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The Rhetorical Network: Harnessing Social Media as Writing Platform

The role of social media in contemporary society has been a topic of scholarly conversation across numerous disciplines over the course of the last few years. In particular, we are learning how to engage others in a more virtual environment and how the change in platform affects what we must communicate with more intentionality and what can be sacrificed in order to create a clear transfer of ideas between people. Sarcasm, for example, cannot be conveyed in textual format as well as it could be delivered verbally, but virtual composers are daily finding ways around obstacles like these by arranging their words in a way that still communicates their ideas in new and innovative ways. It is these new methods of communication that inherently create new rhetorical situations that consumers of social media must deal with in order to present themselves adequately, a reality that comes with a necessity to interact responsibly with others in lieu of face-to-face encounters. As social media continues to evolve and invent new interactions, we have a pedagogical responsibility to at least acknowledge the fact that writing can (and should) be molded to fit certain situations, and that posting on social media and interacting with others' ideas on that platform is no exception.

Though a noble concept, there must be an accompanying pedagogical adjustment to the understanding that students interact with social media on a daily basis and must thus learn to be conscious of the impact they can have on others and the kinds of information they consume.

Again, scholarship in this particular area is not lacking. Henry Giroux reminds us that "pedagogy

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Comment [1]: Got a bit lost in this sentence – the idea seems important, though, so clarify

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Comment [2]: Example of sarcasm workaround?

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Comment [3]: What do you mean?

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Comment [4]: Work transition here – seems like you're saying Giroux is talking about social media here. Is he?

is *not* an a priori set of methods that simply needs to be uncovered and then applied regardless of the contexts in which one teaches but is instead the outcome of numerous deliberations and struggles between different groups over how contexts are made and remade, often within unequal relations of power” (65). We must acknowledge that pedagogy is an ever-shifting entity and make changes accordingly. After all, first-year composition courses revolve around helping students become critical thinkers, writers, and creators of ideas within their own cultural contexts. The integration of multimodality in FYC courses is a step in the right direction in terms of this endeavor; teaching students how to create texts that go beyond just words on a page is key in a society that is quickly losing the ability to focus on longer pieces of writing for extended periods of time. Video blogs and podcasts are now more popular than newspapers, online blogs, and practically any other medium that requires the audience to read rather than listen or watch. Attention, Richard L. Freishtat and Jennifer A. Sandlin argue, has become the currency of digital culture: “Attention, in a very real sense, is the new money. When youth engage in digital networks like Facebook, they consume information in addition to goods—treating information as a good, itself. Information is put into circulation and competes for youths’ attention” (507). The challenge, then, is creating a pedagogically-sound composition course that takes into account the shift in students’ ability to focus while still instilling critical thinking values in them that transfer to how they interact on social media platforms.

In “Assessing the Efficacy of the Rhetorical Composing Situation with FYC Students as Advanced Social Media Practitioners,” Elisabeth H. Buck emphasizes the importance of social media as a pedagogical tool. Buck asserts that there are two fundamental premises that inform a course that utilizes social media as an aid. The first is “that social media sites increasingly mediate and facilitate student writing off-campus,” a factor that plays heavily into how much

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Comment [5]: I’d look at the organization of this paragraph, particularly how the topic sentence relates to the rest of the paragraph.

coursework can adequately be assigned to be completed outside of the classroom. Where some writing courses require most of the work be done in the classroom—with the exception of major essay assignments themselves—a course that employs social media as an educational tool does so with the understanding that most of the impact social media can have on students stems from their ability to create and interact with ideas on this very platform, the majority of which would require work outside of the classroom. Buck's second premise is "that it can be a valuable exercise to channel this extracurricular writing into a teachable moment, particularly one that asks students to consider how digital practices may alter conceptions of audience."

With this second premise comes the basis of crafting a pedagogical approach to teaching FYC that takes social media into account. One of the benefits of this approach stems simply from a relevance factor. Several conventional writing activities (such as free writing, invention, or peer review) used in FYC courses, though reliable, have come to be very transparent in terms of their learning outcomes. Though this initially sounds like a positive aspect of teaching, there is a trait students possess in today's FYC classrooms that brings them to question activities that were previously carried out without any sort of protest. In other words, if a student can sense the goal of a menial activity, they can on occasion believe they have "outsmarted" the activity, and will thus not be completely engaged. Of course, this is certainly not true of every student, but if there are even a few in a classroom that feel this way, then the activity loses some of its effectiveness.

Learning to craft teachable moments out of students' daily interactions with social media creates a population of students that learn to question why they do certain things, but also allows them to tie these exercises they already subconsciously carry out in their own routines to their own writing in other contexts. In particular, there are numerous audience-focused exercises that students can perform that help them contextualize their already-existent knowledge about who

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Comment [6]: I'm not sure exactly how this impacts her particular pedagogy.

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Comment [7]: I'm not sure I fully understand this "outsmarting"—how does it manifest? Why is transparency negative in these cases?

they think will be reading what they post, how many “likes” they can get out of the post, and other factors that contribute to the rhetorical situation of a digital platform. Buck mentions, “Talking with students about which sites they use, whether or not they are public or private (and why), and what makes something ‘Facebook-worthy’ versus ‘Twitter-worthy’ could generate valuable conversation about the kinds of rhetorical choices they make when simply deciding which app to open on their iPhones.” Again, these are decisions students are already making subconsciously, and these rhetorical choices can be made transparent simply by causing them to think about the differences in the things they post and the goals they have for each post.

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Comment [8]: Great paragraph!

It is also important to acknowledge that, most of the time, students’ posts on social media are geared toward accumulating as many “likes” as possible. In a sense, this is a social game that students play on these platforms that helps them begin to understand what their friends prefer to read and what can go unnoticed. Additional research in this area has proven that a “like” on any social outlet triggers a dopamine high, which has its benefits and downsides (Soat). There is an undeniably real incentive for students to craft posts on their own social media that allow them to receive “likes” in order to feel better about themselves; equally important in this context is the need to fit in, particularly in a society where the amount of “likes” one gets tends to dictate status on social ladders in terms of popularity, likability, and general acceptance. This problematic approach to social media and societal pressures can lead to more teachable moments for students simply by helping them to think and interact critically with the texts they are consuming on these platforms.

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Comment [9]: Which area?

In “Developing Critical Literacy and Critical Thinking through Facebook,” David T. Coad references Stuart E. Selber’s concept of “critical literacy” as being a fundamental concept students in FYC courses should be exposed to. Here, Coad emphasizes the importance of

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Comment [10]: Great paragraph! What could this look like in the classroom?

teaching students to question the grand narratives that involve technology and to become “empowered knowledge workers.” To apply it to his own classroom, Coad states, “One way to build students’ critical literacy and encourage them to question the design of technologies is to ask them to consider the humans behind the technology, how this human presence changes the user experience on Facebook, and how students choose to interact with these human desires behind the scenes.” Helping students understand the fact that most people are driven by a need for attention and affirmation on social media platforms can aid them in questioning information that is presented before them as well as how to respectfully interact with someone else’s ideas or comments on a platform like Facebook.

One of the challenges of social media in general is that there are no written rules or guidelines that dictate how one should or must behave—other than Community Guidelines and Terms of Use, which are decided on more of a legal basis than a personal one. In a study conducted by Ann N. Amicucci, a student’s Facebook interactions are observed in terms of how they construct their online **persona**. Amicucci aptly notes in her discussion of findings that “Unlike in a classroom, where writing conventions are made explicit, the world of JJ’s Facebook activity has not come with any sort of teacher or guidelines, yet she has determined how to interact with and participate in this Discourse in ways she deems successful” (46). Not only is it necessary to acknowledge that there are no written rules or teachable conduct for social media, but we must also encourage students to think about these posts in the context of a larger discourse, one which is new and evolving within **itself**.

Social media as a whole is a fascinating entity and object of scholarship. Though there are no end to the amount of approaches that can be taken in terms of employing social media in the FYC classroom, there is a sense that we must teach students how to interact with social

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Comment [11]: Ooh! I need to check out this article for my own paper.

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Comment [12]: I like where this is going – could you expand on this paragraph?

media as a text responsibly. Not only that, but the skills students glean when posting to social media must be harnessed and brought to light in much the same way as skills gamers use to traverse virtual environments in that sense are also being brought to light. Social media brings about lessons of audience more effectively, perhaps, than a FYC classroom can do on its own; thus, helping students to think intentionally about how they make these rhetorical choices can prove beneficial in the context of composition. Furthermore, instilling in students the value of critical thinking and how to adequately evaluate information that is presented to them will lead to a more educated and thoughtful population that can create more accountability for the information that is spread in their own social spheres, an action that would ideally be contagious from that point. Optimistically speaking, educating students on rhetorical choices in their social media posts as well as how to critically consume information would create a society that would, as a whole, be more appreciative of truth and less focused on agreeing with their own echo chambers that are created algorithmically by Facebook. Regardless, we stand to gain much and lose little from using social media as an aid in FYC courses.

Really nice work, Daniel. I'm doing some of this work for my own project, so I'm on board! I agree that you need a bit more synthesis, particularly in regards to concrete application. I think that is where you can create some new knowledge/application instead of just simply recounting what others have said. Also, putting them in conversation with each other would be interesting – showing the connections between them and how they inform each other. Lastly, your conclusion is a bit broad (mine always are on early drafts too) – I think some would say that teaching social media means students aren't learning academic genres. How would you respond to them? Additionally, how will you try to ensure that they transfer these skills to their personal

life and the learning doesn't just stop when they finish the class? How do you see this affecting society as a whole – or is it just enough to impact a few students? Overall, really good stuff here!
- sk

Author's note: In this essay, I felt I was able to transition between ideas fairly well, though sometimes it felt a bit jumpy in terms of how quickly I moved between them. I think the integration of external material balanced with my own ideas and synthesizing information fairly well. I will be trying to add more content to my last body paragraph, and I left myself some room to work with for more material, so I am open to suggestions. I think one thing I will be adding is a more concrete application of how I would like to integrate social media into my own teaching, since most of what I covered was fairly theoretical. Firstly, I'd love feedback on the flow of the paper overall (cliché, I realize). I am not sure if what I am trying to convey makes sense or if it stays coherent throughout the paper, which I think I'll have a clearer picture of once I come back to this draft in a day or two. Other than that, if you can think of any other reading I should do for the paper or anything else you think is missing that would add to the substance of the paper itself, I would love suggestions! This is a new topic for me and I haven't done much research in pedagogy, so I am shamefully unfamiliar with a lot of scholarship in the area.

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