Chapter 6
Social Media and the Rhetorical Situation: Finding Common Ground Between Students’ Lives and Writing Courses

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that students develop rhetorical skills on social media, this chapter presents a number of writing assignments that ask students to engage with social media and complete a variety of tasks online. These tasks range from taking and posting a photograph, to revising social media posts for honesty, to creating memes. Each assignment then requires students to reflect on these experiences in formal written assignments. This reflective component encourages students to consider writing conventions, processes, and genres in order to develop “high road” and meta-cognitive transfer skills. These assignments have three primary goals: (1) they help students engage with course content, (2) they build student confidence, and (3) they ask students to practice transfer.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century students use complex rhetorical practices daily; they consider their audience, compose arguments, and revise posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, SnapChat, and elsewhere. Yet many are unaware of their resulting rhetorical prowess. As educators, we can empower students to recognize how their social media use has made them practiced and successful writers by bringing social media into the classroom and helping students make connections between the rhetorical practices of their daily lives and the rhetorical demands of the academy. In fact, as educators, we must find new ways to reach our students because they don’t think or learn in the same way as past generations. As Prensky (2001) has pointed out, “It is now clear that as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (p. 1). If our students really do think and learn differently, then as educators we must find ways to teach differently.

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Teaching differently is no easy task. In Shaughnessy’s 1976 “Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing,” she recognized,

... that this system of exchange between teacher and student has so far yielded much more information about what is wrong with students than about what is wrong with teachers, reinforcing the notion that students, not teachers, are the people in education who must do the changing. (p. 311)

This continues to be the case, especially now that we teach what Prensky calls “Digital Natives” or “‘native speakers’ of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (p. 1). Thus if we want to reach our students, we must stop focusing on the ills of social media and its impact on writing. Instead, we must teach differently. While Carr’s New York Times column (2015), “The Media Equation,” often discussed the negative impact of social media, he also often recognized the positive impact of such media:

The enhanced ability to communicate and share in the current age has many tangible benefits . . . Many younger consumers have become mini-media companies themselves, madly distributing their own content on Vine, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat. It’s tough to get their attention on media created for the masses when they are so busy producing their own. (para. 9)

Social media is not a fad or at least not one that is going to disappear anytime soon. Thus as writing teachers in the twenty-first century, we cannot simply decry student use of social media; we must find a way to use this social media use to our own (and our students’) advantage.

One way to do this is to incorporate students’ social media use into classroom discussions and writing assignments. By asking students to engage with, post to, and reflect on social media through formal and informal assignments, my writing courses aim to help them recognize their ability to successfully adapt to a variety of rhetorical situations. Helping students understand their social media posts as acts of rhetorically-situated writing allows them to gain confidence in their general writing skills. In their award-winning book, On Multimodality: New Media in Composition Studies (2014), Alexander and Rhodes explain, “In our push to assert our own disciplinarity, we have perhaps privileged text-based forms of writing to the extent that we rarely address the specific invention, delivery, and rhetorical possibilities of other types of composition in our classes” (p. 3). When we only teach text-based writing, we are narrowing students’ understanding of writing to writing that can be done in a Word document, but by addressing the “specific invention, delivery, and rhetorical possibilities” (p. 3) of social media, we can encourage students to recognize that they already do a lot of what we are asking of them in their daily lives. Thus while the negative effects of social media on writing are hard to ignore, a different approach to social media recognizes and focuses on the strengths students have gained through their incessant posting. If we encourage our students to think of social media use as writing, then we can help them transfer their rhetorical knowledge from their social (and online) lives to their academic lives. Perhaps, this can also work in reverse, and such assignments can help them transfer their new academic understanding of rhetorical situations to help them become savvier social media users as well.