Chapter 3
Using Twitter to Scaffold English Composition

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the idea, and offers three real-life, classroom tested assignments, of using the rules of social media, specifically Twitter, to teach students the rhetorical moves needed to write essays of college length and quality. The assignments provide first-year composition students the tools necessary to read an academic article, understand the rhetoric behind it, and apply rhetorical strategies it to his or her writing. The three assignments: 1) rhetorically analyze Twitter and create a formula for an effective tweet; 2) rhetorically analyzing an academic article 140 characters at a time; and 3) rhetorically analyzing a student’s own paper using these same 140-character sound bites, have shown to put students in a position to be successful in the academy. Each assignment has been fully vetted over three years, with a myriad of student examples. This paper shows that the rules of Twitter can be used academically to provide a knowledge base and scaffolding for student writers.

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, as a University of Akron graduate assistant pursuing a master’s degree in English Composition, I was charged with teaching a class of 25 first-year college students to become writers and learn how to succeed in academic settings. In order to do this, students would need to understand the writing process, be able to rhetorically analyze, and respond appropriately to, any academic situation and text, be able to engage in critical reading and writing, and be able to write for different genres in the academy. As the semester began, I quickly realized that many of the students were not capable of entering into academic discourse as easily as I had hoped. I was going to have to find a way to build a bridge, or, as David Wood, Jerome S. Bruner, and Gail Ross (1976) suggest, scaffold the student’s learning. According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross, scaffolding consists “of the adult ‘controlling’ those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (p. 90). To properly scaffold the class I was

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teaching, I had to determine the student’s range of competence and begin to build. By gaining an understanding of the writings of Wood, Bruner, and Ross, Lev Vygotsky, Peter Elbow, Bruce McComiskey, and other respected scholars in the field, I began to guide my writing students through the requirements of English Composition, by creating a social network inside the class.

Each day that I entered the classroom, students were on their cell phones, composing on various social networks. It was then that I realized, instead of asking the students to put away their phones in order to learn composition, I could use social media and their phones to create a genesis. I chose to focus on Twitter. My students came into the classroom proficient at being able to compose, not in the ways of academia, but on social media. It was my job to take this developed social function and begin to build.

The essay that follows explains how I have created ways to use Twitter in my first-year English Composition classroom, results as well as implications these assignments can have on other composition classrooms are also explicated here.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning through Scaffolding

The Oxford English Dictionary defines scaffolding as, “The temporary framework of platforms and poles constructed to provide accommodation for workmen and their materials during the erection, repairing, or decoration of a building.” Without strong scaffolding, buildings are not able to be built; however, the scaffold is temporary. It does not remain with the structure forever. There is a larger goal than just forming the framework. Often, the scaffold takes time to create. Constructing a scaffold in the classroom assures students can be supported as they work to develop their education.

While Wood, Bruner, and Ross’s (1976) definition is suitable to be used, many other scholars during the 1970s discussed the process of development of their writings. John Nordlof (2014) wrote, “Lev Vygotsky can therefore offer us a model for understanding student learning; it is a developmental process in which concepts are internalized through social interaction.” Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of the student’s zone of proximal development is defined as, “The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). For teachers, Vygotsky provides a place of reference for the student. If a teacher is able to identify the zone of proximal development in a student, the teacher can begin to develop the scaffolding. Most importantly, as Nordlof suggests, this is through social interaction.

Prior to Vygotsky and Wood, Bruner, and Ross, Peter Elbow’s text, originally published in 1973, Writing without Teachers, uses the term scaffolding when considering his own writing process. Elbow (1973) wrote, “X. It seems great. But then I find next day that it seems mediocre. But further writing produces an extension of it. That’s better. The original was scaffolding that I had to use to get to the second one” (p. 37). Elbow’s writing process included building on writing, creating this scaffold. Later in the book, he begins to apply this same concept to the development in students. Elbow wrote, “It is the characteristic of living organisms, cell creatures, to unfold according to a set of stages that must come in order. The paradigm is the fetus going through the stages” (p. 43). Elbow also mentions that great thinkers like Freud, Erik Erikson, and Piaget, all have different models explaining this development. Elbow (1973) wrote: