FB in FYC: Facebook Use Among First-Year Composition Students

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Abstract

This article presents results of a survey of 474 first-year composition students about their Facebook use. Findings suggest that students do not see Facebook and first-year composition as being related. However, students seem to enact certain skills from first-year composition on Facebook, such as audience awareness, awareness of rhetorical situation, invention, and even process writing. Other findings include that students who like writing or thought they were good writers were more likely to see a connection between Facebook and first-year composition, that students were much more likely to use privacy settings than previous research suggests, and that there was a strong correlation between how often students perceived certain groups viewing their content on Facebook and how often they had that group in mind when posting. These implications suggest that making students aware of these practices on Facebook may make it easier for students to more clearly see connections between composing practices on Facebook and in first-year composition.

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Many instructors in composition have expressed interest in Facebook and other social network sites (SNSs) in both journals related to composition and conferences devoted to the subject (Vie, 2008; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Balzhiser et al., 2011; Reid, 2011; Buck, 2012). However, there has not been a study systematically exploring how students perceive composing practices on SNSs. In order to have a more grounded approach to the use of SNSs in the composition classroom, it is necessary to look more practically and realistically at how SNSs are used by composition students and how this intersects with the work being done in FYC. We as composition instructors need to take a hard look at where we are before we begin to look at where we can go.

To this end, it is necessary to explore the following questions: Do FYC students see a connection between their SNS use and writing done in the composition classroom? What literacy practices are FYC students actually taking part in on SNSs? In what ways do students enact ideas taught in the FYC classroom in their SNS use?

In order to answer these questions, I have developed a survey of first-year composition students about their use of the most widely used SNS today: Facebook. Facebook had more than "a billion monthly active users as of December 2012" (Facebook, 2013), making it by far the largest SNS in use today. According to Maeve Duggan and Joanna Brenner (2013), 67% of internet users use Facebook and 86% of internet users aged 18–29 have a profile. Facebook is particularly popular among college students, with some estimates that as high as 99% have a profile (Junco, 2012).

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The survey, which was completed by 474 students from various institutions across the United States, explores students' attitudes toward writing, their activities on Facebook, and the intersections that students see between Facebook and FYC. The survey results suggest that students are not likely to see Facebook as related to FYC, but they are enacting several skills commonly associated with composition classes in their Facebook use, such as audience awareness, awareness of the rhetorical situation, invention, and process writing. Facebook may prove to be a very useful tool in demonstrating applications of skills typically learned in first-year composition classes to other writing contexts.

1. Review of literature

There has been a great deal of research exploring Facebook usage among university students, including several studies specifically aimed at linking Facebook and education. A small number of studies have even linked Facebook or SNS use to composition, although these studies tended to approach the subject from a pedagogical and often somewhat anecdotal standpoint, exploring composition classroom practices using SNS but not really gathering data about how SNSs are used (Fife, 2010; Balzhiser et al., 2011). These studies help to show the value of Facebook as a demonstration of a composing space.

1.1. Facebook and education

There is a wealth of literature outside of composition studies that proves relevant to this study. These studies primarily focus on answering questions about how and why university students tend to use SNSs. This research is largely situated in the fields of either communication or education. Most of the current literature related to SNSs begins with danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison's (2007) study in which social network sites were defined. The definitions provided in this study serve as a starting point for all research to come after. The discussion of SNSs continues into Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe's (2007) discussion of social capital on Facebook. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2011) continued this exploration of social capital. In both of their studies, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe explored university students' SNS practices but focused on the social aspects and not the writing taking place on the sites. These studies demonstrate the social benefit of Facebook to university students. Such a benefit may help to explain why students engage in certain literacy practices on Facebook. Many other studies also have dealt with university students but have tended to focus on identity and/or privacy. For example, Stuart Boon and Christine Sinclair (2009) explored identity in relation to engagement in the classroom and potential pitfalls that come with Facebook use, such as "difficulties in engagement, the effects on identity, an emphasis on superficial issues, lack of coherence, and problems with authenticity and trust" (p. 99). Joy Peluchette and Katherine Karl (2010) explored identity in a very different way. They explored students' intended images on Facebook and methods students use to project identity. Peluchette and Katherine's study informed many of the questions used to produce this study. Ethan A. Kolek and Daniel Saunders (2008) primarily looked at what students choose to disclose on Facebook and the implications this information may have. Brock Read (2006) similarly looked at online disclosure and privacy, and his study was one of the earliest scholarly articles to explicitly mention Facebook use in relation to college students. Identity and privacy are popular themes in relation to SNSs and, certainly, those themes have influenced this study. None of these articles, however, mentions writing or composition directly— instead focusing on Facebook use more generally—nor do any of them explore student perceptions of Facebook.

Khe Foon Hew (2011) gave a useful overview of research done on Facebook as it connects to education. He explored several studies dealing with university students, education, and Facebook. He found that the studies generally deal with friending, privacy, and disclosure, and found that "Facebook thus far has very little educational use" (p. 662). None of the studies mentioned in Hew's overview related directly to composition.

M.D. Roblyer, Michelle McDaniel, Marsena Webb, James Herman, and James Vince Witty (2010) also looked into uses of Facebook by university students and faculty. Their study, however, focused mostly on differences between faculty and student use and preferred modes of communication. Reynol Junco (2012) looked at student use as well and related it to engagement with classroom and university activities. His study has some overlap with the data presented in this article. The most notable connection is in relation to student Facebook use as it relates to engagement in the classroom. However, the primary focus of his article was on student outcomes in general, and no mention was made of composition (or any other specific class or class activity) in particular.