Teaching grounded audiences: Burke's identification in Facebook and composition

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Abstract

More college students than ever are participating in social networking sites such as Facebook and are engaged in composing messages to their virtual audience through these sites. Composition scholars have continued to stress the potential these sites have in their use in composition and analysis. Many have responded to this call in expanding the pedagogy about Facebook's uses in composition, but more research is needed regarding the theory of "transfer" to use students' previous experience and prior knowledge with audience in social media to help them learn audience awareness in academic writing. Therefore, because Facebook and other social media sites demonstrate so much user generated text that students are familiar with, students can transfer their prior knowledge with audience awareness and appeal on social media to formal and academic writing. Facebook users consciously or unconsciously appeal to a specific audience, their friends. Rhetorician Kenneth Burke described this interaction as *identification.* He described how individuals will persuade their audience by "identifying" with them in certain ways. I claim Facebook can be used in composition to accomplish "high road" transfer with what students already know about friends and user profiles to teach them about audience awareness and appeal through Burke's identification theory. By implementing strategies of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical identification, students can better understand, analyze, and appeal to their potential audiences in both their social networking, in their academic writing, and in their everyday communication.
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Perhaps the reason I study social media is because of the inordinate amount of time I end up spending on Facebook browsing my news feed or connecting with friends. But I notice that Facebook seems to cultivate its users in rhetorical practices as they maneuver in it, expanding its ability to be mined for pedagogical applications. I see social media's potential in pedagogy growing with the wide expansion of social networks. Facebook itself has "announced that by the end of 2011 there had been 100 billion friend connections, and in recent months users had been registering 2.7 billion Likes and Comments per day" ("Facebook," 2014, Description, para. 10). To me, these daily connections constitute the rhetoric and composition, multimodal or textual, that users are exercising to very real audiences. Composition scholars have called for more focus on this digital rhetoric to take place in order utilize the potential found within this digital communication (Lanham, 1995; Faigley, 1997; Selfe, 1999; Wysocki, Johnson-Eiola, Selfe, & Sirc, 2004; Hawisher &

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Selfe, 2004; Clark, 2010; Maranto & Barton, 2010). Kathleen Yancey (2009), a past president of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), asserted, "We can and should respond to these new composings and new sites of composings with new energy and a new composing agenda" (p. 7). There is a need to research the potential this online community has of encouraging the transfer of rhetorical principles within Facebook using students. These students routinely compose messages to and identify with specific audiences. Facebook's compositional and rhetorical content can open doors for new methods of writing instruction and new ways to integrate new media in the classroom.

Specifically, research into the transfer of rhetorical concepts within Facebook to academic writing still needs development. Many scholars, such as Deborah Balzhiser et al. (2011), David Coad (2013), Jane Fife (2010), Courtney Patrick (2013), Jennifer Swartz (2013), Lindsay Sabatino (2014), and Stephanie Vie (2009) as well as others, have responded to this call in expanding the pedagogy about Facebook's uses in composition. Within the academic journals *Computers and Composition, Kairos, Computers and Composition Online*, and *Pedagogy*, as well as others, there have been articles on teaching persona creation, rhetorical analysis, and critical thinking in the composition class. Nevertheless, the pedagogy of transfer with students' previous experience and prior knowledge of audience in social media requires more scholarly analysis. Many students already have much transferable experience with rhetorical interaction on Facebook. This "transfer" is essential within pedagogical practices. The National Research Council's volume of *How People Learn: Mind, Brain, Experience, and School* (2000) argued that all "new learning involves transfer based on previous learning" (Bransford, Pellegrino, & Donovan, p. 53). Specific ways to enact transfer sometimes need detailed praxis. Perkins and Salomon (1992), for example, explained that dynamic "high road" transfer can occur when students abstract principles and skills from one context and apply them to another (p. 25). Such a pedagogy would enable composition students to utilize the principles they are practicing on Facebook in other communication scenarios. This paper establishes a rhetorical theory as a framework for transferring students' audience awareness and appeal from Facebook to academic discourse. With this theoretical foundation, Perkins and Salomon's "high road" transfer can enable more students to apply Facebook's skills to composition.

I argue that because Facebook and other social media sites demonstrate so much user generated text and communication that students are familiar with, these sites can be used as a bridge to rhetorical analysis, particularly with audience awareness and appeal. Recent research has demonstrated the various and detailed kinds rhetorical practices that Facebook users engage in (Grosseck, Bran, & Tiru, 2011). Facebook users consciously or unconsciously appeal to various specific audiences, including their friends. Lindsay Sabatino (2014) has asserted that "These digitally literate people quickly move between various mediums knowing how to present different information through these mediums to best reach their desired audiences" (para. 1).

Kenneth Burke described this interaction as *identification*. He explained how individuals will persuade and connect to their audience by "identifying" with them in certain ways; as a result, his theory is of particular relevance among networking Facebook users. I claim that Facebook can be used in teaching composition to transfer what students know about friends and user profiles to teach them about audience awareness and appeal through Burke's identification theory. By identifying Burke's identification within their own social media uses, students will be able to apply those principles within their academic writing.

By implementing strategies of Kenneth Burke's rhetorical identification, students can better understand, analyze, and appeal to their potential audiences in both their social networking, in their academic writing, and in their everyday communication. I will discuss the rationale behind using Facebook as a rhetorical platform, demonstrate the digital imperative, and explain how Facebook can transfer audience awareness through Burke's identification theory to composition, giving some practical classroom activities.

1. Description and rationale: Facebook as an integral part of the digital imperative

1.1. The digital imperative

While composition and computer scholars (Lanham, 1995; Faigley, 1997; Selfe, 1999; Wysocki et al., 2004, Hawisher & Selfe, 2004; Yancey, 2009; Clark, 2010; Maranto & Barton, 2010) have long called for greater study to take place within digital rhetoric, the inclusion of transfer theory and identification creates new pedagogical methods using these computer mediated spaces for teaching students writing and rhetoric. Citing this lack of pedagogical study within computers and composition literature, Selfe (1999) argued, "We... need additional research on how various technologies influence literacy values and practices and research on how teachers might better use technologies