Intergenerational Knowledge, Social Media, and the Composition Community: Insights and Inquiries

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Social media has been a cornerstone of my professional life since before I formally entered my doctoral studies, but I never rushed to sign up for new platforms. I didn't use Facebook until 2007, when I joined because a friend encouraged me to. I took even longer to create a Twitter account; in March 2016, I joined, once again because a professional peer highlighted its networking and informal professional development uses. I still maintain both accounts: Twitter as a mostly professional online space, Facebook as a hybrid space showing professional and personal interests. During my doctoral studies, my interest in social media deepened: such media became something I both researched and practiced in multiple contexts and capacities. In considering where we are in terms of intergenerational exchange, I want to use social media as a lens to read some of composition's current fieldwide issues (as well as how those concerns might be intergenerational) by exploring four insights. I hope that, in doing so, we begin to determine what knowledge and pedagogies we hope to carry forward about these media and their place in the composition classroom.

Insight 1: Interest in and Perceptions of Social Media are Generational

Social media is commonly—but not always—an interest of younger generations. We are rapidly approaching a time when the eighteen-year-olds in our classrooms will be younger than Facebook's earliest iteration. These individuals will enter our classrooms having grown up with digital renditions of social media, and their experiences with such media will likely be different than our own. They may even have parents who were avid social media users when platforms like Facebook and MySpace first emerged.

Interest in social media doesn't develop purely because such platforms exist; it instead emerges from what these platforms can do. My own experiences with Facebook and Twitter reflect this point: I initially didn't see a use for Facebook or Twitter, but my perceptions changed when I learned both could serve what I considered meaningful purposes. I adopted Twitter, specifically for reasons similar to those David Coad identifies in his study of graduate student Twitter use at a writing conference: not at the encouragement of instructors, but because of peers. Likewise, my decision to use Twitter in the classroom emerged from interactions with outgoing graduate students. My peers played a large role, but so did my instructors, who provided me with opportunities to explore my research interests related to social media.

I've had interactions with individuals from previous generations outside of academia who claim social media is "ruining writing." I suspect that, were my peers of a similar generational mindset, my interests and perceptions would be much different. One thing we should work to carry forward is how to gauge interest in and perceptions of social media in the classroom.

Insight 2: Differences in Social Media Knowledge and Literacies are Generational

Intersecting with intergenerational interests and perceptions are knowledge and literacy differences regarding social media, a fact which applies to both students and instructors of writing.

As a university student fresh out of high school, I wrote traditional MLA papers with no chance for revision for both of my composition classes back in 2005. In my first semester of teaching composition, over a decade after taking my university's first year writing sequence, my major assignments looked very different, and I used social media for low-stakes purposes. In doing so, I assumed most of my students were interested in—or at least familiar with—social media. And most were, but they understood social media differently than I did. Similarly, Heather Fielding implemented Twitter to increase classroom engagement but found that some students were not familiar enough with Twitter to implement it effectively (110). Moving forward, we should work to preserve the knowledge that not all incoming students are as familiar with social media as we might first assume.

Likewise, we cannot assume all incoming graduate students or composition instructors will be literate in these technologies (even if they are familiar with them), either due to limited personal use or because they use such platforms purely for personal reasons. Stephanie Vie encourages instructors to include technologies familiar to students, including blogs and social networking sites, but she also underscores a need for instructors to familiarize themselves with these technologies before their implementation (10). Graduate students, much like undergraduate students, may be from different social generations and backgrounds. Their knowledge and perceptions of social media, as well as their literacies, may be radically different than what we assume.

Insight 3: Social Media Contexts Vary, but Generational Differences may Obscure such Differences

My own social media use started as purely personal. In fact, looking back at my experiences with teaching first year writing, I suspect many of my students had limited views of how social media could function as writing. It's possible that they understood personal and professional purposes, but their understanding of such implementations varied. Further, they were largely

unfamiliar with using social media in an academic context to portray their identities as first year writing and/or university students.

In many cases, composition scholars frame social media in fairly intergenerational terms: our pedagogies, frequently centered around a single platform, serve as new means with which to carry forward old(er) concepts central to the composition classroom and to help students understand these concepts. As several examples, Elisabeth Buck discusses audience awareness and Facebook or MySpace profiles, Lindsay Sabatino describes teaching visual cues with the Facebook game *Mafia Wars*, and Samuel Head argues that because of how much text exists on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, "these sites can be used as a bridge to rhetorical analysis, particularly with audience awareness and appeal" (28).

The students in our classrooms, however, may not automatically understand the links between these contexts, a point worth remembering. Ryan Shepherd exemplifies this issue through a survey of 474 students in which he found that many considered Facebook writing as informal and, therefore, did not see the connection between social media and first-year composition (90-92). As teachers, we should work to make these connections and disconnections between contexts clearer for incoming students who may not understand how they utilize concepts taught in the composition classroom—audience awareness and the rhetorical situation, for instance—relative to social media.

I pose the same consideration for graduate students and teachers, as they may need to understand how to use social media in varying capacities: as a networking tool (Coad) and by choice as part of their first year writing pedagogy (Vie).

Insight 4: Pedagogies for Teaching Social Media Should be Specific but Adaptable

The question of how to teach composition effectively has been an ongoing theme in our discipline for as long as its existence. In the first volume of *The English Journal* in 1912, Edwin M. Hopkins questioned whether good teaching of composition was possible in then-current conditions. His answer was simple: "No" (8).

Social media has offered us new ways to teach students and has, as my examples highlight, served as texts for analysis (Buck) and as writing itself (Fielding). Composition scholars like Pamela Takayoshi and Stacey Pigg both provide research toward specific pedagogies for newer forms of writing, including social media. To continue to develop such pedagogies, we might look backward at the knowledge we have inherited from previous generations of composition teachers and scholars and determine how we carry it forward. One intergenerational approach, as I have suggested, is to integrate social media with

existing concepts and frameworks to help students understand the differences between genres and processes. Buck used Facebook and MySpace to teach students about audience, for instance, by asking them to complete tasks that included analyzing their own—or a family member's—social media profiles.

A cautionary addendum is in order: as a field, we tend to engage in single-platform studies of social media. However, while pedagogies might emerge out of single platforms, they should be adaptable enough to be transferred to others, if only because social media changes so quickly. MySpace and *Mafia Wars* are both good examples of social media, or elements of it, that have faded from use or that have been discontinued. By attending to specific pedagogies applicable to different platforms, we can better support students and teachers with different backgrounds and levels of interest in social media. Further, we can begin to help students better connect social media contexts and make the most of their learning.

Conclusion: Where Are We Going?

Social media has taken a back seat since I entered my tenure-track position, partly because I'm cognizant that our largely nontraditional student body may have limited interest in using it. It is still very much present as an option in my two current writing classrooms, technical writing and a junior-level course on writing as advocacy, but mostly as an optional form of writing or as a form of writing that we study. I'm still invested in social media research and practice, and I'm also interested to see what new pedagogies emerge as the students we teach, and social media platforms we use, continue to change.

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