Chapter 8

Socializing Composition: 
Entering the Conversation of SNS in Composition

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to act as a primer for scholars looking start working with social networking site (SNS) in the composition classroom. This chapter focuses on research regarding aspects of SNS use in and out of the classroom, such as identity, rhetorical/audience awareness, civic engagement, and SNS pedagogy. This chapter also relies on current discourse, as well as the author’s own SNS experiences, to share lists of best practices and SNS activities in the composition classroom. This chapter ends with a call for future research that includes continued efforts to interact more directly with students to learn with them about their use and views of SNS in and out of the composition classroom.

INTRODUCTION

As I find myself transitioning from life as a college student to that of a professor of composition, I realize how Social Networking Sites (SNS) have been a continuous presence for me in and out of the classroom. My academic life has been punctuated by moments of engaging with SNS. I remember spending plenty of time as a freshman in campus computer labs trying to find all of my high school friends who had just signed on to Facebook, and building my MySpace wall. In my last year as an undergraduate, classrooms were making more frequent use of computers and it was becoming more and more common to see students scrolling through their Facebook walls during class or spending time in the computer labs between classes updating profiles and posting.

Then, as I began to transition into the world of graduate school, I found myself walking the line between student and teacher, and I remember teaching classes and seeing my own students trying to hide the fact that they were signed into their SNS instead of working on an activity or participating in a discussion. In many ways my experience with SNS as an undergraduate echoes the experiences of the undergraduates I was teaching, whether or not I initially realized it.

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I also remember the dissatisfied feeling I got when I sat in on the first workshop for the department that discussed the use of Facebook in the classroom. As a Graduate TA in my second year of teaching, I was intrigued by the idea of incorporating something new into the composition classroom. However, as a student who was still grappling with the fact that Facebook had just recently been opened for access to the general public and as someone who was unsure what that meant about his personal interaction with family and acquaintances, I was skeptical when the primary pedagogical suggestion from the individual running the workshop was to simply use Facebook as a space to meet with students and connect. I did not like the idea of so blatantly mixing school with personal life, and I was sure many of the undergrads who had just begun to sign up to the SNS, and just starting to carve out a place for themselves in those spaces, would probably not respond positively to such implementation either. The pedagogue in me decided to keep SNS and classroom activities separate from one another.

However, as I finished my Masters in Literature and began life in the Rhetoric and Writing Doctoral program, I began to use a greater variety of SNS, and I started to view my own, and others’, use of SNS with a more critical lens. I began to see that the rhetorical moves and considerations we were discussing in the seminars were being played out in these online spaces. Fellow grad students, as well as the FYC students I taught in my own classes, were having debates on SNS. They were creating new kinds of content that entertained, informed, and connected them to people with various perspectives on the world. I perceived the term multimodal composition for the first time, and after seeing classroom activities being built around analyzing websites and witnessing the incorporation of digital tools to discuss audience, and rhetorical composition, I began to consider SNS as spaces with legitimate potential for expanding the discussion of rhetorical composition in the composition classroom.

As I considered the idea of using SNS in the composition classroom, I began to further reflect on the ways in which I had seen instructors attempt to incorporate online technology, and SNS in particular, into the classroom: often without success. I also thought of the workshop I had attended as a masters student and it occurred to me that in so many instances the instructors using SNS in the classroom, or the workshop leaders discussing how to incorporate SNS in the composition classroom, often did so independently, without input from the students who would be working with these technologies in the classroom. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, there are often discrepancies between how students use technology outside the classroom, and how instructors attempt to use the same technology inside the classroom, which can cause a disruption in the students’ ability and willingness to engage with such technologies as learning tools. Second, the use of SNS can be a deeply personal experience, and if certain instructors incorporate SNS too heavily or inappropriately in the classroom, students may not fully participate for fear of having some of the personal element of SNS stripped from their experiences.

SNS is an important part of life for composition students and SNS use is becoming ever more prevalent in the day-to-day interactions of society. Selfe (1999) argues that awareness of what she calls a “new literacy agenda” is:

>An integral part of educator’s larger responsibility to understand the way in which our culture thinks about and values literacy. Perhaps even more important, this awareness is part of our ethical responsibility to understand how literacy and literacy instruction directly and continually affects the lived experiences of the individuals and families with whom we come into contact as teachers. (p. xix)

Over the last decade, SNS have become some of the primary avenues through which to shape literacy in the lived experiences of so many students. Thus, it is important as ever to pay attention to the ways
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