Chapter 14

#WordUp!: Student Responses to Social Media in the Technical Writing Classroom

Kendra N. Bryant
Florida A&M University, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author argues that although integrating online social media networks into a traditional writing classroom seems timely, cutting edge, and apropos to students’ current past-time activities, teachers have the opportunity to create more meaningful classroom activities with social media if they first: consider students’ trepidation regarding such non-traditional classroom activities; and second: realize socially-networked students don’t necessarily translate into career-ready students. By way of two in-class Q&A sessions, the author discovers that her Technical Writing students need less instruction on how to use social media academically, and more instruction on how to use social media to brand and market themselves professionally. In a chapter grounded in student response, readers receive her student feedback about the effects of integrating social media networks into their writing classroom in an effort to assist teachers more purposely integrate social media into their traditional classroom spaces.

Teachers need to integrate technology seamlessly into the curriculum instead of viewing it as an add-on, an afterthought, or an event. – Heidi-Hayes Jacobs, Founder of Curriculum Designers and Curriculum21

INTRODUCTION

For the past four years, I have practiced integrating social media into the Technical Writing, Improving Writing, and Freshman Communicative Skills courses that I teach at Florida A&M University (FAMU). I have incorporated the social media platforms WordPress—and most recently, Twitter and LinkedIn—to my traditional writing courses (whose departmental curriculums make no such requirements), because I wanted my predominantly Black student population to know more about writing with technology than I did when I was a graduate student at University of South Florida (USF) four years ago.

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As expressed in the Preface at the beginning of this book, unlike my White peers, I was unfamiliar with the trends regarding social media networks’ effects on composition, identity, language, and the like. As a result, I found myself quite disengaged from classroom discussions and required online writing assignments. While the Rhetoric & Technology course I was taking at the time was designed to enlighten me (and my White peers) about the current trends in Rhetoric & Composition, because I was the only student who seemed to know nothing about social media platforms (aside from MySpace) and their potential for academic/professional use, I felt stupid and unprepared. I felt like I did not belong in a Ph.D. program, and being the only Black student in the English doctoral program only encouraged my feelings of inferiority.

Although I was struggling with the technological demands of my Rhetoric & Technology course, I had not realized that my challenges with technology were also familiar to other Black undergraduate students attending USF. While teaching a First Year Composition course that required students to use Blackboard—an online content management system for academic purposes—one of my Black male transfer students claimed that he was dropping out of USF because he couldn’t keep up with the university’s technological requirements. Although the composition course he was taking with me didn’t require online tasks aside from Blackboard, this student, who transferred from a historically black university, felt overwhelmed by the technologies that he said were not required at his former institution. And so, despite my attempts at retaining him, he dropped out.

As a teacher in training, I vowed to integrate writing technologies (beyond Word processing) into my writing classrooms so that no other student would be so discouraged and threatened by technological demands that he would forfeit his (traditional) education. And so, in order to garner my own appreciation for and understanding of online communications technologies, I began including WordPress, a content management system that offers a blogging platform, into the Professional Writing courses I was required to teach at USF. I continued my practice at FAMU where the majority of my Black students were like me and my former Black male USF student: they, too, were far removed from the academic and professional possibilities that online writing communities offered its users.

I have integrated WordPress into my traditional writing courses for four years now and have felt a bit like a Mother Theresa of teaching with online writing technologies. I believed, without a shadow of doubt, that my familiarizing my writing students with online writing communities—that both improved their online marketability and forged classroom community—provided them more meaningful learning experiences (Bryant 2013a; Bryant 2013b). And it did. However, this year when I required students to link their Twitter to their WordPress accounts, I realized a trepidation from students I had not realized before.

In an unexpected class discussion, students complained about their Twitter requirement. According to many of them, they either don’t use Twitter because it’s “messy,” or their own Twitter account is “too messy” to share in an academic setting. In other words, student Twitter feeds were inappropriate for the traditional classroom setting. Their Twitter feeds were complete with vulgar images, profane language, and violent video clips, they said. And as a result, students didn’t want to connect their Twitter feeds to their WordPress accounts. Instead, they preferred to create new Twitter accounts or to create pseudo Twitter accounts specifically for the course assignment.

During that unexpected classroom discussion, I realized that reviewing a course syllabus that notes technological requirements, polling students’ familiarity with WordPress, and assuming that each of my students would benefit from and appreciate my notions regarding social media use in the writing classroom based on my own experiences as a college student, are not enough to determine social media’s usefulness in the traditional classroom setting. As a result, I held two Q&A sessions with my students
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