Preface

Social media is changing the way we communicate and the way we are perceived, both positively and negatively. Every time you post a photo, or update your status, you are contributing to your own digital footprint and personal brand. – Amy Jo Martin, founder & CEO of Digital Royalty

Amy Jo Martin, who began her career in social media while working with the NBA’s Phoenix Suns as its Director of Digital Media and Research, broke social media ground when she and former NBA basketball star Shaquille O’Neal partnered to organize the first ever NBA Tweet Up (Gray, 2010). Since partnering with Martin, O’Neal has become the most influential celebrity using social media, (Laird, 2012), therefore encouraging other celebrities like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, sports teams like the Chicago White Sox, and businesses like DoubleTree by Hilton to invest in her ideas and practices regarding social media branding. In essence, Martin helps people create the digital universe (read: utopia) they’d like to have.

While our students are not (yet) playing for the NBA, acting in action-packed films, or presiding over major corporations, they definitely are just as engaged in social media networks as the celebrities, sports teams, and corporations that they follow. As a matter of fact, Facebook (est. 2004) and Twitter (est. 2006)—which to date are the top social media platforms used—were created by university students aiming to make long distance connections with their classmates and communicate within small groups. Not surprisingly, then, for the 15 years I’ve been teaching writing, I have yet to meet a college or high school student unattached to social media. And I totally understand their enthusiasm, for I have been engaged in online social media platforms since I was an undergraduate student at Florida A&M University.

BlackPlanet, an online social networking service that precedes Facebook and Twitter, was designed in 1999 for African American people, and at circa 19 years old, I was a member. However, because BlackPlanet could be accessed through only a desktop computer that most of my peers and I did not own, our participation in online social media sites was quite limited. While we owned cell phones, our mobile devices were not “smart.” Therefore, we did not experience the attachments to social media sites and technologies (smart phones, tablets, and laptops) used to access those sites that current 21st century students experience. So, although my peers and I may not have produced writing that our professors believed were indicative of university level students, our writing practice and comprehension were not affected by our current social media use.

The 21st century student writer, however, is having to contend with the demands of academic writing—which are still quite traditional—while absolutely inundated with social media platforms that insist on 140 character tweets, emoticon-filled text messages, and status updates that are often composed of 3-letter words such as “lol,” “smh,” “wtf,” and “idk.” While 21st students are absolutely writing and composing more often than I and my peers did—more often than all the previous generations before them did—today’s student writer is not necessarily writing as well, or at least to the University’s standard.
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The traditional 21st century undergraduate student (ages 17-21) often finds himself disconnected from and disinterested in academic writing situations, particularly because they are—more often than not—void of the freedom, flexibility, audience (community), creativity, humor, activism, profanity, and empowerment that social media platforms offer its users. No wonder, then, do teachers find themselves competing with in-class cell phone and social media use. With the World Wide Web in the palm of their hands, along with smart phone applications that allow them to access educational tools and resources—all the while being connected to friends and followers—our students are writing themselves into existence; it’s like the biggest explosion of Peter Elbow’s “writing without teachers.”

However, because students and teachers belonging to an academic institution must hold themselves accountable to the demands of what has been called “academic writing,” “good writing,” and/or “standard writing,” the writing classroom often struggles with being relevant, cutting edge, and affirming. Often times, it may even resemble a counterproductive space; for, many teachers and students find themselves swimming against a current: while writing teachers emphatically prohibit technology use (beyond University endorsed course management systems like Blackboard) in their classrooms, writing students are disengaged from the classroom because they are online, writing in and for their social media networks.

Although traditional writing practices and methodologies feel safe and familiar to many writing teachers who either were born prior to Google’s inception or whose pedagogical practices are informed by the pre Google-aged professors who taught them, not inviting students’ at-home experiences into the classroom is a disservice. According to Parker Palmer in To Know as We Are Known (1993), our classrooms should reflect the real life experiences we want our students to have. Therefore, in an effort to ensure our students are leaving a digital footprint and creating a personal brand that reflects their personhood, as educators, we are responsible for teaching students how to critically analyze, compose with and for, and ethically engage the online social media spaces that occupy more of their mind, body, and soul than television and radio.

Social media allows writing teachers and their students a space to explore multimodal literacies, audience, voice, rhetorical elements and modes, and composition in ways still yet imagined. Our writing classrooms can literally be Wonderland. Be it Facebook or MySpace, Twitter or Tumblr, Instagram or LinkedIn, Pinterest or Snapchat, integrating social media into the writing classroom makes possible a more meaningful learning experience for both students and teachers. (More often than not, my students teach me how to use current social media platforms; my job is to figure out how to successfully integrate them into the classroom.)

With all of that said, Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media is just a point of departure for writing teachers interested in implementing social media in their writing classrooms. While the 16 chapters collected here provide readers some insights regarding contributors’ own classroom experiences and theories about social media in the classroom, so much about online communications still needs to be explored, researched, practiced, and shared. Although the World Wide Web is merely 28 years old, it has completely altered the way human beings move in the world, and the system is moving faster than we can keep up with. As a 36-year old writer and English professor, who missed being a member of the Millennial generation (those born between 1982 and 2000) by about five years, I can imagine how daunting, exhausting, and thrilling, this technological phenomenon must be for many. And so, to fulfill the charge to “find a way to bridge the gap between the many years between us” (seasoned and unseasoned folk) that playwright Pearl Cleage made during her 2016 “Essential Conversation” lecture at Florida A&M University, I offer up this text.
In this collection, readers will find chapter essays about blogging with Twitter and WordPress, creating professional personas with LinkedIn, engaging revision practice and the writing process with Wikipedia, and exploring multimodal literacies with Tumblr and Instagram. Additionally, readers will find a compiled list of educational resources and key terms that support their approaches to teaching writing with technology. By no means, however, does this text mean to suggest that teachers abandon traditional approaches to writing instruction. Instead, Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media aims to offer teachers ideas for integrating social media within their current practices as well as provide them with insights regarding the contributions that technological tools make to the learning experience.

Hopefully Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media will serve as an impetus for future work, for so many other social media platforms like Snapchat, Vine, and Pinterest—which serve as important spaces for (visual) rhetoric and composition discourse and instruction—have yet to be fully realized in a space where blogging so closely mirrors traditional writing practices.

THE PROCESS OF EDITING THIS BOOK

Editor’s Note

I became interested in integrating social media in the writing classes I teach while being a graduate student (between 2007 and 2012) at The University of South Florida, Tampa where I was teaching Professional Writing. Truthfully, I simply wanted to engage my undergraduate writing students in the online writing communities that my Rhetoric & Technology professor required me to engage so that I could learn more about online writing spaces, specifically WordPress. I hoped to garner an appreciation for them. For, as the only Black student in my English graduate program at the time, I was unattached to social media beyond MySpace, and therefore, found the technological demands of my graduate course quite overwhelming. Unlike my White counterparts, I had never heard of WordPress or Twitter, which were recently launched (2005 and 2008), and so, I found myself pushed further against the margins.

When I accepted an assistant professor of English position at the historically Black, Florida A&M University (FAMU)—my alma mater—I committed myself to integrating social media in the Improving Writing and Technical Writing courses I was assigned to teach, hoping to “uplift the race.” I wanted to ensure that the “underprivileged” and “underrepresented” students that FAMU targets are not further marginalized as a result of computer illiteracies. I wanted to ensure that my Black students were strapped with the resources that they needed to compete and perform in all spaces, most of which are Ivory Towers.

However, while I found myself interested in integrating social media in the writing classroom to ensure that my Black students would be able to compete with their White counterparts, I was equally invested in making sure that their social media involvement did not prohibit them from forming meaningful relationships with themselves and real-life relationships with each other. I wanted to create a holistic classroom where heart and brain were invited into the learning experience, but I felt challenged to create a balanced classroom while requiring a potentially distancing online community technology. Therefore, during my first two years at FAMU, I practiced engaging my writing students with online writing communities by way of WordPress, while integrating reading and writing practices that were contemplative in nature, and therefore, encouraged mindful thinking and soul talk (which were eventually expressed in student blogging activities).
In every writing course that I taught, about 98% of my students were like I was: They had not been exposed to WordPress (nor Prezi or LinkedIn), and were not invited into discussions regarding the effects of social media on race, language, composition, identity, and focus. I realized, then, that my Black students, although they were not familiar with WordPress, were absolutely privy to the more “non-academic” social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. And surely, most students were not using these popular platforms to compose a professional or academic brand, and they definitely were not interrogating these social media platforms’ effects on their personhood. Many of my students were only “shucking and jiving” in their social media spaces, and I—perhaps selfishly—wanted more for them.

My own limitations and curiosities regarding integrating social media into the writing classroom is the impetus for Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media. In the past year, I have included both Twitter and LinkedIn with my students’ WordPress projects, but there’s so much more I’d like to explore. And so, I proposed this collection of chapter essays that promises to broaden my own pedagogical practices and hopefully your own.

Call for Proposals

During mid-Spring 2015 semester, I distributed an open call for chapter proposals. I asked for chapter essays that discuss how composition instructors use social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest) to teach their 21st century learners basic writing skills and encourage their regular writing practice. More specifically, I invited contributors to submit empirically researched, theoretical, or personal narrative chapters on the following topics related to using social media to teach 21st century writing students in Higher Education:

- Using Twitter to Teach Succinct Writing,
- Composing with Pinterest,
- Blogging as an Approach to Understanding Expository Writing,
- Engaging Audience via Facebook,
- Understanding Rhetoric via Instagram,
- Traditional Writing Practice with Online Social Media,
- Building a Writing Community by Engaging an Online Community,
- Professional Writing with LinkedIn,
- Photojournalism and Tumblr,
- Creating an Online Business Portfolio with WordPress,
- Using Twitter to Write Haikus,
- Understanding Themes by way of #Hashtags,
- Multimodal Composition and Tumblr,
- Snapcharting in the Writing Classroom.

I distributed the call for proposals in multiple venues including the Conference on College Composition and Communication, major professional organizations’ listservs, and universities like University of South Florida, Florida State University, Purdue University, and Ball State University. I also posted the call for proposals on Facebook, Pinterest, and my website, drknbryant.com. Additionally, the Editorial Advisory Board (EAB) was asked to share the call with other academic institutions, colleagues, and friends.
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Chapter Selections

Contributors submitted proposals mid-March of 2015. After receiving a surprising number of proposals, I reviewed each one and accepted those based on their appropriateness for the kind of instructional and informative text I wanted to compile. Authors were notified of their proposal’s acceptance and were given until September 15, 2015 to write their full chapters. Chapters underwent a double-blind (sometimes triple) peer review process with my Editorial Advisory Board. The EAB provided invaluable, extensive feedback regarding each chapter. Authors whose chapters were accepted were given until January 30, 2016 to submit their final chapters.

THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media is divided into five sections:

1. Blogging in the Writing Classroom: The authors whose chapters are included in this section discuss their classroom experiences with integrating Twitter to assist students both in the scaffolding process and in “exploring networked, digital compositions.” Chapters in this section also include discussion on using WordPress to create electronic writing portfolios and to maintain traditional goals of the writing classroom.

2. Exploring Multi-Digital Media in the Writing Classroom: In this section, authors discuss how Tumblr, Instagram, Podbean, and Twitter help to promote “Remix Writing,” which mirrors the multimodal activities that permeate present rhetoric & composition discourse.

3. Theorizing about Social Media Networks in the Writing Classroom: The four chapters that complete this section are grounded in theoretical concepts. While each chapter offers readers ideas about how to implement social media networks into a writing classroom, they more specifically invite readers to interrogate and explore social media networks for their rhetorical characteristics and situations.

4. Integrating Social Media as Professional Development in the Writing Classroom: In this section, chapters explore WordPress, LinkedIn, and Twitter as vehicles for helping writing students compose themselves professionally. In this section, audience is carefully discussed as authors suggest students be aware of their professional audience so that they can write more strategically, and therefore, “curate” a professional online identity that makes them more marketable. This section also includes a chapter Q&A between teacher and students regarding students’ responses to using social media in their Technical Writing course.

5. Re-Envisioning Wikis in the Writing Classroom: Although rarely referred to as a social media platform, the authors in this section invite readers to explore Wiki’s capacity for teaching students how to interact with and write for “real” audiences, while improving student writing skills, including their revising and editing practice.

I organized the book in five sections to make it more accessible. While I hope that readers carefully interact with each chapter included here, I know that many will skim the chapter titles, landing on a few interesting enough to hold their attention—at least through each chapter’s introduction. Nonetheless, by
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sectioning the book into five chapters, all of which intersect with one another, I aim only to enhance the readability of such a thorough text. Therefore, readers may flip through the text, skim sections and their corresponding chapters, and read the works that respond to their pedagogical interests.

CONCLUSION

Florida A&M University’s Department of English & Modern Languages has yet to revise their writing courses to include technological writing requirements beyond the university endorsed content management systems that students and teachers use to post grades. As a matter of fact, the department has yet to hold roundtable discussions regarding possibilities for integrating social media and other non-traditional practices into their major course offerings. I imagine then—especially in the historically black college and university setting where tradition often contributes to static methodologies and practices—that many other English departments, professors, and students are far removed from even considering integrating current social media into their neat classroom spaces. Undoubtedly, inviting trends that inform and alter our classroom spaces, pedagogical theories and practices, and rhetorical and composition discourses is scary. But it doesn’t have to be. Hopefully, Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media can serve as your instruction and your guide. I compiled this text especially for you.

This book is also for you, the individual who, like me, promised to be an educator who reminds students of their humanity. As long as we live, there’s one thing we know for sure: change is inevitable. Consequently, if we are to impact our students and provide them with meaningful classroom experiences that attend to their mind, body, and soul, we, must adapt to the changes. From Atari to Xbox, the typewriter to the desktop, Woodstock to hip-hop, George Bush to President Barack, change is like a writing process: we invent, we research, we organize, and we write and revise, write and revise, write and revise, all in an effort to know ourselves in relationship to each other.

I hope that Engaging 21st Century Writers with Social Media encourages, arouses, and inspires messy classroom practices, heated pedagogical discussions, and meaningful learning experiences. With a Sankofa spirit, I charge readers to “go back and get it”—to return to heart wherein lies curiosity, creativity, wonderment, and courage—so that we can meet each new semester of students as if we were entering the classroom for the very first time.

Write on!

Kendra N. Bryant
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REFERENCES
