

Perspective on Textual Production, Student Collaboration, and Social Networking Sites

PROBLEM

The field of composition has long valued collaboration in every part of the writing process in the invention, composing, and revisions stages (Roskelly, 2000; Howard, 2001). This belief has been espoused in composition classrooms on campuses around the world. Likewise, recent research has shown that collaborative learning can be successful in highlighting the never-ending process nature of composition when conducted in virtual spaces using visual media (Price & Warner, 2007). In addition to facilitating active writing processes, at least one study has also proven that the product of collaborative writing done exclusively online can be deemed as effective, if not more so, than the same work done in a traditional frontal

Because of this perceived divide between social attitudes within strictly defined spaces, students may experience difficulty switching between their personal goal of being heard and their academic goal of pleasing the instructor. While instructors may extend their academic space



inherent nature of social and spatial forces juxtaposed when subjects interact within a given situated space (p. 6). When considering using technology in academic spaces, as sites like Facebook, this comprehensive view becomes more important as instructors realize that a social networking site is an actual space that users can virtually visit and inhabit in much the same ways users, or students, populate classrooms. By allowing users to continuously relate via text, Facebook creates a virtual space that mimics these "real" social settings.

This focus on the social within the spatial, as realized by Keith and Pile, highlights the essential social relationship aspect Henri Lefebvre (1974, trans. 1991) broke ground with by asking, "where does a relationship reside when it is not being actualized in a highly determined situation?" (p. 401). Over three decades before the conception of this study, it is fair to say that he did not foresee the advent of the Internet, where sites literally "wait" to be acted upon and interacted with. A site like Facebook exists, but is essentially dormant until users interact with each other and create textual evidence of their interaction. This, as forecast by Lefebvre in analyzing a social relationship through space theory in that when looking at these types of (online and virtual) relationships it may be "impossible simply to dub it a form as such is empty, and must have content in order to exist. Nor can it be treated as a structure, which needs objects if it is to operate. Even a structure whose task it is to organize elementary units within a whole, necessarily calls for both the whole and the component units in question" (p. 401). This foregrounding displays an essential lesson for using social networking sites in academic spaces: by introducing social space to an academic space, instructors create the possibility of a community formed primarily through situated socialization. This spatiality may affect student attitudes towards collaboration and textual production.

Currently the Internet is being populated by Web 2.0 sites that feature recursive and data-reliant platforms to facilitate interactions in purely visual space. These sites take on an interesting character when viewed through the lens of space theory in that effective Web 2.0 sites cater to "the edges and not just the center" of the web (O'Reilly, 2005), meaning that their virtual space is meant to be explored as changing and uncharted territory, not simply major sites that are visited and considered static. By exploring Facebook's occupation within Web 2.0 virtual space alongside elements of activity and space theories, instructors can observe students in the process of completing a collaborative academic composition assignment online in both a social and spatial context. By using Facebook as a representative virtual space outside of academia, instructors can observe how students (re)occupy this non-academic space.

1

2

3

- ¥ Describe your attitude towards collaboration after the assignment.
- ¥ Would you feel comfortable using Facebook to complete an assignment in class?
- ¥ Do you think academic work produced using Facebook would be as high in quality as work produced not using Facebook?
- ¥ After conducting the survey, I will conduct a traditional composition classroom with individual assignments and frontal collaboration in class.
- ¥ Midway through the semester I will survey the students with some combination of the following questions:
 - ¥ How do you define collaboration?
 - ¥ Describe your attitude towards collaboration before you completed [some assignment].
 - ¥ Describe your attitude towards collaboration after you completed [some assignment].
 - ¥ Do you think the academic work produced by this collaborative assignment is as high in quality as work that you could have produced on your own?
 - ¥ Did collaborating in a group of peers affect the way you approached this academic assignment?
- ¥ For the final collaborative project, I will invite students to form their own groups based on whether they want to use Facebook in class to facilitate their collaboration or proceed according to traditional frontal methods.
- ¥ For the groups that decide to use traditional and frontal methods, I will provide them with a similar survey to the one described above.
- ¥ For the groups that decide to use Facebook to collaborate, I will provide them with a survey that asks some combination of the following questions:
 - ¥ How do you define collaboration?
 - ¥ Describe your attitude towards collaboration before you completed [some assignment].
 - ¥ Describe your attitude towards collaboration after you completed [some assignment].
 - ¥ Do you think the academic work produced by this collaborative assignment on Facebook is as high in quality as work others produced by not using it?
 - ¥ How was the collaborative process affected by using Facebook?
 - ¥ Did using Facebook for this assignment affect your definition of collaboration?
 - ¥ Did you use Facebook exclusively in class? At all outside of class?
 - ¥ Would you ever use Facebook to collaborate in another class that didn't call for it?

PROJECTED DATA ANALYSIS

After the class is complete I will compile the survey results to gauge student attitudes towards producing "academic" text, collaboration, Facebook usage to see if the class experience has changed attitudes at all. The survey results will be considered independent of student grades or personal considerations of the quality of students' final projects. I am interested in the student attitudes towards the process, not necessarily the quality of the final product.

I am interested in seeing whether or not students currently perceive Facebook as a strictly social (and correspondingly, non

discourse into a safely guarded student space. I am also interested in seeing student perceptions of peer collaboration, and whether or not this experience has changed that attitude. This may have implications for instructors assuming positive student attitudes towards collaboration regardless of the introduction of technology. I am interested in seeing if allowing Facebook to be used for an academic setting changed student attitudes towards textual production and collaboration. This may have implications for instructors who want students to produce academic text and collaborate in an easy manner without the inherent anxiety of producing quality projects.

References

- Brooks, K. (2002). Reading, Writing, and Teaching Creative Hypertext: A Case Study. *College English*, 46(7), 635-652.
- Bruffee, K. (1984). Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Meaning. *College English*, 46(7), 635-652.
- Bruce, B.C., Hinn, D. M., & Leander, K. (2001). Case studies of a virtual school. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(2), 156-163.
- Geisler, C., et al. (2001). IText: Future Directions for Research on the Relationship between Information Technology and Writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 15(3), 269-308.
- Holland, D., & Leander, K. (2004). Ethnographic Studies of Positioning and Subjectivity: An Introduction. *Ethos*, 32(2), 127-139.
- Howard, R. M. (2001). Collaborative Pedagogy. In G. Tate, et al. (Eds.), *Guide to Composition Pedagogies* (pp. 54-71). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Howard, R. M. (1995). Plagiarisms, Authorships, and the Academic Death Penalty. *College English*, 57(7), 788-806.
- Keith, M., & Pile, S. (1993). The politics of place. In Keith, M., & Pile, S. (Eds.), *Space and the Politics of Identity* (pp. 1-21). New York: Routledge.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Cambridge:

- Roskelly, H. (2000). The Risky Business of Group Work. In E. Corbett, et al. (Eds.), *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook* (4th ed.) (pp. 123-128). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Simpson, K.P. (2006). Collaboration and Critical Thinking in Online English Courses. *Teaching English in the two-year college*, 33(4), 421-429.
- Yancey, K. B., & Spooner, M. (1998). A Single Good Mind: Collaboration, Cooperation, and the Writing Self. *College Composition and Communication*, 49(1), pp. 4-52.