Rhetorical Choices in Facebook Discourse: Constructing Voice and Persona

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Abstract

This study addresses the need for attention to conflicts surrounding voice in composition studies in conjunction with recent research demonstrating the rhetorically complex array of writing moves in which social network users participate. Together, these areas of inquiry present a need for research into social network users' rhetorical awareness of writing practices. The article presents a study of one first-year college student's Facebook activity. I analyze Facebook screenshots and interview data to describe the participant's construction of voice in writing and of a persona on the social network site. Findings reveal that the participant has gained literacy in Facebook as a secondary Discourse as evidenced by her rhetorical awareness in Facebook activity. The participant demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of rhetorical functions within Facebook by hiding her personal opinion, crafting a persona characterized by non-mainstream interests, and paying attention to readers' behavior to distribute content they found interesting at times they were most likely to engage with it. I conclude the article by discussing applications for the first-year composition classroom that can be drawn from the study findings and from students' existing writing practices on social network sites.
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A social network participant engages in an array of complex rhetorical moves to construct a persona aimed at persuading others that he or she is a literate participant in a given digital context. On Facebook, cumulative rhetorical choices made through status updates, photographs, linked content, and other methods of site engagement serve as a participant's attempts to demonstrate his or her position as an insider in Facebook Discourse (Gee, 2015). Such a participant also makes choices in written text that forward a certain writing voice, one of many aspects of a social network persona. This range of rhetorical activity on social network sites offers us rich material for teaching students how to present themselves effectively in writing for academic purposes. Here, I use one college student's construction of a persona and writing voice on Facebook to illustrate valuable ways to teach students to gain awareness of and reflect critically upon their construction of persona and voice in everyday writing practices and the ways they can transfer these rhetorical constructions to academic writing.

In order to explore persona and voice within a social network context, we must first consider how these rhetorical concepts have been framed within composition and rhetoric literature. Peter Elbow's seminal work on the concept of voice along with Roger D. Cherry's and Roz Ivanič's explanations of persona offer ways for us to examine voice and persona within the literacy activity of social networks. Peter Elbow (1994) has articulated five separate qualities of voice in writing, one of which, the *resonant voice or presence,* we often conflate with authenticity or some sense of the

writer's "real" self. Elbow called this quality "the swamp" (p. 11), explaining that because of readers' impulse to equate a sense of a writer in a text with the writer's actual self and, further, to make the faulty assumption that any individual has an actual self to begin with, critics have disparaged scholarly discussions of voice as uncritical or uninformed. Although studying voice is no longer popular in composition studies, Peter Elbow (2007) has argued that the subject is still worth attention because teachers and students talk about voice often in regards to students' development as writers.

Within Elbow's definition of the concept, one voice quality warrants particular attention in the field of computers and composition: the *dramatic voice,* what Elbow called the "character or implied author in a text" (1994, p. 1). Dramatic voice is a feature of writing complicated by the complex discourse spaces of social network sites, where the affordances of multimodal composing and the complexities of networked publics mean we find writers constructing selves through both authored and replicated visual, spoken, and alphabetic text in the face of changing and unknowable audiences (boyd, 2007). A writer/composer operating in a social network has a challenging task placed before him or her: To be persuasive, he or she must construct a writing voice whose dramatic aspects suggest the exact character the writer hopes to convey and also construct a persona enacting a role to present a certain version of him or herself to the networked publics viewing the individual's composing activity.

Through the construction of a writing voice on a social network site, a writer informs his or her construction of a persona in this digital context, and it is the writer's dramatic voice in particular that contributes to the ways such a persona is configured. Elbow's concept of dramatic voice concerns the characteristics of a writer we discern through textual features and aligns with Aristotle's *ethos,* or a speaker's construction of a character that enhances reception of an argument by demonstrating the speaker's good sense, good moral character, and goodwill toward audience members (Aristotle, 2004; Elbow, 1994).[1] While ethos and the concept of *persona* often bleed together into one discussion, Roger D. Cherry (1988) distinguished between the two, arguing that persona and the literary tradition of analyzing its construction concern the role(s) an author adopts in sending a particular message. Roz Ivanič (1998) furthered Cherry's distinction by explaining that ethos concerns personal characteristics we associate with a writer based on the text, such as "being warm, loving, caring, sincere, reliable, astute," while persona concerns the role a writer creates for him or herself in a text, such as "student of philosophy, a Black activist, an apprentice social worker" (p. 90). An author's construction of a writing voice and a persona in a single, stand-alone text is complex rhetorical work to begin with. This work becomes far more complex in the networked publics of sites such as Facebook (boyd, 2007). The fact that many of us as scholars along with many of our students are engaged in social network literacies affords us a wealth of resources in drawing on social network rhetorical practices to inform how we teach students to enact rhetorical moves in the construction of voice and persona in academic writing.

In this article, I present a study of one first-year college student's Facebook activity to demonstrate how such social network practice represents literacy in a specific Discourse (Gee, 2015) and to illustrate the implications that Facebook literacy holds for how we teach students to transfer rhetorical awareness from their non-academic digital writing practices to the first-year composition classroom. Facebook activity produced by this student, JJ, highlights the complexities at play in a writer's construction of voice and persona on a social network site. In showcasing her Facebook activity, I demonstrate how JJ's awareness and purposeful construction of a Facebook persona is indicative of her literacy in Facebook Discourse. I draw on Ivanič's (1998) theory of identity in writing to analyze how JJ constructs a discoursal self through Facebook writing and use James Paul Gee's (2015) definition of literacy to analyze her mastery of participation in the social network site as a secondary Discourse. Additionally, I outline the implications that JJ's Facebook use holds for the ways we teach students to construct themselves as writers within academic discourses. This student's use of Facebook and findings in related studies (Buck, 2012; McLean, 2010; Takayoshi, 2015; Yi & Hirvela, 2010) have shown us secondary and post-secondary students who are highly aware of the rhetorical choices they make on social network sites. As Amber Buck argued, social network participation represents "rich literate activity" (p. 35), and JJ's is no exception. Her attention to persona on Facebook highlights the depth of her rhetorical awareness in this context and can offer valuable guidance for the ways we teach students to reflect critically on their rhetorical abilities in writing. JJ's use of Facebook evidences her literacy in this communicative mode through her enactment of Facebook

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[1] In his discussion of the five qualities contained in a writer's voice, Elbow (1994) argued that finely tuned dramatic voice alone cannot make a text rhetorically successful. Just as Aristotle (2004) argued that a speaker's construction of credibility is more likely to persuade successfully if the speaker him or herself is in fact already an individual with good moral character, Elbow wrote that "persuasiveness often comes from *resonant voice or communicated presence* as often as it comes from merely dramatic voice or implied author. . . . If *ethos* is nothing *but* implied author, it loses all power of persuasion" (p. 18).