Chapter 12
Using an Anywhere/Anytime Technology to Facilitate Student Writing

Hilary Wilder
William Paterson University, USA

Carrie Eunyoung Hong
William Paterson University, USA

Geraldine Mongillo
William Paterson University, USA

ABSTRACT

Can a new technology, widely embraced by today’s students, be used to facilitate the traditional writing process? In this chapter, we describe a pilot study which used the social networking tool Twitter to afford anytime/anywhere writing by first-year seminar students at a mid-sized public university in the U.S. Students were expected to post ("tweet") weekly ideas, thoughts, and reflections on their first-year experience throughout the semester; in a sense, using Twitter as an omnipresent notepad for jotting down ideas. At the end of the semester, it was hoped that students would be able to compile all the posts into a formally written text (a “Freshman Survival Guide”) to see if they could use a new literacy skill to promote traditional writing.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s students are the most wired and connected of any generation. With their facility with technology, can a new technology, widely embraced by today’s students, be used to facilitate the traditional writing process? New technologies are not only changing the communication expectations and habits of young people, but they are also changing the literacy requirements that these students will need in their professional and personal lives. Many literacy educators are now looking at ways that these new technologies such as e-mail, cell-phone text messages, slideshow presentations, weblog posts, and discussion threads can be used to give students a more compelling purpose and a more valid audience for their writing while using technologies that students prefer.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-347-8.ch012
BACKGROUND

Many believe that students today learn differently from previous generations (Barnes, Marateo, & Ferris, 2007). They are wired, constantly connected, and expect immediacy in communication, but the Net Generation is not known for their reading or writing skills (Sweeney, 2007). Although many teachers blame the decline in writing skills on the technologies that today’s students are immersed in, a recent Stanford Study of Writing (Haven, 2009), reports that the opposite, in fact, is true. Students are writing more than ever, but in a different context and form expected by their college professors. The study finds that students are using technologies such as e-mail, cellphone text messages, slideshow presentations, weblog posts, and discussion threads to write for a compelling purpose and to write for a real audience. Literacy research has demonstrated that students produce better writing products when they have an interest in the subject and feel they are writing for a specific purpose (Alvermann, 2001; Englert, 1992). The Stanford study found that the type of writing students enjoyed most was writing that was performative or “does something” (Lundsford, 2009), like creating a poster or a website related to a social issue in which they had an interest. Similarly, initial findings from the Writing in Digital Environments (WIDE) Research Center show that students find value in writing for personal fulfillment and entertainment, using technologies such as cellphones, Facebook and email (Grabill & Pigg, 2010).

There is little doubt that the composition of traditional academic writing has significantly changed with the advent of new digital literacies, but it is not necessarily bad news. Students’ writing scores have steadily improved over the last few years according to the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). Today’s students are proficient users of multiple technologies and the use of these technologies requires them to be problem solvers and strategic thinkers (Anstey & Bull, 2006). Turner and Katic (2009) suggest that the non-linear literacy practices that are often engendered by new technologies will help students connect more authentically to the meaning-making processes. Sweeny (2010) suggests that technological literacies are related to writing literacies and should be integrated in teaching the latter. Literacy research (Gee, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; New London Group, 2000) obliges us to find a way to bridge the gap between out-of-school (texting, twittering, etc.) and in-school literacy instruction because students see these modalities not only as a social communication tool, but a method to accomplish ‘real life’ tasks.

New technologies such as smart phones or micro-blogging via common cellphones may afford even greater authentic and meaningful writing for these students, providing an inexpensive, anytime/anywhere technology for communicating their thoughts. Twitter (http://twitter.com/) is an example of a micro-blogging technology that is accessible through computers, smart phones and low-end cellphones. “Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent messages. People write short updates, often called “Tweets” of 140 characters or fewer. These messages are posted to your profile or your blog, sent to your followers, and are searchable on Twitter search…All you need to use Twitter is an internet connection or a mobile phone” (Twitter, 2010). Posted tweets can be read by friends and others who have signed up to “follow” these postings and will appear automatically on their Twitter homepage. Tweets that contain a unique hashtag (e.g. “#obama”) can be easily searched for to find ones about a specific topic posted by people you are not following. Tweets that refer to a login name (prefaced with the “@” sign) will automatically appear on that person’s Twitter homepage, in the Mention section.