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The Writing Is on the Screen

Social Networking Is Here to Stay

Picture intermission at a Broadway show. The curtain has just come down after a rousing end-of-Act-One number. The lights are coming up. Suddenly, almost in unison, many people in the audience reach in their pockets or purses and flip open cell phones. Immediately, there is the sound in the air of various versions of the burning questions that seem to be on everyone's mind: "Where are you?" or "What are you doing?"

Picture afterschool at an elementary school somewhere in the Midwest. The kids are racing for their book bags and coats. As they make their way out of the building, a metamorphosis occurs as they whip out cell phones, Blackberries, iPods, and even laptops. The kids are getting back in touch with the world after hours of forced disconnect.

Picture a woman giving birth. She is in the last stages of labor and surrounded by medical staff and a loving husband who winces at her occasional cries. Periodically, between contractions, she reaches for her cell phone and posts a message to Twitter, providing her followers an account of the debut of her new son.

Variations of these pictures are taking place throughout the world at an astounding pace. One could make the argument that never before have we been more connected. The Internet has always been interactive in nature, but this latest iteration of the Internet (known as "Web 2.0") has

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featured an intensified level of what has come to be called “social networking.” This kind of community building across interest groups, demographics, and nationalities has transformed the way we connect with strangers, loved ones, friends, colleagues, and even ourselves.

But has it transformed the way we “do” school? Attempting to answer this question is the goal of this book. How are teachers and students incorporating these new literacies that add an intensified level of social networking into their classrooms? What happens when our classrooms become as big as the world?

TERMINOLOGY AND TRENDS

What exactly do I mean by “new literacies” and “social networking”? Ah, there is the rub. We have multiple terms for these multiple literacies, and while everyone seems to know what we’re talking about, no one seems to be able to agree upon what to call it. Whatever we call these new ways of communicating (new literacies, multiliteracies, ICT, media literacy, digital literacies, or multimodalities, to name a few terms being used currently), it’s clear that we are experiencing a vast transformation of the way we “read” and “write,” and a broadening of the way we conceptualize “literacy.” As Gunther Kress (2003) has described, we are going from a page-based society to a screen-based society—a great deal of the reading and writing we do today is on a computer screen, and the texts we are accessing there include not only print communication but also elements of graphic design, video, sound, visual art, and even advertising (thus making them “multimodal”). For purposes of clarity in this book, the terms “new literacies” and “new media” will be used interchangeably to suggest not only the multimodality of today’s communication forms but also the interactivity that is embedded in them—these are essentially screen-based literacies.

social networking

When I use the term *social networking* in this book, I will intend it to mean the kind of communication that takes place online using some kind of platform (Web site) such as Facebook, Twitter, or Ning in which people can place messages and connect with others who are on the Web site. These platforms usually require each participant to publish a “profile” that usually includes a picture of the participant as well as any personal details the participant wants to share, thus forming an online identity that can be wholly created by the participant. The “networking” part of social networking comes from the fact that these platforms usually involve some kind of grouping or categorization system so that we all become participants in a kind of “Kevin Bacon Game,” connecting to many various “friends” and “followers” in different ways and forming networks that range in size and scope from the very small and personal to the vast, international, and professional.

These new media often allow for a great deal of interactivity (social networking); for instance, readers are able to shape a text as it is collaboratively written (even as they are simultaneously instant messaging 10 of their friends and commenting on Twitter or Facebook as to how things are going). According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008), 62% of Americans are

part of a wireless, mobile population that participates in digital activities away from home or work. Teens are creating and sharing material on the Internet in greater numbers, with 28% of online teens maintaining their own blogs. . . . Virtually, all American teens play computer, console, or cell phone games and . . . the gaming experience is rich and varied, with a significant amount of social interaction and potential for civic engagement. (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008)

People are tethering themselves to each other, crisscrossing the Web as they Twitter everything from the mundane to the sublime.

Twitter

Twitter is an online social network that asks participants to update their “followers” as to what they are doing in fewer than 140 characters. Some “twits” choose to “tweet” many times a day to hundreds, sometimes thousands, of followers.

SELECTED TWITTER QUOTES, 2008

- I can feel my pulse through my eye.
- What a disappointing poptart.
- I love the smell of pineapple juice.
- Just finished mowing my lawn . . . half the clippings seem to have made it into my shoes or gotten in my nose.
- Debating whether i should go to the pool today or relax in air conditioning . . . what do you think?
- 2 days till i leave for africa; 1000 things to do; new school head etc. all want mtngs; am hit with worst gastro illness in memory! blah
- Tearing myself away from the computer for a bit to eat a late dinner and change out of work clothes.
- Trying to decide whether to go grocery shopping or bowling or both.
- So now that I'm using it, let me be the 400th to confirm that yes, Google apps run very fast in Chrome.
- Okay, I need to calm down. I've only been using this thing for like 20 minutes, but I'm ready to scream I like it so much.
- Baby is head down! Starting to induce.

Many of us are familiar with MySpace and Facebook—popular social networking platforms on which people post their pictures and connect with friends as well as strangers. But it also seems that most major Web sites today have some kind of sharing function, whether it's "Listmania" on Amazon, in which people make lists of book titles for different categories, or forums for discussion on YouTube, Blockbuster, Ustream, and the Internet Movie Database; on the latter, you can find discussions on everything from whether a certain actor is going bald to whether the ending of a certain film makes sense. All these spaces allow for some community to form, even if for only a few seconds. One could make the argument that today's kids are more connected to other people on a second-by-second basis than they have been at any other time in our history. These ties that bind are getting broader and more far-reaching.

The kids are definitely not alone. But we want to know whom they're not alone with—it's fine to be connected as long as they're not connecting to people who mean them harm. This fear factor may be a major reason why the social networking aspects of Web 2.0 haven't infiltrated their way into today's classroom and why they remain mainly afterschool activities (except in some of the classrooms in this book). The children are increasingly leaving our watchful care without even leaving home. They are "meeting" and talking with people whom they will probably never meet face-to-face. This is a frightening idea to educators and many adults.

THE MYTH OF A "SAFE" ADOLESCENCE

Ironically, the attempt to achieve a protected childhood is a relatively recent development. It wasn't too long ago that children took an active part in the adult world from a very young age. Before the onset of the construct of "adolescence," even into the late 1800s, "the young were often left to fend for themselves. There was very little schooling, endemic child labor, and puberty marked the moment when the fight for survival began in earnest" (Savage, 2007, p. 10). Children were put to work early not only in so-called legitimate work as factory work and agriculture but also in more questionable lines of work such as show business and even criminal pursuits such as theft and prostitution (Lahr, 1969/2000; Mintz, 2004).

The very first Puritan settlers of North America in the 1600s felt that childhood was at best a time to prepare children for death by making sure they had salvation; "children were adults in training who needed to be prepared for salvation and inducted into the world of work as early as possible" (Mintz, 2004, p. 10). Children were even shown corpses and executions so that they would have a heightened sensitivity to the reality of their own mortality; the Puritan childhood was so brutal that some children who were abducted by Native Americans preferred to stay with their captors once they were rescued (Mintz, 2004).

In the late 1800s, the writer and photographer Jacob Riis and other writers began to document the difficult lives that so many children lived; before long, there came an attempt to standardize what the typical adolescence should look like—this new “intermediate state that as yet had no name” (Savage, 2007, p. 13). The trend became one of an idealized, sanitary childhood, one in which even play was moderated, and children had to be protected from having bad lunchroom manners and driving too fast on prom night (Smith, 1999). Those in non-Western societies continued to see children as competent at a much earlier age than did those in Western societies, allowing play to proceed without formal supervision. For example, children in Western societies were increasingly subjected to a more structured, scripted childhood and adolescence (Chudacoff, 2007). Currently, it is common to hear reports of “helicopter parents,” who talk with their children on the phone several times a day, hovering over their daily lives well into early adulthood. We have had several instances recently, at the university where I teach, of parents showing up for advising appointments with their children who are now graduate students!

To borrow a media phrase from the 1960s, “We’ve come a long way, baby!” since the 1800s. Or have we really? We may have an assumption that childhood is safer now than in those prescript days, but of course, that assumes everyone is following the script. Fast-forward to the beginning of the 21st century, and we see statistics that make it a stretch to believe that childhood is much more of a protected space for kids than it was “back in the day.” According to *American’s Children in Brief* (ChildStats.gov, 2008), “in 2006, 17% of all children ages 0–17 lived in poverty,” and the poverty rate was higher for nonwhite children, with 33% of black children and 27% of Hispanic children living in poverty. Only 68% of children lived with two parents in 2006, down from 77% in 1980. While 88% of adults, age 18–24, had achieved a high school diploma in 2006, 26% of 12th graders described themselves as “heavy drinkers,” 22% of 12th graders reported illicit drug use in the last 30 days, and almost half of students in Grades 9–12 responded that they were no longer virgins (ChildStats.gov, 2008). We may have abolished child labor, but it’s not clear that our children are any better protected or any safer now than they were a century ago.

THE SCRIPT AT SCHOOL

Whether or not there has ever truly been a scripted, “safe” childhood outside of school, there can be no doubt that since the publication of 1983’s *A Nation at Risk*, there has been an increasing climate of scripted, standardized curricula and assessments inside of school, with few of these models including room for new literacies activities that fully use the potential of Web 2.0. Many districts have instituted “curriculum maps” that include

fairly specific directions regarding what material is to be “covered” and at what point during the year, and while it’s been demonstrated that many U.S. state standards documents include mention of new media (Kubey & Baker, 1999), many teachers still claim they don’t “have room” in their daily classroom practices to explore this mandate.

Often, it is the new teachers who get caught in the squeeze between their knowledge of new media practices outside of school and the realities of rules that have been set up in school. A former student who is now a first-year teacher, Cassie Neumann, describes how wired her students are outside of school:

As soon as 2:15 hits, they’re all out and walking down the halls texting or making calls. Just today, I told a kid to put away his cell phone because I thought he was texting, but he showed me that he was actually accessing the Internet from his phone—he was on task! The rule at our school is no cell phones, no iPods, so I had him put it away, but I personally think we (a general educational “we” not meaning my district specifically) should work towards ways to integrate this technology into our classroom. I think we definitely need rules for this technology and how it is to be used in a school setting, but I think that by ignoring and banning new tech products, we are sending the wrong message.

In some cases, a disinclination to use new media in the classroom may simply stem from uncertainty and limited familiarity with the possibilities. Even the newest teachers who are supposedly “digital natives” (Prensky, 2005) may feel baffled about the plethora of new communication tools that are available and how to make best use of them in the classroom. Recently, a teacher who appeared to be in her late twenties approached me after a presentation I gave and said, “I’m embarrassed to ask, but you referred to a ‘wiki’ in your presentation, and I don’t know what a ‘wiki’ is.” Just because teachers and their students are relatively young (born after 1985, let’s say), that is no guarantee that they are able to communicate effectively using new media. So, whether due to scripted curricula that leave no room for new media or whether due to schools’ fears of new media or educators’ lack of knowledge, many students are left to do their networking after school, often without adult supervision.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

This book takes the stand that the writing is on the wall or rather on the screen: Schools are going to have to move past whatever barriers exist and closer to the literacy practices increasingly used in the “outside world.” No matter where you may be on the continuum of believing in or disbelieving

the construct of “childhood,” there can be no doubt that communicating in this new century is going to be different than communicating in the old century—not necessarily better or worse but different—and that it is going to involve some form of social networking on screen with strangers as well as friends and colleagues. Many of the teachers portrayed in this book are of the opinion that we need to give kids practice using these new media in school, where there can be a dialogue about all the issues that come up when communicating in these new ways.

But this is not a cheerleading book in which glowing portraits are provided of the transformative power of Web 2.0. This book, rather, aims to chronicle the sometimes messy first steps of educators who are attempting to include social networking inside real schools and who are grappling with all the challenges that come along with this new kind of teaching. These pioneering teachers, whom I have found through my own online social network, are attempting to figure out ways to keep their students safe while at the same time provide them with the experiences they will need to become fully functional literate citizens in this century.

The chapters are organized to parallel the various technology levels of the school environments within which the teachers I’ve interviewed are working and are titled in honor of the wired Starbucks terms for their different serving sizes. Thus, I begin with the most basic nonwired situation—“Short” (Chapter 2)—and lead up to those truly visionary classrooms—“Venti” (Chapter 5)—that may not look anything like the traditional chalkboard classrooms of our collective past. In between are “Tall” (Chapter 3), or a moderately limited environment, and “Grande” (Chapter 4), or a high-tech environment. It’s worth noting that the size of the container, however, doesn’t influence the taste of the coffee—it’s all good. It is my hope that this structure—starting with examples of social networking in a low-tech environment (including my own classroom) and proceeding gradually to the most advanced levels of classroom capacity and administrative tolerance for technological innovation—will enable you to easily locate your district on this continuum and readily identify those activities that are most appropriate to try in your own school or classroom.

To provide an additional cup of reality, all of the teachers profiled in this book are teaching new media lessons within the context of standardized curricula and assessments. The constant tension between going where the kids need to go and the need to stay within a proscribed curriculum is a real-world constraint that will be discussed throughout the book. These teachers’ own words provide a running commentary throughout and, mimicking blog entries, will appear in boxes at various locations in the chapters.

And I’m including my own journey toward attempting Web 2.0 projects in my own classroom of preservice teachers. Most of the work from my classroom is featured in Chapter 2 in which I provide activities that get at questions about new literacies but that use very little technology in the

process. My students' comments as they come to terms with how to incorporate on-screen literacies within their own teaching will also be featured in sidebars to the text.

NEW LITERACIES: ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Within each chapter—and indeed, providing the subtitles that chart the content—are essential questions that are worth exploring in any classroom with or without technology. This follows the lead of many of the teachers in this book who believe it is the questions that are important rather than the tools we use to explore these questions. The questions actually were developed from my own pedagogical experiments as I tried to implement what I had studied in my own classroom. Such questions include, “How do new forms transform writing?” “Who is the audience for our writing in a new media age?” and “How do we form communities?”

When I began this line of inquiry in 1997, I had to come up with some way of describing what I wanted to look at. If I were truly going to find new literacies classrooms, I was going to need to have some descriptors of what a “new literacies classroom” would look like. Based on a review of the literature available at that time, I came up with five characteristics that I felt were essential to be present for me to label a classroom as a new literacies classroom (Kist, 2000):

- New literacies classrooms feature daily work in multiple forms of representation.
- In such classrooms, there are explicit discussions of the merits of using certain symbol systems in certain situations (such as when conveying a concept, advertising a product, or expressing an emotion), and the students are given many choices about the kinds of texts they read and write.
- There are think-alouds by the teacher who models working through problems using certain symbol systems such as video production, Web site design, and print writing.
- Students take part in a mix of individual and collaborative activities.
- New literacies classrooms are places of student engagement in which students report achieving a “flow” state.

I used these characteristics again as I searched for classrooms to profile for this book and then to structure the inquiry paths my own students and I would follow (as I describe in Chapter 2). The activities that I have collected over the years support inquiry questions that can each be categorized under one or more of the original five new literacies characteristics. Each chapter includes a number of these questions and supporting activities that I have adapted or that I have collected from

teachers across the world. These activities are followed by some possible questions to consider with students and some brief comments about the experiences coming out of the activities from students and teachers who have used them.

I believe this book can serve a real need for educators of all grade levels (but mainly Grades 5–adult) and all subject areas and who place themselves at any point along the continuum—from those on one end who feel increasingly left out (sometimes against their will) of new media trends and those on the other who might be considered “first adopters” and embrace whatever the latest technology is in its very newest form. In summation, this book seeks to add to the emerging literature on what a truly “socially networked” classroom could look like on a daily basis. We have very little description that deals in a systematic way with how this kind of teaching can be implemented or what some of the outcomes may be. The goal of the research that has informed this book is to identify and document the processes of teaching and learning in these pioneering new media classrooms with a special focus on projects that involve some social networking. The assignments and assessments that have been collected from across the world are documented not so much via screen shots and step-by-step instructions but rather in support of essential questions that teachers and students have always been asking, even back in the “stone-age” pre-Internet eras.

Although the questions are perennial, this book serves as a snapshot in time of the current state of classroom teachers’ use of screen-based literacies, through its inclusion of many real-world examples—assignment sheets, assessments, and rubrics that I have collected through online and phone interviews with teachers across the world in 2007 and 2008. These examples of real work are set in a context of the rapidly evolving world of literacy instruction. As in my earlier book (Kist, 2005), I see myself as a qualitative researcher, a reporter, and a participant, taking down oral histories at the beginning of this revolution in teaching, attempting to show how this looks now in the “real world” of K–12 classrooms. The backdrop for this study is a field that is trapped between these new developments in media and the countervailing emphasis on the standardizing and even franchising of teaching and learning. My own classroom will be included in this story, partly due to the fact that I am working with preservice teachers whom I continue to follow into the early years of their careers and who tell me that for a variety of reasons, they just aren’t able to try “cutting-edge” assignments during student teaching or the first years of their fledgling careers. So, we begin at the very beginning.