Chapter 12

Teaching Casual Writing for Professional Success with Twitter: Digital Small Talk and the New Textese

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ABSTRACT

Using social media to construct a digital, professional presence for the job search is a necessity in today’s labor market. Millennials are skilled in using social media for personal purposes but cannot immediately intuit how to use familiar social media outlets in professional contexts. Writing instructors can guide students in enacting an online, professional presence through digitally mediated communication practices that increasingly are seen as valuable in the workplace. Instead of training students away from using “textese,” instructors should help students develop an abbreviated writing style that is strategic, consistent, and responsive to the needs of their audience. Twitter is the best social media platform in which to help students achieve these learning goals. This chapter provides readers with a description of a capstone, problem-based learning assignment in which students use Twitter to market their professional selves, network, and improve their digital workplace writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, when MySpace reigned supreme and Facebook was in its infancy, universities and colleges began advising students to censor their digital selves in order to achieve greater career success after graduation (Bombardieri, 2006; Cummins, 2006; Maitre, 2006; Pope, 2006). Today, students of all ages still are being warned to use social media judiciously (S. Buck, 2012; Donnelly, 2013; Stauts, 2015). At the same time they are being urged to censor their social media footprint, however, they also are hearing something new: that they should have a separate “professional” web presence that would be attractive to employers. Despite millennials’ skillful, frequent use (E. Buck, 2015; Grabill et al., 2010) of social media to sustain interpersonal relationships, they cannot immediately intuit how to use social media for professional purposes, like augmenting a job search (Pegrum, 2011).

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This learning curve first emerges when millennials are tasked with building a professional presence through “digital small talk,” or the polite, online exchange of career aspirations, observations of the world, and appropriate information about their lives outside of work. “Casual” or “everyday” writing genres overlap with digital small talk. Like digital small talk, digital- or computer-mediated (DCM) casual writing has an important place in and adjacent to workplace communication. In a professional context, casual writing is produced quickly and under pressure. Casual writing genres can encompass email, instant messaging, and mobile phone text messaging. Grabill et al., (2010) has shown that millennials are prolific casual writers who see this material as valuable. However, despite the frequency with which they produce casual writing, and despite the value to which they ascribe it, millennials have difficulty enacting such genres in professional (i.e., non-personal) contexts.

Millennials especially struggle with digital and casual writing at the level language. They tend to use “textese,” an abbreviated, orthographically and grammatically innovative writing form (Crystal, 2008). On the surface, textese appears to expose a poor grasp of Standard Written English (SWE). Empirical studies demonstrate, though, that textese does not necessarily reflect poor grammatical knowledge or the degradation of a once-adequate understanding of SWE (Crystal, 2008; DeJonge & Kemp, 2012; Kemp, Wood, & Waldron, 2014). Rather, textese partially stems from an inability to “code switch,” or recognize that “language varies by context, and . . . what is appropriate in one setting may not be appropriate in another” (K. Turner, 2009, pp. 61-62). In addition, as Tannen (2013) has shown, textese’s repetitions, misspellings, and abbreviations often are not mistakes but rather deliberate attempts to convey “metamessages” or markers of emotional intent.

This essay addresses how instructors, especially those who teach workplace writing, can guide students in constructing an online, professional presence that is expressed through digital small talk, casual writing, and (surprisingly) textese. To help students create a professional persona that anchors their online presence, instructors should capitalize on millennials’ existing social media skillset and rhetorical sensibilities. To improve students’ online writing skills—that is, the language they use to enact their professional persona—instructors should guide students in code switching, or more mindfully using SWE. Just as importantly, instructors also should aid students in what I call “code sliding.” Whereas code switching encompasses abandoning textese in favor of SWE, code sliding involves mediating between the conventions of SWE and the inventive, supposedly “deviant” forms of online communication that many millennials already use. Code sliding or intermittently relying on textese is a necessary skill. Many forms of workplace communication require the ability to write quickly. Furthermore, the constraints or “affordances” of electrical or digital technologies sometimes make using textese unavoidable. Thus, rather than train students away from using textese, instructors should teach students how to break the rules of SWE in ways that respect their workplace audiences’ needs and expectations.

The social media site Twitter is the best platform on which millennials can (1) establish an online presence as early- or pre-career professionals, (2) engage in digital small talk, and (3) hone their casual writing skills, including their ability to code switch (abandon textese) and code slide (strategically use textese) in a professional context. Twitter facilitates this learning better than other social media sites for several reasons, and one of the most consequential involves its affordances: Because tweets can be no more than 140 characters, some necessarily include textese. Twitter, of course, has long been used in college classrooms, yet most critical analyses do not address using it to help students write for workplace audiences; instead, much of the existing scholarship describes how Twitter promotes subject-specific discussion within the classroom and exclusively among students and teachers (Kuznekoff, Munz, & Titsworth, 2015; Marshall, 2015). In this essay, I provide a blueprint for helping students use Twitter