Chapter 9

Creating Meaning for Millennials: Bakhtin, Rosenblatt, and the Use of Social Media in the Composition Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Despite the Millennial’s growing attraction to social media technologies, composition instruction has yet to fully explore the potential of these technologies as resources rather than hindrances to instruction. As instructors of composition, then, it seems logical to apply what we know about these dominant rhetorical and pedagogical theories of the 20th century to the prospective use of social media to better our own pedagogies. Employing the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin’s social construction of knowledge and Louise Rosenblatt’s student-centered pedagogy, the author explores the many complementary uses of social media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter in the composition classroom in order to generate a new model of instruction – one which challenges traditional, unilateral exchanges of knowledge and centers on a dialogical, student-centered model of composition instruction.

INTRODUCTION

As a society grounded in rhetoric, the ways in which we understand how to most effectively use discourse to build knowledge in the university setting are in constant flux with rhetorical epistemic shifts. It does seem somewhat certain, however, that as technology use becomes more frequent, and college students become even more connected in their discourse through the use of these technologies, University instruction will likely follow suit. Composition instructors often attempt to meet the needs of changing groups of students, and the use of social media sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter, can help composition instructors best meet the writing abilities of Millennial students.

Most recently, instructors have sought to serve the unique requirements of students of the “Millennial” generation – those born between 1982 and 2000, according to the Pew Research Center (2015). DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0562-4.ch009
Despite efforts by composition instructors, however, students of the Millennial generation often find the composition course, in its most basic form, difficult to construct personal meaning from. In his essay “Language, Power, and Consciousness: A Writing Experiment at the University of Toronto,” Guy Allen (2008) writes that over a span of 15 years of surveying, nearly 95 percent of students have a negative view of writing in a school setting (p. 72). In her 2008 dissertation, “I hate to write. I can’t do it.”: First-Year Composition and the Resistant Student Writer, Heather Urbanaski explains that resistant writers in the composition classroom “don’t just struggle with writing; they actively resist the task and the course because both seem incompatible with their strengths and affinities” (p. 1).

So, one might ask then: What are the Millennial students’ strengths as writers, and how can composition instructors use what they may already know about rhetorical theories and pedagogies to better connect with this distinctive generation?

Members of the Millennial generation, many of whom are now of traditional college age, are known for their constant connectivity and use of multi-modal technologies. “Social Media & Mobile Internet Use among Teens and Young Adults,” a 2010 study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, found that 73% of United States people ages 18-24 use social networking sites; 45% of them use the sites daily. Whether through the Internet, cell phones, or social media sites, today’s average college student is constantly connected to a circle of friends, family, and—potentially—to hundreds or even thousands of other people, and they interact quite frequently with these groups. As Greg Heiberger and Ruth Harper assert in their 2008 article, “Have You Facebooked Astin Lately? Using Technology to Increase Student Involvement,” Millennial students “network with each other using technology as much as, if not more than, face-to-face communication” (2). The millennial students’ strengths, therefore, are in fact inherently situated in their ability to communicate.

According to an Ipsos Millenial Social Influence Study (2014), 71 percent of Millennials connect on social media sites daily. Social media sites are where a large majority of Millennial students do their writing; these sites are where students discuss, argue, and question topics relevant to their lives. Millennial students hold entire arguments on Facebook, they work through problems on blog posts, they text message their parents for life advice, and they Twitter their friends regarding their relationship woes.

Composition teachers might meet the Millennial generation’s unique communication skill sets, then, through the many potential uses of social media sites in the classroom. The writing proficiency of the incoming Millennial college student is often framed by the use of the Internet and online technologies; as such, the use of interactive social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in the classroom is a significant and promising trend to examine for how composition instructors might facilitate greater student interest, participation, connectivity, collaboration, and community to subsequently generate optimal knowledge-building. Further, employing social media tools in the composition classroom might generate a new model for composition instruction which empowers the student-learner in ways not as synonymous with the traditional, unilateral transfer of knowledge often found in college-level classrooms.

Using Twitter and Facebook in the classroom may be new to some teachers; however, integrating Twitter and Facebook into the traditional classroom is not a new concept: Communications, media studies, anthropology, social sciences, and several other college disciplines have found useful ways to incorporate social media into the classroom. In fact, major studies touting the benefits of employing social media in the classroom are now beginning to emerge: in a 2010 study published in the Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, researchers found that Twitter in the college classroom can lead to greater student