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Taking Facebook Seriously : A 21st Century Writing Space for Collaboration and Learning

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~~/~~TAKING FACEBOOK SERIOUSLY~~/~~

A 21ST CENTURY WRITING SPACE FOR COLLABORATION AND LEARNING

by

ANASTASIA RUBIS

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Taking Facebook Seriously:

A 21st Century Writing Space for Collaboration and Learning

Introduction

Facebook has achieved such widespread adoption around the world that it can no longer be dismissed by those who study writing. It has grown from a student directory founded at Harvard in 2004 to the world's largest social networking site with 200 million users. Facebook is now more popular than email: used by more people around the globe for more hours. As a platform, it is employed for objectives as diverse as hanging out, campaigning for a Presidential bid, and organizing a political rebellion. Increasingly, there is no reason not to be on Facebook if one's aim is to communicate, engage, and connect--and it is free.

In contrast with the ubiquitous adoption of Facebook as a primary communications platform around the globe, academia has been slow to embrace Facebook or to consider it seriously. While at least 80% of college students use Facebook¹, academics have not viewed it as a new space of writing that can impact education positively until recently. Kathleen Blake Yancey suggested as early as 2004 that the Web is the site of more writing by students than school, and that new modes of writing are important to study given that they expand the very definition of writing ("Made Not Only in Words" 298). However, it was not until February 2009 that the NCTE issued a policy statement written by Yancey calling for new writing curricula that integrate blogs, wikis, and social networking sites including Facebook: "It's time for us to join the future and support all forms of 21st century literacies, inside school and

¹ A 2007 study of undergraduates puts the number at 80% (Lomas et. al.). However, a University of Michigan study of its own campus puts the number at 99.5% (Aleman and Wartman 6).

outside school” (“Writing in the 21st Century” 1). Both Yancey (“Made” 302) and Joseph Moxley (“Datagogies” 200) have suggested that if educators do not engage with new literacies that students are practicing primarily outside of school, the entire academic enterprise of teaching writing is at risk.

How does Facebook qualify as a new literacy practice? Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear define new literacies by contrasting Web 1.0 with Web 2.0 services and practices:

The more a literacy practice can be...associated with the concept of Web 2.0, the more it is entitled to be regarded as a new literacy. That is to say, the more a literacy practice privileges participation over publishing, distributed expertise over centralized expertise, collective intelligence over individual possessive intelligence, collaboration over individuated authorship, dispersion over scarcity, sharing over ownership, experimentation over ‘normalization,’ innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, creative-innovative rule breaking over generic purity and policing, relationship over information broadcast, and so on, the more we should regard it as a ‘new’ literacy. (“Sampling the New in New Literacies” 21)

Facebook is certainly built upon Knobel and Lankshear’s new literacy principles of participation, sharing, collaboration, and relationships. Its main function is online conversation through the sharing of images, video and text with a publicly articulated network. It can be viewed as the cyberspace version of the Burkean parlor that Andrea Lunsford posited (113) or the Athenian marketplace imagined by Stephen North (46) as

the ideal environments in which writers work on writing. A key characteristic is that Facebook enacts and makes transparent the *social* nature of writing and construction of knowledge that scholars such as Kenneth Bruffee (641) have theorized since the 1980's. The premise of social networking is that writing is shared by one's articulated network, and meaning is created through conversation among peers, rather than dictated by a monolithic, static website, for example. Writing as a social activity is the lifeblood of social networking sites.

Even so, Facebook and social networking have been little studied by the academic community, which, when it has paid attention to Web 2.0 technologies, has focused primarily on wikis and blogs: "While rhetoric and composition scholars have made great headway in bringing certain technologies into the classroom—blogs, wikis, course management systems...other technologies like computer games, social networking sites, and cell phones have received less academic attention despite their pedagogical value" (Vie 21). The possible rationale for ignoring Facebook will be explored subsequently; suffice it to say that further study of social networking is valid today, when so many people globally are finding so many applications for this new medium.

I want to suggest that it is important for writing studies scholars to pay attention to Facebook as a promising new space of writing and learning, especially given that so much of our audience, college students, is already there. The moment is ripe, since in the past 18 months, Facebook has evolved beyond personal profiles to offer Public Profiles, commonly known as Pages. Pages have become an important communication channel for such symbols of power as President Barack Obama and bastions of literacy such as Stanford University and the *New York Times*. All are finding increased value and

relevance in Facebook as a tool that expands our ability to engage in dialogue with one another for myriad purposes, one of which is to learn.

The moment is ripe, moreover, because, as will be demonstrated, there is a pendulum swing toward the positive regarding youth technologies, including text messaging, which has been vilified in the past for ruining literacy skills but is now thought to have a positive effect on reading and writing skills. The same positive pendulum swing appears to be occurring with social networking and its ability to promote learning and literacy.

The focus of this study is to explore the potential of Facebook and social networking for teaching and learning writing. Furthermore, the aim is to envision Facebook applications for the writing class, based on the pedagogical applications of other Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs and wikis as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the social constructivist view of writing.

Facebook makes obvious not only the social nature of writing but the evolving nature of writing and knowledge-making over time. Thus it is important to view social networking and its possibilities within the framework of societal change: a new culture of writing and learning that is developing in the digital age. Joseph Moxley claims that we are at a seminal moment in the way writing, text, and authorship are defined and practiced:

From collaborating and authoring practices in and out of academe, we have evidence that we are at a transformative tipping point, a juncture in habits and assumptions that may significantly change global societies—a move from the Knowledge Society to the Age of Peer Production. Clearly,

then, it makes sense for us as educators to consider how these technologies can improve teaching in writing programs. (“Datagogies” 199)

Moxley’s use of the term “peer production” gestures toward the collaborative, user-generated content which marks social networking sites and other Web 2.0 technologies, and the fact that this will increasingly become the paradigm for learning, replacing the paradigm of a closed “knowledge society” represented by an elite. It is my purpose to investigate the Facebook phenomenon: how Facebook is currently being used by early adopters in media, art, politics, and academia—and how it might be integrated into writing courses to support student writing. My objective is help lay a foundation—or even to act as a catalyst-- for future study of this new writing space.

The New Face of Facebook

What began as a student directory founded at Harvard University in 2004 has transformed into the “consumer phenomenon of 2008” (“Global Faces and Networked Places” 1). According to *The New York Times*, Facebook is “one of the fastest growing and best known sites on the internet today...an essential personal and business networking tool in much of the wired world” (Stone). More people use social networking sites than email²; Facebook is now visited by three in every ten people online across the world; and the greatest user growth in the past year has come from people aged 35-49 (“Global Faces” 4).

These facts demonstrate not only Facebook’s sweeping popularity but its evolution from a tool for Harvard students used primarily for entertainment into a global

² To demonstrate the irrelevancy of email as compared with social networking among teens: according to a Pew Internet study, only 14% of teens surveyed reported sending emails (Lenhart, “Teens and Social Media” 20).

communications tool for *adults*. Many adults use Facebook for diversion, but increasingly, they are using Facebook to meet professional and educational objectives.

Facebook has not always been open to the general public. Launched in 2004 as a social networking site open only to Harvard students, it was subsequently extended to college students in the U.S. It opened to high schools in September 2005 and then spread to universities worldwide. As of September 2006, the network was extended beyond educational institutions to anyone with a registered email address (Hempel and Kowitt, "How Facebook is Taking Over Our Lives").

Social networking sites are, by definition, "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison 211).

Facebook offers three types of accounts: 1) Profiles, commonly used by individuals; 2) Pages, used by public figures and entities; and 3) Groups, used by affinity communities. Profiles have Friends, Pages have Fans, and Groups have Members. The personal Profiles of Facebook are well known; lesser known are Pages and Groups, which are the platforms with the most potential for education. One must establish a personal Profile on Facebook in order to engage with Pages or Groups.

Facebook Pages launched in November 2007 to allow universities, businesses, non-profits, media, sports teams, artists, films, and public figures, to have a presence on Facebook and to interact with publics (*Facebook Pages: Insider's Guide* 15). Pages can

establish dialogue with publics to create identity, promote awareness, drive traffic to websites, and even to sell products and services.

As of March 22, 2009, the most popular Facebook Page was President Barack Obama's with almost 6 million Fans ("Facebook Page Statistics"). CNN, *The New York Times*, MoMA, The White House, PBS, and Stanford University all have robust pages with which they communicate to Fans—and Fans communicate to them.

Barack Obama used Facebook Pages successfully to recruit supporters in the 2008 Presidential election "as a core element of his outreach and mobilization," according to a Pew Internet report (Rainie). Obama drew over 2 million American supporters to his Facebook page, while McCain drew only 600,000. Obama also has an official Facebook group with over 1,000,000 members which is mediated by his team with ground rules for participation and posts; in addition, he has many less official groups formed by citizens. Not surprisingly, one of Obama's campaign strategists was 24-year-old Chris Hughes, a Facebook co-founder (Fraser).

President Obama is just one successful user of Facebook: it has become the new way to communicate and organize for many. A survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that more than half of employers now use social networks to find job candidates (Blanding). A youth rebellion in Egypt in April 2008 was organized via a Facebook Group (Shapiro). In March 2009, President Obama appointed Vivek Kundra as the first federal chief information officer (Knowlton and Hansell A17). Kundra was previously chief technology officer for the District of Columbia and worked toward allowing drivers to pay tickets or renew driver's licenses on Facebook. He believes that "we have Darwinian innovation in the consumer space" brought about by

Web and cell phone technologies, and it makes sense for government to adopt these technologies in order to lower its operating costs (A17).

This notion of “Darwinian innovation” echoes similar phrases such as “tectonic change” used by writing studies scholars like Yancey (“Made” 298) when describing the expansion of literacies brought about by Web 2.0. Both phrases imply that Web 2.0 is not just for entertainment or sharing one’s opinion, but that somehow it is contributing to lasting changes in cultural norms and behavior.

In February 2009, Facebook revamped its Pages, essentially making Pages more powerful for conversing with Fans. Pages presently function more like individual Profiles and include opportunities for interactivity. For instance, a Page holder can now publish a Status Update that will appear in Fans’ News Feeds (Groups do not share this feature). A Page holder can also now gather user feedback and comments. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* explains the distinction between the first and second generation of Pages for a university administration attempting to engage students:

Previously, the central pages for a college or university were essentially walled off from the rest of the site [students’ personal Profiles], making it difficult for administrators to know whether any announcements or content that they posted were being seen students, alumni, and others who have Facebook accounts. Facebook executives said they hoped the changes would make the site less like an address book and more like Twitter, another social networking site that allows users to post minute-by-minute status updates. (J. Keller, “Facebook Gives College Officials Better Tools to Reach Alumni and Students”)

It should be noted that Facebook has been more widely embraced by universities for administrative use, rather than classroom use. For example, Facebook is being used for recruitment, development, alumni relations and even emergencies on campus (Aleman and Wartman 129). During the Virginia Tech University shooting in April 2007, a Facebook group called "I'm OK" displayed the most up-to-date information to concerned families (130).

Though Facebook has not been widely used in the classroom, with the new Pages, educators can establish a Page for each course they teach and accomplish the following basic communication:

- post syllabus or class assignments, as supplement to a course management system
- publish Status Updates about that day's class or news related to class; an inspiring line from literature; or tips for an essay assignment
- send targeted Fan Updates to students (similar to an email blast)
- post a Discussion topic to extend class discussion--or participate in one started by students
- invite students to upcoming Events on campus, for example a visiting lecturer, poetry reading or writing workshop
- post Links to useful internet content: sources for class projects; literary or social sites of interest, including magazines or non-profit groups for social change; YouTube videos on MLA format or of authors reading; and websites on different genres of writing, including screenwriting, speechwriting, and comedy writing, to appeal to special interests
- share Photos of authors or settings of novels

- share Videos, for example a video produced by the campus writing center to encourage visits

Facebook can accomplish more specific objectives in the writing class, as will subsequently be discussed. What the more powerful Pages demonstrate, however, is the likelihood that Facebook will continue to evolve and introduce features with potential applications for teaching and learning. For example, Harvard has produced a Facebook application called H-Link that allows students to find peers online who are taking the same courses, so they can network and form study groups (Blanding). This continued development is important for educators intrigued by Facebook but unsure of how it can currently support student writing.

Pages vs. Websites

Facebook Pages are almost always employed as complements to websites, as an additional channel of communication, by social networking leaders. Stanford, for instance, has a dozen website URL's listed on its Facebook Page for ease of access, recognizing that students are likely to keep Facebook open on desktops. The integration of Pages and websites is becoming common, as is made evident by the ubiquitous Facebook links on websites.

Facebook Pages differ from websites in that they are free; they are already networked with 200 million Facebook users; they require no special technical knowledge to set up or integrate with multimedia beyond familiarity with navigating the Web; and, most importantly, they feature built-in interactivity. Fans of Pages can Comment/Share/Like on the Wall, join or start discussions, upload photos, videos or links, and RSVP to events, among other functions. Page holders can send Updates to

Fans and target them by geographic region and age; they can invite Fans to events, start discussions, respond to Fan comments or discussion, and send weekly Fan Notes, among other functions.

Though websites are increasingly interactive, it is difficult to accomplish more than static html on one's own (Lowe and Williams), and there is often a financial cost associated with interactivity, whereas it is built into the Facebook platform. Websites were designed to disseminate information, whereas Facebook was founded to share information, as its mission statement makes clear: "Giving people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook Page). Disseminating information and sharing information differ *ideologically* and today's students have grown up with the latter as a culture.

Tim O'Reilly calls websites Web 1.0, whereas blogging, Wikipedia, and social networking are Web 2.0 (qtd. in Knobel and Lankshear, "Sampling" 16). Knobel and Lankshear explain that "What one 'gets' on a website is what web publishers put there. The logic is of use rather than participation; of reception and/or consumption rather than interactivity and agency" (16). Information consumed by the public rather than produced recalls Joe Moxley's claim that we are undergoing a transformation from the Knowledge Age to the Age of Peer Production. Students tend to be more comfortable with peer production than teachers, who were likely trained in a knowledge age model. Participation on Web 2.0 platforms is the most effective way to understand and acclimate to the new culture.

One of the challenges with a Facebook Page is that one is not finished upon setup, as is more typically the case with a website. A Page needs to be maintained and posted to

on an ongoing basis. The creation of dialogue rather than monologue requires more of an investment of time and attention. According to Nielsen Online, "social networks are ultimately about friendships, where members add value to each other's lives through interaction" ("Global Faces" 6). For an educator using a Page, this means regularly posting and replying to posts to engage students. It also means maintaining the stance of co-learner or facilitator rather than authority.

Another challenge with Facebook is that educators cannot "own" a Page, as they can a website; therefore, they do not ultimately control Facebook Pages. In fact, the redesign was forced upon Page holders: many were unhappy and posted by the hundreds their displeasure. This highlights an issue: Facebook will make continual changes in design and applications, but what if those changes do not meet educator needs? The implication is that it is important to maintain a departmental or course website that one can control, in addition to a Facebook page, and not solely the latter.

A final drawback of Facebook Pages is that, with the redesign, they now include ads in the right sidebar. These can be distracting from a Page's message. It is another example of how one does not control a Facebook Page as one would a website.

Most social networking leaders also use Groups in an official capacity; in addition, unofficial Groups spring up around them, formed by individual Facebook users. For instance Stanford University has official groups, e.g. Stanford Sports, as well as unofficial: Stanford Democrats, Stanford Pride, and Hispanics at Stanford University. Groups support the same features as Pages: the Wall, Discussion, Events, Links, Photos and Video. However, they do not include a Status Update feature or a Note/blogging feature. My research indicates that Groups are in all cases secondary to Pages for social

networking leaders: Pages always have more Fans than groups have Members, and Pages are more active with more conversation. Some Groups today are becoming Pages, following the redesign, to capitalize on new features. One distinct advantage of Groups for educators, however, is that they offer the option of being “closed,” or in other words impossible to join without invitation, whereas Pages are open to all Fans.

Facebook Leaders

To study the adoption of Facebook by social media leaders, one must create a personal Profile and, through Facebook’s search engine, find and “become a Fan” of the *New York Times*, CNN, Stanford University, NPR, and MoMA, for example.

Automatically, one receives News Feeds to one’s personal Profile about their activities.

One can also peruse Page links, postings, photos, videos, notes, and discussions. In addition, one can “become a member” of Groups that are “global” and open to everyone.

One’s personal Profile is protected according to selected privacy settings and is *not* made accessible to other Page Fans or Group Members.

The New York Times

Those who doubt the validity of Facebook for intellectual purposes might be surprised to learn that the *New York Times* has an active Facebook page with almost 400,000 fans.³ In fact, the *Times* launched its Facebook Page on the first day that Pages became available, according to Vivian Schiller⁴, former senior vice president and general manager of NYTimes.com. Schiller states, “Social media marketing is one of several essential strategies for disseminating news online—and for surviving” (Emmett 41).

³ Research data on leaders’ Pages is as of March 17, 2009 unless otherwise noted.

⁴ Schiller left the *Times* to join NPR, which also has a growing Facebook presence.

The emphasis that the *Times* places on Facebook for survival recalls Yancey's and Moxely's claim that embracing 21st century literacies is key to the survival of English studies.

The *Times* Page content is vibrant and changes daily, with Wall posts of breaking news and attractive photos often from the travel section. The Wall is comprised mostly of news stories, including print and webcasts. The *Times* posts news items 10-15 times a week. The information box contains the tagline "Where the Conversation Begins." A second box cleverly coins the term "Fan us" (rather than "Friend" us).

Fan photos lend a face to the massive audience of the *Times* Page. The polyvocal opinions of Fans are asserted through Comment/Like/Share options on the Wall and to a lesser degree through Discussion topics and posts.

Interactivity is encouraged through direct questions such as this one, posted on the Wall March 27, 2009: "Should the government reveal the names of bonus recipients who work at firms receiving public bailout money?" In less than 24 hours, 1287 fans provided feedback: 802 gave it the thumbs up (or liked it) and 486 commented.

Interactivity by fans is also encouraged through calls for content such as this one, posted March 17: "*The New York Times* wants your videos. Interview relatives or friends about their memories of the Great Depression and ask them if they have advice for surviving these new hard times. Submit your video here: <http://tinyurl.com/cge3uf>." This post received 710 pieces of feedback: 590 thumbs up indicating "like" and 120 more detailed comments.

The *Times* offers more multi-media than any other Facebook Page researched. This includes a library of 203 Videos, all *Times*-produced webcasts on topics from the

late John Updike, to surfing's dark side, to Obama's inaugural parade. In addition, there are 624 Photo albums covering topics from "Women's shelters in Afghanistan" to "Home & Garden."

The Discussion board features 61 topics and is more active than that of any other Page studied. Some topics are *Times* generated, while others are user generated.

Discussion can get heated, more so than Wall comments; generally, posts appear on-topic and respectful.

CNN

CNN is also an early adopter of Facebook. Even more so than the *Times*, CNN is an innovator in Web 2.0 technologies, integrating Facebook, Twitter, e-mail, CNN.com, and broadcast television to generate conversation and socially construct the news. For example, on February 24, 2009, President Obama's address to Congress was broadcast on CNN.com and accompanied by a live-feed integration with Facebook.⁵ Viewers were able to share Obama's address with Friends on Facebook (or international users at large) and comment through the Status Update feature. Many experienced the thrill of seeing their "published" words and names roll by on the scroll. People felt the power of being a part of the national (and international) political discourse, as they made clear in Status Updates such as "This is cool!!!"

CNN advertised its live-feed event using the slogan "CNN and Facebook want you to join the conversation." The *Times*, as mentioned, advertises "Join the Conversation" on its Page. Social networking, in fact, has made a buzzword out of

⁵ CNN's live-feed integration with Facebook was done for the first time with the presidential inauguration of January 20, 2009.

“conversation,” the same word used by Kenneth Bruffee (640) to argue that writing and learning depend on human conversation, a social constructivist view that will be explored subsequently.

CNN’s main Facebook Page--it has several--had over 100,000 fans (as of February 25, 2009). It employs Page features largely as the *Times* does, however CNN has a unique way of using the Notes feature: it drafts weekly “Fan Notes” that are direct addresses to the audience. Notes feel more personal than Wall posts and distinguish the Facebook platform from a website. Fans can also comment back on Fan Notes and attach multimedia. This feature does not exist in Groups and gives ample writing space to Facebook users who, in a writing course, want to blog their ideas, post a draft, or provide feedback to fellow students. Educators, too, can send Fan Notes to students containing, for example, writing guidelines or literary quotes for inspiration.

CNN posts breaking news on its Wall, as does the *Times*. Discussion topics are started by Fans only, and not the news network, unlike the *Times*. An offensive discussion topic posted by a Fan on March 13 was not deleted: “The earth is over populated so be gay, get and spread aids, abort and kill all the babies, depopulate the world, ok!!” While this is disturbing to read, it makes the point that Facebook is different from a website: it is dialogic, which necessarily includes dissensus and different voices. The post violates Facebook’s Terms of Use by being discriminatory and might have been removed at a later date. Educators can be assured that Facebook Pages and Groups are not free-for-alls. A link may be clicked by both Fans and administrators to “report” anyone who has written something “obscene, racist or offensive;” a user can also be permanently blocked (*Facebook Pages: Insider’s Guide* 29).

Stanford University

Like CNN, Stanford is using Facebook in conjunction with YouTube, Twitter, and iTunes because, according to Lisa Lapin, spokeswoman for the university, “[Facebook] is yet one more tool to bring the communication to where much of our audience already is” (qtd. in J. Keller, “Facebook”). In addition, Lapin claims that the redesigned Pages will “reach more people and encourage more of a conversation than the old one” (qtd. in J. Keller).

Stanford had 34,000 fans as of May 4, 2009, a number that nearly tripled in two months. The Page includes campus url’s for quick reference, illustrating how universities can use Facebook to direct students to institutional websites. The most innovative activity on the Wall is “Stanford’s Open Office Hours.” This program replicates a professor’s office hours online, with various hosts taking posted questions from students and responding in taped webcasts that get linked to the Wall. Ground rules for open office hours include respect and staying on topic; Stanford Page administrators reserve the right to delete off-topic or offensive comments and to permanently block users.⁶

Each Wall post by Stanford garners an average of 50-100 comments by students, indicating a robust conversation the size of CNN’s. Comments can be off-topic, such as “I LOVE YOU STANFORD. PLEASE ACCEPT ME AS YOUR STUDENT IN 2012,” proving that the Fan base extends beyond campus and emphasizing the reach of the Facebook platform. The Discussion board is less successful with 14 topics that have generated at most 11 posts each.

⁶ Stanford expresses this policy using a light tone: “please ignore the trolls. There is always the possibility that some Facebook users will deliberately post inappropriate or offensive comments in the thread. The best way deal with these comments is to ignore them. We will delete these comments and ban these users...” (Stanford Facebook Page)

Stanford's Page, like that of the *Times*, is made eye-catching through color photography. Of four photo albums, one consists of student-uploaded photos. Three to four Stanford lectures are advertised per week via the Events feature. There are 58 links, mostly to Stanford news services and mentions of the university in national press.

MoMA

In early 2009, the Museum of Modern Art in New York embraced Web 2.0, adding a Facebook Page, YouTube channel, and Twitter feed to its revamped website and prompting the *New York Times* to report that the museum's communications strategy has "loosened up" (Kennedy C3). The creative director of digital media for the museum said, "The notion of opening up the museum's singular voice is really the driving thought behind this... We're opening the doors, though not necessarily throwing them open" (C3). MoMA's move toward inclusiveness recalls the debates in writing studies over hegemonic discourse, Standard English vs. Englishes, and which voices are allowed to speak with authority in the classroom. The museum's inclination to continue to gatekeep *partially* is understandable in institutions like museums and universities which are built on Joseph Moxley's Knowledge Society rather than Peer Production model. MoMA's partial door-opening approach--and Stanford's reserving the right to oversee Page comments—are good examples for educators who want to launch their participation in social networking circumspectly and one step at a time.

Facebook and the Teaching and Learning of Writing

Implications of Use by Leaders

Research on Facebook leaders demonstrates that major institutions are using social networking to promote literacy, education and culture. They are employing

Facebook as a way to exchange ideas and construct content and knowledge communally. This strongly suggests that students can use Facebook not only to socialize but to collaborate and learn. Furthermore, the emphasis on user-generated content and knowledge suggests Facebook can advance a student-centered pedagogy with students learning independently, from each other, and from a worldwide community rather than solely from the teacher. In addition, the popularization of Facebook writing behaviors such as Comment/Like/Share and Status Update provide evidence that the platform is part of what Yancey calls a "New Age of Composition" ("Writing in the 21st Century" 5). Social networking is a major new mode in which people are composing. Thus, it is should be considered in designing "new models of composing that are not based in print, a new curriculum that supports these models, and new pedagogies that enact that curriculum" (8). The sheer number of people putting their thoughts into words on Facebook renders social networking important to writing education moving forward.

Another implication is that the redesigned Pages offer more options for educators since they function as a kind of hybrid between website and social networking site. The new Pages have the ability to disseminate specific messages and to elevate the conversation to more intellectual ground that is usually encountered on personal Profiles-while maintaining a sense of relationships and community that websites do not offer. Pages can mimic a website's more static, centralized messages, through Status Update for instance, which provides space for an educator's message, and through administrative controls such as deleting comments or permanently blocking users. At the same time, Pages support the dynamic, decentralized conversation that is the hallmark of social networking sites with their invitation to join, share, discuss and create content.

There are several pedagogical applications that are suggested by social media leaders' use of Facebook. For example, a new kind of writing assignment might evolve in which students are asked to create a Page for a piece of literature, author, or social issue being studied. Students can add links, upload photos—even create videos and podcasts. The Page can be shared with the entire class and even a broader audience, rather than solely the teacher. This assignment differs from asking students to create a website, primarily because it invites interactivity: peers can Comment/Like/Share on the Wall, ask questions, provide feedback, and suggest further sources.

Creating a Facebook Page is a rhetorical task that requires a range of decisions about purpose, audience, discourse style, and claims. Consequently, Facebook can provide students with more critical thinking and reflection practice than is at first obvious. For instance, Dawn Reed asked her high school students to create a Poet Profile that included a list of friends, chat conversations with other poets, and an analysis of the poem written from the poet's perspective" (Borsheim 11). This type of profile requires "skill in composition, selection, manipulation, and appropriation" according to Dan Perkel (qtd. in Vie 20-21). Though there has been concern in academia that students' critical thinking skills are suffering from engagement with digital writing spaces like Facebook, the opposite might be true: Facebook has the potential to build those skills.

While the components of this type of assignment might have been achieved in the past through the creation of a poster with accompanying music, for example, Facebook and social networking provide one platform to accomplish the above. Moreover, the technology is networked and the platform can be shared outside the classroom. In addition, the assignment can be quickly revised according to feedback. Most importantly,

this type of multimodal, networked assignment engages today's students who are "digital natives" who are different from previous generations. As Prensky describes it:

Digital natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics *before* their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work. (2)

Given this description of students today, it is clear that the task of "create a Page" is more in synch with their 21st century literacy skills than "create a poster" and therefore the direction that a new writing curriculum should be taking.

One important point: students need to be assured that when creating Pages or joining Groups, *personal* Profiles cannot be accessed by teachers or classmates: they remain protected by privacy settings chosen. This reminder can help dispel potential student reluctance to use Facebook in an educational setting. In addition, the option to create a Page or Group helps avoid the blurred boundaries that can occur when students "Friend" educators and vice versa.

Stanford's open office hours on Facebook, though they might require supplemental technology than comes standard with a Page, are another exciting example of a pedagogical application. Facebook can increase student access to faculty and enhance communication. Shy students or those who live far away might not take advantage of a professor's face-to-face office hours; however they might do so remotely. Furthermore, open office hours can be accessed by former students or those not enrolled

in the course. For example, open office hours on constructing an argument by a first-year writing professor might be taken advantage of by a history or psychology student.

A 2007 survey suggests that social networking can help low income, minority, or first generation students communicate with faculty. Black students expressed a preference for electronic communication and greater interest in using social networking to interact with colleges and make enrollment decisions compared to their White counterparts (Harris 40). This has implications for a writing instructor's office hours and even writing conferences, which certain students might be loathe to do face-to-face, and are more apt to take advantage of via Facebook.

Elaine Childs found that Facebook made her more accessible to students. She reports using a Facebook Group in an English 101 course to "take rhetoric out of the classroom and locate it in their [students'] space." Childs chose to use Facebook over Blackboard, which she deemed "too institutional." (Moxley agrees, calling Blackboard and WebCT "anti-collaborative" and "anti-interactive" because, for example, students cannot create workspaces that allow other students to collaborate and teachers and students do not share the same writing space ["Datagogies" 189]).

Childs appreciated Facebook's toppling of hierarchy and ability to bring her closer to students:

Next time I use Facebook in a class, I plan to have a weekly 'Facebook hour,' so students will know when I'm accessible...Moreover, since the students ...can actually see my picture when they message me, messaging seemed to make me far more accessible, and I was able to address issues about extensions, good sources, etc. with much less formality.

In addition to increasing access, Childs was able to foster more horizontal exchange among students on the Wall, though she reports less positive results with Discussion feature. Obviously aiming to empower writers, Child believes that “placing course material in students’ social space promotes the demystification of writing, the university, and the instructor.” One can speculate that as a non-institutional writing space, Facebook helps students overcome the barriers of new discourse communities and connect with academic writing. Performing academic work on Facebook can send students the message that they are competent academic writers because they are already writers. In this way, Facebook provides opportunities for low-stakes writing for students who would otherwise be intimidated by the foreignness and formality of academic writing. In addition, the ability to “talk” to one’s professor in a low-stakes environment seems to support students’ ability to learn.

In addition to validating the platform and suggesting pedagogical applications, social media leaders’ use of Facebook highlights the gap between inside-school and outside-school writing. What students compose on their own--on social networking sites, blogs, and cell phones, for instance--is self-directed and largely disconnected from what they compose at school. As Yancey claims: “the members of the writing public have learned...to write, to think together, to organize, and to act within these forums--largely without instruction and, more to the point here, largely without our instruction” (“Made” 301). In addition to being self-taught, students do a much larger quantity of writing outside school than inside (J. Keller, “Studies”). This suggests that non-academic writing is having a stronger influence on students than academic writing. These are the

trends that prompt Yancey to warn that English departments need to bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school writing if only to remain relevant (302).

The observation that students are more engaged with writing outside school than inside clamors for attention. Research by Goldberg, Russell and Cook demonstrates that “on average students who use computers when learning to write are not only more engaged and motivated in their writing, but they produce written work that is of greater length and higher quality” (Alexander 51). Alexander notes similar findings when students work toward publishing their writing on the Web (51). A Pew Internet study found that 78% of teens feel that computer-based writing tools in the classroom would help their writing skills (Lenhart, “Writing, Technology and Teens” 47). It seems imperative to incorporate computers and digital writing into the writing curriculum to improve skills, on the basis of these studies.

Digital writing also promises to increase enjoyment of writing: an NCTE study found that while only 17 percent of teens said they enjoyed school writing a great deal, 49 percent enjoyed non-school writing a great deal (“Writing Between the Lines” 3). While certainly the entertainment purposes for which students are writing outside of school influences their enjoyment, I would argue that using 21st century writing literacies also plays a major role in enjoyment. For educators, there is an opportunity to take students from where they are – *half* of them enjoy writing – and build on their positive feelings, perhaps narrowing the enjoyment gap by adding computers and digital writing into the writing curriculum.

One of the factors that make integrating social networking into the writing class complex, however, is that many educators and even teens do not see extracurricular

writing as being very influential: Among teens who send text messages, email, instant messages or post on social networking sites, 73% say this communication has had no impact (either positive or negative) on the writing they do for school (Lenhart, "Writing, Technology and Teens" 44). Increasingly, educators such as Richard Sterling, former director of the National Writing Project and a faculty member at Berkeley University, argue otherwise: social networking and other forms of digital writing *can* improve writing (qtd. in Philips). Jeffrey Grabill agrees and claims that college writing programs need to help students become better writers in the outside world, something they often forget, in addition to helping them become better academic writers (qtd. in J. Keller, "Studies"). In fact, Grabill contends, "online writing should be seen as 'the new normal' and treated in the curriculum as such" (J. Keller, "Studies"). The implication is that outside-school writing has become just as significant if not more so than in-school writing and might eventually become the standard.

A writing curriculum that unites student enjoyment and learning opportunities is clearly needed. Presumably, it will be the future role of educators to bridge the gap between the creation of texts for fun vs. the creation of texts for academic purposes.

New Literacies=New Possibilities

To begin bridging the gap, educators might view Facebook not as a distraction or danger but rather as a new literacy practice arising from cultural change. According to Knobel and Lankshear, literacies are new when they involve new technical *and* new ethos characteristics ("Sampling" 7). It is easy to see how Facebook involves new technical attributes, such as Friend-ing or uploading a Photo album; but these technical attributes have socio-cultural significance as well.

For Knobel and Lankshear, the technical component of new literacies means students “can, for example, create a multimodal text and send it to a person, a group, or an entire internet community in next to no time and at next to no cost” (7). The new ethos component reflects the fluidity and openness of emerging media values: “new literacies are more participatory, collaborative and distributed ...and less published, individuated and author-centric than conventional literacies...and also less expert-dominated” (8). This description recalls the culture of the Internet from its inception as a way for scientists to share code; what has happened is that this culture or ethos has trickled down to all, making us all participate and publish and become “citizen composers” (Yancey, “Writing in the 21st Century” 8). This new ethos or culture is “reaching a scale hitherto unprecedented” (Knobel and Lankshear, “Sampling” 13) and is “a historical trend...rather than fleeting” (20-21). The implication is that writing is being altered: the combination of technological and sociological change is expanding the writing we do, changing how we feel and think about writing--and fundamentally changing the definition of writing.

Contrary to what many parents and educators have assumed, what students do on Facebook *is* writing, according to Sterling: for many years writing has been neglected in schools, but the Internet has triggered an “explosion of writing” on blogs, MySpace, Facebook, e-mail, instant messaging, and texting that have the potential to improve a student's ability to write (qtd. in Philips). However, this “explosion of writing” does not look or behave like a five-paragraph essay or research paper. Social networking is expanding writing as we know it to include conversation and multimodal text, among other characteristics. The Status Update has become a genre of writing much the same as

haiku is a genre of writing. One need only consider the popularity of Twitter, which allows a 140-character Status Update to one's computer or cell phone, to understand that new forms of writing are being invented by the digital age. As a result, Facebook's use in the writing class might not resemble what educators are accustomed to – pencil on paper or fingers on keyboard to produce text—with students working privately within the confines of their minds and handing in the finished product solely to the teacher. Students might instead be messaging each other, surfing links, or reading Discussion boards. However, this does not mean that thinking, writing and learning are not taking place.

The need to pay attention to youth's rapidly evolving literacy practices, which are often viewed negatively early on, is made clear by a study published in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. The study found that “Children's use of textisms (e.g. “18r” for later) is not only positively associated with word reading ability, but it may be contributing to reading development” (“Texting Can Help Reading Skills”). In addition, contrary to the prevailing view of parents and educators, the study suggests that texting does *not* negatively impact children's spelling ability.

A second study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project reports that middle and high school students understand what kind of language is appropriate in which context: educators have *not* been able to prove that electronically mediated communication is changing traditional speech and writing (Baron). Teens themselves do report, however, that textisms sometimes slip into their school writing (Lenhart, “Teens, Technology”). The point remains, however, that teens can distinguish between texting and more standard forms of language.

Sterling is unconcerned with abbreviations and punctuation made popular in online writing and texting, claiming “some changes may eventually become standard” and that “Students are savvy, and they will learn to adjust the way they write to fit the audience” (qtd. in Philips). Though texting has been vilified for destroying spelling and grammar skills, its neutral and even positive effects are slowly coming to the fore.

A similar pendulum swing appears to be occurring with Facebook: for example, a Harvard-affiliated study dispelled a media frenzy in May, 2009 suggesting Facebook use negatively affects academic performance (Pasek). The same study maintains that “mass expansions of new technologies [including motion pictures and television] especially among young people, have been ripe topics for hysteria” and therefore it is important to view Facebook-bashing critically (Pasek).

Moreover, a report by Internet safety organization Childnet International claims that while social networking has its risks, it offers myriad benefits, first of which is that students “can develop a wide range of literacy skills” (“Young People and Social Networking Services” 14). The report argues that social networking can be used to teach students debating and discussion skills; how to function in a community; how to create content and be creative; how to produce public showcases for one’s own work, events or organizations; how to find affinity groups and advance one’s interests; the laws surrounding copyright issues; and the skills to recognize and manage risk and evaluate situations (14). Furthermore, the report stresses that “Managing an online presence and being able to interact effectively online is becoming an increasingly important skill...” (16). The aforementioned skills involve writing for and among other people, i.e. writing

as a social act, and are largely not addressed by today's standard writing curriculum. As Erika Lindemann acknowledges:

Writing classes are not places that encourage community. Students work on their assignments alone. They rarely write for one another or discuss their work with classmates. Teachers expect the class to be quiet and fill up most of the hour with their own voices. Schools virtually ignore the notion that all uses of language are essentially social. (34)

The writing class of the future, we can infer, will be more concerned with the social aspects of writing: public showcases, affinity groups, debates, and managing online presences powered by ever-changing technologies.

The 21st Century Writing Class

Lindemann acknowledges that "a growing number of writing classes encourage students to use writing to interact with one another" and engage in collaborative projects and group work. She claims that such classes "enable students to see themselves as real writers and readers, engaged with others in using language to shape communities" (34). A 21st century writing class such as the aforementioned might integrate Facebook and social networking to accomplish such goals. It would be characterized by the following:

Academic Conversation and Collaboration

In 1984, Kenneth Bruffee argued that thinking and writing depend on conversation: "To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively--that is, we must learn to converse well (640). Bruffee's claim can be put into practice and studied on Facebook, Ning, Elgg, and similar sites. Facebook offers an ideal platform for students to converse on, in order to share class notes, questions, ideas, links, bookmarks,

websites, feedback, drafts, and sources. In addition, students can organize group projects, contact experts in fields they are writing about, and become aware of issues in a field using Facebook's vast network.

Blanding reports that students are already having academic conversations on Facebook, soliciting homework advice with questions such as "How long did you take on your essay?" or "How'd you write it?" These academic conversations can be extended if social networking is embraced in the writing class. As a first step, educators can acknowledge and support the use of social networks by students on their own time to aid communication and learning. It helps to think of social networking as analogous to e-mail: few adults could function without the communication and collaboration they do through email, and youth view social networks as similarly indispensable.

Facebook might not always be the appropriate venue for academic conversation or collaboration; sometimes face-to-face class or group discussion might be better-suited, for example. Since Facebook is largely untested in meeting pedagogical goals, it requires experimentation and the willingness to make mistakes.

Student-Centered Workshop

Social networking supports and extends the workshop approach to writing given that it emphasizes peer learning with teacher as facilitator. The benefits of a workshop approach in teaching writing are well known. Peter Elbow contends that "a writing support group" is the most effective way to get feedback for overall improvement of writing and learning about its effect on readers (273). Lindemann argues that writing workshops, because they allow students themselves to exchange solutions to writing problems, encourage them "to become independent critics of their own prose" (207).

This is the ultimate goal of any writing instruction. She cautions that students need guidance in working together and giving feedback: perhaps they would need more guidance in using social networking, a tool they generally use for entertainment – or perhaps not, given that social networking is so tied to their literacy practices. It would be an interesting study to determine whether students have more or less of a learning curve in adapting to the workshop format using Facebook.

Facebook remains a natural tool to integrate into a face-to-face writing workshop, given that it is integral to the way students communicate with one another. Social networking can help focus the writing class on student-talk rather than teacher-talk, which Lindemann notes takes up as much as 70 to 80 percent of class time (277). Higher levels of achievement have been observed in classes where there is less lecture and more “dialogic interaction” (J. Williams 105). On Facebook, students can participate in communal conversation, rather than maintaining a linear, hierarchal relationship with a teacher. Moreover, they can get to know each other faster through Friending personal Profiles (which students are likely to do with one another), rather than solely attending class together. Getting to know one another builds trust in the workshop group, which according to Lindemann is an important element for workshop success (205). Furthermore, collaboration can happen in less time than if one was to physically pass out paper; it can also happen remotely and asynchronously, something that was beyond Bruffee’s imagination in the 1980’s when he acknowledged the impediments of time and space to collaborative learning (637).

Finally, as Faigley points out, in addition to their peers, “students can communicate with members of government, professionals in various fields, and online

mentors” (132). The teacher is not the repository of all knowledge. If writing about a social issue on race, gender, or poverty, for example, students can join Facebook Pages or Groups to ask questions, read posts, or join discussions. Just as email made it easier than the telephone or traditional mail to contact experts or leaders, Facebook makes it easier than email; Facebook also increases the potential for interactivity as its ethos is sharing, transparency and participation.

Community

While face-to-face discussion can help build community in the classroom, social networking can build community outside the classroom. David Parry reports that community building was the greatest benefit of using Twitter in the classroom (Young). Twitter can be compared to Facebook’s Status Update feature as both provide micro-blogging capability. Parry posted personal tweets as well as links to web sites that he wanted students to access; students posted back, both with mundane comments and academic questions. The immediacy of the messages bonded students into a community: “It was the single thing that changed the classroom dynamics more than anything I’ve ever done teaching,” claims Parry (qtd. in Young). Parry says that subsequently his students were more willing to talk in classroom conversations and more respectful of others.

Interestingly, youth have not yet embraced Twitter, though it has become popular with adults (boyd, “Social Media Is Here to Stay”). Youth practically live on Facebook, however, and the platform can be similarly employed for community building.

In addition to students bonding, educators can discover what they might not otherwise know about students and their culture. While there has been emphasis on the

embarrassing details revealed about students' lives, Laura Nicosia reports finding out through Facebook that one of her students was an award-winning writer for online tag-team story-writing; this is helpful information to have in a writing class.

Finally, educators can get important feedback on their own teaching through students' social networking conversation, including which part of an assignment is the most challenging or what was confusing in lecture. Students are often reluctant to share or be honest when asked questions directly in class; on Facebook however the conversation can be more informal and revealing.

Innovative Assignments

Students today have the tools to compose in innovative ways but are frustrated because school requires them to "power down" from their status as digital natives and compose linearly, and often with pen and paper (Prensky 3). Facebook makes possible innovative assignments which allow students to be what Daniel Anderson calls 'prosumers' of new media, or both producers and consumers (qtd. in Alexander 392). This stimulates their investment in writing and, according to Alexander, promotes literacy skills (50). What kinds of assignments are effective? Prensky suggests a game approach to learning (3). For instance, students can publish a Status Update with a sentence that poses grammatical problems and classmates can provide feedback. GoodReads, one of the most popular applications on Facebook, allows users to share books they have read and write reviews; these can be exchanged with classmates. Another example: students can take a popular Facebook quiz that asks "Which Famous Writer Are You?" and initiate a Discussion on that writer's use of the elements of short fiction or poetry.

Other assignments can include analyzing a news story or webcast on the *New York Times* Page and comparing it to a print version; analyzing a Discussion thread on a social issue; posting relevant links to class topics and academic writing; engaging in conversation via the Wall, Discussion, Messaging or Notes to discuss paper topics, introductory paragraphs, arguments, evidence, sources—and to conduct self or peer review. Assignments can get as playful as this one originally used on Twitter: one student states an argument on Facebook's Status Update, and the next person contributes evidence, and the next analysis, and so on (Young). The arranging for writing in many modes, as Lindemann argues, helps writing to improve (234). Thus the inclusion of Facebook into assignments such as the above can help other modes of writing improve, including writing in print.

Moreover, asking students to write on a platform they are at home with can encourage risk-taking and fresher academic writing.

Content Creation/Creative Expression

One of the academic pursuits that youth are already engaged in on Facebook is creative writing. In total, 53% of social networkers have shared some kind of artistic work online, compared to 22% of those who do not use a social network. (Lenhart, "Teens, Technology and Writing" 6). Being a producer of content, rather than consumer, is directly tied to developing literacy skills, according to Alexander (51). Educators who teach creative writing courses or assignments can make use of Facebook, directing students to specific Groups or Pages to read others' work, comment, and potentially post their own.

For instance, Facebook has a Group titled "Creative Writing" with 4,168 members who post original work (on the Wall, through a link to a website, or on Discussion board) and receive feedback. Another group, titled "Creative Writing Sites on Facebook" provides a list of hotlinks where writers can go to read original work or post their own. Critique and feedback can take many forms, including posted comments, private message exchanges, offers to collaborate, and invitations to join other groups (Ito 31). These sites expand peer review opportunities and perhaps can be integrated into assignments: a student receives peer review from class members but also from an unknown creative writing Group member. The differences in the content of these peer reviews can subsequently be discussed by the class. Students can also analyze the reviews of creative work posted online and discuss the criteria used.

What is clear is that Facebook is not merely a platform where one can socialize but where one can original writing to an audience and receive reader response. This supports Jenkins argument that schools should incorporate social networks into the curriculum, so that students "can learn how to use networks to get one's own work out into the world and in front of a relevant and, with hope, appreciative public" (51). Publishing and receiving feedback are real-world benefits for those who have an inclination toward writing and who will use it in their careers. Tapping Facebook for creative writing applications can help students become better writers in the outside world, which is a primary goal of writing education, according to Grabill (qtd. in J. Keller, "Studies").

Knowledge Creation/Special Interests

Youth are learning independently online, in ways that educators are barely aware of: they are gaining knowledge and skills about subjects they are passionate about and that can become lifelong interests. Facebook and social networking provide access to affinity communities through which students can pursue personal interests. In what Ito calls “geeked out interest-driven groups,” youth find “like-minded peers who share knowledge and expertise that may not be available to them locally” (35). This expertise can include anything, from video games to the Revolutionary War.

How can we extend independent learning into the writing class? Students take more ownership of their learning when it is self-directed and peer-based (Ito 36). Therefore, if a student is writing about the role of religion in his native count of India, an educator might direct him to a Facebook Group or Page that can help him conduct research, or ask that he create a Group with users in his native country to conduct his own research.

The ways in which knowledge can be constructed using Facebook are only beginning to be tapped. Most Facebook users themselves are unaware that the *New York Times* has a thriving Page, for example. A Facebook search on any topic turns up enough significant links to prove Facebook is a knowledge network, as much as it is a social network. Educators would do well to expose students to writing-related Pages and Groups. Simply demonstrating to students that educators know learning occurs via social networking goes a long way toward connecting their experiences in bricks and mortar school with Web 2.0 “school.”

Writing as Social Action

Facebook can be used to raise social awareness and to provide a space for activist writing. For instance, students can research or join the American Cancer Society Page or Group, the Rhetorics of Difference Group, or the United Against Holocaust Denial on Facebook Group. These socially-aware Pages and Groups can model for students what Alexander calls “a sense of writing as critically engaged with important issues, as exploring alternative views and positions, as extending dialogues about significant debates” (336). Students who have not been interested in writing might change their minds by being engaged in issues they care about. According to James D. Williams, students whose assignments are related to the world are more engaged and can better see themselves as writers (121). Therefore, using Facebook both as a resource and space for writing about social issues can be an engaging assignment. For instance, students can research an activist Group on Facebook, surf its website, read a peer-reviewed article, and finally create a Page about that issue from their own point of view.

Williams claims “real writing actually does something in the world” (121) and gives an example of what finally improved one student’s writing: adopting a pen pal and sending emails back and forth (123). Today’s version of pen pals can be said to be social networking sites such as Facebook, with the distinction that one can be pen pals with an entire community with a keystroke, rather than an individual. Facebook, likened to a commons in a small town (Yancey, “Writing” 5), has enormous potential to be used for serious subjects as well as light subjects, as has been proven for example by Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

Alternative Discourses

Writing studies scholars have often championed “students’ right to their own language in classrooms traditionally dominated by academic writing” (Alexander 58). Student languages today are increasingly web-related and comprised of multimedia. Social networks are just one example of writing spaces where youth speak in their own voices. It is important to take seriously and respect the literacies students bring into a writing class, as Mina Shaughnessy argued about nontraditional writers at CUNY in the 1970’s (239). Her imperative that educators “dive in” and learn from students is perhaps what is called for with today’s digital youth. Open-mindedness appears key when we consider Alexander’s claim that youth are “deploying a number of interesting...rhetorical strategies and compositional practices...these writing strategies and practices... give the lie to fears of ‘end of literacy’ ...these practices also foreshadow *changes* in rhetorical and literacy practices” (66). Writing, as Bolter has argued, is unstable and changing, as is language. Students who practice digital composition have something to teach us in terms of difference and other--and also to teach one another as they communicate across the globe.

Social Networking in the Context of Other Web 2.0 Tools

The benefits of blogs and wikis for writing instruction are helpful to examine and extend, where possible, to social networking. Like wikis and blogs, there is reason to speculate that Facebook and social networks will *slowly* be adopted as educators “try to understand and navigate ...the challenges of keeping up with students as they create and publish in ever-increasing numbers” (Richardson 26). This adoption, however, will likely be accompanied by resistance as it involves transforming cultural norms and behaviors in

addition to learning new technologies. Web 2.0 technologies “push up against the academic status quo as spaces of collaborative writing and because established teaching practices can be stretched or strained with the introduction of new technological practices” (Lundin 433). This notion of challenging the status quo ties into Knobel and Lankshear’s definition of new ethos. Wikis, blogs and Facebook represent the new ethos of sharing, transparency and participation, while the university represents the old ethos of authority, individualism, and hierarchy.

Blogs, which have gained more academic acceptance than wikis, are essentially online journals which are regularly updated (Davies and Merchant 167-68). Blogs help students to take writing more seriously and to write more, because they are published immediately to large audiences (Lowe and Williams). In fact, according to a Pew Internet study, teen bloggers do more kinds of writing, and write more frequently, than other teens (Lenhart, “Writing” v). Though bloggers write more frequently than social networkers, both write more than the average teen: “there is a relatively strong association between writing and the technology platforms that help teens share their thoughts with the world such as blogs and social networking sites” (32). Bloggers are significantly more likely than non-bloggers to do short writing, journal writing, creative writing and to write music or lyrics and letters or notes to friends. Social networking teens tend toward “short writing, journal writing and music or lyrics” (34). These latter genres recall the expressivist approach to writing theorized by Peter Elbow and Donald Murray which encourages the writer’s own “individuality and thinking” (Hewett and Ehmann 56). Social networks might be ideal spaces, then, for students’ expressivist writing, either as an end unto itself or as a way in to more formal academic writing. For

instance, a journal entry on Facebook can turn into a thesis query, while a song lyric can turn into a poem.

The main implication for writing instruction is that students who write on the Web, whether blogging or social networking, are more engaged writers. Presumably, the Web increases their engagement: according to Charles Lowe and Terra Williams, assignments on the Web can “tap into students’ sense of play and familiarity with online environments to stimulate investment in and engagement with writing.” This view is in accord with Prensky’s argument that students are bored with school, because it does not make use of their literacies—and even the possible physical differences of their brains—resulting from growing up in a digital age (1).

Lowe and Williams, in their classrooms at Purdue and Arizona State University respectively, require students to use blogs for reading responses; discussion; peer review and feedback; to share articles from the web that are related to class via a blog bibliography; to personally explore a topic; or to write off-topic posts about their lives, moods, and observations.

Besides increasing engagement, Lowe and Terra find that Web writing fosters a community that reduces anxiety about writing for the teacher and for grades and leads to more thinking and creativity. Reluctant or shy students who do not typically participate in class discussion have been found to participate in blog discussions. According to these educators, weblogs are a space where students draw on the “benefits of writing publicly⁷”

⁷ Lowe and Williams suggest that all students benefit from sharing their ideas and feelings publicly. In a blog post, Terra Williams notes that she has never encountered a student who did not want to post publicly to the class blog, that students can use pseudonyms and that personal writing is not required in class. She also makes the point that students know their work will be public from the course website and syllabus. They suggest working around the public writing issues a student might have on an individual basis (T. Williams).

which include commiserating on a bad day or workload; getting solutions for problems; getting new ideas by reading other students' weblogs; and processing class discussion by reading different interpretations. This benefit can easily be extended to social networks, which are even better designed for social exchanges than blogs. For example, a call for help written on a class Wall can quickly result in feedback, especially given that Facebook is likely to remain open on students' desktops, much as e-mail remains open on professionals' desktops.

One of the main benefits, Lowe and Williams claim, is that blogs encourage informal writing where students can share drafts and brainstorm. I would argue that social networking, too, is ideal for informal writing and sharing. It is particularly useful in the prewriting stage of process writing: discussion of the assignment, audience, message, sources; discovery and outlining of major points; and freewriting (J. Williams 108-09). The simple act of articulating one's ideas to classmates via the Wall, messaging, or Notes can help focus thinking and clarify ideas. Students are prone to skipping the prewriting stage when working alone, or running through it cursorily; the back and forth communication with peers could lead to more engaged prewriting that generates more and better writing.

Furthermore, Status Update, Facebook's most popular feature, can be an innovative space in which students rehearse tightly-focused arguments and claims for papers, bouncing them off classmates and defending them against counterarguments. A writing teacher's task, according to Bruffee, is "engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in both the writing and reading process as possible" (642). Facebook makes conversation logistically possible across boundaries and time and so

helpful at the crucial stage of argument formation. Students often find drafting and revising arguments challenging, especially when alone in their rooms, facing a blank word-processing screen. Rehearsing arguments on Status Update might be less intimidating and more fun, while publishing to a live audience and receiving feedback can foster critical thinking and reflection. Students might even be more motivated, knowing that their words are public, to take care not only with ideas but sentence-level issues.

For educators concerned about the public nature of Facebook or the possibility that students will get distracted on the site, Ning.com is a promising platform to consider. Ning offers private social networks that can be custom-built for individual writing classes or group projects. The benefit of Ning is that one can design an individualized learning community and students already know the interface, which is similar to Facebook; the negative is, however, they have to log on to a different space—in other words, it still has the feeling of an institutional space.

Laura Nicosia reports using Ning in a methods class for pre-service teachers who needed experience in providing feedback on student writing. She collaborated with a high school literature teacher in Virginia who was looking for just such feedback on her class Ning. Her high school students posted essay drafts twice a week on a Ning blog, and Nicosia's pre-service teachers logged on (after being invited in) and commented, suggested sources and asked questions. Prior to using Ning, Nicosia used to ask high school teachers to mail samples of student writing, which were awkward to share with the class and had to be returned in a timely fashion. She reports that her pedagogy has

changed given the fact that pre-service teachers can collaborate with real students, and the positive experiences have prompted her to pursue similar opportunities.

For the drafting and revising stages of writing, wikis may be a better tool than either social networks or blogs. Wikis are a collection of web pages that can be collaboratively written, added to, deleted or modified by users, the best-known example being Wikipedia (Knobel and Lankshear, "Wikis, Digital Literacies and Professional Growth"). Wikis are less popular than blogs in the classroom, but they enable collaboration, continual revision and knowledge constructed socially (Lundin 431). The entire class can work on one text, or students can work on individual home pages, posting class notes, drafts, bibliography, multimedia, and links. Wikis provide the highest level of interactivity, because unlike blogging and social networking, users can alter the actual text, leaving a trail of who made what changes. On a blog or social network, users can comment on but not alter original text.

As a result, blogging and social networking probably function better as tools for the pre-writing and editing process, while wikis are better-suited for drafting and revising. A teacher can suggest, for example, that students share brainstorming with peers on Facebook, and post drafts on a class wiki (Blanding). This makes the point that educators must familiarize themselves with Web 2.0 tools and choose the one that fits their pedagogical goals for the stage of writing. As Lester Faigley argues, the focus needs to be on learning and not technology, with the question being "what do we want students to learn?" and "What is the best environment for learning?"(137).

All three platforms allow students to create content, collaborate, and publish to a real audience rather than sending one's final product to a teacher's mailbox. All three are

also spaces in which peers can write to each other. Social networks, blogs and wikis, then, all support and extend a student-centered, writing workshop approach to teaching and learning writing. Lundin's claim about wikis can be applied to all three platforms: they "broaden the definition of writing to include new media elements and deep collaboration...help us realize and enact a more fully social view of writing in which each text is...connected to and developed by a number of people (445).

It would seem that Web 2.0 contributes ideal platforms on which to practice writing. Yet writing curricula have not embraced these "collaborative, decentralized, online communities where crowds of people interact to construct knowledge" (Moxley "Datagogies"). The reasons lie in both the public and collaborative nature of Web 2.0 writing.

There is concern in writing studies about public writing on social networking, blogs, and wikis that is separate from the risk of predators. The debate over public vs. private writing is articulated by scholars such as Wendy Bishop and Charles Moran. Bishop argues that students need to share more, not fewer, public texts (76) whereas Charles Moran claims that publication on the Web will lead students to be less authentic and personal in their writing because of its broad audience (42-43). However, Moran does not consider the new ethos of sharing and participation which marks the digital age, and the fact that today's students hardly seem shy about sharing in public. In fact, according to Anders Albrechtslund, in the context of social networking, what older generations think of as surveillance can be potentially empowering, subjectivity building and even playful for today's students, to the point where he dubs it "participatory

surveillance.” This willingness to be under surveillance must be considered when speaking about digital natives.

While compositionists tend to agree on the benefits of collaboration in writing, Moxley and Meehan point out that classrooms and texts have not changed in 20 years to reflect the strides made by technologies; though many writing classes use peer review and some co-authorship, they contend educators have not gone far enough. Lisa Ede has suggested that the writing-as-collaboration movement is “inherently subversive” (104) because it challenges traditional notions of author, power, authority, and knowledge. By extension, collaborative tools such as Facebook, blogs and wikis are subversive.

Collaboration is crucial to writing, however, if we accept Bruffee’s theorizing; by extension, the collaboration fostered by social networking can be considered crucial to writing. Bruffee’s 1984 essay titled “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind” is prescient given its use of the word “conversation,” a buzzword in today’s social networking culture.⁸ Education is meant to prepare us to take part in the human conversation, Bruffee maintains (639). Since today’s conversation is taking place increasingly on social networking platforms, it follows that education should prepare students to some degree for social networking. This, in fact, is what Jenkins and others argue today: educators should cease putting social networking under fire and guide students to deploy the platform wisely and maturely, toward their own ends (51).

From a Bruffean perspective, since social networking makes possible global conversation, it contributes to thought, writing, and learning. What is more, as Hewett

⁸ As previously mentioned, CNN used “Join the conversation” in its advertisement of Obama’s address broadcast with a live-feed Facebook integration. The *New York Times* page features “Join the conversation” under its profile photo.

and Ehmann explain, if knowledge is not outside students but is instead socially constructed, then teachers cannot approach writing pedagogy as if they hold the secret to good writing; instead, students must become active in the process by teaching one another (36). Both these points support the idea of a writing class that is peer-centered and conversation-oriented, or in effect a workshop where student learning is active and draws on 21st century literacies.

Moxley claims that the social nature of writing and knowledge-making brought to the fore in the Web 2.0 era has implications not only for academia but for our roles as citizens: “Information worldwide is breaking free, flowing viral-like across the world, challenging and transforming governments, economies, and academic knowledge—changing to some degree what it means to be human, what it means to participate in society” (“Datagogies” 184). We need only to witness the June 2009 events in Iran, where individual citizens recorded protests on cell phone videos and sent them to CNN’s i-reports to understand Moxley’s point about the implications of networked information for citizenship.

Moxley’s observation recalls Knobel and Lankshear’s new ethos and the notion that we are experiencing a paradigm shift that is not merely technological but ideological as well. In Moxley’s terms, we are evolving from a Community of Power to a Community of Learning (185). We are being led—largely by youth—into a social and cultural revolution that prioritizes dissensus and democracy over hegemony and authority. Matthew Barton argues that blogs and wikis play an important political role in fostering public discussion and critical debate and that “a truly enabling” composition pedagogy would include them (189). By extension, an enabling pedagogy would include

social networking. It seems important to bridge the gap between the democratic ideals students experience by digital writing and, for example, the lack of these ideals they might experience in a composition class that specifies an ideal text, for example.

Collaborative writing is not always ideal. As Moxley and Meehan point out, “groups of people can act illogically, capriciously and in some instances viciously.” Their conclusion, however, is still in favor of using social networking for academic purposes: “...when dissensus is permitted, groups of people can be wiser than individuals...hence social networking tools constitute a major new way to construct and disseminate knowledge.” The idea that a collective can work better than individuals supports the argument for using social networking to enhance a workshop approach to writing.

It is no wonder that institutionalized education has resisted controversial platforms such as social networking, blogs and wikis, which make obvious the democratic, negotiated, and ultimately unstable nature of writing and by extension knowledge. However, millions of people worldwide have embraced these platforms, with the result that writing, which changed radically with the invention of the printing press, is changing again with our networked Internet culture (WIDE Research Center). Where will writing go? Jay Bolter claims that “We are writing in the late age of print...The printed book is no longer...the most important space in which we locate our texts and images...print is now measured over against digital technology... It is fair to wonder whether the late age of print may also become the late age of prose itself” (210). Bolter’s use of the word “prose” appears to indicate alphabetic text printed in books and

articles. His observation seems valid when we consider the typical website, which is only partially constructed of prose and relies heavily on visuals, for instance.

While prose is integral to the notion of writing in most English departments, those in computers and composition have been arguing for a more multimodal definition of writing for years. Takayoshi and Selfe among others have questioned how long the essay will remain the centerpiece of American education: "if composition instruction is to remain relevant, the definition of 'composition and texts' needs too grow and change to reflect people's literacy practices in new digital communication environments" (3). The definition needs to involve images, animations, video and audio-- all the elements that Facebook Pages, Profiles and Groups entail. Thus, teaching with Facebook necessarily means redefining composition to include more than prose.

What happens to reflection, critical thinking and rhetorical decisions traditionally taught in the composition class using alphabetic text? Takayoshi and Selfe believe these skills can be taught across genres, and that "teaching students to make sound rhetorically-based use of various modes of representation hones their essay skills as well" (10). This becomes clear if one considers the creation of a Page representing a social issue: decisions need to be made about main claims and those claims need to be presented, just as they would on paper. However, in multimodal compositions there are more choices about how to present those claims, ie using text, video or podcast. Daniel Keller admits that too often students lack critical thinking and reflective skills when it comes to multimedia, but they can be taught (52). This situation is not dissimilar from advertisements and commercials, which students often consume uncritically unless taught otherwise.

Judging by classroom use of blogs and wikis to date, the main benefits that can be expected by using Facebook and social networking for writing instruction are the following: immersion of students in digital composition they are familiar with and enjoy; collaboration to discover and develop ideas, so that learning is more peer-centered and less teacher-centered; a wider, real sense of audience; and the ability to create content and publish immediately online (Barber 243).

While writing studies scholars generally support collaborative learning, most agree that further empirical evidence is needed to show how collaboration improves student writing: "While contemporary learning and writing instruction have privileged social constructivism...most of the literature reveals a largely untested theory of collaboration in both the traditional and computer mediated communication environments" (Hewett and Ehmann 46). I would argue that writing collaboratively is something that has been avoided by most educators for the reasons explored here, and that hitherto collaboration has been difficult to accomplish, requiring face to face peer work or proprietary software with a financial cost and steep learning curve. Today's platforms make it easier to accomplish collaborative writing, but before theories can be adequately tested, new curricula and models for teaching need to be designed that incorporate these platforms.

Conclusion

This discussion has sought to demonstrate how Facebook has evolved and how it might be used to support student writing. It has emphasized the *social* nature of writing, thinking and learning, and how they can be supported by a *social* tool such as Facebook. The discussion has explored Facebook applications that promote the development of

ideas and giving of feedback in a class where learning is democratic and collaborative, workshop-oriented and student-centered.

Facebook is not so much a *teaching* tool as it is a *learning* tool in this environment. Putting the emphasis on learning, rather than teaching, highlights the increased independence of the learner who uses social networking and Web 2.0 technologies. In addition, it is helpful to consider the potential of social networking to become *academic networking* instead (Smith). The latter connotes the serious objectives to which Facebook and similar platforms can be applied.

Our biggest challenge in the digital age might be to take youth and their 21st century literacies seriously. The Facebook generation is not like us. Prensky argues, “Our students have changed radically. Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach” (1). Perhaps the best way to begin redefining writing, and redesigning a curriculum for digital natives, is to request the input of students themselves. As Bronwyn Williams argues:

The most important thing we can do is talk with our students about how and why they read and write online, in spaces like Facebook...they’ve been told too often their online activities are a waste of time...they may not talk about their online literary practices in the academic language we recognize. If we listen closely we will find that their experiences and resulting knowledge may...offer new opportunities for connecting our pedagogies with their lives. (685)

The fact that student knowledge of digital writing and new literacies far exceeds our own (in most cases) is a reminder that we need to learn from those we are paid to instruct.

To exchange ideas and overcome challenges, educators themselves can employ social networks. As Moxley argues, social networks can shatter the isolation of the classroom, helping teachers to connect with teachers, define and develop curriculum, and share syllabi and assignments (“Datagogies”196). An example of a social network being employed for just such purposes is the Ning Classroom 2.0, which bills itself as “the community for educators using Web 2.0 and collaborative technologies.” In addition, the NCTE Ning and Facebook Group are used for collaborative purposes.

Experts are in agreement that the trend toward user-generated content will continue (“The Micro Threat to Facebook”). Nobody can predict how long the popularity of Facebook will last or what platform might succeed it.⁹ Social networking experts such as danah boyd believe that “social network sites may end up being a fad from the first decade of the 21st century, but new forms of technology will continue to leverage social networks as we go forward” (“Social Media is Here to Stay”). In other words, while Facebook could be replaced, its characteristics, such as an articulated peer network and the blurring of public and private writing, will likely prevail. This view is convincing given the proliferation of social networks for various audiences, including, for example, Linked In, which is aimed at professionals.

In negotiating social networking platforms such as Facebook, educators must wrestle with questions of authority and control which mark the academy and which conflict with the participatory, user-generated culture of Web 2.0. Nevertheless, a free network of 200 million users, including 80% of college students—all putting their thoughts into writing--is difficult to ignore. Can Facebook help students improve their

⁹ Facebook and MySpace succeeded Friendster as popular social networking sites.

writing? How? Is it *already* helping to improve student writing? Are youth “learning by doing” as they spend hours of free time composing digitally and multimodally?

These questions deserve further study and experimentation.

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