personal digital practices in pedagogical theory. “Connected Reading,” as coined by Turner and Hicks is defined as “a model that situates individual readers within a broader reading community and acknowledges a variety of textual forms, both digital and print” (Turner & Hicks, 2015, p. 5). Turner and Hicks encourage educators to embrace text types and reading processes that are relevant and similar to the processes that students already use when reading and writing texts online, on social media, or through other digital, “connected,” communications. For example, a project in which students develop wiki pages, blogs, or digital book trailers as alternatives to traditional written book reports offers an opportunity for the creation of the types of media that students read and view on their own outside of school while simultaneously offering opportunities for authentic audience as part of the social literacy aspect of connected reading

(Turner & Hicks, 2015, p. 81). My inquiry builds loosely on this idea of connected reading by working to acknowledge students' interaction with texts outside of the classroom as an entry point for their analysis of texts within my curriculum. And, while Turner and Hicks make strides in emphasizing the importance and relevance of a shift to digital literacy in the classroom, my inquiry narrows their method even more to focus on the specific use of social media as a low-stakes writing assignment in response to reading.

Social media as genre

Since my inquiry examines the impact of social media-style writing tasks on students' reading processes, it is important to not only justify social media as a literacy practice but also to define the conventions, characteristics, and formats of the social media genre. Stine Lomborg's 2011 explanation of the genre in "Social Media as a Communicative Genre" describes the characteristics of social media which qualify it as a genre. Lomborg notes that the term "social media" is actually "nonsense because it presumes that other communication media are not social" even though "using media is intertwined with, and sometimes a core part of, our social activities" (p. 56). To qualify the term, Lomborg (2011) writes, "social media are distinctly social because they are based on interpersonal communication and interactive content creation" (p. 56). As a sub-genre of the digital media genre, social media can be characterized by its two-directional communication (which can be contrasted with traditional asymmetrical communication from producer to audience), its "deprofessionalized" and informal quality because of open access, and its constant fluidity due to the fact that content is constantly changed as more and different users participate in the conversation (Lomborg, 2011, pp. 65-66). Because my research took place in a classroom setting where access to online social media platforms is prohibited, my students used the conventions of social media outside of authentic online settings

by completing mock social media posts using resources such as word processing programs or journals. While this may seem counterintuitive to the defining characteristics of the social media genre, the ongoing nature of reading and writing processes and the opportunity for discussion and collaboration in the classroom setting allowed for dynamic and interactive communication similar to that which takes place on social media platforms. Therefore, by situating social media-style writing tasks as a bridge between the classroom curriculum and the authentic social media platforms that students use outside of the classroom, my inquiry examines an extended definition of social media—one that recognizes the qualities and characteristics of social media as part of literacy practices in a variety of contexts rather than only in online platforms.

While Lomborg's work positions social media as a genre with defining characteristics and my research builds on this definition, examining the specific qualities of social media platforms provides further insight into the genre and highlights its features and conventions. In 2017, the social media site with the most users per day was Facebook, followed by the messaging apps WhatsApp, Messenger, and WeChat. Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and Snapchat, all popular among high school students, were also on the list of top apps (Dunn, 2017). Between these apps, there are several similar and unique conventions. All apps allow for both text and image or video integration. They also allow features such as gifs, filters, and direct message options. Facebook does not limit text or images, while Instagram and Snapchat are made especially for images and video. Twitter limits most posts to 280 characters (increased in late 2017 from the previous cap of 140 characters), and all apps that post to an audience (not private messaging apps) can utilize a hashtag feature. My research worked to mimic and utilize similar conventions to enhance students' reading processes and their transactions with texts. While conventions such as hashtags, character limits, and short videos may seem far removed

from the academic writing that is usually required by the high school English curriculum, as Alvermann (2008) notes, educators must realize that “online and offline literacies are not polar opposites” (p. 16). Hence, our teaching can (and must) adjust in order to meet the needs of new forms of literacies. Alvermann’s position contributes to the foundation for my research and is also supported by scholars such as Tanya Joosten (2012), who explains in *Social Media for Educators: Strategies and Best Practices* that educators can use social media to increase student communication and “develop a richer learning experience” (p. xiv). Greenhow and Gleason’s (2012) “Twitteracy: Twitter as a New Literacy Practice,” also explores the connection between learning and social media and cites positive impacts including increased student engagement and active learning in response to Twitter usage in academic settings (p. 468). In addition, Greenhow and Gleason (2012) also note a need for “better theorization and study of the forms and function of social media communication and their relationship to the existing literacy curriculum” (p. 464). My research speaks to that need by expanding Greenhow and Gleason’s topic to examine styles from multiple social media platforms (rather than only Twitter) and by narrowing their ideas to focus only on the conventions of the social media genre.

Conclusion

Overall, the literature on low-stakes writing highlights its importance in encouraging a process-based approach to learning and a focus on content. In addition, low-stakes writing functions as an important part of reading processes that encourage a student-centered approach and emphasis on students’ transactions with texts. Furthermore, social media can be justified as a literacy practice due to the characteristics of its genre and to evolving definitions of literacy in today’s digital society. However, specific connections to the genre of social media is less represented in the field of low-states writing, and my inquiry explores how social media writing

forms may provide an additional level of relevance and interaction in writing and reading processes. My research removes the authentic context of a social media site due to the restrictions of the classroom setting and Internet access; nevertheless, even when authentic online contexts are not available, the conventions of a genre which typically engages students should not be neglected. If low-stakes writing activities during the reading process have positive impacts on student understanding, and if students are typically engaged in tasks that involve social media, it is possible that the use of social media conventions, even outside of authentic online contexts, can provide students with comfortable entry points into reading processes.

Methodology

Research rationale

As a teacher researcher, I take advantage of the opportunity to draw on the body of literature that informs and frames my practice while simultaneously developing a greater understanding of my teaching and my students' learning within the contexts of that literature. As Dana and Yendel-Hoppey (2014) note:

By cultivating [an] inquiry stance toward teaching, teachers play a critical role in enhancing their own professional growth, and, ultimately, the experience of schooling for children. Thus, an inquiry stance is synonymous with professional growth and provides a nontraditional approach to staff development that can lead to meaningful change for children. (p. 13)

Because my research question involves a particular challenge presented in my classroom, conducting this research in the classroom provided insight about my teaching practices and also created more purposeful learning situations for my students.

Context of the research

The research was conducted at a high school located in the Southeastern United States. It is located in a rural community and serves approximately 730 students. The county in which the school is situated has one of the highest unemployment rates in the state, and a large percentage of students live below the poverty threshold. Despite the economic disadvantages that many of our students face, the educational opportunities and resources available to them are abundant. The county is a 1-1 laptop initiative district, meaning that each middle and high school student has a laptop to use for educational purposes; students are permitted to take their laptops home during the school year. In addition, the school offers dual enrollment classes, online classes, and

many Advanced Placement classes for students seeking to earn college credit while in high school. Furthermore, a focus on the college-going culture of the school has been an important topic for the past several years, and there is a large push each year for every senior to apply to college and/or make a post-graduation plan. The graduation rate has increased steadily for the last several years and reached 95% at the end of the 2016-2017 school year. Because of the technology-centered atmosphere of the school, teachers, administrators, club sponsors, and coaches use a variety of digital communication strategies, including social media tools, to publish information about school events.

Participants

This study took place in my second semester English II classes during the 2017-2018 school year and involved 27 students (16 students in my third period class and 11 students in my fourth period class). Of these students, 13 were male and 14 were female. Two of the study participants were Hispanic and five were African American; the remaining students were Caucasian. Students were in the 10th grade at the time of the study and ranged in ages from 15-17. English II is a 10th grade level course in which students study a range of American literature and world literature along with informational texts; students also complete a range of writing activities including informal and low-stakes activities along with formal writing such as essays and research papers. Per state requirements, students must complete an end-of-course exam which requires analysis of complex literature and informational texts through both multiple choice and constructed response questions.

Data Collection

This research study was conducted during a six-week thematic unit focusing on the impact of technology on society. This theme allowed for a seamless integration of social-media

based mini-lessons in the beginning of the unit to familiarize all students with the conventions of the chosen social media platforms; however, the thematic content (readings, topics of discussion, etc.) of the unit itself did not specifically address social media as an educational tool so as not to skew data involving the use of low-stakes writing in social media formats. Prior to beginning the study, I received approval to conduct the research by the Gardner-Webb University Institutional Review Board. Afterward, I requested signed informed consent forms from students and their parents; only students who returned these forms were included as part of the study. During the unit, students read several short stories, poems, and informational texts, all which adhere to demands of text complexity as outlined by the North Carolina Standard Course of Study for Grade 10. Furthermore, the texts used in this particular unit were those for which students had shown a lack of engagement during previous English II classes. For these reasons, I felt that these texts were appropriate for use in this study to provide insight about the impacts of the use of social media on low-stakes writing and on reading processes.

Because access to actual social media sites is prohibited at school and the sites are blocked by school servers, the low-stakes writing assignments used in this unit utilized the conventions of social media while taking place outside of an online context, meaning that students did not actually post to online social media platforms. Nevertheless, because of the 1-1 technology environment and the fact that all students have access to computers, students were able to use their computers to record video, capture images, and compose digital posts using the conventions of social media platforms.

I collected three types of data over the course of the six-week study: two student surveys, student artifacts for low-stakes writing tasks, and my own observations of students during these writing tasks. The variety of data collected from these sources allowed me to analyze many

perspectives on the impact of social media-formatted low stakes writing in the high school English classroom. The initial survey (Appendix A) was administered prior to the beginning of the unit. Instead of using paper surveys, as I initially planned for in my proposal for this research, I chose to create surveys using Google Forms. This proved to be a beneficial decision because the survey data collected was safe through my password-protected account and was also easy to sort, analyze, and view in a variety of forms (graphs, charts, individually by student, collectively by class, etc.). This method of survey administration was also possible because our school is a 1-1 technology school in which every student has a MacBook computer with them in each class period. The final survey (Appendix B) was administered at the end of the unit once students had completed all of the social media-based writing tasks. Both of these surveys were anonymous and asked students about their social media habits (how many sites they use and how frequently), their views on social media and literacy, and their general opinions toward their ability to comprehend and engage with texts they read in English class. While both surveys asked similar questions, the final survey asked students to reflect specifically on the low-stakes writing tasks they had completed during the unit.

In terms of student artifacts, I initially planned to collect 4-5 Instagram quick-writes, 6 Twitter annotation activities, 2 Snapchat video journal responses, 1 Facebook feed for freewriting, and 1 task for which students would choose their own social media format to use. However, I quickly realized that this number of tasks was ambitious, and, based on my reflections of students' strengths and weaknesses during the unit, I chose to lessen the number of tasks collected to ensure that students had ample time to engage with their writing and learning. I actually collected 2 Instagram quick-writes, 3 Twitter annotation feeds, 1 Snapchat journal response, 2 student choice assignments, and 1 Facebook free writing assignment. Before each of

the Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and Facebook assignments, students participated in a discussion and short lesson about the features of the format (for example, the character limit on Twitter, and the text/image integration of Instagram and Snapchat). While most students were already familiar with these features, these lessons provided necessary background knowledge for the writing tasks.

Instagram. Students began the unit by completing two Instagram quick-writes. The first of these quick-writes took place after a discussion about the pros and cons of technology. I chose to utilize the website Padlet for students to publish their “Instagram” posts. Padlet allows for text and image posts and displays the posts in a format that is easy to scroll through and browse. Students first posted their own ideas about the pros/cons, and then after reading an article on the topic, responded to their original post and the posts of other students. The second of the Instagram quick-writes took place a couple of days later after students read articles about virtual reality. Students were asked to choose an article and create an Instagram post to highlight the article’s main idea using both text and an image. While I recognize that asking students to post on a specific literary skill (identifying main idea) takes away from the freedom and informality of low-stakes writing and social media, I chose this particular skill because I had previously identified it as an area of weakness in students’ skills earlier in the semester. For example, when asked to identify the main idea of an informational article, students often cited supporting details that the author incorporated rather than effectively stating the main idea that those details support. By including main idea as a specific skill targeted by the low-stakes Instagram post, I hoped to see that the social media format would allow students to find relevance in the task, helping them to engage with the process of understanding main idea and writing effective main idea statements. As explained in the data analysis section, data collected showed that the

Instagram format did impact students' main idea statements, mostly through the feedback that students received from their peers as they created and revised their posts.

Twitter. Students completed Twitter-style annotations while reading Ray Bradbury's short stories "The Veldt" and "There Will Come Soft Rains," and they also completed a Twitter feed while viewing a television adaptation of Bradbury's "I Sing the Body Electric." Most of the students in my classes were already familiar with annotating texts because they had practiced the skills in English I. As an English department, my colleagues and I use an annotating method that encourages students to utilize a variety of strategies in order to respond to their reading. These strategies include finding and defining unfamiliar vocabulary words, making connections to other texts or experiences, making predictions, and posing (and attempting to answer) questions about the text. For "The Veldt," I provided students with a list of annotation methods that follow this format through the use of hashtags for their "tweets": #connection, #question, #vocabulary, #prediction, and #technology (this hashtag was used for students to connect their annotations back to the theme of our technology unit specifically). Students were asked to complete two tweets for each hashtag using the Pages software on their MacBooks. Pages allowed students to track the character count so that they did not exceed the 140 character limit for each annotation (which I planned for prior to understanding that Twitter's character limit had been increased), and Pages also allowed for the incorporation of emojis and images. After I noticed that students enjoyed being able to view and comment on their peers' posts, I used discussion boards in our Canvas course management system for the other two Twitter annotations activities. In addition to collecting students' tweets for this writing task, I also collected exit tickets from students that asked them to reflect on how the activity impacted their understanding or engagement with the

story. These exit tickets responses were written on paper and collected as students left the classroom for the day.

Snapchat. After reading “The Veldt” and “There Will Come Soft Rains,” students also completed Snapchat journals to record their thoughts about the two stories and the connections between the stories. Students used Quicktime on their MacBooks to take pictures or videos and edited those graphics with text in Keynote in order to respond to the two stories. While I initially planned to require students to create videos for their Snapchat journals, I ended up changing the task to allow for pictures and/or videos because students were quick to point out that they use Snapchat more for images than video. I also realized that when all students were trying to record videos at once, the room was too loud for any one student’s video to be audible.

Student choice and Facebook. Students completed two choice assignments in which they got to choose whether they wanted to use Twitter, Snapchat, or Instagram as their social media format. One of these assignments took place after students read an article on millennials and technology, and another took place as students were brainstorming possible topics for their final research paper for the unit. In addition, students used Facebook-style discussion boards in Canvas to collaborate on free writing and brainstorming for their chosen research topics.

Observations. Throughout each of these activities, I recorded observations in my daybook. Sometimes, these observations focused on the atmosphere of the classroom as students worked silently or collaboratively on their tasks. Other times, my observations were made up of details from students’ conversations or questions, either directed to one another or to me. Initially, I underestimated the importance of these observations, but I quickly became aware of the fact that recording details about students' conversations and questions provided additional

insight into the work samples they submitted and made visible the thought processes underlying each of the writing tasks.

Data Analysis

By analyzing my classroom observations, in conjunction with the artifacts and surveys, I have been able to pinpoint specific themes and patterns relating to the impact of social media-based low stakes writing on students' reading and writing, as well as how these writing tasks impact students in the high school English classroom. In order to identify patterns in the collected data, I reviewed the surveys, student artifacts, and my observations. During this review, I exported the Google Forms survey results into a Google Spreadsheet so that the data could be annotated. As I came across survey results and student explanations that were particularly insightful or seemed particularly relevant to my research questions, I created a list of these ideas. As I reviewed the collected student tasks, I added to the list of relevant ideas, but I also began to note that patterns were emerging between the three types of data collected. Finally, as I reviewed my classroom observations, I was able to narrow and organize the patterns. After this initial review of my data, I noticed that there were three patterns which emerged: audience awareness, student engagement, and students' views of literacy practices.

Data Analysis

In my analysis, I have chosen to present the data by focusing on each pattern that emerged from data analysis individually. Although this creates overlap in the discussion of some student artifacts, this method of presenting the information allows for the most thorough analysis of how each pattern is linked to my research questions.

Audience awareness

One of the first major patterns to emerge in the data involved audience. In my analysis, audience refers to the people who read students' writing, and "intended audience" refers to the group of people for whom students are writing. This theme focuses on both audience as a general term and the more specific intended audience because data indicated that students initially recognized that they had an audience and then began to revise and write specifically for their classmates as the intended audience. This audience awareness seemed to impact students' writing processes by prompting them to consider how their writing is being perceived and interpreted by others.

The first data collected concerning audience awareness came from the pre-unit survey, in which most students noted that friends and family are their primary and intended audience on social media. For example, when asked to explain why they use social media or why they choose not to use social media, one student noted, "I use social media to keep in touch with my family and friends;" while another wrote, "The reason I use social media is to talk to my friends or post what I'm doing or how I feel." Another student wrote, "I use social media to keep in touch with people and to see [what's] going on with the world. I use a bunch of social media to talk to people and to post stuff about myself." It is clear through these explanations and the many others that echoed these ideas that students' purpose for using social media is connected to the audience

viewing their posts. Students acknowledge that they hope to “keep in touch” with their audience, and they also hope their own posts have an audience when they “post what [they’re] doing or how [they] feel.” In this way, students appreciate the fact that, as social media users, they have an audience of viewers but are also part of an audience for other people. This recognition echoes Lomborg’s (2011) definition of social media as “distinctly social” because of its “interpersonal communication” (p. 56). Although students used different language to describe their interactions with an audience on social media, their explanations show that “interpersonal communication” with an audience is major element of the reason they choose to use social media.

Survey responses also indicated that students are not only aware of audience on social media, but they are also aware of how that audience perceives and interprets their writing. Furthermore, students are aware of how viewing other people’s writing on social media impacts their perceptions of their own writing skills. One survey question in which these ideas became particularly clear asked students to tell whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “The reading and writing I do on social media positively impact my literacy skills.” Because I was aware that many students may not understand what “literacy skills” are, prior to the survey I explained that in its most basic definition literacy means the ability to read and write. While this definition excludes the elements of literacy which provide the foundation for my inquiry (Beers, 2007; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, and Leu, 2008; Gee, 2008), I felt that this basic definition would allow students to give their opinions without being influenced by a definition of literacy that directly includes social media. Most students (54%) agreed that the writing they do on social media positively impacts their literacy skills, while 37.5% were neutral, and 8.3% disagreed. However, it was the explanations for their responses which again highlighted the important role that audience plays in both social media and students’ perceptions

of their literacy skills. One student who agreed explained, “I agree because it helps me see how other people write and how it can be better than mine,” a response which indicates that the student engages with social media not only as a tool to keep up with friends and family but perhaps as a tool to evaluate his own writing skills compared to others. In addition, this response indicates that the student views a “positive impact” as one that would help him understand how his writing could be better. Another student responded by noting, “The reason why I chose 4 (agree) is because when I post something on social media, I want the people that see it, to think that I have some sense and that I know what I’m talking about.” This response again acknowledges an awareness of audience when posting to social media, and it also implies that this audience is actually an active agent in the creation of social media posts. For example, this student keeps his audience in mind when posting to social media, possibly editing and revising his work so that he is confident that the audience will know “what [he’s] talking about.” Also, this student feels that social media has a positive impact on his literacy skills because it encourages him to write in a way that makes sense to his audience. While these responses highlight different understandings and ideas about how social media might positively impact literacy skills, they collectively indicate that audience awareness impacts students’ writing processes on social media, either through an evaluation of their own writing compared to others, or through an evaluation of their writing based on what they want the audience to perceive about them and their literacy skills or knowledge.

Student artifacts and my observations during the study provided further insight into how an awareness of audience impacts students’ writing processes when social media-formatted tasks are used. In addition, this data also gave insight into the role of images in social media writing, how images are impacted by audience awareness, and how the use of images and multimodal

tasks impact students' writing processes. The first low-stakes writing task that students completed was an Instagram-style quick-write at the beginning of a class period to explain their views on the pros and cons of technology. This quick-write took place the day after the class had read several informational texts about the benefits and drawbacks of technology, and students were asked to use the quick-write as a way to review their own thoughts on the topic. Using the online web tool Padlet, which acts as a collaborative bulletin board, students posted Instagram-style quick-writes including both text and an image. While the format of the post itself mimicked Instagram (text plus an image), the collaborative format of Padlet allowed for the writing task to take on the "social" element of social media and further explore how audience might impact students' writing processes. As students began posting to Padlet, they quickly realized that they could view each other's posts in real-time as edits were made and pictures were added. During this work time, students were mostly quiet as they navigated the Padlet screen, searched for images to represent their ideas, and clicked back to the articles to review their notes. One conversation that I noted in my observations emerged as especially important to the pattern of audience. These two students, Jake and Cierra, sit at the same table in the classroom, but they rarely work together, choosing instead to work independently.

Jake: "This is cool. I like this. I don't know if I did it right, though."

Cierra: "Jake, I like what you put, and I agree. I think I want to change my picture, though. I think yours is better."

In responding to Jake's question of whether or not he completed the writing task correctly, Cierra acted as an active audience member—in both the virtual (through Padlet) and face-to-face forms (through in-class response to Jake). In addition, Cierra's viewing of Jake's response prompted her to move further into her own writing process by editing her picture (Figure 1).

I found it interesting that Cierra was mostly concerned with choosing an image that reflected her ideas; in fact, I noted that many students spent more time choosing their picture than writing the text portion of their post. I asked Cierra about her choices:

Me: “Why didn't you like the first picture?”

Cierra: “Well, I think it was okay, but Jake’s made more sense with what he said.”

Me: “What did you write?”

Cierra turned her computer towards me so that I could read her post. She had written:

“Technology can be good and bad at times. For example [a] good thing about technology is communicating with someone you might be too scared to talk to in person. But there is bad things such as always being on it and not having human connection. #connection”

Me: “So, why did you change to this picture?”

Cierra: “This picture shows all of the things coming out of the phone, and there’s so much and it can be overwhelming but it can also be good.”

Based on Jake’s choice of image and explanation, Cierra realized that she wanted to choose an image with a stronger connection to the text she had chosen to write, and the affordance of the social media format allowed her to do so. Cierra’s thinking and writing processes are visible through the sequence of events that led to this new post: she summarized her thoughts on the articles, posted an initial response and image, evaluated her image based on other images presented in the class (Jake’s), reevaluated what type of image she would want to use in order for the image to better align with her ideas, and then revised her post in order to do so. Her actions

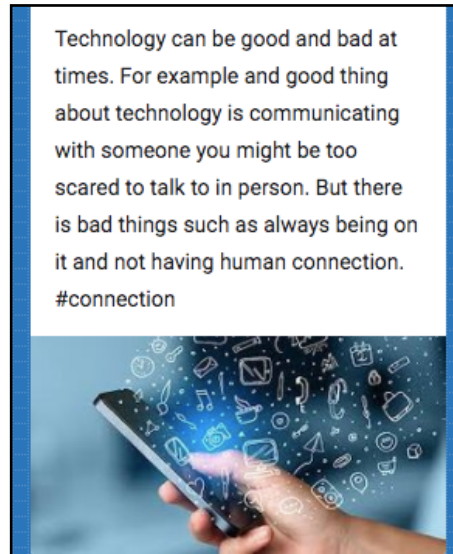


Figure 1. Cierra’s revised post

here, along with her comment that she thought Jake's post was "better" than hers, echo the initial survey responses of other students which indicated that social media impacts literacy by allowing users to see "how other people write and how it can be better than [their own writing]." In this case, then, it seems that Cierra's writing process, specifically her motivation to review and revise her work, was impacted by two different elements of the Instagram activity. Initially, the social nature of the post (in that her writing was published to her classmates) facilitated a sense of audience awareness that encouraged Cierra to revise her work. This audience awareness then prompted Cierra to look closely at the multimodal format of the social media post as she reconsidered the connections between the text and images in her work. In this way, both the social and multimodal elements of the activity were important to Cierra's writing process.

A conversation similar to that of Jake and Cierra took place in another Instagram quick-write later in the study. For this activity, students were asked to create an Instagram-style post (on a new Padlet board) to highlight the main idea of an article they read on virtual reality. Students chose from five articles, each highlighting ways that virtual reality can be used in different industries. Students were asked to write a main idea statement and then include a picture that corresponds to their statement. I chose to focus on main idea statements for this task because students had struggled with this skill in the previous unit. Specifically, students struggled to write statements which captured the main idea of a text and instead often focused on minor or supporting details. As students began working on the Instagram task, I quickly realized that audience played a larger role in this mock social media post than I anticipated. I heard the following comments at a table where students John, Charlie, and Cody were looking at each other's posts:

John (to Cody): "I don't know what you meant. What was your article about?"

Charlie (to Cody): “That’s not even a sentence, man, so how is that the main idea? It’s not a full idea.”

Cody: “Oh, I get it now. Mrs. Loving, can I edit?”

Cody, the student who asked me to edit, had originally posted this statement to the Padlet board:

“Trying to make VR for shopping.”

After viewing the posts of other students (some of which were for the same article he read, most of which were for a different article since students got to choose from 5 options), Cody changed his statement to this:

“Some stores are starting to use virtual reality equipment with their customers because the VR lets customers browse the store and try different options without having to leave their house.”

Although his original comment of “trying to make VR for shopping” mimics social media-style writing in that it is short and not a complete sentence, it is vague in terms of addressing the task of stating the main idea. I discuss the social media language of Cody’s original post using Gee’s (2014) ideas on language privileging later in the analysis section concerned with students’ perspectives of literacy, but for the purpose of discussing the impact of



Figure 2. Cody’s revised statement and image

audience, I focus on the idea that Cody’s revised statement (Figure 2) effectively captures the main idea of his chosen virtual reality article, whereas his original post was less clear. Cody’s original post was vague for many reasons: it was unclear who was using virtual reality for shopping or why, both of which are important ideas to identify when stating the main idea of that

particular article. His revised statement clarifies this by explaining that “some stores” are using VR to “browse” and “try different options.” Without having to read the entire article, Cody’s audience can read his revised main idea statement and understand what the article is about. In addition, Cody’s image (which he kept the same in both versions of his post) reinforces this main idea by showing someone wearing virtual reality goggles with a store in the background.

Although the image possibly helped to clarify Cody’s original post of “trying to make VR for shopping,” his peers John and Charlie focused more on the lack of clarity in the text portion of his post. This focus on the text regardless of the image, along with Cierra’s earlier focus on changing the image to better correlate to her text, seems to highlight the idea that both elements (text and image) of the post are important in terms of conveying the student’s idea, and students felt that each of the elements should be clear, regardless of the clarity of the other element. Furthermore, in both Instagram posts, audience emerged as an important element in students’ decisions to make these revisions to their texts and/or images.

Many other students edited and revised their posts as they viewed other students’ responses and as other students commented orally and discussed the main idea posts. Again, having a peer audience for this “Instagram” post encouraged students to interact more with their own writing by comparing their work to the work of their peers (seeing how other students phrased their statements, how much detail they included, etc.) and then revising for clarity. In some way, this sense of evaluation and revision might come across as a distraction from the “low-stakes” quality of the writing (as low-stakes is meant to be informal, ungraded, etc.). However, as Cynthia Urbanski (2006) explains, comfort is key when it comes to encouraging students to embrace their writing and thinking, and students’ comfort with the social media format provided a level of comfort with the writing task itself and enhanced its informal and low-

stakes quality. On the final unit survey when students were asked to tell their thoughts about the social media-style assignments, one student noted that the social media-style assignments were “easy because we could give an example and opinion and see what others had to say,” and another student echoed this sentiment by responding that the social media tasks “had an impact because everyone had an opinion to share.” These final survey responses speak to the idea that the social media format and peer audience for these tasks allowed students to possibly feel more comfortable expressing their opinions and considering the opinions of others than they might have been if non-social media formats had been used or if they had only been writing to me as their intended audience rather than their peer audience.

Student engagement

Another pattern that emerged as I coded and analyzed data was that of student engagement. In “School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence,” Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) explain that student engagement is multifaceted, including three different forms or types of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (p. 60). Fredricks et al. (2004) summarize the literature on student engagement by noting that, in broad terms, “behavioral engagement encompasses doing the work and following the rules; emotional engagement includes interest, values, and emotions; and cognitive engagement incorporates motivation, effort, and strategy use” (p. 65). Because data collected during my study speaks to all types of engagement, I am using these broad definitions as the foundation for my analysis of students’ engagement during low-stakes writing tasks.

On the initial survey, several questions focused specifically on students’ reading processes, particularly their comprehension of what they read and engagement with what they read. Early in the semester (weeks before the study took place), students discussed what reading

comprehension is as part of an introductory lesson on analyzing literature. For this reason, I did not provide students with a definition of comprehension for the survey. I did, however, provide them with a very basic definition of engagement as “thinking about” or “responding to” texts. While this definition is simpler than the broad definitions given by Fredricks et al. (2004), it still relates to the behavioral (“responding to”) and emotional and cognitive (“thinking about” and “responding to”) elements of engagement.

In the data from the first survey, I noticed that, while few students felt that it is difficult for them to comprehend most of the texts they read in school (Figure 3; option 1 was “strongly disagree” and option 5 for “strongly agree”), most students admitted that they struggle to engage with texts (Figure 4).

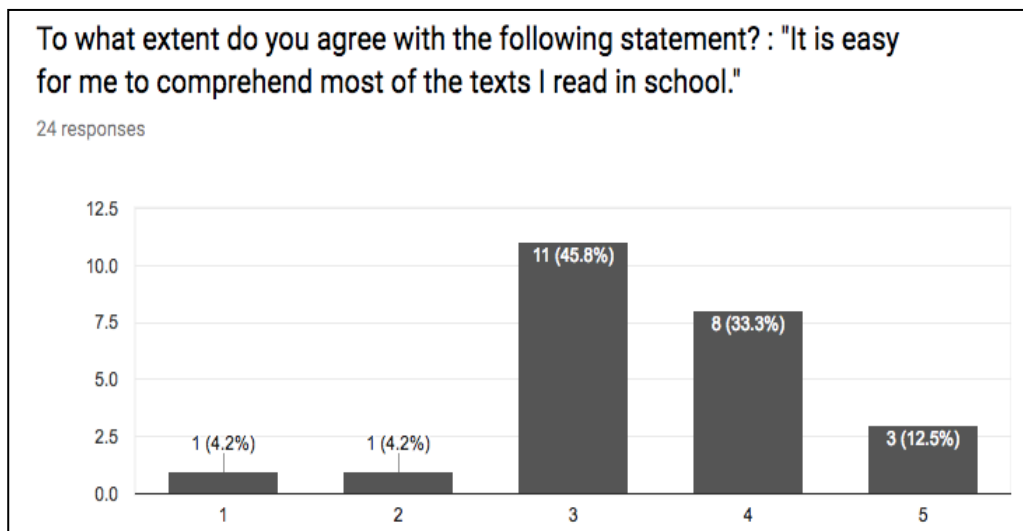


Figure 3. Initial survey question about reading comprehension

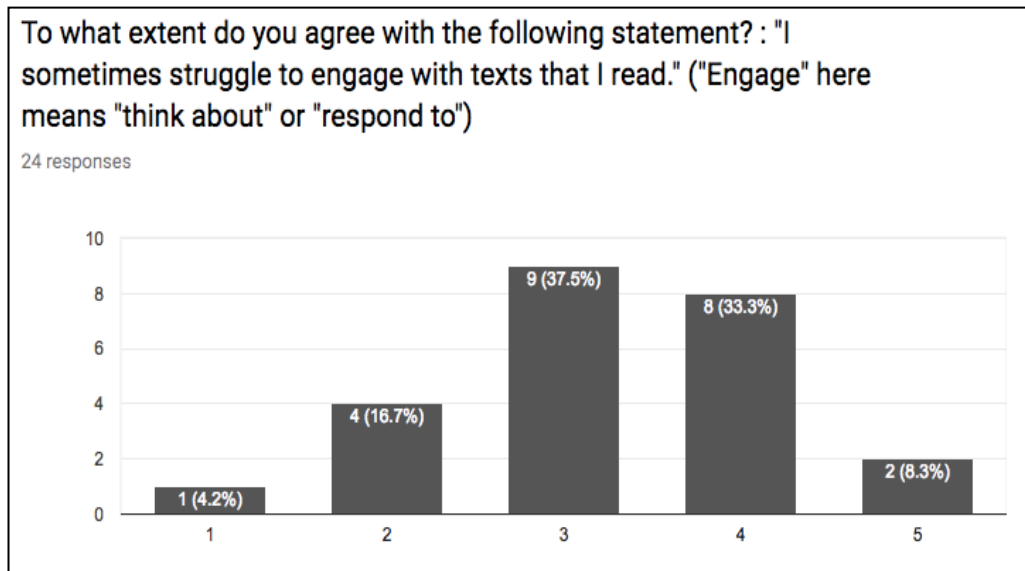


Figure 4. Initial survey question about reading engagement

Furthermore, even students who were neutral or agreed that they easily comprehend texts noted that they sometimes struggle to engage. As Wilhelm (1997) notes, students are not able to “converse with the text fully unless they learn how to take particular stances, deploy strategies to engage with the text, and to make sense of literary conventions to truly make meaning with the text” (p. 34). Essentially, students must be able to engage with the text in order to fully experience the transactional meaning-making that Rosenblatt (1978) described. For this reason, the discrepancy between comprehension and engagement indicated by the initial survey highlights the need for students to find meaningful ways to engage with texts in order to enhance their growth as readers.

On another set of survey questions, most students agreed that writing helps them understand what they read (Figure 5), but they also acknowledge that they are more likely to comprehend and engage when they are reading texts that are relevant to them (Figure 6).

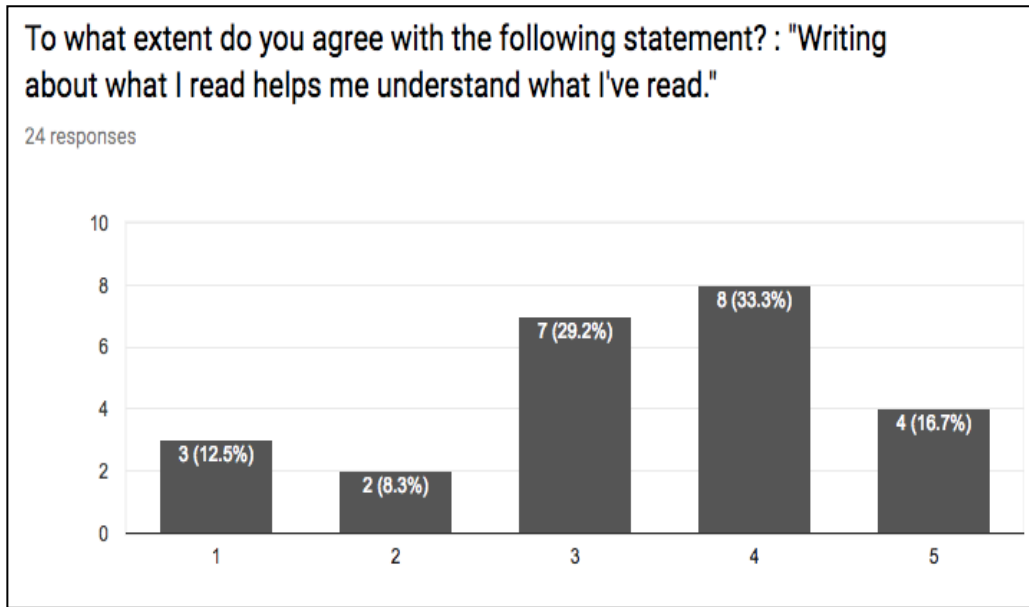


Figure 5. Initial survey question about writing and reading comprehension

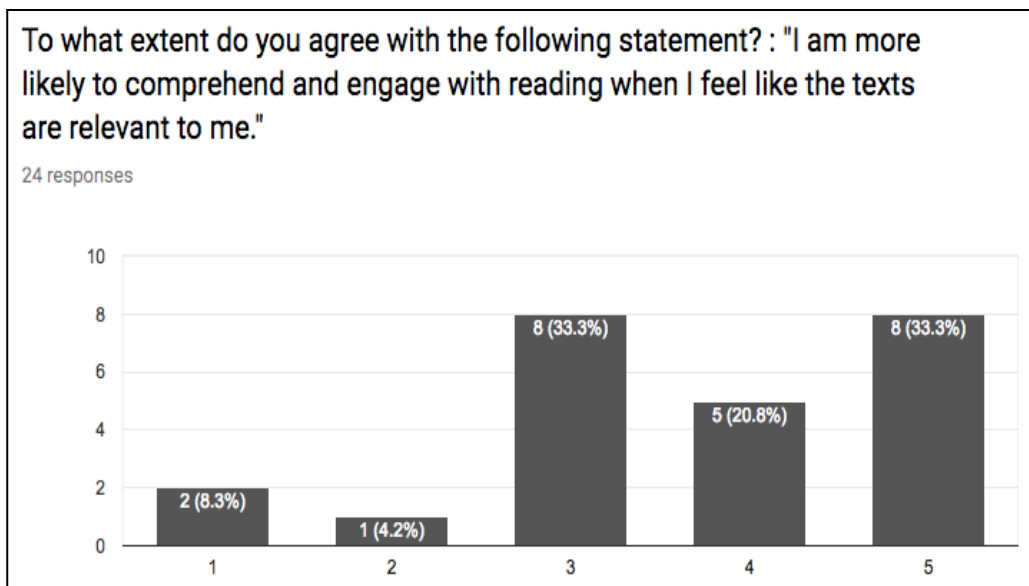


Figure 6. Initial survey question about reading and relevance

It is no surprise that students felt that their comprehension and engagement improve when they read relevant texts, and since most students feel that writing about what they read helps them understand what they have read, the survey results indicate that using writing tasks that are relevant to students might be a way to bring relevance into the reading process even when the

texts themselves are not relevant to students. In general, the initial survey results correspond with my initial wonderings about how social media-based low-stakes writing might impact students' reading processes, and additional data collected further explored how these elements impact students in the high school English classroom.

In order to examine how student comprehension and student engagement is impacted by social media-formatted low-stakes writing, one lesson in the study asked students to write annotations while reading "The Veldt" by Ray Bradbury. Since annotations are a common strategy used in our English department, most students were already familiar with the process of stopping and writing short comments while reading a text. Students are taught that these annotations can take on a variety of forms, including vocabulary definitions, connections to other texts or personal experiences, or evaluations or summaries of what is happening in the text, among others. For this particular activity, students were asked to create the annotations in the format of Twitter, including limiting posts to 140 characters (planned prior to my understanding of the updated 280 character limit), and using hashtags to identify which type of annotation they were making: #connection, #question, #vocabulary, #prediction, and #technology. I also told students that they could link to outside sources and use emojis in their tweets (I use the term "tweets" in my analysis in reference to the Twitter-style annotations that students created). Since students used the Pages word processing program on their MacBooks to create these, the tweets were not shared publicly with the class. However, many students shared their tweets with the classmates sitting at their tables as they worked to create them. As the class read "The Veldt" (I read several pages aloud and several students volunteered to read, as well), we stopped every 2-3 pages for students to stop and write their tweets.

Behavioral engagement. The first observation I made during this activity was that students quickly began working on the tweets without much instruction from me. After the first two pages had been read and we took a break to write, students immediately began typing. Several students raised their hands to ask how to access emojis on their MacBooks, and several other students shared their tweets verbally with their peers as they worked. While it is not uncommon for most students to consistently engage in classwork in a behavioral way by completing their work, the data from this activity struck me as particularly interesting because students who typically had to be asked to remain on-task several times seemed to focus easily on the writing task using the Twitter format. For example, I noticed that students Colby and Mary, who often disengaged from class activities and reading assignments in previous units, were following along on the digital texts on their Macbooks and were highlighting portions of the text as they read. If, as Fredricks et al. (2004) posit, behavioral engagement concerns students “doing the work” and “following the rules” (p. 65), it seemed that students like Colby and Mary were engaging behaviorally with the reading process by actually following along with the reading in addition to participating in the low-stakes writing task.

Emotional Engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) define emotional engagement as including “interest, values, and emotions” (p. 65), and my observations of students as well as collected student artifacts show that students were emotionally engaged, particularly in terms of their emotional reactions to the process of creating the tweets and to the storyline of “The Veldt.” For example, I recorded these student comments in my daybook:

Charlotte (*as she types her tweet*): “Mrs. Loving, are we going to share these with the class like the Instagram posts we did?”

Cameron (*looking up from John's computer, which John had turned to him so he could read his tweet*): “Yeah, I want to see what other people said.”

Charlotte and Cameron's emotional engagement is evident through their interest in the writing task and their interest in seeing what other students wrote. In addition, many students noted emotional reactions to the story



Figure 7. Angela's tweet about "The Veldt"

through their composed tweets. For example, Angela wrote (Figure 7) that the same “type of thing” had happened to her before and it made her “very angry.” Although I am not sure what specific event in “The Veldt” she was referencing, her emotional engagement is demonstrated through both the connection she is making with the story (she had experienced a similar situation), her use of the words “very angry,” and her choice to use an emoji to highlight her anger.

The use of emojis in the Twitter format also seemed to allow students to express emotions more specifically or intentionally than perhaps a discussion or a traditional piece of writing.

Furthermore, emotional engagement

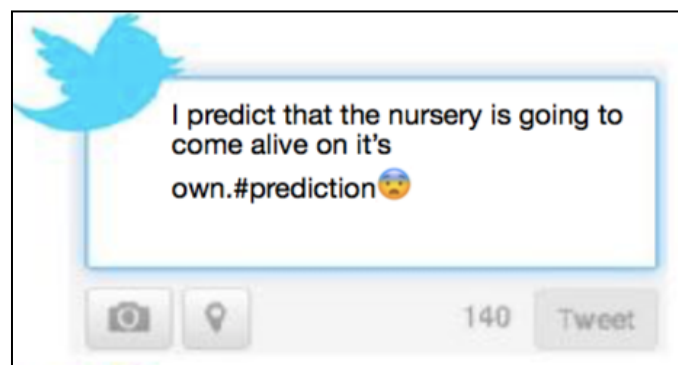


Figure 8. Samantha's tweet showing emotion through emoji

with the reading was also visible in tweets where students used emojis not simply to reinforce the emotion they wrote about but to also uncover an emotional response not clear through the text portion of the tweet itself. For example, Samantha's tweet (Figure 8) makes a prediction about

the nursery (the virtual reality room in “The Veldt”), but her use of an emoji helps readers understand that she is reacting with suspense or worry. Her emotional reaction is less evident without the emoji, so in this case, it seems that the ability to use emojis in a social media format allowed Samantha to further engage and demonstrate her emotional engagement with the text.

Some students also chose to use hashtags other than the ones I instructed them to use as a way to further convey their emotional reaction to the text. For example, Nick’s tweet (Figure 9) noted that our school has automated lights similar to the Happylife Home in “The

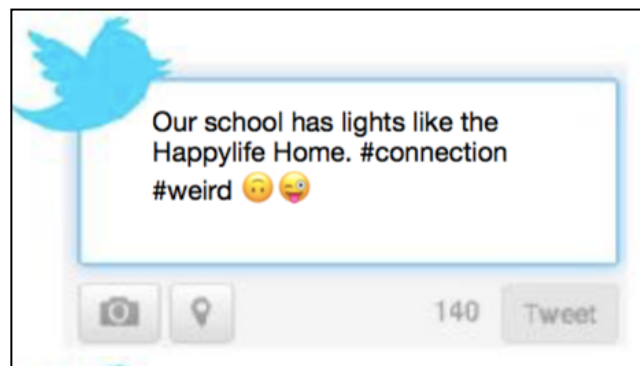


Figure 9. Nick’s tweet about the connection between our school and “The Veldt”

Veldt.” His choice to include “#weird” allowed him to display his reaction to the connection that he made, while his choice of the playful emojis possibly show that, although he thinks it is weird that our school has a similarity to the Happylife Home, he is reacting in a positive way to the connection (maybe thinking that it is funny). In Nick’s tweet, the relationship between the text of the post, the hashtag, and the emojis—all important elements of the social media format—allow him to convey the nuances of his emotional reactions to the text. In this way, the tweet showcases his engagement with his reading processes by making his transaction with the text, as explained by Rosenblatt (1978), more transparent and by highlighting his thinking and meaning-making process as he worked through the text, from comprehending the text (understanding that the Happylife Home has automated lights), to making connections, to engaging with the text by “tweeting” about his emotional reaction to those connections.

Cognitive Engagement. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), cognitive engagement includes motivation, effort, strategy use, and investment since cognitive engagement “incorporates [the] thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills” (pp. 60, 65). Based on this definition, cognitive engagement and the effort it requires is different from behavioral and emotional engagement in that students must demonstrate that they not only are willing to do the work, but are also willing to put forth effort in terms of mastering skills, meaning that they are willing to strategically work through problems, continue working despite challenges, etc. Because my study focused mostly on students’ writing in response to reading and on their engagement with texts, students were not necessarily asked to demonstrate full mastery of any specific skills. Furthermore, because each social media writing task took place within one 90-minute class period, students were not able to demonstrate an extended investment in each activity. For these reasons, the cognitive engagement visible in the collected data from my study mostly involves the strategies that students used to tackle the requirements for each task in light of the conventions of the social media format. For example, in the Twitter-based activity for “The Veldt,” many students worked to represent their ideas through both text and emojis. Choosing an emoji may seem like a simple task on the surface, partially because of its common use in social media formats that are typically considered to be informal and easy to write; however, I noticed that many students spent more time choosing an emoji than actually typing the text of the post and sometimes struggled to find the “best” emoji to represent their ideas. This seemed to indicate that the multimodal format and conventions of the tweets provided students with an opportunity to further their engagement with the text in both behavioral and cognitive ways. For instance, Samantha, a typically quiet student who prefers to work independently, quickly typed her tweet and spent the majority of her time

switching back and forth between emojis. After about 30 seconds of watching her click back and forth before choosing a thumbs-up emoji, I asked:

Me: “Why did you settle on a thumbs-up?”

Samantha: “I wanted to find one that fit the word horrid, but I decided that doing a thumbs-up means I learned a new word.”

Samantha’s strategy for approaching this tweet involved defining the new word, typing her definition in a tweet, and then finding an emoji to also represent the word or add a visual element to the tweet. She was behaviorally engaged from the beginning of the activity as she got right to work and was on-task. However, she faced a challenge when she felt that she could not find an emoji to effectively represent the definition. Admittedly, this challenge was short: Samantha was able to quickly adjust her emoji choice to best fit the text of her post and her purpose. However, her explanation of why she chose the thumbs up indicates that the choice was deliberate and also gives visibility to her revised strategy as she switched from finding an emoji to represent the word to finding an emoji to represent her own learning. While this example does not qualify as the mastering of skills that Fredricks et al. (2004) describe as part of cognitive engagement, it does show that the multimodality of the Twitter format offered Samantha a way to further her own thinking about her learning as she worked to visually depict a new vocabulary term and then worked to represent her learning with an emoji. For this reason, this instance can be described as an example of strategy use and problem-solving, two indicators of cognitive engagement.

Other students showed cognitive engagement by working through the challenge of the character limit of each tweet. I recorded this conversation from one table:

Dillon: “This is frustrating. I don’t like being limited to 140 characters.”

Cory: “Don’t use a bunch of small words. Get right to the point. That’s what I do.”

This exchange not only highlights Dillon's emotional (albeit negative) engagement with the writing task, but it also showcases Cory's cognitive engagement. In finding and sharing a method (avoiding "small words") to best share his thoughts, Cory has demonstrated his strategy for approaching and completing the writing task, a feature of cognitive engagement as discussed by Fredricks et al. (2004). In addition, Cory's advice to "get right to the point" suggests that he understands the importance of choosing words carefully in order to best convey his ideas, which requires him to think critically about word choice. This critical thinking about word choice shows that Cory is "strategically working through problems" (Fredricks et al., 2004) as he figures out how to best express his ideas in light of the challenge of the character limit.

By presenting students with challenges that they may not encounter in more traditional low-stakes writing, the conventions of the Twitter format afforded students like Samantha and Cory the opportunity to engage cognitively and demonstrate that engagement. Rather than simply defining 'horrid' in a text post, Samantha's challenge of finding the best emoji to represent the definition added an additional layer of critical thinking to the task. Samantha not only worked to apply the definition of 'horrid' by representing it in a visual way, she also demonstrated her learning by making a decision to represent her learning through the thumbs-up emoji when she could not find one to effectively represent the definition. Similarly, Cory's cognitive engagement was visible when he explained his strategy for representing his ideas in a concise way due to the strict character limit. It is possible that without the character limit, Cory would have been less motivated to "get right to the point" or less focused on presenting his ideas using the most effective diction in light of the character limit. In these ways, it seems that the specific social media format of the tweets added layers of engagement that may not have been present in a traditional annotation format.

At the end of this activity, I used an exit ticket to ask students to reflect on how the tweet activity impacted or did not impact their understanding and engagement while reading “The Veldt.” Students wrote their reflections on paper and turned them in to me as they exited class. Many students noted positive impacts from the activity. Kristen wrote, “It was helpful because if we didn’t do this then I would have forgotten what we read.” Another student, Trey, wrote, “Stopping to tweet helped me pay more attention to the text.” Steven also noted a positive impact, explaining, “[tweeting] helped me get more involved and think more and focus more.” These responses suggest that the process of the low-stakes annotations helped students engage cognitively (“think more”) and behaviorally (“pay more attention” and “focus”). And, while “thinking more” and “paying more attention” might also be impacts of traditional annotation assignments, the specific impacts of the social media formats were visible in student observations and artifacts such as those collected from Samantha and Cory, whose cognitive engagement seemed to be furthered by the conventions of the Twitter format, and in those collected from students like Nick and Angela, who represented their emotional engagement with the text through emojis. In this way, it seems that using social media as a low-stakes writing task provided multiple opportunities and a variety of ways for students to engage behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively.

Student Choice. Although many students noted on their exit tickets that they enjoyed stopping and writing tweets while reading “The Veldt,” other students explained that the writing did not positively impact their reading process or their engagement. One student wrote, “I don’t really like stopping in between the pages. I would rather just read the whole story,” and another student explained “It frustrated me, it took me out of the story.” Sara, a dedicated student who typically works diligently on all assignments wrote: “It confused me to stop and write something

down because I get distracted.” Based on these responses, I could tell that this particular low-stakes writing strategy negatively impacted some students’ engagement. Because of this, I felt that activities which allowed more student choice might provide opportunities for all students to engage, and analysis from these choice assignments did indicate that choice played a role in student engagement.

Toward the end of the study, students read an article called “#Selfie or #Selfless: Stewardship for Millennials.” Students were given choice in the corresponding low-stakes writing task and could choose between using tweets or Instagram/Snapchat style posts. To stay consistent with our previous uses for each of the social media formats, students who chose to use Tweets completed multiple short posts (similar to annotations) to track their thinking about the article *as* they read. Students who used an Instagram or Snapchat format posted only one response (using text plus an image) *after* reading the text. The option to choose a particular social media format not only allowed students to respond to the text at a time which was most comfortable for them (either while reading or after reading), but students were also able to choose a social media format based on their level of comfort with the particular conventions of each format. Before students began to read the article and create their posts, we discussed the similarities and differences in these formats:

Me: “You can choose to create tweets or an Instagram or Snapchat post. If you use tweets, what will your posts look like?”

Kayla: “140 characters”

Josh: “Emojis and hashtags”

Me: “Yes. Anything else? Any questions about the tweets?”

Josh: “Do we have to do the same hashtags as before?” (*from when we read “The Veldt”*)

Me: “No, but you can if you want to. Do you remember what they were?”

The class called out the hashtags from our study of “The Veldt” and I listed them on the board.

Me: “If you choose to use Instagram or Snapchat, what will your posts look like?”

Polly: “Words and a picture”

Me: “Yes. What’s the difference between Instagram and Snapchat?”

Polly: “Snaps have less words? Insta has a lot of words?”

Class agrees; someone says, “Snapchat goes away so it isn’t as important.”

Mark: “If we use Snapchat, it’s more like a Tweet. Instagram is more thought out.”

Me: “Okay, so you can choose which one to use. We’ll post them all to Padlet or Canvas.”

Twitter-style posts were posted to a classroom discussion board in Canvas, while Snapchats and Instagram posts were posted to a new board in Padlet. To differentiate between Snapchat posts and Instagram posts (which both contain text and images), students used a template for Snapchat. This template consisted of a clipart image of a phone that students could edit and overlay the text and image in (see Figure 10). Student responses during the instructions and conversations about the similarities and differences in the formats showed that they recognized many differences between each of the social media forms, such as the fact that Snapchat usually uses “less words” and Instagram “is more thought out” because it typically uses more text. As students read the article and worked on their posts, I noticed that these nuances played a role in the student’s choices about which format to use and how to use it. I walked around and asked them questions about their choices:

Mark (using Twitter): “I like writing a little bit at a time as I read. It helps me focus.”

Kayla (using Twitter): “I don’t like using pictures. I like the short tweets. And I can write as I read instead of waiting until the end.”

Sara (using Instagram): “I could have used Snapchat, but I wanted to be able to explain with more words. I didn’t know how to say it in just a few words like Twitter, either.”

Tony: “I like the way it looks. I like Snapchat best for real, too.”

It seems that students chose a format which they felt would best suit their preferences in terms of connecting reading and writing. Mark’s note that “writing a little bit at a



Figure 10. Tony’s “Snapchat” post

time...helps [him] focus” shows that he is cognizant of the type of writing that helps him engage in reading tasks, and he used that awareness to make conscious choices about the format to use. Kayla offered a similar explanation, while Sara, who had previously mentioned on the exit ticket that tweeting made her distracted, chose to use Instagram not only because of Twitter’s possible distraction but also because she “didn’t know how to say it in just a few words like Twitter” or Snapchat. Students like Tony chose to use a format based mostly on “the way it looks,” a choice which highlights the impact of social media’s multimodality on students’ preference. For example, Tony’s “Snap” (Figure 10) shows that he used a text and picture combination to emphasize his point, and based on his comment, he prefers the “look” of Snapchat better, possibly because of the way that the text and picture interact in an overlaid manner rather than separate as on Instagram. In addition, Tony’s comment shows that his preferences for social media outside of the classroom also played a role in his choice because he liked “Snapchat best

for real.” In this way, choice allowed Tony to engage with the text through a format that is relevant to his personal preferences.

On the final survey at the end of the study, students were asked to tell their thoughts on the formats of the social-media low-stakes writing that had been completed in class through the unit. One specific survey question was:

Tell me your thoughts about the formats of the recent social media-style writing tasks that you completed in English class. We did "tweets," Instagram-style posts, Snapchat-style posts, and Facebook-style discussion. Were these formats easier, more difficult, more engaging, or less engaging than other types of writing that isn't formatted like social media posts? For example, did you think the "tweets" were more engaging than regular annotations? Give specific examples and share your thoughts.

In response to this question, many students indicated that the social-media tasks did impact their engagement. One student responded that “[the social media tasks were] easier because it was easy to do and I could get them done faster than annotations.” Although it is unclear how exactly the social media-formatted tasks were easier than more traditional annotations for this particular student, his recognition that he could complete the task “faster” than other types of annotations possibly indicates that he was more focused and willing to complete the task than usual (behavioral engagement) or found the task more accessible in terms of his understanding of the text and requirements (cognitive engagement), which might have allowed him to feel more comfortable with the task, making the task “easier” and “faster” to complete. Another student wrote “I think that the tweets [are] more effective because it was easier and it was fun to do. I like it better than annotations.” This particular response highlights the student’s emotional engagement with the task in that he or she found it “fun” to do. Another student responded that

she “liked the different media-style writing we have done because it has helped me get more into and actually understand what we are reading.” Although the student does not use the term “engagement”, I feel that her idea of “get[ting] more into [the text]” indicates her behavioral or emotional engagement (or both); furthermore, she explains that her understanding of the reading was positively impacted by the writing tasks. In that case, it seems that being able to engage or “get more into” the texts through the social-media format of the writing tasks helped her better comprehend the reading.

Naming of tasks and engagement. I also found it interesting that the way the low-stakes writing task was presented seemed to make a difference in students’ engagement with the task. Although the low-stakes writing students completed while reading “The Veldt” were formatted and described as “tweets,” they were similar to “annotations” that we would usually complete in class (short, ask students to respond and connect with texts, etc.). Nevertheless, students seemed to respond more positively to low-stakes writing when it was formatted and called by a format and name familiar to them. For example, when asked to tell their thoughts about the low-stakes writing on the final survey, one student wrote:

I believe that the media-style writing we do in class are more engaging and easier than normal writing formats. For example, I struggle with writing long and difficult things because I run out of ideas fast and it gets boring easier. While media-style writing is shorter and easier to come up with what you want to say.

This student’s explanation for why the “media-style” writing was more engaging focuses on the *length* of the task: the student says “media-style writing is shorter” compared to “normal writing formats.” This indicates that the student considers “normal” writing to be “long and difficult”, a misconception that our English department tries to overcome, partly through the use of our

annotating methods (students were taught to write short annotations in English I before they arrive in English II, and again at the beginning of the English II semester, prior to the study). However, it seems that packaging the annotations as “tweets” or “media-style” allowed this student to find a better opportunity to engage with his or her writing process. In fact, I noted that the importance of the format or name of the writing task transferred into other classroom activities not directly related to the social-media formatted writing in the study. For example, while I was giving instructions for students to take notes/annotations on a practice assessment for the English II End-of-Course test (the state-mandated standardized test that students take at the end of English II), one student raised his hand and asked, “Should we write summaries and notes that are short like tweets?” The instructions for the activity were for students to summarize the text as they read and write annotations to track their thinking, but I had not connected the “tweeting” style we had previously used in class to this annotating process. Nevertheless, the student’s connection between the two activities highlights the idea that students found the social media-formatted low-stakes writing accessible; when I responded “Yes” to the question, another student responded by saying “Oh, I can do that then.” Just as the survey response indicated that students felt that the social-media formatted low-stakes writing tasks gave them the opportunity to explore their thoughts outside of the bounds of writing formats that they feel has to be “long” or “difficult,” students seemed to feel more confident about their note-taking skills when they were reminded that their writing could be similar to a social-media format. Again, it seems that the relevance of the format to students, and the fact that students did not feel pressure to write in what they might consider to be a “normal” or “difficult” way, allowed them to feel that they could engage more with the text and the writing task than they might in a writing situation that did not use social media-formatted writing.

Student perception of literacy practices

The final pattern to emerge from the data involved students' perceptions of literacy practices, particularly how the literacy practices expected of them in the classroom are similar or different to the literacy skills they use outside of the classroom. As discussed previously, when asked on the initial survey how strongly they agree or disagree with the idea that the writing they do on social media positively impacts their literacy skills, a majority of students (54.2%) agreed, while 37.5% of students were neutral, and only 8% disagreed. Although "literacy" had been loosely defined for students as "the ability to read and write," students' explanations gave a great deal of insight into what they consider as the products and outcomes of "being able to read and write." For example, one student wrote that "[Social media] could [positively impact literacy skills] because you have to type it so it could help with grammar." Although it seems that this student focused more on the use of technology ("typing") rather than other unique characteristics of social media, the idea that "it could help with grammar" shows that the student automatically made a connection between literacy and grammar, implying that being "able" to read and write is connected with grammatical skills. Another student who chose to remain "neutral" to the question (rather than agreeing or disagreeing) explained, "Sometimes I like write like I'm smart and sometimes I use big words, and sometimes I get lazy and text talk." This explanation seems to imply that using "big words" is a key feature of writing in a way that presents the writer as "smart" whereas "lazy...text talk" seems to function as the opposite. Although the student does not clearly indicate which type of writing is positive, the tone of the explanation indicates that writing in a "smart" way and using "big words" could be a positive literacy impact whereas "text talk" might foster a negative impact.

I found it interesting that students seemed to automatically connect a “positive literacy impact” with skills that they are encouraged to use in school (e.g. using appropriate grammar, a robust vocabulary, etc.). This connection might suggest that students view the literacy skills of social media and school in a similar way; however, students’ responses to other survey questions seemed to contradict that. On the initial survey, students were also asked “To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The writing I do on social media is similar to the writing I am asked to do in school.” Responses to this question were much different than the question about literacy skills: 37.5% of students disagreed, 45.8% were neutral, and only 16.7% agreed. Many student explanations focused on the format and type of writing, referencing back to the ideas of grammar, spelling, and vocabulary as key differences in writing for school and writing on social media. In fact, regardless of whether they chose to disagree, remain neutral, or agree, many students noted similar reasons:

Student A (disagree): Because normally on social media and other stuff you don't have to talk normally you can abbreviate and use stuff like lol and stuff like that but for school writing it has to be more proper and spelled correctly and all that good stuff.

Student B (neutral): Because in some situations while in class, I spell everything correctly and don't use abbreviations like in text I will 'Lol' or 'Brb'.

Student C (agree): The reason why I agree with this is because when I post something, I want to have proper grammar and spell things correctly, so it's similar to the writing I do in school.

It seems that all of these students feel that school writing is “proper,” requires correct spelling, and does not accept abbreviations or other features of text talk. The students who chose to disagree or remain neutral explain that they do not always abide by these requirements of school

writing when they write on social media, while Student C agreed with the question because he or she does work to “have proper grammar and spell things correctly” on social media.

Furthermore, student responses seemed to imply that teachers also recognize and enforce these “rules” for writing in school as opposed to allowing students to use a similar type of writing that they use on social media. For example, one student explained that “some people like to shorten their sentences but in school you can’t because your teacher will make you write the word out.” The student’s use of the word “make” seemed very strong to me, implying that students are forced to change their writing based on teachers’ expectations. Other students wrote explanations such as “People use things like ‘lol’ and ‘wyd’ on social media and we can’t use things like that in school.” Again, using the word “can’t” here implies that abbreviations and text language are not accepted in school.

In addition to indicating differences in the format of social media writing versus writing in school, student responses also indicated that there are differences in the content of the writing. One student explained, “I disagree because I talk about different topics on social media,” and another student responded similarly with “No, because I talk about different stuff.” Yet another student wrote, “I disagree because the stuff I post on social media isn’t about school.” These responses, in conjunction with students’ responses about the positive impacts of social media on their literary skills, provide insight into students’ perceptions of literacy practices and the difference between literacy skills inside the classroom and on social media. The responses also indicate a recognition of the differences in purpose between school and social media writing, and while it seems that students realize that “online and offline literacies are not polar opposites” (Alvermann, 2008, p. 16), they also realize that many teachers may not share the same belief. That is, students seemed to feel that the writing they do on social media *does* positively impact

what they consider to be classroom-based literacy skills (grammar, vocabulary, etc.), but the majority of students still felt that in-class writing is much different than the writing they do on social media, possibly because of restrictions placed on their writing by classroom teachers.

By using social-media formatted low-stakes writing in the study, I hoped to explore how embracing the format of social media and allowing some of the features like text talk, emojis, and hashtags might impact students' perceptions of literacy skills. Once the first survey was completed, I knew that students recognized a difference between writing in school and writing on social media, so I was curious to see how connecting these two types of writing in the classroom would impact students' perceptions of literacy or impact their reading and writing processes. Early in the study, I found that, while most students were immediately engaged in the writing tasks, some students had difficulty using the format of social media because of the classroom setting. For example, I noted this conversation from a group of students in my third period class as they worked on their tweets for "The Veldt":

Polly: "Are we allowed to use text talk if we want to say something but it is too long?"

Me: "Absolutely."

Samantha: "Or, you could use an emoji like the laughing face."

Polly ends up using "lol" (Figure 11) in order to convey her emotional reaction to the text. However, it was her question of whether or not she was "allowed" to use text talk that seemed important.

Although the instructions for

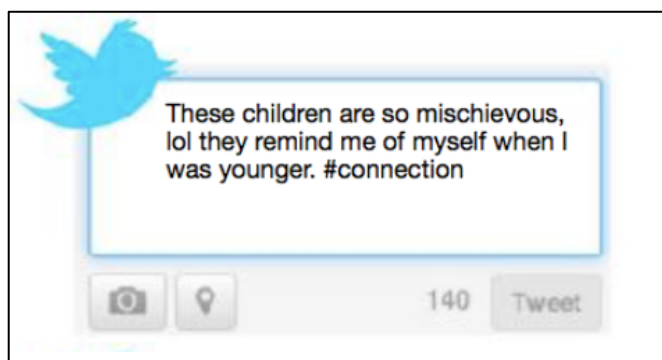


Figure 11. Polly's tweet about "The Veldt"

the activity specifically listed emojis and hashtags as examples of the Twitter format to use, I had not mentioned text talk directly. I found it interesting that Polly wanted reassurance that she was “allowed” to use text talk even though the task used a social media format. It seems that because the activity was taking place in a school setting, Polly still recognized that there might be discrepancies between what she views as part of writing on social media and what I, as the teacher and the typical audience for classroom work, would accept.

Other students also noted discrepancies between their understanding of social media formats and my understanding of them as a teacher. For example, I used the Instagram format for quick-writes, but a conversation I observed between two students in my fourth period class challenged the assumption of Instagram as a “quick” writing format. As Catherine and Kate began to post their Instagram-style posts about the pros and cons of technology, I heard them discussing the length of the post:

Catherine: “This doesn’t have to be long, right?”

Kate: “No, it’s a quick-write”

Catherine: “Yeah, I know, but Insta isn’t always quick.”

Kate: “Well, I think Mrs. Loving just wants this to be quick.”

Catherine: “Okay.”

In assuming that the Instagram format would work best for a quick activity, I had not considered that students might question Instagram as a quick format. Catherine’s note that “Insta isn’t always quick” uncovers the differences between her understanding of Instagram and my assumptions about it. While Polly’s question about being “allowed” to use certain types of language recognized a possible discrepancy between her understanding of social media literacy practices and my expectations in the classroom, Catherine recognized that my understanding of

the literacy practices of Instagram might be more limited or different than her understanding of them. Both of these instances reinforce the findings from the survey which indicate that students understand the differences between in-school literacy and social media literacy and the ways in which teachers traditionally approach and respond to these differences.

These moments when students worked to navigate the conflict between what they view as social media literacy skills and what they view as expected classroom literacy skills can be further analyzed by considering the privileging of certain forms of language. In *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, James Paul Gee (2014) explains this idea by noting that people “use language to build privilege or prestige for one sign system or way of knowing over another (p. 35). These “signs systems,” include different languages (English, Spanish, etc.), different types of language (conversational language, formal language, the language of certain careers and fields, etc.), and also communicative systems such as graphs and images (Gee, 2014, p. 35). In the observations discussed earlier involving Cody’s initially vague Instagram post on main idea (“Trying to make VR for shopping), it must be noted that his first post was not entirely “incorrect.” The article he had read was, in fact, about people trying to use virtual reality for shopping. In this case, Cody’s original post was not necessarily an indication that he did not understand the concept of main idea; rather, it is possible that he crafted the short original post because it used language that aligns with the sign systems of social media, the format that he was being asked to use. Yet, when Cody saw that other students were writing in a way that privileged the language typically used in the classroom over the language of social media, he edited his post to also use non-social media language despite the social media format. I realized while analyzing this data that my own expectations about the language necessary to create a clear main idea statement possibly led to conflicts for students like Cody, who, when using the social media

format, immediately privileged its language conventions and then felt that it was necessary to edit the post in order to privilege the language conventions of the classroom. In addition, Cody's shift in language may also indicate a shift in his sense of audience for this assignment, as he possibly recognized me as his intended audience for the revised post and changed his wording to follow classroom conventions accordingly. Similarly, Polly and Catherine also worked to make sure that they were privileging what they felt would be the "correct" type of language for the task considering their understanding that the language of the classroom setting typically conflicts with the language of social media.

After using social media-formatted low-stakes writing tasks throughout the unit, students were once again asked to tell whether they agreed or disagreed that social media positively impacts their literacy skills and whether they agreed or disagreed that the writing they do on social media is similar to the writing they do in school. Figures 12 and 13 show results from this final survey, as well as results from the initial survey for comparison. For the question about whether or not social media positively impacts literacy (Figure 12), it seems that on the final survey student responses became stronger—either for the disagree or agree side.

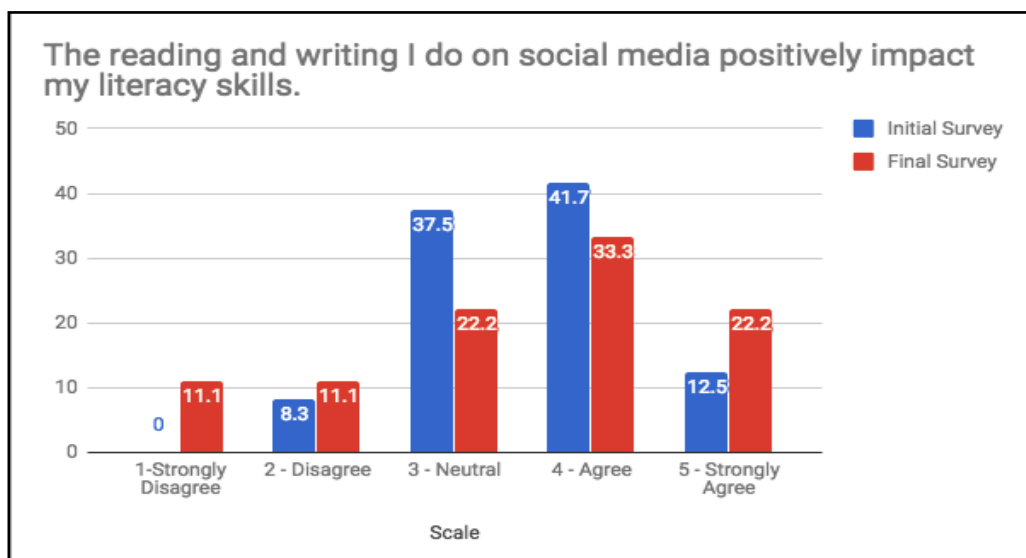


Figure 12. Student responses about social media's impact on literacy skills

Again, student explanations give insight into why these changes occurred. One student who chose “strongly agree” on the final survey said, “I strongly think that because nothing is really different.” This student seems to have recognized that, despite possible differences in the perceived literacy skills involved in the tasks, the social media-formatted writing tasks that we used in the classroom were similar to non-social media tasks that we had also used. Another student agreed, explaining: “Because I know what way I should talk whenever something is different.” This response indicates that writing on social media helps the student’s literacy skills by allowing him or her to recognize when they should adjust their “talk” for “different” writing formats (e.g. writing on social media helps the student realize that social media-writing is different than writing in school). As before, some students noted that social media impacts their grammar and vocabulary or allows them to practice writing and reading. For example, one student wrote, “I put 4 because I read a lot of things on social media to maybe learn something I didn’t know or just to read and sometimes I learn new words and stuff.” In general, students who agreed that social media positively impacts their literacy skills wrote explanations that were very similar to previous explanations on the initial survey. In contrast, students who were neutral or disagreed wrote explanations with more negative tones:

Student D: “[Social media] hasn’t helped my skills at all.”

Student E: “It’s easy to pick up bad habits on social media. Such as being more lazy when you text.”

Student F: “I don’t think this is true because if it was everyone would pass English class.”

Student D explains their “strongly disagree” choice by speaking from experience and admitting that social media has not helped his or her skills at all. It is unclear whether the student was specifically referring to the social media tasks we completed in class or his or her social media

use outside of the classroom; either way, the student believes that social media has no impact on his or her literacy skills. Student E focuses again on social media as perpetuating “bad habits” and being “lazy,” which the student believes negatively impact literacy skills. Student F’s response was the most interesting for me, as it suggests that social media cannot positively impact literacy skills because if it did, “everyone would pass English class.” This response gives insight into several elements of this student’s perception of literacy. First, it suggests that passing English class is a sign that one has proficient literacy skills. Secondly, the response indicates that the student believes there is a distinct difference between social media-based literacy skills and classroom literacy skills, and the student does not feel that one necessarily impacts the other. Collectively, these survey results seem to imply that after completing the activities during the study, many students were more aware of how social media impacts their literacy, either for the better or worse. Furthermore, the data again speaks to the need for teachers to not only recognize the similarities between online and offline literacies as discussed by Alvermann (2008), but to also make those similarities visible to students so that their perception of literacy is not limited by what they perceive as the literacy “rules” of the classroom.

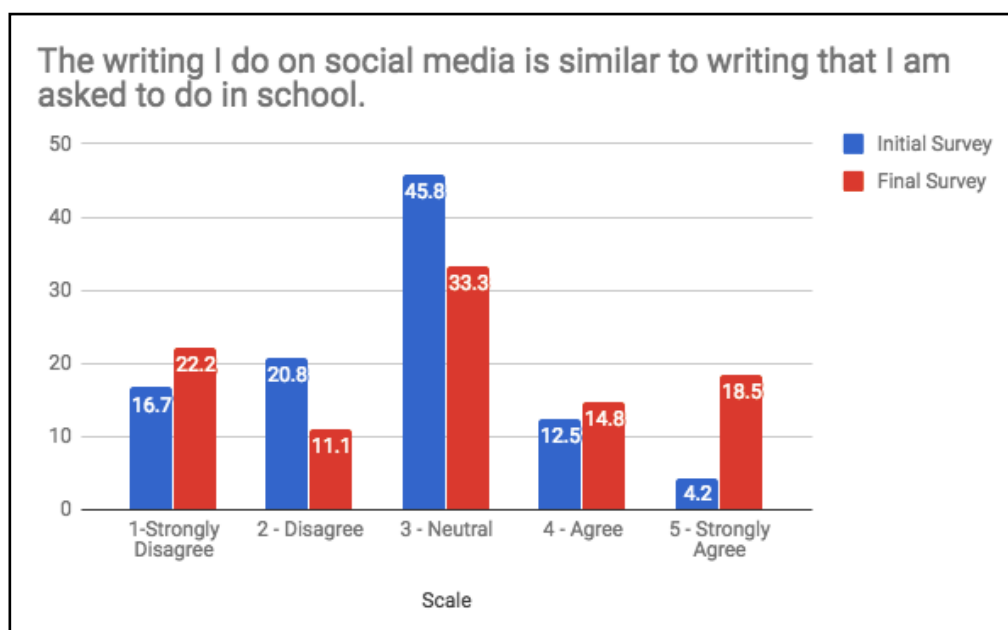


Figure 13. Student responses about the similarities between social media writing and writing in school

Results for “The writing I do on social media is similar to the writing I am asked to do in school” on the final survey (Figure 13) also showed that some students moved from a “neutral” standpoint to either agreeing or disagreeing, but many students remained neutral. Again, student responses focused mostly on content, grammar, or other requirements often set by teachers:

Student G: The grammar I use is the same but the things I talk about are totally different.

Student H: I talk about different subjects on social media than I do in school, but there have been a few times where the writing in school is similar on social media.

Student I: The writing we do at school is longer.

Student J: No, because if you are writing on Twitter or something, you won't have a teacher there to tell you like what to say or how to say it.

Student G recognizes that his or her use of grammar is the same on both social media and in school, but he or she also recognizes that the content is different, as does Student H. Student I focuses on the length of assignments, noting that writing in school is usually “longer.” Although we had completed many short, social-media style writing tasks, Student I still felt that overall, writing in school has a length requirement that exceeds the formats of social media. Student J focused on the role of the teacher, explaining that school writing is mainly different from social media writing because a teacher does not have a role in instructing the student about “what to say” or “how to say it.”

I recognize that my initial definition of literacy as one that involves “being able to read and write” likely impacted students’ narrowing of literacy to things like grammar, vocabulary, and content. Although I emphasized social media-formatted writing throughout the unit as “real” literacy tasks that students were participating in to further their reading processes and thinking skills, students seemed to focus more on the fact that this in-school version of social media

writing was much different than the “real” social media writing that they do outside of school. Rather than considering that the formats of social media (text talk, hashtags, length, etc.) are literacy practices in and of themselves, students continued to focus on the idea that social media either does or does not contribute to their use of the literacy skills that are required of them in school. In this way, it seems that using low-stakes social media tasks in the classroom prompted many students to become more aware of the perceived differences between social media as a literacy practice and writing in school as a literacy practice. While students recognized their own understanding of these differences, they also believe that teachers often recognize these differing literacy practices and require them to abide in some way by traditionally perceived “rules” of writing in the classroom.

Conclusions

My inquiry was initially inspired by a recognition of students' disengagement with texts and their lack of comfort and confidence with finding ways to engage and increase their understanding with texts, especially those texts that they do not find to be relevant to their own lives. My research explored how using a relevant format, such as social media, might provide students with ways to increase their engagement or how using this format might impact students in other ways in the classroom. As I review and reflect on the data collected during this research process, I realize that using a social media format for low-stakes writing can impact students in the high school English classroom, but this impact varies based on numerous factors. In order to summarize my findings, I will discuss each of my initial research questions along with a review of the data and findings relevant to each question.

What happens, if anything, when social media conventions are incorporated into low-stakes writing activities in an English classroom?

Students are highly aware of the social nature of social media, especially in terms of audience. In their initial surveys, students indicated that they write for an intended audience on social media (typically family and friends). In addition, many students noted that one of the key ways that social media impacts their literacy skills is by allowing them to compare their writing to the writing of others, which helps them see how their own writing "can be better." In a traditional sense, students typically view the teacher as the intended audience of their writing in the classroom (as the teacher typically gives feedback, grades their work, etc.), but the social media format used during the study fostered interaction between students, which led to students viewing their classroom peers as their intended audience in many instances. For this reason, it is not surprising that audience awareness initially emerged as a major pattern in the data that

seemed to speak to this research question; students immediately began comparing their work to that of their peers. Whether students were using their role as an audience member in order to evaluate their own writing, such as Cierra did after she viewed Jake's Instagram-style post, or using the advice and feedback of their intended audience in order to revise and edit their post, such as Cody did, the social aspect of the writing tasks seemed to impact students by encouraging and motivating them to reflect on their writing and make changes to their writing. Students were able to quickly give each other face-to-face feedback based on their virtual posts; this volume of feedback far exceeds what one teacher would be able to provide in the same length of time. As students revised their writing, they sought to provide clarity for their intended audience or clarity in terms of conveying their purpose and ideas. For these reasons, it seems that the audience interaction afforded through the use of the social media format encouraged students to engage with their writing processes and further examine how they can demonstrate their thinking through writing.

In addition to providing opportunities for audience interaction, the social media formats also provided students with multiple ways to express themselves. When using texts and images, as with the Instagram posts, many students found it important for both the text and the image to be equally clear. Cierra revised her chosen image because she felt that it did not effectively convey her idea, while John and Charlie commented that Cody's main idea statement of "Trying to make VR for shopping" was not clear despite the extra detail provided by his image. As students worked to reconsider their ideas in order to find corresponding images and vice versa, not only was the impact of audience visible, but students' engagement was also visible. Cierra and Cody were cognitively engaged in the processes of working through revising their posts and addressing the "problems" that they and others noticed in their posts. Also, students like

Samantha, who worked through the challenge of finding the best emoji to represent her learning, and Cory, who found a strategy for presenting his ideas despite the challenging character limit of Twitter, also demonstrated behavioral and cognitive engagement: they were not only “doing the work,” but they were also “motivated” to complete it, and they were willing to work through challenges and problems to do so (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004, p.65).

Allowing students to choose which social media formats to use also afforded them the opportunity to consider their own learning styles and the ways in which they prefer to express their ideas. Students seemed to be aware of which styles of low-stakes writing worked best for them, and they were quick to engage behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively when they were able to make those choices. While choice is not necessarily a convention of a social media format (such as hashtags, short posts, emojis, etc.), students seemed to appreciate the choices they had in terms of which social media apps and sites to use, possibly because this mimics the choice they exert when they navigate between various social media platforms outside of school. When writing using the conventions of social media formats, students seemed to make choices based on their intended audience, which was their peers, and they seemed to engage in more ways, especially when given choice in how to create their low stakes social media post.

How, if at all, does the use of social media-style writing tasks impact students’ reading processes?

Along with engaging through audience and choice, students also seemed to internalize certain ideas concerning their reading processes and were able to transfer those skills because of the accessibility of the social media format. For example, students seemed better prepared to use various types of annotations when they were connected with corresponding hashtags (#vocabulary, #connections, etc.). Also, as was evident in the EOC preparation activity, students

seemed more comfortable with writing in response to their reading when this writing could be called a tweet. Again, it seems that using a social media format added another layer of accessibility and comfort to the already informal low-stakes writing process, and this comfort seemed to encourage students to embrace their reading process during the unit.

It is important to note that although many students reacted positively to the social media formats, some students admitted that the formats did not impact their reading processes. Student choice again seemed to play a role in this, as some students wrote on the final survey that they would rather not use social media formats, while many other students enjoyed using them. And, while my observations and collected data focused on students' engagement with the reading process as we read, my study did not necessarily consider the impacts of this low-stakes writing after the initial reading process. For example, I did not analyze how these social media-formatted low stakes tasks impacted students' proficiency on assignments such as essays, tests, or projects that require students to demonstrate a thorough analysis of the texts read. A longer study focused on the use of social media tasks over the course of a full semester might provide insight into how students' use of these low-stakes writing formats might impact their reading processes and growth as readers and writers across a variety of literature, informational texts, and writing tasks.

How, if at all, do social media-style writing tasks impact students' perceptions of the similarities and/or differences between their personal literacy practices and the tasks required of them in school?

As I analyzed data, this question and pattern presented itself as possibly the most complex of all, as it became clear that students were aware of a divide between what they consider to be their literacy skills outside of the classroom and what they feel are accepted literacy skills inside the classroom. It is interesting that before the study, most students believed

that social media does positively impact their literacy skills, yet they gave explanations which qualified “literacy” as those grammatical, vocabulary, and content-based skills that are traditionally required in the classroom. After the study, students who still agreed cited similar reasons, while students who disagreed noticed that the difference between the writing they do in school and the writing they do outside of school are not similar enough to foster a connection between literacy practices.

I also noticed that my own assumptions of social media formats as “quick” formats possibly heightened students’ awareness of the differences between social media literacy practices and classroom-based literacy practices. In addition, the fact that the writing tasks took place in a classroom and were sometimes combined with curriculum-based skills (such as main idea), possibly made it difficult for students to fully embrace or feel comfortable using the conventions of social media, such as when Cody was prompted to rewrite his Instagram post based on audience feedback, or when Polly and Catherine asked for reassurance that they were completing tasks “correctly.” Also, combining social media with literary skills, such as stating a main idea, led to situations where the conventions of social media were sometimes fully accepted and sometimes they were not. For example, Cody worked to avoid being vague in his Instagram-style post about virtual reality, but it was more acceptable for Angela to leave out details in her Twitter posts about “The Veldt.” Although it is possible that the character limits and particular conventions of each social media format allowed for these differences in clarity, it is also possible that these differences heightened students’ awareness about the conflicts between social media literacy and classroom literacy while also limiting their recognition of social media conventions as unique literacy practices.

Final Conclusions

Many students responded positively to the use of social media as low-stakes writing tasks. These students demonstrated increased engagement during reading and writing tasks and seemed to appreciate the opportunity to interact with and get feedback from their peer audience. However, some students did not feel that the social media formats impacted their learning, and not all students showed signs of engagement in all of the tasks, findings which indicate that student choice and individual learning preferences play an important role in student engagement. In addition, while the use of social media as a literacy practice in the classroom prompted some students to draw connections between their personal literacy practices and literacy practices in school, many students became more aware of the differences between these literacy practices while working to determine which type of language to privilege in the writing tasks.

As social media continues to grow as a method of communication in society, students will continue to adapt to its formats, platforms, and language, making choices as writers that showcase their individual personalities, writing styles, and purposes for sharing information and ideas. High school English teachers wish for students to do the same in our classrooms as we push for them to engage in their learning and take ownership of their work. For this reason, the use of social media formats as low-stakes writing tasks may provide students with relevant and accessible ways to engage with coursework, increasing their ability to feel comfortable and confident participating in transactions with a variety of texts.

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Appendix A Student Survey 1

5/27/2018

How Technology Impacts Us: Pre-Unit Survey (Group A)

How Technology Impacts Us: Pre-Unit Survey (Group A)

Please answer each question honestly. This survey is part of Mrs. Loving's study of the impact of social media on low-stakes writing. Results from this survey are anonymous and will not impact your grade.

* Required

Social Media

This section focuses on your use of social media.

1. How many different social media sites do you use? *

2. On average, how many hours per week do you spend using social media? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5 hours per week
 6-10 hours per week
 11-15 hours per week
 16-20 hours per week
 20+ hours per week

3. To what extent do you agree with this statement: "The reading and writing I do on social media positively impact my literacy skills." *

Mark only one oval.

- 1 2 3 4 5
- strongly disagree strongly agree

4. Explain your response to the previous question. (For example, if you chose 2, explain why you mostly disagree; give examples and reasons, etc.) *

5/27/2018

How Technology Impacts Us: Pre-Unit Survey (Group A)

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The writing I do on social media is similar to the writing I am asked to do in school." *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

6. Explain your response to the previous question. Why did you choose the number you chose? *

7. Explain why you use social media and how you use it (for what purposes). If you choose not to use social media, explain why. *

Reading and Writing Assignments

This section focuses on reading and writing assignments.

8. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? : "It is easy for me to comprehend most of the texts I read in school." *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

9. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? : "I sometimes struggle to engage with texts that I read." ("Engage" here means "think about" or "respond to") *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

5/27/2018

How Technology Impacts Us: Pre-Unit Survey (Group A)

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? : "Writing about what I read helps me understand what I've read." *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? : "I am more likely to comprehend and engage with reading when I feel like the texts are relevant to me." *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

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Appendix B Student Survey 2

5/27/2018

Technology Unit - Final Survey

Technology Unit - Final Survey

This survey is part of Mrs. Loving's study of the impact of social media on low-stakes writing. Results from this survey will not impact your grade in any way. Only responses from students who returned an informed consent form will be used in the research study, although information from all students will be used for Mrs. Loving's classroom reflection.

* Required

1. What is your student number? *

2. On average, how many hours per week do you spend using social media? *

Mark only one oval.

- 0-5 hours/week
 6-10 hours/week
 11-15 hours/week
 16-20 hours/week
 20+ hours/week

3. How many social media sites do you use?
(Give a number) *

4. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: The writing I do on social media is similar to writing that I am asked to do in school. *

Mark only one oval.

- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | strongly agree |

5. Explain why you chose the number above (give examples, reasons, etc). *

5/27/2018

Technology Unit - Final Survey

6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: The reading and writing I do social media positively impact my literacy skills. *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

7. Explain your response to the question above (give reasons, examples, etc). *

8. Tell me your thoughts about the formats of the recent social media-style writing tasks that you completed in English class. We did "tweets," Instagram-style posts, Snapchat-style posts, and Facebook-style discussion. Were these formats easier, more difficult, more engaging, or less engaging than other types of writing that isn't formatted like social media posts? For example, did you think the "tweets" were more engaging than regular annotations? Give specific examples and share your thoughts. *

9. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: It is easy for me to comprehend most of the texts I read in school. *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

10. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: I sometimes struggle to engage with texts that I read ("engage" here means "think about" or "respond to"). *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

strongly disagree strongly agree

5/27/2018

Technology Unit - Final Survey

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: During our last unit in English class (about technology), writing about what I was reading helped me understand the information. (Examples - writing about The Veldt, virtual reality, the selfie or selfless article, etc). *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

12. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?: During our last unit in English class, the social media-style writing tasks made the reading and assignments more relevant/familiar to me. (This means - When I wrote "posts" similar to social media posts, I felt that the activity was more relatable to me as a teenager.) *

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly disagree Strongly agree

13. Think about the social media-style writing tasks that you completed while participating in reading activities in our technology unit. Explain how/why you feel those writing tasks impacted or did not impact your learning during the unit. *

