Chapter 1

Networked Digital Spaces: Twitter in the Composition Classroom

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ABSTRACT

As the landscape for communication changes with new and evolving digital technologies, the format for college composition classrooms must change and adapt as well. If we are moving towards compositions that are created by and mediated through a screen, we must adopt new approaches for talking about and teaching these new forms of language and communication. During the fall 2014 semester, I was given the opportunity to teach a composition class focused on digital rhetoric. As a facet of the classroom experience, my students created and used Twitter accounts for fictional characters. Utilizing Twitter within the composition classroom allowed students to compose as a part of a much larger network of actors that interact with the texts they create. As a form of networked communication, the compositions created by students through this medium demanded interaction and engagement in a way that a classroom composition, shared only between student and instructor, does not.

INTRODUCTION

Before I set foot in my first composition classroom as a graduate teaching assistant at the University of South Florida, I spent the week prior to fall classes assessing the available technology in the classrooms I was assigned. More than anything, I was nervous that I was not skilled enough to even start the projector. I was so fearful of the educational technology provided by the university that I quickly implemented a “no tech” policy within the classroom that asked students to leave their laptops, cell phones, and other electronics in their bags during class. Inexperienced and young, the last thing I wanted was for my students to not respect me, and I thought that technology would only detract from my oh-so-mesmerizing lesson plans about thesis statements.

As I progressed in my own graduate coursework, I began to have positive experiences with projects requiring social media and web writing that were extremely valuable to me as a writer and scholar. Through the creation of personal and professional websites, for example, I began to gain a new respect
for modes of writing that diverge from the traditional academic essay. I realized that I was unfairly blaming technology for distracting students from an outdated pedagogical style instead of embracing these varied, interactive, and evolving forms of communication. In Chris Gerben’s (2014) “Free and Easy: A Rubric for Evaluating Everyday Technology,” he states, “The problem, of course, was not the technology: it was the user” (para. 4). By bringing technologies into my composition classroom, I hoped to share with students many of the same valuable experiences with multimodal writing that I was having as a graduate student.

While I immediately wanted to incorporate as much of this technology as possible into my existing assignments, I needed to consider how these emergent technologies, such as Twitter, change the landscape of the college composition classroom. Chris Anson (1999) notes that, as teachers, “We spend much of our time working within the framework of certain fairly stable educational conditions. These conditions include physical spaces that define the social and interpersonal contexts of teaching,” such as classrooms and offices (p. 262). Although written in 1999, Anson’s “Distant Voices: Teaching and Writing in a Culture of Technology,” aptly makes an assertion that holds true for 2015 writing classrooms: the basic layout, tools, and modes of assessment are largely comparable, and perhaps even identifiable, to a “mid-nineteenth century schoolteacher” (p. 264). New writing technologies drive developments in the way we talk and think about communicable compositions. Thus, we must reevaluate the layout and textual “spaces” that we ask our students to participate in.

If classroom spaces are not changing to meet the needs of students and the digital networks they inhabit on a daily basis, perhaps it is important to recall the warnings of composition theorists who have repeatedly asserted that writing instruction can and will become obsolete if it is unable to meet the needs of students composing as a part of such digitized communities (e.g. Yancey, 2004; Hawk, 2007; Brooke, 2009; Sirc, 2010). Twenty-first-century writing instructors are currently experiencing an inability to engage student writers despite the fact that the vast majority of these students read and write massive quantities of text on a daily basis. These forms of writing that students engage with—text messages, emails, tweets, blog posts, and Facebook updates to name a few—do not resemble the traditional model of academic writing that many composition classrooms still employ as the crux of writing instruction.

In order to engage instruction with the real-world writing that these students create, instructors must consider how composition can include such multimodal formats. As Takayoshi and Sullivan (2007) explain, “Technological practices complicate existing definitions of writers, writing, and publishing, which in turn affect our roles as writers, writing teachers, and writing theorists” (p. 7). Many students in the classroom do not realize that they are all creating and consuming text through social media on a daily basis. By asking students to become more aware of their role as creators within this networked process of writing, composition classrooms can incorporate a fundamental aspect of communication practices in the 21st century.

In this chapter, I seek to:

1. Establish the importance of digitizing composition classrooms by integrating assignments that allow students to compose in a multimodal format;
2. Present a sample method for integrating social media, specifically twitter, into the classroom; and
3. Analyze the results of my students’ interactions with Twitter in the classroom.
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